



Monitoring Review Report

Clarke County School System
Athens, Georgia

December 12-13, 2022

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Monitoring Review Report

Introduction

This report summarizes the findings of the Cognia Monitoring Review held on December 12-13, 2022 for Clarke County School System. The purpose of the Monitoring Review was to assess the district's progress toward addressing the Accreditation Standards, Improvement Priorities, and Directives from the Special Review held on December 1-3, 2021.

In preparation for the Monitoring Review, the review team examined the district's Progress Report and related documentation shared by the system. Prior to the virtual review, team members also had the opportunity to view recorded board meetings through digital links shared by the system. During the review, the team engaged in the following activities:

- Meetings and interviews with the superintendent, seven school board members, and eight district leaders
- Additional interviews with stakeholders representing seven principals and four parents/community members
- Review of artifacts
- Deliberations and report preparation

The Monitoring Review Team used the findings from these activities and evidence to assess the progress the district has made toward the Accreditation Standards as listed in the report.

Findings

The Monitoring Review Team's findings are organized by each Performance Standard previously rated by the Special Review Team as Insufficient. For each cited Standard, the Monitoring Review Team provides an updated rating followed by a Summary of Findings, Directives, and Recommendations to guide the next steps for sustaining progress made. The findings of the Monitoring Review Team are reported within four ranges identified by the colors below.

Color	Rating	Description
Red	Insufficient	Identifies key areas that need more focused improvement efforts
Yellow	Initiating	Represents areas to enhance and extend current improvement efforts
Green	Improving	Pinpoints quality practices that meet the Standards
Blue	Impacting	Demonstrates noteworthy practices producing clear results that exceed expectations

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Leadership Capacity Standard		Rating
1.5	The governing authority adheres to a code of ethics and functions within defined roles and responsibilities.	Initiating

Improvement Priority 2

Review the Code of Ethics to develop and implement a plan of accountability to ensure all board members adhere to and execute their roles and responsibilities and manage Board functions effectively and efficiently.

Findings

Learning opportunities focused on enhancing the knowledge and understanding of the Board's roles and responsibilities. The reviewed documents confirmed whole board training was conducted on February 17, 2022, where the agenda topics included "Policy Development: A Team Effort" and "Accreditation Agencies-Georgia Accrediting Commission (GAC) and Cognia". According to information included in the system's Progress Report, the accreditation discussion during the professional learning session centered around the leadership standards identified by the previous Monitoring Review Teams. In addition, on March 31, 2022, Zenda Bowie, a consultant with the Georgia School Board Association (GSBA) conducted a board workshop on Parliamentary Procedures. Review team members had the opportunity to examine the agenda from the session which included topics such as making and amending motions, taking the vote, moving into Executive Session, and adopting the minutes.

Team members also learned of the board's ongoing work in fulfilling its responsibility of reviewing, revising, and adopting policies. The minutes from the July 14, 2022 board meeting noted that at Timestamp 18:39, a motion was made and approved to identify an ad hoc committee to review and update 54 policies that were currently five or more years old but still housed in the system's current Board Policy Manual. The committee was given until the end of December 2022 to complete the work. Information relayed during the interview with the superintendent and confirmed during interviews with board members and district staff revealed that revisions have been completed on 51 of the 54 policies. The remaining policies are scheduled for action during future board meetings.

Team members reviewed a copy of Policy BAC-Equity, an artifact presented to demonstrate the Board's work of policy adoption. According to the Progress Report, the policy was drafted by a board member and further revised through a "rigorous but respectful" discussion. The policy subsequently was adopted at the August 11, 2022 board meeting.

During the August 27, 2022 board of education retreat, artifacts and interviews indicated board members completed the Clifton's Strength Analysis as opposed to the traditional self-assessment conducted in the past. According to board members, the results of the analysis provided a clear depiction of the various personality and character traits of each person which led to a better understanding of why different persons reacted in certain ways. Comments made about the analysis included, "We learned we do have a lot in common" and "The activity helped us appreciate each other more."

However, even though board members have continued to focus on professional learning, have successfully maneuvered through the major task of reviewing and revising the Policy Manual, and have completed an analysis of their personality traits, actions and deliberations observed during recordings of board meetings and information shared during interview sessions indicate the board still does not consistently operate in a manner that demonstrates clear knowledge and understanding of their roles and responsibilities. Throughout interviews, stakeholders at the district and school level referred to the need



for board members to consistently display learnings from professional development sessions during meetings and other board related activities.

The board's actions over a series of meetings regarding the adoption of a state mandated policy served as an example of the difficulty the group sometimes still has in focusing on the task at hand without interjecting their personal feelings. During the July 14, 2022 meeting of the board, a lengthy discussion ensued regarding the adoption of Policy IKBB: Divisive Concepts. The Georgia State Legislature had mandated that all school boards, by August 1, 2022, adopt a board policy that outlined procedures for addressing complaints about divisive topics. The discussion of this policy initiated extensive exchanges between board members that also resulted in issues regarding parliamentary procedures and adherence to previously adopted policies. Because of the timing of the meeting and the required adoption date presented by the state legislature, the discussion started by asking if the rule to vote on a policy before being placed on the table for public comment could be suspended. At one point in the discussion, a motion was made to suspend the board's rule regarding allowing time for public comment on policies, to go ahead and vote on the policy, and then send it out for public comment. The motion failed based on a 3-3-1 vote. However, even after the vote on the motion, the discussion continued even to the point of inquiring why members voted the way they did. The subsequent discussion also included comments where board members shared their personal views about critical topics. These actions demonstrate the Board's inability to move forward even after a vote had been taken on the motion. During the board meeting one month later on August 11, 2022 at Timestamp 24:05, the floor was again opened for discussion on Policy IKBB. It was moved and seconded that the policy should be approved. There was no discussion on the motion. Subsequently, the vote on the motion was taken but failed to pass by a count of 0 – 8 meaning the persons who made and second the motion even voted against the motion.

Three months from the initial discussion of Policy IKBB, during the October 13, 2022 board meeting, at Timestamp 41:47 the superintendent shared research he had completed on the status of approval of Policy IKBB across the state noting that, to date, "149 school systems had approved the policy with 11 districts still at a status of pending approval." The superintendent shared with board members potential consequences the system may face if it does not move forward with officially adopting the legally mandated policy. A long discussion ensued that involved a debate on whether or not the policy ever went out for public comment. The verbal exchange indicated lack of clarity about what previous discussions and actions the board had engaged in regarding Policy IKBB. At Timestamp 51:18 in the meeting a motion was made and seconded to amend the agenda to again discuss Policy IKBB. The discussion prior to the vote on the motion included deliberations about whether the rules needed to be suspended, whether or not the policy had been distributed for public review, the pending due date of the Cognia Monitoring Review Progress Report, and the potential consequences the system may face regarding accreditation. At Timestamp 53:30, the motion was made and second to amend the agenda to add Policy IKBB as an action item. After much discussion that focused on the purpose of the policy and the difference between a policy and a regulation, a vote was taken on the motion to amend the agenda. The board chair announced that the amendment to the motion had passed, and the policy would now be discussed under item eight on the agenda, even though the discussion had already started.

At Timestamp 58:17, the meeting was opened for discussion on Policy IKBB. The ensuing cordial conversation which lasted until Timestamp 1:17:40 included discussions on ways to work around adopting the policy and sharing of personal views. The discussion prior to the vote on the motion included suggestions on how to circumvent the adoption of Policy IKBB which violated the Board's written policy on the steps in policy adoption. The lengthy discussion continued all on the topic of a policy that was state mandated, crafted by the GSBA, and outlined procedures to follow in the case of a complaint regarding divisive concepts. Ironically, the policy mimics the traditional chain of command in handling complaints-first to the principal, then to the superintendent, then to the board of education.

The element of trust was an ongoing theme throughout interviews with stakeholders at all levels in the system. When asked about the relationship between board members as well as the relationship between the Board and district leaders, responses referenced hidden agendas, personality clashes, cliques, and not being able to "agree to disagree." Principals discussed how board members are "disconnected from who we are-not always making decisions based on the whole" and that the media still portrays the



presence of a “dysfunctional” group. Even though during interviews parents and community representatives indicated that this is probably the healthiest they have seen the board, they did add there was still some concern about whether all board members, especially the newly elected members, fully understand their roles and responsibilities. District leaders also concluded the relationships are more productive now but also indicated a need to stay laser-focused on the work and not let personal issues distract from the work that needs to be done to support student achievement.

Artifacts revealed the GSBA had provided school board training on parliamentary procedures as well as on effective board governance. However, observations of board recordings indicate that board members’ interactions and actions do not consistently demonstrate effective operational practices. Team members learned of initiatives being introduced to help streamline board meetings so board members can be more prepared beforehand and can operate more effectively during the meeting. Feedback from interviews with district staff revealed one of the ongoing concerns is the length of board meetings mainly because members engage in lengthy conversation and dialogue about information they received in advance but had not taken the time to review or to seek clarity before the meeting. This lack of preparation has sometimes stifled the move toward making timely decisions that ultimately could impact student achievement. One example was the recent discussion on the program of study for a particular course. Because of the intensity of the discussion, the board could not reach consensus and moved to table action on an item which had a trickle-down effect on curricular planning and the access to resources. One school level stakeholder suggested that board members spend extensive time asking questions during the meeting to keep their constituents from thinking they are not effectively performing the duties of their position. The superintendent, who officially started in the position on October 10, 2022, has introduced several initiatives which have included providing a Google document with board packets so that when members have questions, they can post them in the Google form and the appropriate district staff can respond and all members receive the answer at the same time. The superintendent also has scheduled one-on-one sessions with board members to address information needed to clarify understanding on topics to be discussed. Additionally, he has implemented a procedure where board members should not call upon district staff members for specific individual requests for information but should seek him to determine the appropriateness and urgency of the request and determine if all members need to receive the response or just the person making the inquiry. Even though these initiatives increased the workload of the superintendent, he noted, he wants to “better improve our communication so we can be more effective.” Information included in the system’s progress reports described these initiatives as being implemented “to reduce micromanagement.” However, evidence from the review of board meeting recordings and interviews indicate these initiatives are still at the introductory phase and have not become consistently operationalized during the work of the Board.

Last, interviews revealed concerns about how the addition of three new members may change the dynamics of the board. One stakeholder stressed the importance of clearly defining the onboarding process for new members to ensure clarity in understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the positions they hold. Team members learned that new members have already had an opportunity to spend time with district staff to learn more about the work of system level departments in enhancing student achievement and overall organizational effectiveness. Two of the new board members have completed initial governance training with the GSBA that highlighted their roles and responsibilities. The third new board member is scheduled to complete this same training in February 2023.

Although the Monitoring Review Team determined significant progress has been made in reference to the work of the board, work still remains in routinely implementing effective practices learned through trainings and aligned with the board’s Code of Ethics. Staff and board member interviews as well as a review of artifacts including recorded board meetings indicate the Board’s lack of consistently implementing new learning from training still hampers effective and efficient work as well as the development of a cohesive spirit of trust among the group. The continuous implementation of recently introduced initiatives may serve as enhancement to the efforts of the board to collaboratively work to support the mission and vision of the school system as well as overall organizational effectiveness.

Directives

- Identify a means to monitor ongoing implementation of learning from professional training through observations of the action and work of the board during meetings and work sessions.
- Establish, implement, and document opportunities for board members to annually review the adopted Code of Ethics and to publicly acknowledge adherence to the written guidelines.
- Implement, monitor, and evaluate the impact of recently established initiatives intended to enhance the work of the board in alignment with its roles and responsibilities.
- Conduct team building sessions to promote the development of trust and positive professional relationships amongst and between board members as well as board members and district staff. Include opportunities at each session for participants to reflect and provide feedback on their role in ensuring the cohesive operation of the board.

Leadership Capacity Standard		Rating
1.7	Leaders implement operational processes and procedures to ensure organizational effectiveness in support of teaching and learning.	Improving

Improvement Priority 3

Review the Board committee structure policy to develop and implement a plan to make certain that Board committee work does not pose potential violations of other board policies and state and federal regulations.

Findings

Artifacts and interviews revealed the system has implemented an Advisory Committee and the group has met on several occasions to discuss critical issues that provided insight into decisions rendered by the board. Information included in the Progress Report revealed that the board, at the October 14, 2021 board meeting, nominated and approved a list of 15 participants to serve on the Advisory Committee. The district's website includes a description of the purpose of the Advisory Committee as well as a listing of meeting dates. Team members were able to review notes from the Feb 2, 2022, May 11, 2022, and October 26, 2022 meetings of the Advisory Board. Topics discussed at the various meetings included the ideal characteristics of a superintendent, student code of conduct, school safety, communication, pride, and restorative practices. According to interviews, board members rotate, taking turns attending the meetings of the Committee and on occasion, have even led some of the discussions at the meetings. This was confirmed through a review of evidence that included the names and roles/titles of persons in attendance at each of the Advisory Committee meetings held to date. Three members of the Advisory Committee participated in interviews during the review and spoke positively about their work and noted other means the board could use to garner input from external stakeholders such as neighborhood leaders, the Local School Governance Team (LSGT) and town hall meetings. The system's Progress Report indicated using the Board Advisory Committee has helped to solicit balanced feedback and develop a more global perspective.

However, board meeting recordings as well as interviews indicated a level of misunderstanding or lack of clarity on the rationale of having an Advisory Committee and exactly how this committee should function. Additionally, comments from board members during the interview process indicated confusion still exists in terms of whether or not additional committees are needed to support the work of the Board. The need for clarity stems partially from the board's decision several years back to disband the committee structure and now the Board senses the push to formulate and use a committee.

Interviews and artifacts indicate the Advisory Committee has functioned effectively during the initial year of existence and has provided valuable information and input in numerous areas. However, artifacts did reveal a decrease in attendance at meetings. System level staff indicated the lack of attendance is possibly due to a need for more clarity about the expected work of the group.



Recommendations

- Revisit the existing protocols for the Advisory Committee structure and make revisions, if needed, to ensure the expectations clearly align and support the positive growth and performance of the board while still adhering to legal statute (i.e., Open Meetings Act) and board policies.
- Communicate established committee protocols to ensure understanding and clarity among the governing board, the Advisory Committee, and other applicable stakeholder groups.
- Design and implement a means to routinely collect, analyze, and use data through mechanisms such as surveys, feedback forums, etc. to annually gauge the effectiveness of the advisory committee structure as well as stakeholder perceptions of the work of the school board.

Insights from the Monitoring Review

The Monitoring Review Team for the Clarke County School System recognizes the efforts of stakeholders throughout the system in addressing the Cognia Performance Standards and Directives outlined within the previous Monitoring Review Report. Although the system has completed much work, a culture built on trust and transparency is not fully established. While board members applauded the professional learning training sessions in which they participated, the Board has not fully and consistently implemented what was learned during the trainings to create a positive culture focused on student needs.

Even though the Board has engaged in a variety of training on building trust among members, working as a team, and learning about its roles and responsibilities, the Board needs to effectively and fully operationalize the learning gained by participating in all training to create a highly productive board. Team-building training was referenced in many interviews. Even though interviews consistently indicated “things have gotten better”, the Monitoring Review Team noted that the Board does not consistently function as a cohesive unit in all aspects of its duties.

The new superintendent for the Clarke County School System was beginning his 63rd day on the job at the onset of the review and described his work to date as a “whirlwind.” He shared with the team data on the number of town hall meetings he participated in, the special interest groups he spoke to, the schools he visited, the GSBA training he attended with board members, the one-on-one sessions he had with members of the board as well as members of the community, and the board retreat he participated in even before assuming the position of district superintendent. He describes his mission as “changing the culture of the Clarke County School System.” To this end, new initiatives have been introduced to support that cultural change at the board and district level. However, those practices have not been in place to reach the point of being embedded in the day-to-day operations of the system. A continuation of these initiatives and the monitoring of the implementation with fidelity will help move the system toward the point of sustainability of efforts over time.

Accreditation Recommendation

Based on the Monitoring Review Team’s findings Cognia concludes the Clarke County School System has met Improvement Priority 3 (Standard 1.7) and has made progress in initiating the Directives derived from Improvement Priority 2 (Standard 1.5). Clarke County School System will maintain its accreditation status of **Accredited Under Review** as recommended by the Monitoring Review Team requiring a Monitoring Review by August 2023. The system is commended for its progress and commitment to continuous improvement on behalf of all learners.

Next Steps

Upon receiving the Monitoring Review Report, the district is encouraged to implement the following steps:

- Review and share the findings with stakeholders.
- Ensure that the Board fully implements effective board governance best practices from professional learning sessions.
- Regularly revise and update policies and procedures to ensure all are current and relevant.
- Document work and accomplishments related to each Cognia Performance Standard, Directive, and Improvement Priority.
- Complete and submit a Progress Report to Cognia after addressing the Standards and Directives.
- Schedule and host a Monitoring Review by August 2023.

