

Monitoring Review Report

DeKalb County School District
Stone Mountain, Georgia

November 8-11, 2022

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#215065

Monitoring Review Report

Introduction

This report summarizes the findings of the Monitoring Review held on November 8-11, 2022, for the DeKalb County School District (DCSD). The purpose of the Monitoring Review was to review the district's progress toward addressing the findings related to Board Governance from the Accreditation Engagement Review that was conducted on March 20-25, 2022, and continuance of governance concerns over the last several years.

In preparation for the Monitoring Review, the team reviewed the district's progress report and related documentation. The team also reviewed evidence and documentation from the district's remote Accreditation Engagement Review during the month March 2022 and viewed all recorded board meetings since June 2022 (which included over 20 hours of board meetings, work sessions, and called meetings). During the review, the team engaged in the following activities:

- Meetings with the interim superintendent and all seven of the system's board members (five on-site and two remotely).
- Interviews were conducted with four of the regional superintendents (on-site).
- Virtual interviews with 21 school administrators randomly selected to represent one from each of the geographic areas and from each of the school levels (elementary, middle, and high school).
- Virtual interview with the Georgia Department of Education advisor assigned to the district.
- Interview with the Chair of the SPLOST* Committee (on-site).
 - *A **special-purpose local-option sales tax (SPLOST)** is a financing method for funding capital outlay projects within the State of Georgia. It is an optional 1% sales tax levied by any county for the purpose of funding the building of parks, schools, roads, and other public facilities. The revenue generated cannot be used toward operating expenses or most maintenance projects.
- Evidence review
- Team deliberations
- Report preparation

The Monitoring Review Team used the findings from these activities and evidence to assess the progress the district has made toward the Cognia Performance Standard (1.5) as listed in the report.

Context

The DeKalb County School District (DCSD) has experienced a steady and consistent change in leadership since 2013. Since that time, there have been six superintendents with two of them being interim and two being terminated by the Board. In 2013, the Governor removed most of the sitting Board and appointed new members; two of those members currently serve on the Board.

During this same time, AdvancED (now Cognia) has been engaged with the district on a regular basis. In January 2011, the district was placed on **Accredited on Advisement** status from the Special Review that was conducted January 24-26, 2011. As a result of the Special Review, a follow up Monitoring Review was conducted in May 2013. The emphasis of that report was on the urgency within the district to repair its reputation and restore trust and stakeholder confidence in the Board of Education. Evidence indicated deficiencies regarding communication, training, implementation, and accountability of district policies. The district's accreditation status was **Accredited on Probation** following the review.

In December 2013, a follow-up Monitoring Review was conducted that resulted in the district status being changed from **Accredited on Probation** to **Accredited Warned**.

Findings from the December 2013 Monitoring Review (following up from the Special Review of January 2011 and the Monitoring Review of May 2013) yielded directives to develop a plan for unifying the DeKalb County Board of Education, devise a policy and training plan to address concerns about the sustainability of progress, and devise and implement a plan to ensure that the policies and training of future boards will maintain a core focus on serving the needs of DeKalb County School District’s students.

A Monitoring Review was held in May 2014. The findings of the 2014 review found that the Board must establish and implement policies and procedures that ensure segregation of duties of the governing board members. The district’s status did not change as a result of this review. A Monitoring Review held in December of 2014 moved the district’s status from **Accredited Warned** to **Accredited on Advisement**.

After the Monitoring Review in 2014, in recognition of the *sufficient progress* made based on the Institution Progress Report submitted by the district and acknowledgement of the continued work needed to sustain the Required Actions that needed to be address, the Georgia AdvancED Council affirmed at its January 28, 2016, meeting that DeKalb County School District’s accreditation status would be changed from **Accredited Under Review** to **Accredited**. The district held its Accreditation External Review on March 12-15, 2017, and earned the continuous status of **Accredited** for a five-year term.

Findings

The Monitoring Review Team's findings are organized around the one Standard previously rated by the Engagement Review Team as **Initiating**. For this cited Standard, the Monitoring Review Team provides an updated rating followed by a summary of findings and Directives to guide next steps or Recommendations for sustaining the 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

Findings

Individual interviews with each of the seven board members indicate that each is highly committed to the district and the students; however, board members are not working collectively in support of the mission of DeKalb County School District. Board members are elected to serve four-year terms. Each board member is elected from one of the seven regions in the district. This structure has the tendency to put board members in the position of being a “representative for my region.” The review team was very meticulous about discussing

the roles and responsibilities of board members directly with the board members. Implementation and support for governance responsibilities assigned to the board were not consistent across all board member interviews conducted. For example, decisions to hire/dismiss superintendents have never been unanimous, and several board members felt left out of the discussions and were unaware of specific items placed on the Board's agenda for action. Several board members interviewed indicated that "silos" exist among the Board and that some board members meet regularly to plan and discuss what should be the focus of the full board discussion.

From the review of evidence and interviews, the team noted that the Board consistently reviews and develops policies as required. A review of the policy manual indicates that policies are written to define board responsibilities. As the Board discusses policy revisions and/or the development of new policies, it would be beneficial for the Board to continue its effort to consider policies as well as procedures as a key element in building cohesiveness among the Board and effective governance. Interviews further indicate that board members participate in the required training provided in accordance with state requirements. Interviews also revealed that board members stay abreast of what is happening in the district through communication from the superintendent and presentations from schools to the Board. Weekly meetings occur between the superintendent and board leadership (Chair and Vice-Chair). Interviews with board members indicate that they receive weekly communications from the interim superintendent to keep them current as well as receiving a copy of the weekly newsletter the superintendent produces for the system staff. The Board operates under policies with respect to Code of Ethics and each member acknowledges this commitment annually. Additionally, the Board operates under Policy BAB: School Board Governance (Last Reviewed: May 14, 2015) with respect to Culture and Values. This policy states: "The Board dedicates itself to assuring a culture of collaboration, transparency, and continuous learning. The Board values open communication and input and prioritizes the best interests of the classroom as most important." The Board has most recently (July 13, 2020) approved the DeKalb County Board Member Handbook: The Unity of Purpose, Roles & Responsibilities, Norms, and Agreements. To sustain quality instructional programs and practices for all students systemwide, the team urges all members of the Board to revisit and renew their commitment to the expectations outlined in this handbook and in Board Policy BAB.

The Board engages in a regular system of self-evaluation. It may wish to further examine a system of reflection that looks at how the Board functions, how it achieves consensus, and how it is perceived by the public in this regard. Board members must fully understand and appreciate the significant role they occupy in school district governance and the equal importance of acting within, not beyond, this role. It is incumbent upon every board member to set aside personal agendas and focus their efforts on governing together in the best interest of the school system. While Cognia fully appreciates that board members can and will have differing opinions, Cognia's governance standards expect board members to be professional and collaborative in resolving or moving beyond those differences, focusing primarily on areas of common interest and responsibility in service to the school system and its students to support the district's continuous improvement efforts and its organizational effectiveness. Fully embracing Cognia's recommended practices with respect to governance will increase the board's effectiveness in fulfilling the responsibilities of their elected positions. In anticipation of the Monitoring Review, the Monitoring Review team members viewed all available online recorded board meetings from May 2022 until the end of October 2022 (over 20 hours) to specifically examine and/or observe board interactions, actions, and comments during meetings. From there, the team met to debrief the findings and impressions from their viewings of recorded board meetings. During the October 17, 2022, board meeting (in which a number of community members participated this time), community members remarked, "I am looking at the division of our board. We need to be in accord." Another participant said, "This board is troublesome. Board members are working to undermine the superintendent. They are interfering with the day-to-day operation of the school system. You are not making a difference in the lives of the children. If you are not here for the children, you should resign now" (Timestamp: 1:30:30). Another participant representing a local pastor's group stated, "We are concerned about turnover in the role of superintendent" (Timestamp: 1:37:37). Additionally, board members said, "We have to have a united front." The Board understands that the lack of unity and cohesion among board members affects its overall effectiveness.

Other areas noted by the team during these observations include some board members were ill-prepared for meetings with respect to content being discussed and references made to internal communications that do not include everyone. Comments made by board members from the called June 30, 2022, Budget Meeting illustrate this analysis include, "We can't hide things, hidden from me and hidden from the public" (Timestamp: 24:01). "I am not part of a side conversation. We are operating in silos, and we need to respect each other"

(Timestamp: 58:48). Understanding that being prepared makes everyone on the Board interested, organized, committed, and able to conduct board business.

The October 20, 2022 Special Called Board Retreat is of specific relevance. The purpose of the retreat was to review the results from the most recent Board Self-Assessment developed and provided by the Georgia School Boards Association (GSBA). This process was facilitated by an individual from Clarification Mediation, Inc., a local company employed by the Board, who led the Board through a review of members' responses to the instrument. Each board member responded individually and anonymously to the instrument. Major areas of assessment included the following:

- Governance Structure
- Strategic Planning
- Board and Community Relations
- Policy Development
- Board Meetings
- Personnel
- Financial Governance
- Ethics

It is important to note that only six of the current seven board members participated in the assessment and five out of the seven board members were present for this debriefing. Data derived from this self-assessment are pertinent to Cognia Performance Standard 1.5. Comments logged by board members within the instrument responses as well as verbal comments made during the review of the self-assessment indicate the board members are not unified in their approach to the addressing needs of the district.

The facilitator led the Board through a review of their ratings and the anonymous comments and asked for additional input. Board members offered very few comments to the prompts from the facilitator for their opinion or additional feedback, and very little input was forthcoming. The facilitator provided a summary of the areas with the most disparity in scoring and suggested that a plan be developed and implemented to address these areas. The facilitator identified areas considered to be Priority I and Priority II areas. Priority I areas were defined as those where four or more board members (of the six who completed the self-assessment) scored "needing improvement" (Timestamp: 2:18:30). These included the following:

- Board and Community Relations – Standard A
- Board and Community Relations – Standard B
- Policy Development – Standard A
- Financial Governance – Standard B

Priority II areas were defined as those where three or more scored "needing improvement." These Priority II areas (Timestamp 2:20:27) included:

- Board and Community Relations -Standard C
- Governance Structure – Standard B
- Personnel – Standard A

The recommendation of the facilitator (Timestamp: 2:20:52) was for the Board to do the following:

- Review Priority I areas that require attention.
- Develop a strategy for moving the needle to satisfactory.
- Discuss the strategy.
- Adopt a plan of action.
- Set a timetable to review progress.

One board member's response to the comments and findings of the self-assessment indicated they were "riddled with untruth" (Timestamp: 2:28:00). A comment from the Board Chair ("it was shocking to me") was made with respect to the expectation from the self-assessment that leadership should be the spokesperson for the press (Timestamp: 2:28:53). The board has not fully embraced the concepts of the leadership roles of the board members.

The meeting ended with no further action or discussion of plans to address the information gathered from the self-assessment. Discussions with board members while on-site indicate to their knowledge, no plans have been developed or discussed to address these areas. The development and implementation of strategies that build relationships should increase the number of board members who select “satisfactory” rather than “needs improvement” in the self-assessment. A review of the data contained in the Board Self-Assessment supports the need for greater cohesion among the Board in the assessment of their performance.

Evidence provided by the school district for the team’s review indicates that the Board has engaged most recently in a revision process for its Board Handbook. This handbook contains the system’s unity of purpose, roles and responsibilities, norms, and agreements. The preface to the handbook states,

This handbook reflects the governance team’s work on the creation of a framework for effective board governance. This involves ongoing discussions about the unity of purpose, roles, commitment to norms, and agreement on protocols and formal structures that will enable the governance team to perform its responsibilities in a way that best benefits the students of DeKalb County. The Board Member Handbook outlines the practices that build and sustain a positive Board/Superintendent relationship and define a culture of quality, equity, and respect.

It is clear to the Monitoring Review Team from specific and common questions posed to all seven board members, that the Board understands the expectations for their roles and responsibilities defined in the handbook and supported by DeKalb County Board Policy. Board members understand but do not always follow these defined roles. Interviews across the district with 21 school administrators randomly selected from each of the seven regions indicate that board meetings are fractious and tense. These administrators indicated that the meetings were unpredictable, and they wished for a more collaborative spirit among board members. When asked how they felt while viewing or attending board meetings, some administrators said, they are “hard to watch, very combative, uneasy that some kind of rant is going to happen.” Other comments include, “I wish they were more collaborative and collegial, and less confrontational.” Another stated, “Board members are disrespectful to each other.” Several commented that they were “determined to continue to lead their schools and support high-quality learning and teaching ‘in spite of’ the Board.”

Some board members perpetuate the public opinion that the Board is not functioning properly or appropriately through public comments that are picked up by the local media. In anticipation of the review, team members not only viewed all board meetings since Spring, 2022 but also researched perceptions of the Board’s effectiveness as represented in local media that was reported. Media coverage frequently quotes board members addressing community groups in which their comments continue to highlight the Board’s inability to work together cohesively. Examples from various media outlets include:

- <https://www.11alive.com/article/news/education/timeline-what-led-dekalb-schools-superintendents-termination/85-ccb37af3-0062-4e32-b322-d026d3b38469>
- <http://www.allysongevertz.com/issues>
- <https://www.ajc.com/education/dekalb-school-board-district-4-incumbent-challenger-face-off/PRTFZZKY4VCOJGF5VUCBJOA5YM/>
- <https://reporternewspapers.net/2022/05/03/dunwoody-meeting-turns-contentious-over-firing-of-school-superintendent/>
- <https://decaturish.com/2022/08/at-retreat-dekalb-school-board-chair-voices-support-for-keeping-interim-superintendent/>

The Board has continued to foster public opinions of their lack of cohesion as evidenced by the public remarks captured in the media coverage. Many noteworthy happenings occur in the district that should be spotlighted in the community.

Artifacts provided information that all board members have participated and continue to participate in required training. The State Board of Education has developed an annual requirement for continuing education for board members to which the Board respects and adheres. The requirement ensures that board members remain aware of best practices related to the functions of a Board as well as any change in law that impacts the work of a Board. A review of the Local Board Training Plan submitted to the Georgia State Department of Education annually indicates that all board members have participated in the requirements as set forth and have included

workshops on Equity, Access, and Student Agency; New Board Member Training; and workshops on Budget and Policy. Most recently, a summer retreat afforded them the opportunity to engage in training provided by Hall, Booth, Smith PC, Attorneys at Law that included *Board Governance Training: Rebuilding Trust, Focusing on the Future* and a workshop on *Professionalism and Collegiality*. The district's local board training plan and a description and timeline of the Board Handbook revision process was provided to the team. The institution's progress report also provided additional information for the team's review.

Interviews with all seven board members indicate there is not a clear commitment to the vision and mission of the DeKalb County School District by all board members. School board members are responsible to all members in the organization, not just to those within their assigned regions. Every issue before the Board is a special issue, even when it is not particularly special to every individual board member. Board members are simply citizens until there is a quorum, and the meeting is called to order. During interviews with board members, frequent references were made to "my schools" and "my constituents" rather than to the system as a whole.

Feedback from board members indicates there is lack of organization within the Board that hinders its effectiveness. A review of board meetings indicates board members are unclear as to how some items get on the agenda or are removed from the agenda. Information shared sometimes appeared to catch some board members off guard and to be the first time some of them had seen or heard the information. The Board may wish to consider implementing standing committees that focus on the entire district but see its functions through a specific lens. This process can be most useful and in some cases indispensable. Standing committees can become a practical way to structure and manage the Board's work. Any recommendations made by a committee would need to be approved by the Board. Involving board members in committee activities is a direct way of taking advantage of everyone's special skills and expertise and would eliminate some of the intimidation felt by some board members on the DCSD board. Effective committees are those that have clear job descriptions and defined goals, understand their role of advising and recommending, and participate in a regular evaluation process to assess their own achievements. The purpose of these committees is to streamline the work and not to replace the authority or work of the Board. Committees were part of the Board's operational practice previously but were not properly organized and executed as described in a previous Monitoring Review Report (2013). The Board abandoned this practice as a result. Careful consideration should be given to how these committees operate when implementing this process. The Board recently revised its policy on Board Committees during the board meeting on February 14, 2022 (Board Policy BBC: Board Committees). Additional training for board members and the selection of a party or parties to act as parliamentarian(s) would assist in moving a committee process forward and managing the public work of the Board.

Interviews with all board members indicate that their processes for managing board members who are acting in violation of board principles and protocols or of Board Policy as outlined in their Board Handbook are not being followed. Specific questions were directed to all board members during the individual interviews about actions of the board that have been outside of the parameters defined by board policy. Examples of these violations have been cited in this report. In every case, no one could cite any specific way in which these actions were addressed in line with the procedures for addressing violations, although everyone could identify what those violations were. In a conversation with the Board Chair, the team emphasized the importance of following these procedures with fidelity and integrity. This is the most important finding from the team. The Board must monitor its own behaviors. References to board member violations stated in the Board Handbook include:

Process for Addressing Board Member Violations

- The principles and protocols in this handbook have been developed to ensure that the Board is a positive force in moving the district forward and that it functions effectively as a corporate body in governing and overseeing the management of the district.
- It is essential for the success of this effort that all members of the Board respect the principles and protocols included in this manual, as well as adhere to Board Policy. To that end, the Board has developed a process for working with members who may be acting in violation of these principles and protocols or of Board Policy.

- In the event of a member's willful and continuing violation of policy or these protocols, the Board will seek remedy by the following process:
 1. Private conversation between the offending member and the Board Chair or his or her designee.
 2. Discussion in closed session between the offending member and the full Board.
 3. After a discussion in closed session and with direction from the Board, a written reprimand, citing specific policy violations, will be sent by certified mail to the offending member by the Board Chair or other board member designated by the Board.
 4. Completion of 3-6 hours of professional development as appropriate for violation of policy or protocol.

The Monitoring Review Team for the DeKalb County School District recognizes the Board, the Superintendent, and district leaders' efforts in addressing the Cognia Performance Standards and Recommendations outlined within the previous Engagement Review Report, March of 2022. Although the system has completed some work, a culture built on trust and transparency has not yet been fully established. While board members clearly understand board member behavior expectations as outlined in board policy and their locally developed Board Handbook, the Board has not fully and effectively implemented what was learned and reviewed in these tools to create a positive culture focused on successful student outcomes. The Monitoring Review Team noted that the Board does not consistently function as a cohesive unit in all aspects of its duties.

Interviews with all current board members indicate that each member has a high level of commitment to what they perceive their role to be and to support the overall success of the district. Further information gathered from these interviews indicates there is lack of clarity as to how they perceive their roles and responsibilities and how their roles are defined by board policy and the board handbook.

After a thorough review of artifacts, conversations with all current board members, and interviews with 21 administrators, several central office administrators, the Georgia Department of Education Advisor, and the interim superintendent, the Monitoring Review Team has determined that little progress has been made with respect to Cognia Performance Standard 1.5.

Directives

- Review and renew board member commitment to the vision and mission of the DeKalb County School District and board member role and responsibility regarding the overall success of the district and learning outcomes for all students.
- Engage in a thoughtful and reflective review of recent Board Self-Assessment results to determine areas of focus and next steps.
- Examine current structures in place that support efficient and effective Board operations.
- Ensure meetings are conducted following the prescribed procedures outlined in Robert's Rules of Order.
- Determine and commit to adhering to processes as outlined in the Board Handbook when board members are not following policy or the principles of the district.

Conclusion

Results from the Accreditation Engagement Review from March 2022 indicate the district has much to be proud of in relation to what has been accomplished for teaching and learning. Highlights from that report show that the district has a clear focus on improving teaching and learning with a renewed focus and increased accountability. Continuous improvement is forefront, and the district employs a robust, inclusive, and formalized process that engages and enlists input from stakeholders. The DCSD continues to demonstrate a focus on the well-being and social/mental health of everyone in the family.

To maintain the momentum described in the Accreditation Engagement Review Report of March 2022, the Board must act on the information shared in this report. It is critical not only for the future of the students at the DeKalb County School District but also in the ability of the district to attract and retain high-quality individuals, most importantly the superintendent.

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 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 the Cognia Performance Standard (1.5).
- Complete and submit a Progress Report to Cognia after addressing the Directives.
- Schedule and host a Monitoring Review by **December 2023**.