



Monitoring Review Report

Clarke County School System
Athens, Georgia

December 7-8, 2020

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Monitoring Review Report

Introduction

This report summarizes the findings of the Cognia™ Monitoring Review held on December 7-8, 2020, for Clarke County School System. The purpose of the Monitoring Review was to review the district's progress toward addressing the Accreditation Standards, Improvement Priorities, and Directives from the Special Review held on January 26-28, 2020.

In preparation for the Monitoring Review, the Cognia Monitoring Review Team reviewed the district's Progress Report and related documentation. During the review, the review team engaged in the following activities:

- Meetings and interviews with the superintendent, nine school board members, and district leaders
- Additional interviews with stakeholders representing 11 principals, 15 parents, and nine community members
- Evidence review
- Observations of digitized board meetings posted on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/user/clarkecoschools/videos>)
- Team 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 below.

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



Monitoring Review Report

Leadership Capacity Standard		Rating
1.4	The governing authority establishes and ensures adherence to policies that are designed to support system effectiveness.	Improving

Improvement Priority 1

Develop, implement, and evaluate a comprehensive professional development plan for board members to include orientation sessions for new board members, whole board training on the roles and responsibilities of board members and the superintendent, and an annual written commitment to adhere to the Code of Ethics.

Findings

The professional development plan confirmed the Georgia School Board Association (GSBA) had conducted numerous training sessions for the Clarke County School District Board of Education, including the February 2020 training entitled, *Standards for Effective Governance of Georgia School Systems* (2010). Two GSBA facilitators conducted the training on the eight domains of effective governance, including scenarios and exercises to clarify how to evaluate the implementation of knowing whose role serves what needs. The Board also engaged in training and continuous improvement about board norms to operate within its Code of Ethics.

In August 2020, the Board revised Policy BH: Board Code of Ethics. This policy reads, “To operate in the most ethical and conscientious manner possible” and contains the seven GSBA domains for highly effective governance teams (i.e., the Board and superintendent and their collective work with district leaders). The policy also aligns the Code of Ethics with the Board’s Self-Assessment and Action Plan and addresses board member conduct and conflicts of interest. All board members signed the Code of Ethics, symbolizing their acceptance of the policy. Board members plan to review and sign the Code of Ethics annually.

According to the Clarke County School District’s Progress Report, the Board created a committee to review policies and make recommendations regarding needed revisions or updates. The Monitoring Review Team examined a Policy Review Summary spreadsheet that detailed progress on board policy reviews and the Policy Review Infographic that illustrates the five-step policy review process. The Board records its meetings and posts them on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/user/clarkecoschools/videos>) for public viewing. The Monitoring Review Team viewed many online recorded board meetings and confirmed that the policy review committee presents reviewed policies for approval to the Board at monthly meetings. As of November 2020, the Board had reviewed 147 policies (75 percent) using this process. One board member stated, “Updating policy has probably been the best professional learning for some of the board members. The Board is now more mindful and intentional about its work. Members with vested interests remind others of their roles and responsibilities.” Interview data verified the Board is currently reviewing and adopting policies. The Board adopted the Adoption Policy (BDC) on April 14, 1994, and officially revised it on July 30, 2020; however, the team did not find a procedure that detailed a definitive timeline for ongoing future policy reviews beyond this initial process.

The Monitoring Review Team confirmed that regular professional learning opportunities are provided and added to the Board’s work session meeting agendas to enable all board members to participate. Newly elected board members who will take office in January 2021 also participated in training with existing board members to ensure a smooth transition of new learning and institutional knowledge prior to assuming their new role as board members. The Monitoring Review Team examined a PowerPoint presentation entitled, *Policy Development for Effective Governance* presented by the Georgia School Boards Association. The presentation was dated August 18, 2020. Interview data and the Clarke County School District’s Progress Report confirmed that all existing and one or more new board members participated in this training. The team also reviewed the PowerPoint entitled, *Parliamentary Procedures* training developed by the Georgia School Boards Association and the training agenda dated July 2020. Interview data verified that board members participated in the *Parliamentary Procedures* training. According to the Progress Report, board



members also participated in team-building training. Interview data indicated board members believe the team building has created trust among board members.

The Clarke County School District’s Progress Report revealed the Board conducted a self-assessment in July 2020. Interview data also verified that the self-assessment produced a deep and honest conversation about board professional learning needs. The Monitoring Review Team reviewed the Board’s self-assessment results and the listing of norms subsequently adopted. Board interview data and a review of the Clarke County School District’s Progress Report revealed the Board has only completed one phase of the self-assessment process but plans to conduct a post-self-assessment during the spring of 2021 for comparative analysis. The Board intends to develop and implement action plans based on the self-assessment results and annually sign a certification of commitment to adhere to the Code of Ethics and the *Standards for Effective Governance of Georgia School Systems* (2010). The self-assessments will continue to occur as part of the continuous improvement planning that follows the GSBA model domains. Board members plan to annually sign a certification of their commitment to the Georgia State Standards for School Boards and the Code of Ethics.

Board member interview data show the Board is exploring ways to routinely gather and analyze stakeholder perception data and use findings to support continuous improvement. As previously stated, the Monitoring Review Team observed Board meetings posted on YouTube. Board meeting observation data indicate that on October 29, 2020 the Board considered various options (e.g., marketing firms, GSBA) to generate these data (Digital Board Meeting, Timestamp 06:15-58:30). Interview data also revealed that board members and district leadership perceive local constituent blogs and forums continue to feed some of the unproductive discourse among some board members.

The Monitoring Review Team observed recorded board meetings and presentations and interviewed stakeholders. The team found that the Clarke County School System’s leadership (e.g., the Board, superintendent, district staff members) had made substantial progress and met Improvement Priority 1 related to board member professional development and its commitment to the Code of Ethics.

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 adherence of all board members in order to execute the roles and responsibilities of board members and manage board functions effectively and efficiently.

Findings

Information in the Clarke County School District’s Progress Report indicated the Board participated in the *Standards for Effective Governance of Georgia School Systems* (2010) training through the Georgia School Boards Association during a retreat on February 28-29, 2020. Board members reported that the Board’s ability to be effective had improved. However, the Board did not fully implement practices that demonstrated a full understanding of its role. During its May 7, 2020 meeting, for example, the Board spent considerable time discussing how to add an item to the current meeting agenda for the next board meeting (Timestamp 17:30 to 45:54).

Observations from recorded board meetings and staff and board member interview data indicated the need to fully implement the practices learned through training. One parent’s comment summed up the sentiment of many interviewed stakeholders when the parent stated, “There seems to be a lack of understanding about processes. Oftentimes the question is asked whether we are allowed to do this. It’s like they are not well rooted in what they are responsible for doing or how it should be done.” Another comment echoed that perception: “It’s as if they are not quite sure of how they are supposed to work

together.” Observations of recorded board meetings also indicated misunderstanding or confusion about regular board practices, such as amending the meeting agenda (May 7, 2020, Timestamp 17:30 to 45:54) or electing officers (January 16, 2020, Timestamp 01:43:18 to 02:23:20). During interviews, some parents shared that board members do not always have the information they need to make decisions.

Through interviews and the review of documents, the team found several examples of the Board's lack of functioning as a cohesive governing body. First, interview data indicated that one board member participated in a drive-by protest about the Clarke County School District Board of Education's decision for teachers to return to school. On October 20, 2020, the *Flagpole* newspaper reported this board member's dissatisfaction with the Board's decision. Seven board members engaged in ongoing email communication about another board member's actions related to a racist poem read during a recent event. The email discussions became caustic and ignited thoughts and conclusions before formal consideration of the facts. Finally, some stakeholders reported that board members' actions often disrupted the schools' day-to-day operations because discussing what happened at recent board meetings dominated staff member and parent conversations.

The Board initiated and scheduled the completion of the self-assessment's first cycle in July 2020. The Board discussed the self-assessment results in August and September 2020. These results were charted and published in the Progress Report with a link to the results and narrative comments. Stakeholder interviews confirmed the Board's completion of the initial self-assessment. Additionally, the Board worked with the GSBA to establish a self-assessment measurement method to help determine future success and growth. Interviews with stakeholder groups, however, indicated little improvement has occurred in conducting business at the board meetings

The Monitoring Review Team reviewed the PowerPoint entitled, *The Importance of Developing Board Norms for Your Governance Team* presented by the Georgia School Boards Association on October 6, 2020. Board members reported that the GSBA helped them develop the following board norms:

- Norm - School Visits
- Norm – Communication
- Norm - Self Assessment
- Norm - Strategic Planning
- Norm - Stakeholder Concerns
- Norm - Governance Roles and Responsibilities
- Norm - Board Meetings
- Norm - Norms for How to Address Situations in Which Non-Officer Board Members Do Not Follow Board Policy
- Norm - How to Address Situations in Which Board Officers Do Not Follow Board Policy

The Board has engaged in training on its roles and responsibilities and the Code of Ethics, addressing one part of the Directive, to “Provide whole board training session(s) on the *Standards for Effective Governance of Georgia School Systems* (2010) and use the information gleaned from the training to support the system's purpose of improving student achievement and organizational effectiveness.” However, interviews and a review of artifacts, including recordings of board meetings, revealed the Board has not fully or effectively implemented learning from the professional development training to support the system's purpose to improve student achievement and organizational effectiveness. Interview data showed the Board plans to receive additional training in January 2021.

Artifacts revealed the GSBA had provided school board training on effective board governance. However, observations of board recordings and interviews with various stakeholder groups indicate that board members' interactions and actions did not consistently demonstrate effective operational practices. Interview data and observations of recorded board meetings revealed barriers such as adding items to the agenda for an upcoming board meeting and having a quorum (i.e., majority of the nine board members present) at a Policy Committee meeting.



Although the Monitoring Review Team determined that three of the four Directives for Improvement Priority 2 have improved, significant work remains in implementing more effective practices learned through training; therefore, the team rated Improvement Priority 2 as Initiating. Stakeholder interview and board meeting observation data indicated the Board’s lack of implementing new learning from training as the missing characteristic for this Improvement Priority. The remaining part of the Directive that the Board needs to address is exhibiting the identified characteristics of a highly effective governing board and professional decorum in individual actions and behaviors.

Directive

- Identify and demonstrate characteristics of a highly effective governing board and professional decorum.

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

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 as well as state and federal regulations.

Findings

Interview data revealed that not all board members were aware of the relationship between committee meetings and legal guidance in the Open Meetings Act that referenced quorums for board meetings and at board member gatherings. One board member explained that as part of the Georgia School Boards Association training, board members learned about committee structures and responsibilities. However, stakeholder interview data and a review of documents showed the Board has not addressed how to avoid its members attending committee meetings in numbers that create a quorum. Some board members were unaware that they could activate an official board event when the majority of the nine board members gathered. The Board gave the Policy Committee responsibility for evaluating its policies and making policy-related recommendations to the full Board for consideration. Board members could attend the Policy Committee meetings online through a link or in person; however, the leniency of this process allowed board members to accidentally create a quorum and trigger an official board meeting when five members attended the Policy Committee meetings on March 26, 2020, and June 4, 2020.

Based on procedures adopted by the Board and policies, BBC (i.e., Board Committees) and BBAD (i.e., Board Duties), the Policy Committee’s responsibility is to regularly review board policies and make recommendations for revisions, if necessary, to be presented to the Board. According to procedures, the Policy Committee is composed of a current board member, a district-level staff member, and an incoming board member. During the August 13, 2020 board meeting, one board member reported having no knowledge of the committee plan and asked to see the policy on committees (Timestamp 33:35). Another board member stated that all discussions on any issue related to the Cognia Directives should involve the entire Board (Timestamp 35:25). In response to the statement, another board member asked whether that statement meant that all board members should “... roll itself into the policy committee” (Timestamp 37:27). Interview data suggested that some board members do not understand the role of committees. In fact, interview data indicated one board member attended committee meetings due to a lack of trust. Board member interviews further confirmed that committees now regularly submit minutes or notes to the Board to ensure all members receive the same information.

The Monitoring Review Team found no evidence that the Board has established advisory committees to involve stakeholders in decision-making. The Board, however, adopted a policy entitled, Board Committees on February 12, 2004, and revised it on September 10, 2020, which addresses the need to and the process for creating advisory committees and details how to delegate responsibility to those committees. In addition,

the policy also requires advisory committees to keep the Board informed through written or oral reports. The Board has not created advisory committees to gather stakeholder input and to inform decision making. One board member reported that the Board has not learned to use committees to their full extent.

Directive

- Utilize the advisory committee structure to effectively gather feedback to help all board members receive the same information prior to rendering decisions.



Insights from the Monitoring Review

The Monitoring Review Team for the Clarke County School District recognizes the Board's, the superintendent's, and district leaders' efforts in addressing the Cognia Performance Standards and Directives outlined within the previous Special 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 many professional learning training sessions in which they participated, the Board has not fully and effectively implemented what was learned during the trainings to create a positive culture focused on student needs.

While 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. The Monitoring Review Team noted, however, that the Board does not consistently function as a cohesive unit in all aspects of its duties.

Accreditation Recommendation

Based on the Monitoring Review Team's findings and subsequent review by the Cognia Global Commission, Cognia concludes the Clarke County School System has met Standard 1.4 and has made significant progress in initiating the Directives derived from Standards 1.5 and 1.7. The Global Commission has also accepted the Monitoring Review Team's recommendation regarding holding the accreditation status at **Accredited Under Review** and requiring a Monitoring Review by December 2021. The district 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 **December 2021**.

