



Monitoring Review Report

**Gilmer County School System
Ellijay, Georgia**

Dates of Review: December 2-4, 2014

Monitoring Review Report

Introduction

This report summarizes the findings of the Monitoring Review held on December 2-4, 2014, to Gilmer County School System, Ellijay, Georgia. The purpose of the Monitoring Review was to review the institution's progress toward addressing Required Actions from the Special Review held on May 18-20, 2014.

Activities of the Monitoring Team

In preparation for the Monitoring Review, the team reviewed the institution's progress report and related documentation. The system provided the following electronic artifacts in advance along with the progress report:

- Professional Development Calendar (Artifact #1)
- Professional Development Needs Assessment (Artifact #2)
- eBoardmanship 12 Topics (Artifact #3)
- Georgia School Board Association Roles and Responsibilities training agenda and participant sign-in (Artifact #4)
- Georgia School Board Association Board of Education Timeline of Services (Artifact #5)
- Policy Review Calendar (Artifact #6)
- Charter Governing Council training topics (Artifact #7)
- Georgia School Board Association Effective Meetings training PowerPoint presentation and Board meeting documentation (Artifact #8)
- Self-Evaluation instrument (Artifact #9)
- Georgia School Board Association Timeline of Services (Artifact #5)
- Georgia School Board Association Effective Meetings training PowerPoint presentation and Board meeting documentation (Artifact #8)
- Georgia School Board Association Robert's Rules of Order training presentation materials and Board meeting minutes (Artifact #10)
- Georgia School Board Association Quality Board criteria (Artifact #11)
- Georgia School Board Association Governance Team Roles and Responsibilities, Ethics and the Governance Team, and Determining Who Makes the Decision training agenda and materials (Artifact #12)
- Board of Education Monday meeting agendas (Artifact #13)
- Board of Education/Superintendent Protocols and Norms (Artifact #14)
- Stakeholder meeting agenda and participant sign-in sheets (Artifact #15)
- Board of Education individual meeting agendas (Sessions 1 and 2) (Artifact #16)
- Superintendent Survey (Artifact #17)
- Gilmer County Charter Schools Web page and link at: www.gilmerschools.com and <https://eboard.eboardsolutions.com/index.aspx?S=4023>
- Community Forum agenda and sign-in sheet Georgia School Board Association Effective Meetings training PowerPoint presentation and Board meeting documentation (Artifact #18)

Once on site, the team engaged in the following activities:

- Interviews with the superintendent and the board facilitator;
- Interviews with the four current board members;
- Interviews with the assistant superintendent and seven central office directors;
- Interviews with the principals of all six schools;
- Interviews with eleven teacher representatives from all six schools, some of whom were members of School Governance Teams;
- Interviews with ten stakeholders some of whom were parents or grandparents of students, members of School Governance Teams, members of the Local Education Action Forum, concerned citizens and two former board members;
- Review of artifacts supplied in response to the three Required Actions from the May 2014 Special Review;
- Team deliberations and report preparation.

The Monitoring Review Team used the findings from these activities and evidence reviewed to assess the progress the institution has made toward addressing the Required Actions made by the Special Review Team.

Findings

The Monitoring Team's findings are organized by each of the Required Actions made by the May 18-20, 2014, Special Review Team. For each Required Action, the Monitoring Review Team provides a Performance Level score, summary of findings and directives to guide next steps or recommendations for sustaining progress made.

Required Action 1: Develop and implement a plan for ongoing board training focused on (1) board member roles and responsibilities for developing and overseeing policy (2) compliance with policies and procedures, (3) ensuring board members have a clear and comprehensive understanding of all policies through which they govern and (4) team-building and productive collaboration.

Performance Level score: Indicator 2.1

2.1	The governing body establishes policies and support practices that ensure effective administration of the system and its schools.	Rating 3
Level 4	Policies and practices clearly and directly support the system's purpose and direction and the effective operation of the system and its schools. Policies and practices require and have mechanisms in place for monitoring conditions that support student learning, effective instruction and assessment that produce equitable and challenging learning experiences for all students. There are policies and practices requiring and giving direction for professional growth of all staff. Policies and practices provide clear requirements, direction for and oversight of fiscal management at all levels of the system.	

Level 3	Policies and practices support the system's purpose and direction and the effective operation of the system and its schools. Policies and practices promote conditions that support student learning, effective instruction and assessment that produce equitable and challenging learning experiences for all students. There are policies and practices regarding professional growth of all staff. Policies and practices provide requirements, direction for and oversight of fiscal management at all levels of the system.
Level 2	Policies and practices generally support the system's purpose and direction and the effective operation of the system and its schools. Most policies and practices promote conditions that support student learning, effective instruction and assessment that produce equitable and challenging learning experiences for all students. There are policies and practices regarding professional growth of staff. Policies and practices provide requirements and oversight of fiscal management.
Level 1	Little connection exists between policies and practices of the governing board and the purpose, direction and effective operation of the system and its schools. Policies and practices seldom or never address conditions that support student learning, effective instruction or assessment that produce equitable and challenging learning experiences for students. There are few or no policies and practices regarding professional growth of staff. Policies provide requirements of fiscal management.

Summary of Findings: The school system has developed a robust professional learning plan that encompasses board member training on topics such as roles and responsibilities, developing and overseeing policy, compliance, and teambuilding. Included in the artifact compilation was a Professional Development Plan. The plan included sectional narratives on the topics of New Board Member Orientation and Board Member Development Opportunities. Attached to the plan was a Professional Development Calendar that outlined monthly topics for board training and identified a schedule for policy review. The calendar, which covers 2014 and 2015, includes professional learning sessions on the twelve chapters of the Georgia School Board Association (GSBA) eBoardmanship Manual as well as other topics such as the Strategic Plan, Vision, Mission and Beliefs, Conducting Effective Meetings, Conflict Resolution, Communication, and Compliance through Self-Assessment. According to interviews with central office staff and board members, these monthly training sessions will be conducted during open board meetings and will be facilitated by the superintendent and/or other identified instructors. The Professional Learning Calendar also includes board retreats, something new for the school system.

Prior to the review by the Monitoring Review Team, the Board had engaged in several other professional learning sessions facilitated by presenters including Dr. Jim Puckett and Zenda Bowie of the Georgia School Board Association (GSBA) on August 18 and August 25, respectively, and Mike Bryans of AdvancED Georgia also on August 25. The artifacts included sign-in sheets documenting attendees at each session as well as meeting agendas. Additionally, the school system contracted with Keith Porter, an external facilitator, to help document steps taken to address the Required Actions established by the AdvancED Special Review Team. According to interviews, the facilitator met with board members individually on two occasions, met with board members collectively on two occasions, and met with stakeholder groups, including teachers.

To identify specific topics for ongoing professional learning, a needs assessment was completed by the GSBA. Results of the assessment identified needed training specifically in the areas of governance as it relates to the leadership team of the board and superintendent and financial governance training as it relates to ensuring sound fiscal policy that maximizes student achievement. To gather quantitative data, a board member Self-Evaluation Instrument was developed. After each board meeting, members are to rate themselves on a list of 15 items using a Likert scale that ranges from "4-Strongly Agree" to "1-Strongly Disagree." The items listed on the Self-Evaluation,

which was included in the artifact collection, articulated prompts such as: “My discussion and decision-making was aligned with the system’s vision, mission, core values and guiding principles.” and “I did not allow personal interests or those of another organization to conflict with the school system.”

Written policies that are supportive of the system’s purpose and direction and the effective operation of the system and its schools are in place. These policies address numerous areas including professional growth and directions for oversight of fiscal management at all levels in the system. However, the practices of the Board at this point are not always clearly aligned with the guidance and expectations outlined in the school system’s policies and procedures. For example, references were repeatedly made regarding the Board not adhering to its own policy on public participation during board meetings. Based on interviews, self-policing of the Board’s operational procedures has not become a perfected habit at this time. One interviewee said “the fear of the unknown regarding accreditation has caused somewhat of an awakening but has not totally caused a change in behaviors.”

The intent of professional learning is to equip participants with the knowledge, skills and attributes needed to effectively perform specific duties and responsibilities. Therefore, the effectiveness of professional learning is measured not by attendance at the training sessions, but through implementation of the learning from these sessions. Even though the school system has worked extensively in engaging board members in professional learning and has established a comprehensive calendar for ongoing sessions, board members are still in the early stages in implementing much of the learning from the trainings. In order to support changes in behavior and institutional culture, the learning from professional development sessions must be routinely practiced and demonstrated. Such routine and regular demonstration of knowledge and skills in governance and leadership will better ensure that practices become systemic.

Directives/Recommendations:

- Monitor implementation of learning from professional development sessions on best practices for board operations by regularly collecting, analyzing, and using data from the Self-Evaluation Survey, from stakeholder perception surveys, from reviews of board meetings minutes and recordings, and from other accountability artifacts.

Required Action 2: Develop and execute a written plan for monitoring the Board’s actions and behaviors to ensure compliance with the Board’s own Code of Ethics and Conflict of Interest Policy, as well as proper procedures for Board meetings and laws and regulations that govern local school boards.

Performance Level score: Indicator 2.2

2.2	The governing body operates responsibly and functions effectively.	Rating 2
Level 4	The governing body has implemented a process to evaluate its decisions and actions to ensure they are in accordance with defined roles and responsibilities, a formally adopted code of ethics and free of conflict of interest. Governing body members are required to participate in a systematic, formal professional development process regarding the roles and responsibilities of the governing body and its individual members. The professional development curriculum also includes conflict resolution, decision-making, supervision and evaluation, and fiscal responsibility. Members comply with all policies, procedures, laws and regulations and function as a cohesive unit for the benefit of effective system operation and student learning.	

Level 3	The governing body has a process to ensure that its decisions and actions are in accordance with defined roles and responsibilities, a code of ethics and free of conflict of interest. Governing body members participate in a systematic, formal professional development process regarding the roles and responsibilities of the governing body and its individual members. The governing body complies with all policies, procedures, laws and regulations, and function as a cohesive unit.
Level 2	The governing body ensures that its decisions and actions are in accordance with defined roles and responsibilities, are ethical and free of conflict of interest. Governing body members participate in professional development regarding the roles and responsibilities of the governing body and its individual members. The governing body complies with all policies, procedures, laws and regulations.
Level 1	The governing body has no method for or does not ensure that decisions and actions are free of conflict of interest, are ethical and in accordance with defined roles and responsibilities. Governing body members rarely or never participate in professional development regarding the roles and responsibilities of the governing body and its individual members. Evidence indicates the governing body does not always comply with policies, procedures, laws and regulations.

Summary of Findings:

The facilitator who has worked with board members throughout the fall of 2014 identified five priorities areas for work, all of which relate directly to areas in the Code of Ethics and Conflict of Interest Policy:

- Proper procedure for visiting schools
- Refraining from involvement in bidding processes, unless specifically invited
- Conducting public comment in board meetings according to accepted rules
- Understanding board authority as a body
- Following the protocols signed by board members (see below).

The Board of Education has developed protocols to guide relationships between the Board and the superintendent, consistent with the Gilmer County Board of Education Code of Ethics and Conflict of Interest policy. Topics covered by the document clarify authority of the Board, the process for developing and sharing meeting agendas, board member dynamics, communication, and accountability. The document concludes with the following statement: “This document has been covered publicly in its entirety with the Board of Education and the Superintendent of Schools, and all parties agree to adhere with the expectations noted therein. Failure to comply with the aforementioned protocol statements will be addressed individually, by the Board of Education collectively, and then will be monitored for fidelity of progress. Non-compliance may result in a punitive action for the individual(s) involved.” The document has been signed by the superintendent and the four currently serving board members.

As noted in the narrative accompanying Required Action 1, the Gilmer County Board of Education has engaged in training in the laws and regulations for board members. In addition, very specific training has been provided on conducting productive meetings. The board’s facilitator shared with the Monitoring Review Team the need to impress upon board members that board meetings are business meetings, not town hall sessions. Numerous internal and external stakeholders noted improvements in the public persona of board members during meetings, as well as improvements in efficiency in conducting business. One area for continued attention is in the area of public participation; attendees at meetings noted that at one recent meeting, public participation was not controlled in accordance with the rules that the presiding officer’s had just read aloud prior to the Public Comment section of the meeting. Witnesses also shared that at a subsequent board meeting, public comment was handled in model fashion.

One administrator indicated that the board attorney did not always provide timely guidance or correction to board members when meetings deviated from prescribed rules.

The Board shared with the Monitoring Review Team an instrument entitled *Board Member Self-Evaluation* to be used during Work Sessions, Regular Meetings, and Called Meetings, as described in the Summary of Findings for Required Action 1. The instrument was developed in-house and at the time of the December 2014 Special Monitoring Review had not yet been put into use. Board members and central office personnel involved in the development of the instrument acknowledged that it may require further refinement in order to be fully effective. They were, however, very positive about its potential for providing ongoing data on individual board member and collective board performance. The instrument could be helpful in identifying problems that can be addressed before they become patterns of behavior that compromise board effectiveness. The Monitoring Review Team recognizes that use of the instrument does represent an honest attempt to ensure that board training will have continuing impact and that improvements in board functioning will be sustained and increased.

The Monitoring Review Team acknowledges that the Board of Education has laid a foundation for its execution of the protocols. The effect of these initiatives over the long-term remains to be seen, particularly sustained Board self-evaluation. While stakeholders noted that progress has been made, e.g., in recent months, board members seldom, if ever, visit schools unannounced and promote individual agendas with school-level stakeholders, there are also concerns about whether all board members will continue to act appropriately without continued monitoring.

Directives/Recommendations:

- Implement the Board Member Self-Evaluation instrument routinely; adjust the instrument based on use in order to increase its effectiveness.
- Ensure that all board members, including new ones, are routinely briefed on the Board of Education/Superintendent Protocols and that issues of non-compliance are addressed in accordance with the rules set forth within the document.

Required Action 3: Establish and implement policies and procedures that ensure delineation of duties between the governing board and the administration focused specifically on appropriate and effective decision-making and communication between board members and school system stakeholders.

Performance Level score: Indicator 2.3

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.	Rating 2
Level 4	The governing body consistently protects, supports and respects the autonomy of system and school leadership to accomplish goals for achievement and instruction and to manage day-to-day operations of the system and its schools. The governing body maintains a clear distinction between its roles and responsibilities and those of system and school leadership.	
Level 3	The governing body protects, supports and respects the autonomy of system and school leadership to accomplish goals for improvement in student learning and instruction and to manage day-to-day operations of the system and its schools. The governing body maintains a distinction between its roles and responsibilities and those of system and school leadership.	

Level 2	The governing body generally protects, supports and respects the autonomy of system and school leadership to accomplish goals for improvement in student learning and instruction and to manage day-to-day operations of the system and its schools. The governing body usually maintains a distinction between its roles and responsibilities and those of system and school leadership.
Level 1	The governing body rarely or never protects, supports and respects the autonomy of system or school leadership to accomplish goals for improvement in student learning and instruction and to manage day-to-day operations of the system and its schools. The governing body does not distinguish between its roles and responsibilities and those of system or school leadership or frequently usurps the autonomy of system or school leadership.

Summary of Findings:

The Gilmer County Board of Education received excellent professional training from the Georgia School Boards Association (GSBA), the Georgia School Superintendents Association and AdvancED with a focus on policy development and implementation and the role of the board. The Professional Development Plan shows scheduled sessions for each of the twelve chapters/areas of board policies. Along with this, the Board has developed policies which define their role in a number of areas. Protocols that lay out the commitments of board members regarding the manner in which they will conduct business collectively rather than individually have been developed and signed by all four board members. These documents definitively describe how work will be accomplished and how members will be addressed should they fail to carry out responsibilities in this manner.

On November 3, 2014, Zenda Bowie of GSBA conducted a training session on how to conduct effective meetings with a focus on planning the meeting, following Roberts Rules of Order and integrating effective approaches to public participation in the meeting and how board members should respond to public comments. It was reported by stakeholders, including staff members and community representatives, that on the day of this training a session followed in which the public was invited to provide input regarding a possible upcoming local option sales tax. The protocol on which the training focused was not evident in that session. This posed an embarrassing situation for some stakeholders because attendance was large and included a contingency of staff members and families attending for the Teacher of the Year recognition. While in one later session, board members followed the protocol effectively; stakeholders fear that the board members have not had enough experience in following this procedure specified in their policy and that these new practices have not been internalized or institutionalized for consistency in practice.

Stakeholders expressed concern that relationships among board members are not firmly established and that it will be difficult for them to self-regulate in the event that a board member violates the protocols. Stakeholders also commented that there is mistrust and concern because of the unstable environment created through years of activity in which a school was closed, significant reduction in force events occurred, numerous administrative staff members were moved and new personnel hired, and a superintendent terminated. School and system administrators were united in their statement that board members have not been in their buildings for the purpose of interfering with the decision-making process. Administrators asserted that they have the needed autonomy to make the day-to-day decisions and that they are supported in that work. It will be important for stakeholders at all levels (community and staff) to observe consistent and trustworthy practice in order to restore a level of trust.

There continues to be a need for a systematic means of communicating with stakeholders regarding the activities of the school board and the schools. There is sporadic use of surveys generated from various sources and attempts to communicate through newspaper articles and the website. A recent town hall meeting resulted in fewer than twenty (20) attendees. The system's strategic plan lists some powerful strategies for two-way communication with stakeholders that require ongoing attention.

Directives/Recommendations:

- Internalize and institutionalize the practices taught and learned during professional learning opportunities to ensure that board members comply with the protocols designed by them for effective interaction and with board policies which delineate their roles and responsibilities for communicating and conducting meetings.
- Continue to monitor performance of the board through the use of the Board Member Self-Assessment instrument to focus on the manner in which meetings are conducted to ensure fidelity of practice and consistency with the written protocols.
- Design and implement a systematic approach for communicating with stakeholders.

Conclusion

The Monitoring Review Team recognized areas in which the institution is making progress toward the Required Actions made by the Special Review Team. Indeed, given the relatively short amount of time between the Special Review and the Monitoring Review, it is hard to see how the system could have done more than has been done to meet some of the directives, particularly those relating to board training.

The level of effort expended, particularly from September through November 2014, cannot be sustained indefinitely without cost to the system. It will be important for the Board of Education to embed and document self-evaluation processes and ongoing training into its routines so that compliance with best practice and with accreditation standards is seen as a continuous (and never-ending) process, rather than as an event.

Monitoring Review Team members had the opportunity to speak with a number of members of the School Governance Teams formed as a result of the school system's new charter status. These teams are undergoing training in their roles, including meeting management, decision-making, identifying and addressing issues, etc. It is important that the Gilmer County Board of Education model effective practice for the school-level teams that are being established to function almost as mini-school boards.

The directives provided in this report are designed to help the institution meet all of the Required Actions established by the Special Review Team. The institution may discuss these directives with AdvancED to gain assistance and support in directing their efforts to meet the Required Actions. For Required Actions that have been completed, the Monitoring Review Team has included Recommendations to support the institutions continued progress in this area.

In recognition of the progress made to date, the Monitoring Review Team recommends to the AdvancED Accreditation Commission that the accreditation status of the Gilmer County School System be moved from **Warned** status to **Advised**. The AdvancED Commission has approved this action. It is necessary that the school system demonstrate that the progress previously noted is sustained and that sufficient time is allowed for the system to address the team's recommendations.

Therefore, the institution will be expected to submit a follow-up Institution Progress Report by July 1, 2015. The institution will use the report to document additional steps it has taken to address the Required Actions of the Special Review Team as well as the recommendations outlined in this report. Following review of the Institution Progress Report, AdvancED will determine whether an on-site Monitoring Review will take place to assess the institution's progress and also consider the evidence supporting a change in the accreditation status.

About AdvancED®

Background

Dedicated to advancing excellence in education worldwide, AdvancED provides accreditation, research and professional services to 30,000 institutions in more than 70 countries. AdvancED provides accreditation under the seals of the North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement (NCA CASI), Northwest Accreditation Commission (NWAC) and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Council on Accreditation and School Improvement (SACS CASI).

The Accreditation Process

To earn and maintain accreditation, an institution must:

1. Meet the AdvancED Standards and accreditation policies.

Institutions demonstrate adherence to the AdvancED Standards/Indicators and accreditation policies, which describe the quality practices and conditions that research and best practice indicate are necessary for educational institutions to achieve quality student performance and organizational effectiveness.

2. Engage in continuous improvement.

Institutions implement a process of continuous improvement focused on improving student performance and organizational effectiveness.

3. Demonstrate quality assurance through internal and external review.

Institutions engage in a planned process of ongoing internal review and self-assessment. In addition, institutions host an External Review Team at least once every five years. The team evaluates the institution's adherence to the AdvancED Accreditation Standards and policies, assesses the efficacy of the institution's improvement process and methods for quality assurance, and identifies Powerful Practices and provides Required Actions to help the institution improve. The institution acts on the team's Required Actions and submits an Accreditation Progress Report at prescribed intervals following the External Review. Monitoring Reviews may be conducted during this time to ensure that the institution is making progress toward the Required Actions.

Special Reviews

At any point, a Special Review may be conducted in response to complaints or information about the institution and/or its system (school system, board, or corporation) to determine adherence to the AdvancED Accreditation Standards and policies. The institution and/or its system must respond to the Required Actions of the Special Review Team. Monitoring Teams may be sent to the institution and/or its system at regular intervals to ensure that progress is being made toward the Special Review Team's Required Actions. Both Special Review Teams and Monitoring Review Teams are empowered to make accreditation recommendations based upon evidence obtained during said review.

A Process of Continuous Improvement

The AdvancED accreditation process engages institutions in a continuous process of self-evaluation and improvement. The overall aim is to help institutions be the best they can be on behalf of the students they serve.