



External Review

Richmond County School System

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Date: February 3, 2013 - February 6, 2013

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Introduction to the External Review Process

Accreditation is a voluntary method of quality assurance developed more than 100 years ago by American universities and secondary schools, and designed primarily to distinguish schools adhering to a set of educational standards. Today the accreditation process is used at all levels of education, and is recognized for its ability to effectively drive student performance and continuous improvement in education.

Institutions seeking to gain or retain accreditation must meet AdvancED standards specified for their institution, demonstrate high levels of or improvement of student performance if applicable, and provide evidence of stakeholder satisfaction with the operation of the institution. The accreditation standards focus on conditions and processes within a system that impact student performance and organizational effectiveness. The power of AdvancED Performance Accreditation lies in the connections and linkages between and among the standards, student performance, and stakeholder feedback.

Institutions participate in an External Review by a team of highly qualified evaluators who examine the institution's adherence and commitment to the accreditation criteria. The External Review is the hallmark of AdvancED Performance Accreditation as it energizes and equips the leadership and stakeholders of an institution to achieve higher levels of performance and address those areas that may be hindering efforts to reach desired performance levels. External Review is a rigorous process that includes examination of evidence and relevant data, interviews with stakeholders, and observations of instruction, learning, and operations.

The AdvancED External Review Team used the AdvancED Accreditation Standards and Indicators and related criteria to guide its evaluation, looking not only for adherence to standards, but also for how the institution functioned as a whole and embodied the practices and characteristics of quality.

Using the evidence at their disposal, the AdvancED External Review Team arrived at a set of findings contained in this report. The report is presented in three sections: Findings, Conclusion, and Addenda.

Part I: Findings

The Findings section presents the External Review Team's evaluation of the AdvancED Accreditation Standards and Indicators. It also includes Powerful Practices and Opportunities for Improvement identified by the External Review Team, observations of the Learning Environment, as well as Required Actions.

Accreditation Standards and Indicators

Standards help to delineate what matters. They provide a common language through which an education community can engage in conversations about educational improvement, system effectiveness, and achievement. They serve as a foundation for planning and implementing improvement strategies and activities and for measuring success. AdvancED's Standards for Quality were developed by a committee comprised of effective educators and leaders from the fields of practice, research, and policy who applied professional wisdom, deep knowledge of effective practice, and the best available research to craft a set of robust standards that ensure excellence and continuous improvement. The standards were reviewed by internationally recognized experts in testing and measurement, teacher quality, and education research.

This section contains an evaluation of each of AdvancED's Accreditation Standards and Indicators, conclusions concerning Powerful Practices and Opportunities for Improvement related to each of the standards, and a description of the evidence examined by the External Review Team. Indicators are evaluated and rated individually by the External Review Team using a four-level performance rubric. The Standard Performance Level is the average of indicator scores for the standard.

Standard 1: Purpose and Direction

Purpose and direction are critical to successful institutions. A study conducted in 2010 by the London-based Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) reported that "in addition to improving performance, the research indicates that having a sense of shared purpose also improves employee engagement" and that "...lack of understanding around purpose can lead to demotivation and emotional detachment, which in turn lead to a disengaged and dissatisfied workforce."

AdvancED has found through its own evaluation of best practices in 30,000 institutions around the world that a successful institution commits to a shared purpose and direction and establishes expectations for student learning aligned with the institutions' vision that is supported by internal and external stakeholders. These expectations serve as the focus for assessing student performance and overall institution effectiveness.

Standard	Standard Performance Level
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The system maintains and communicates at all levels of the organization a purpose and direction for continuous improvement that commit to high expectations for learning as well as shared values and beliefs about teaching and learning.			2.25
Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
1.1	The system engages in a systematic, inclusive, and comprehensive process to review, revise, and communicate a system-wide purpose for student success.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Interviews•Observations	1
1.2	The system ensures that each school engages in a systematic, inclusive, and comprehensive process to review, revise, and communicate a school purpose for student success.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Examples of school purpose statements if different from the district purpose statement•Observations•Interviews•School Improvement Plans, School Self Assessment Reports	3
1.3	The school leadership and staff at all levels of the system commit to a culture that is based on shared values and beliefs about teaching and learning and supports challenging, equitable educational programs and learning experiences for all students that include achievement of learning, thinking, and life skills.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Observations•Interviews•Statements of shared values and beliefs about teaching and learning•The district strategic plan	2
1.4	Leadership at all levels of the system implement a continuous improvement process that provides clear direction for improving conditions that support student learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Interviews•Examples of schools continuous improvement plans•Professional development plans and implementation timelines on topics related to equity, organizational effectiveness, and improved instruction and programs•Observations•The district data profile	3

Standard 2: Governance and Leadership

Governance and leadership are key factors in raising institutional quality. Leaders, both local administrators and governing boards/authorities, are responsible for ensuring all learners achieve while also managing many other facets of an institution. Institutions that function effectively do so without tension between the governing board/authority, administrators, and educators and have established relationships of mutual respect and a shared vision (Feuerstein & Opfer, 1998). In a meta-analysis of school leadership research, Leithwood & Sun (2012) found that leaders (school and governing boards/authority) can significantly "influence school conditions through their achievement of a shared vision and agreed-on goals for the organization, their high expectations and support of organizational members, and practices that strengthen school culture and foster collaboration within the organization." With the increasing demands of accountability placed on institutional leaders, leaders who empower others need considerable autonomy and involve their school communities to attain school improvement

goals. Leaders who engage in such practices experience a greater level of success (Fink & Brayman, 2006). Similarly, governing boards/authorities that focus on policy-making are more likely to allow school leaders the autonomy to make decisions that impact teachers and students and are less responsive to politicization than boards/authorities that respond to vocal citizens (Greene, 1992).

AdvancED has found through its own evaluation of best practices in 30,000 institutions around the world that a successful institution has leaders who are advocates for the institution's vision and improvement efforts. The leaders provide direction and allocate resources to implement curricular and co-curricular programs that enable students to achieve expectations for their learning. Leaders encourage collaboration and shared responsibility for school improvement among stakeholders. The institution's policies, procedures, and organizational conditions ensure equity of learning opportunities and support for innovation.

Standard			Standard Performance Level
The system operates under governance and leadership that promote and support student performance and system effectiveness.			2.17
Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
2.1	The governing body establishes policies and supports practices that ensure effective administration of the system and its schools.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Professional development plans •Student handbooks •Staff handbooks •District operations manuals •Communications to stakeholder about policy revisions •School handbooks 	2

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2.2	The governing body operates responsibly and functions effectively.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Governing authority minutes relating to training•List of assigned staff for compliance•Proof of legal counsel•Governing authority training plan•Assurances, certifications•Findings of internal and external reviews of compliance with laws, regulations, and policies•Observations•Historical compliance data•Interviews•Governing authority policies on roles and responsibilities, conflict of interest•Governing code of ethics	3
2.3	The governing body ensures that the leadership at all levels has the autonomy to meet goals for achievement and instruction and to manage day-to-day operations effectively.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Communications regarding governing authority actions•District strategic plan•Examples of school improvement plans•Roles and responsibilities of school leadership•Roles and responsibilities of district leadership•Observations•Interviews•Survey results regarding functions of the governing authority and operations of the district•Stakeholder input and feedback•Agendas and minutes of meetings•Self Assessment	2

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2.4	Leadership and staff at all levels of the system foster a culture consistent with the system's purpose and direction.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Examples of decisions aligned with the district's strategic plan•Professional development offerings and plans•Examples of collaboration and shared leadership•Examples of decisions aligned with the school's purpose statement•Interviews•Survey results•Observations•Examples of decisions in support of the schools' continuous improvement plans•Examples of improvement efforts and innovations in the educational programs•Examples of decisions aligned with the district's purpose and direction•Self Assessment	2
2.5	Leadership engages stakeholders effectively in support of the system's purpose and direction.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Minutes from meetings with stakeholders•Examples of stakeholder input or feedback resulting in district action•Interviews•Survey responses•Involvement of stakeholders in a school improvement plan•Involvement of stakeholders in district strategic plan•Observations•Self Assessment	2

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2.6	Leadership and staff supervision and evaluation processes result in improved professional practice in all areas of the system and improved student success.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Interviews•Examples of professional development offerings and plans tied specifically to the results from supervision and evaluation•Governing body policy on supervision and evaluation•Job specific criteria•Observations•Supervision and evaluation documents with criteria for improving professional practice throughout the system and student success noted•Representative supervision and evaluation reports•Self Assessment	2
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Opportunities for Improvement

Indicator

1. Refine continuous improvement practices to ensure deliberate alignment to the system's purpose and direction.

2.4

Artifacts and interviews revealed inconsistent continuous school improvement practices throughout the system. Refining continuous improvement practices will promote collective accountability, high standards for students and staff, and aligned decisions and actions to achieve the system's purpose.

2. Maximize stakeholder involvement in the participation and engagement in the system and its schools to yield increased support of the system's purpose and direction.

2.5

Interviews and surveys revealed that there are varying degrees of stakeholder involvement in awareness, development, and implementation of the system's purpose and direction. Increasing stakeholder involvement throughout the system will create and enhance the sense of ownership and community.

Standard 3: Teaching and Assessing for Learning

A high-quality and effective system has services, practices, and curriculum that ensure teacher effectiveness. Research has shown that an effective teacher is a key factor for learners to achieve to their highest potential and be prepared for a successful future. The positive influence an effective educator has on learning is a combination of "student motivation, parental involvement" and the "quality of leadership" (Ding & Sherman, 2006). Research also suggests that quality educators must have a variety of quantifiable and intangible characteristics, which include strong communication skills, knowledge of content, and knowledge of how to teach the content. The school's curriculum and instructional program should develop learners' skills that lead them to think about the world in complex ways (Conley, 2007) and prepare them to have knowledge that extends beyond the academic areas. In order to achieve these goals, teachers must have pedagogical skills as well as content knowledge (Baumert et al, 2010). The

acquisition and refinement of teachers' pedagogical skills occur most effectively through collaboration and professional development. These are a "necessary approach to improving teacher quality" (Colbert et al, 2008). According to Marks, Louis, & Printy (2002), school staff that engage in "active organizational learning also have higher achieving students in contrast to those that do not." Likewise, a study conducted by Horng, Klasik, & Loeb (2010), concluded that leadership in effective schools, "supports teachers by creating collaborative work environments." Institutional leaders have a responsibility to provide experiences, resources, and time for educators to engage in meaningful professional learning that promotes student learning and educator quality.

AdvancED has found through its own evaluation of best practices in 30,000 institutions around the world that a successful institution implements a curriculum based on clear and measurable expectations for student learning that provides opportunities for all students to acquire requisite knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Teachers use proven instructional practices that actively engage students in the learning process. Teachers provide opportunities for students to apply their knowledge and skills to real world situations. Teachers give students feedback to improve their performance.

Standard		Standard Performance Level	
The system's curriculum, instructional design, and assessment practices guide and ensure teacher effectiveness and student learning across all grades and courses.		2.42	
Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
3.1	The system's curriculum provides equitable and challenging learning experiences that ensure all students have sufficient opportunities to develop learning, thinking, and life skills that lead to success at the next level.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Learning expectations for different courses and programs •Interviews •Course, program, or school schedules •Course or program descriptions •Survey results •Lesson plans •Observations •Posted learning objectives •Self Assessment 	3

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3.2	Curriculum, instruction, and assessment throughout the system are monitored and adjusted systematically in response to data from multiple assessments of student learning and an examination of professional practice.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Curriculum guides•Common assessments•Observations•Interviews•Program descriptions•Products – scope and sequence, curriculum maps•Lesson plans aligned to the curriculum•Self Assessment	2
3.3	Teachers throughout the district engage students in their learning through instructional strategies that ensure achievement of learning expectations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Examples of professional development offerings and plans tied specifically to the results from supervision and evaluation•Authentic assessments•Examples of teacher use of technology as an instructional resource•Examples of student use of technology as a learning tool•Student work demonstrating the application of knowledge•Examples of professional development offerings and plans tied specifically to the approved or prescribed instructional strategies and programs•Interviews•Observations•Interdisciplinary projects•Self Assessment	2

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3.4	System and school leaders monitor and support the improvement of instructional practices of teachers to ensure student success.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Curriculum maps•Supervision and evaluation procedures•Documentation of collection of lesson plans, grade books, or other data record systems•Peer or mentoring opportunities and interactions•Surveys results•Administrative classroom observation protocols and logs•Interviews•Observations•Professional development offerings and plans tied to the prescribed education program, instructional strategies, developmentally appropriate practices, and student success•Self Assessment	2
3.5	The system operates as a collaborative learning organization through structures that support improved instruction and student learning at all levels.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Observations•Common language, protocols and reporting tools•Agendas and minutes of collaborative learning committees•Calendar/schedule of learning community meetings•Survey results•Professional development funding to promote professional learning communities•Interviews•Peer coaching guidelines and procedures•Evidence of informal conversations that reflect collaboration about student learning•Examples of improvements to content and instructional practice resulting from collaboration•Examples of cross curricular or program projects, interdisciplinary instruction, and classroom action research projects•Action research at the high school level, Collaborative teams across the system	3

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3.6	Teachers implement the system's instructional process in support of student learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Observations•Examples of learning expectations and standards of performance•Interviews	2
3.7	Mentoring, coaching, and induction programs support instructional improvement consistent with the system's values and beliefs about teaching and learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Descriptions and schedules of mentoring, coaching, and induction programs with references to district and school beliefs and values about teaching and learning•Interviews•Professional learning calendar with activities for instructional support of new staff•Personnel manuals with information related to new hires including mentoring, coaching, and induction practices	3
3.8	The system and all of its schools engage families in meaningful ways in their children's education and keep them informed of their children's learning progress.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Examples of learning expectations and standards of performance•Observations•Survey results•Volunteer program with variety of options for participation•List of varied activities and communications modes with families, e.g., info portal, online, newsletters, parent centers, academic nights, open house, early release days•Calendar outlining when and how families are provided information on child's progress•Parental/family/caregiver involvement plan including activities, timeframes, and evaluation process•Interviews•Self Assessment	3
3.9	The system designs and evaluates structures in all schools whereby each student is well known by at least one adult advocate in the student's school who supports that student's educational experience.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Master schedule with time for formalized structure	2
3.10	Grading and reporting are based on clearly defined criteria that represent the attainment of content knowledge and skills and are consistent across grade levels and courses.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Interviews•Policies, processes, and procedures on grading and reporting	2

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3.11	All staff members participate in a continuous program of professional learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Evaluation tools for professional learning•Survey results•Brief explanation of alignment between professional learning and identified needs•Crosswalk between professional learning and district purpose and direction•Interviews•Self Assessment	2
3.12	The system and its schools provide and coordinate learning support services to meet the unique learning needs of students.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Schedules, lesson plans, or example student learning plans showing the implementation of learning support services•List of learning support services and student population served by such services•Interviews•Observations•Training and professional learning related to research on unique characteristics of learning•Data used to identify unique learning needs of students•Self Assessment	3

Opportunities for Improvement

Indicator

1. Provide more timely feedback to students regarding their academic performance and engage them in self-reflection.

3.3

Observation and discussions with staff indicated a lack of consistency in student self-reflection and feedback to students. Recognizing the staff is well on its way with implementing strong instructional strategies, the need to help students self-reflect and foster their critical thinking skills as well as provide timely feedback to students is paramount in improving the quality of mastery learning.

2. Provide quality exemplars to serve as a model to guide and inform students through the instructional process.

3.6

Classroom observation revealed a lack of consistency in providing exemplars to guide and inform students in producing high quality work. When learning expectations are clear to students through the use of exemplars, students are better able to hit the learning target.

3. Align grading across all courses by creating policies and processes that are systematically evaluated for fidelity of implementation. 3.10

Grading policies, processes, and procedures are not consistently evident nor evaluated by course, subject or grade level. Standards based reporting is one option to improve grading and will inform instruction in order to give meaning to grades for students and parents.

Standard 4: Resources and Support Systems

Institutions, regardless of their size, need access to sufficient resources and systems of support to be able to engage in sustained and meaningful efforts that result in a continuous improvement cycle. Indeed, a study conducted by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (Pan, 2003) "demonstrated a strong relationship between resources and student success...both the level of resources and their explicit allocation seem to affect educational outcomes."

AdvancED has found through its own evaluation of best practices in 30,000 institutions around the world that a successful institution has sufficient human, material, and fiscal resources to implement a curriculum that enables students to achieve expectations for student learning, to meet special needs, and to comply with applicable regulations. The institution employs and allocates staffs who are well qualified for their assignments. The institution provides a safe learning environment for students and staff. The institution provides ongoing learning opportunities for all staff to improve their effectiveness. The institution ensures compliance with applicable governmental regulations.

Standard		Standard Performance Level	
The system has resources and provides services in all schools that support its purpose and direction to ensure success for all students.		2.25	
Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
4.1	The system engages in a systematic process to recruit, employ, and retain a sufficient number of qualified professional and support staff to fulfill their roles and responsibilities and support the purpose and direction of the system, individual schools, and educational programs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Interviews •Assessments of staffing needs •Policies, processes, procedures and other documentation related to the hiring, placement and retention of professional and support staff for the district and schools •Self Assessment 	3
4.2	Instructional time, material resources, and fiscal resources are sufficient to support the purpose and direction of the system, individual schools, educational programs, and system operations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Examples of school schedules •Examples of school calendars •Interviews •Alignment of district budget with district purpose and direction •Self Assessment 	3

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4.3	The system maintains facilities, services, and equipment to provide a safe, clean, and healthy environment for all students and staff.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Interviews•Observations•Documentation of compliance with local and state inspections requirements•Self Assessment	3
4.4	The system demonstrates strategic resource management that includes long-range planning in support of the purpose and direction of the system.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•District quality control procedures showing the monitoring of compliance with district expectations for school facilities, learning environments•Survey results•Interviews•Self Assessment	2
4.5	The system provides, coordinates, and evaluates the effectiveness of information resources and related personnel to support educational programs throughout the system.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Observations•Interviews	2
4.6	The system provides a technology infrastructure and equipment to support the system's teaching, learning, and operational needs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Survey results•District technology plan and budget to improve technology services and infrastructure for the district-level and school-level•Interviews•Observations•Self Assessment	2
4.7	The system provides, coordinates, and evaluates the effectiveness of support systems to meet the physical, social, and emotional needs of the student population being served.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Interviews	1
4.8	The system provides, coordinates, and evaluates the effectiveness of services that support the counseling, assessment, referral, educational, and career planning needs of all students.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Interviews•Description of referral process	2

Opportunities for Improvement

Indicator

1. Revisit the system's technology plan to implement a fully functioning technology infrastructure, upgrade equipment, and secure highly qualified technical support staff to support teacher and student learning to build and support 21st century classrooms throughout the system. 4.6

Interviews with stakeholders, documents provided by the school system, including the 3-year technology plan, and walkthroughs in classrooms revealed the need for an improved technology infrastructure, updated equipment, and highly qualified technical staff. Ensuring all buildings and classrooms have the resources, including highly qualified technical staff to support teacher and student learning, particularly in the area of 21st Century Skills, is a priority as evidenced in the system's technology plan. Though sympathetic to the unfortunate budgetary constraints the system has endured, staff were able to cite several examples of ways the current infrastructure and equipment are not sufficient or able to meet the needs of all students. Staff expressed a significant concern that five technical support staff members and two technology instructional support staff members are not enough to support the system's staff and student technology needs. Providing sufficient resources and staff to support the acquisition of 21st century skills is essential for student learning. In addition, possession of modern-day skills by all staff members is necessary to ensure efficient and innovative work in the day-to-day operations of the system.

2. Prioritize the system's processes to determine the physical, social, and emotional needs of students and implement programs to meet the needs of all students. 4.7

As evidenced in interviews with stakeholders and walkthroughs in classrooms, there is a need for an improved process of evaluating the physical, social, and emotional needs of students and in implementing sufficient programming to meet these determined needs. Meeting the physical, social, and emotional needs of students is a key ingredient to ensuring academic progress and success of all students.

3. Evaluate the effectiveness of services that support counseling, assessment, referral, educational, and career planning needs of all students. 4.8

Evidence provided in the artifacts, interviews with stakeholders, and walkthroughs in classrooms revealed services that support counseling, assessment, referral, educational and career planning needs of students were not systematically being evaluated to determine effectiveness. This evidence illustrates the need for the school system to be more equitable rather than equal in its services, increasing the need for regular evaluation for effectiveness. Establishing effective evaluation processes throughout the system is a critical step in ensuring that services are maximized to meet the needs of all students.

Standard 5: Using Results for Continuous Improvement

Systems with strong improvement processes are moving beyond anxiety about the current reality and focusing on priorities and initiatives for the future. Using results, that is, data and other information, to guide continuous improvement is key to an institution's success. A study conducted by Datnow, Park, & Wohlstetter (2007) from the Center on Educational Governance at the University of Southern California indicated that data can shed light on existing areas of strength and weakness and also guide improvement strategies in a systematic and strategic manner (Dembosky et al., 2005). The study also identified six key strategies that performance-driven systems use: (1) building a foundation for data-driven decision making; (2) establishing a culture of data use and continuous improvement; (3) investing in an information management system; (4) selecting the right data; (5) building school capacity for data-driven decision making; and (6) analyzing and acting on data to improve performance. Other research studies,

though largely without comparison groups, suggested that data-driven decision making has the potential to increase student performance (Alwin, 2002; Doyle, 2003; Lafee, 2002; McIntire, 2002).

AdvancED has found through its own evaluation of best practices in 30,000 institutions around the world that a successful institution uses a comprehensive assessment system based on clearly defined performance measures. The system is used to assess student performance on expectations for student learning, evaluate the effectiveness of curriculum and instruction, and determine strategies to improve student performance. The institution implements a collaborative and ongoing process for improvement that aligns the functions of the school with the expectations for student learning. Improvement efforts are sustained, and the institution demonstrates progress in improving student performance and institution effectiveness.

Standard		Standard Performance Level	
The system implements a comprehensive assessment system that generates a range of data about student learning and system effectiveness and uses the results to guide continuous improvement.		2.4	
Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
5.1	The system establishes and maintains a clearly defined and comprehensive student assessment system.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Survey results •Interviews •Brief description of student assessment system including range of data produced from standardized and local or school assessments on student learning and school performance •Brief description of learning management systems or data management systems that support the effective use of student assessment results, school effectiveness, and district effectiveness •Self Assessment 	3
5.2	Professional and support staff continuously collect, analyze and apply learning from a range of data sources, including comparison and trend data about student learning, instruction, program evaluation, and organizational conditions that support learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •List of data sources related to district effectiveness •Survey results •Interviews •Self Assessment 	2
5.3	Throughout the system professional and support staff are trained in the interpretation and use of data.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Survey results •Interviews •Self Assessment 	2

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5.4	The school system engages in a continuous process to determine verifiable improvement in student learning, including readiness for and success at the next level.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Interviews•Student surveys•Evidence of student growth	2
5.5	System and school leaders monitor and communicate comprehensive information about student learning, school performance, and the achievement of system and school improvement goals to stakeholders.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Survey results•Sample communications to stakeholders regarding student learning, conditions that support learning, and achievement of school improvement goals•Examples of district marketing tools and websites that cite student achievement results or that make promises regarding student achievement•Executive summaries of student learning reports to stakeholder groups	3

Learning Environment

Every learner should have access to an effective learning environment in which she/he has multiple opportunities to be successful. The Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool (ELEOT) measures the extent to which learners are in an environment that is equitable, supportive, and well-managed. An environment where high expectations are the norm and active learning takes place. It measures whether learners' progress is monitored and feedback is provided and the extent to which technology is leveraged for learning.

Observations of classrooms or other learning venues are conducted for a minimum of 20 minutes per observation. External review team members conduct multiple observations during the review process and provide ratings on 30 items based on a 4 point scale with 4=very evident, 3=evident, 2=somewhat evident, and 1=not observed. The following provides the aggregate average score across multiple observations for each of the 7 learning environments included in ELEOT.

Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool

<i>Environments</i>	<i>Level</i>
A. Equitable Learning Environment	2.4
B. High Expectations Environment	2.8
C. Supportive Learning Environment	2.9
D. Active Learning Environment	2.9
E. Progress Monitoring and Feedback Environment	2.5
F. Well-Managed Learning Environment	2.9
G. Digital Learning Environment	1.8

Part II: Conclusion

Summary of the External Review

In off-site and on-site review sessions, the AdvancED External Review Team examined artifacts and evidence provided by the institution. During the on-site portion of the review, the team reviewed additional artifacts, collected and analyzed data from interviews, and conducted observations.

The on-site review spanned four days beginning Sunday, February 3, 2013 and extending through Wednesday, February 6, 2013. The actual review began well before the on-site visit with the ten-person External Review Team (ERT) reviewing and studying the Executive Summary, Self-Assessment, School Improvement Plans, the Strategic Plan, and other documents available for review. Information reviewed during the off-site period was used to conduct the first round of data triangulation. The school system was well-prepared for the external review. Throughout the visit the Richmond County School System responded to all of the team's queries and requests; and based on the team's review and triangulation of data, the system demonstrated an honest appraisal of itself and the way it shared information.

The ERT observed and listened to presentations from the superintendent and staff where they described the state of the system and how they approached and completed the Self-Assessment process. The superintendent profiled the school system by highlighting its Vision, Mission, and Belief statements, and describing "Who We Are" from demographic and student performance perspectives. He profiled challenges facing the system and facility improvement projects completed from 1997 through 2012 which illustrated the major funding priority placed on upgrading building and schools throughout the system. He continued by outlining the challenges facing the school system and the community. Among the challenges were:

- 1) The economy
- 2) Budget cuts
- 3) Furloughs
- 4) Class size increases
- 5) Recruitment and retention of high quality teachers
- 6) Consistent, pervasive data-driven instruction
- 7) Loss of professional learning days, and
- 8) Limited technology support.

The team visited schools to examine the interface between the schools and the central office administration, observe operations and instructional practices, and examine classroom learning environments. Schools visited were:

- 1) Sue Reynolds Elementary School
- 2) Freedom Park K-8 School
- 3) Richmond County Tech Career Center
- 4) Warren Road Elementary School
- 5) Cross Creek Comprehensive High School

- 6) Pine Hill Middle School
- 7) Murphey Middle School
- 8) Craig-Houghton Elementary School
- 9) Josey Comprehensive High School
- 10) Lamar-Milledge Elementary School

The ERT interviewed eighty-six (86) administrators, one hundred fifty-one (151) teachers, fifty-nine (59) parents/business partners, one hundred (100) students, and nine (9) board members to gain additional insight and perceptions of stakeholders regarding the school system's adherence to AdvancED standards and the effectiveness of the system in meeting its continuous improvement goals.

Using the evidence collected, the team engaged in dialogue and deliberations concerning the degree to which the institution met the AdvancED Accreditation Standards and Indicators.

As the ERT reviewed artifacts and engaged in discussions/interviews with stakeholders, several overarching themes emerged. Among them were:

- * The school board and the superintendent of schools form a governance team that is viewed by stakeholders as being committed to and supportive of the district's vision, mission, and beliefs.
- * Richmond County School System has established a culture of learning and collegiality that focuses on student achievement. As a result, student learning and performance have emerged as core values that permeate all levels of the system.
- * Improving instructional practices through research-based professional development is a central focus of the system in its quest to increase student achievement even though economic conditions may seem to dictate otherwise.
- * A need exists for the review of system policies and procedures to determine their sufficiency to guide consistent collection, analysis, and application of data, including training in the use of data.
- * Building and renovation projects across the district show a systemic approach to modernizing school system facilities.
- * The lack of adequate technology support services impairs the teaching and learning process and significantly delays the system's desire to achieve 21st century learning environments in all the schools.
- * There is a need for the system to consistently provide services to meet physical, social, emotional, educational, and career planning needs of ALL students.
- * There is a need for the system to provide equitable school resources to ensure that it meets the needs of all students and allow staff to more effectively perform their duties and responsibilities.
- * Schools demonstrated their engagement in a process to review, revise, and communicate their

individual purpose and direction. However, there appears to be no systematic, inclusive, and comprehensive process in place to review, revise, and communicate the system's mission, vision, and beliefs.

* Program and process evaluations were not found to be systemic and/or endemic in the analysis of program effectiveness for the varied initiatives employed in the district.

During the on-site review, members of the External Review Team evaluated the learning environment by observing classrooms and general operations of the institution. Using data from these observations, the team evaluated the quality of instruction and learning that took place classified around seven constructs or environments: equity, high expectations, support, engagement, progress monitoring and feedback, management, and use of technology.

All of the constructs within the overall learning environment were rated from a low of 2.4 to a high of 2.9 with the exception of the use of technology (digital learning). The team noted, in general, that teachers were not, in a consistent manner, effectively using the technology to promote higher order thinking or greater use among students for independent creative inquiry.

The ERT extends its appreciation for the excellent hospitality, support, and professionalism displayed by the Richmond County School System. The team respects and acknowledges efforts the system expended to improve the quality of its educational program and offers its congratulations for the progress made toward maintaining district accreditation as a quality system. The ERT recommends RE-ACCREDITATION of the Richmond County Schools System for a new five-year term with the AdvancED Accreditation Commission.

Required Actions

1. Engage in a systematic, inclusive, and comprehensive process to review, revise, and communicate the system's mission, vision, and beliefs on an annual basis.

Primary Indicator or Assurance: 1.1

There was little to no evidence in the Self-Assessment or in other supporting documents that the system reviews its mission, vision, and belief statements on a routine and frequent basis. Interviews revealed very little has been done in recent years to ensure that these statements reflect the current focus and realities of the system. Implementing this required action will ensure consistent review and modification to the system's mission, vision, and beliefs statements so that they reflect the current focus and realities of the system.

2. Develop, implement, and evaluate structures that provide for long-term interaction with individual students that build strong relationships over time with students and adults in the schools.

Primary Indicator or Assurance: 3.9

The normal and routine availability of guidance services is present in schools. Administrators and teachers avail themselves to students who may need them for advice, routine advisement, and personal problem resolution. However, the ERT found little to no evidence of formal structures that provide for long-term interaction with individual students and adults in the schools where the adult role is one of advocacy. When such structures are in place they will allow school employees to gain significant insight into each individual student where the adult serves as an advocate for the needs of the student relative to learning, thinking, and, most importantly, life skills.

3. Develop and regularly employ formal evaluation processes and procedures to ensure that the wealth of early and mid-stage initiatives, both human and physical resources reach full implementation with fidelity to maximize student achievement.

Primary Indicator or Assurance: 4.7

The ERT noted a significant number of programs and initiatives in place in the district. However, no formal evaluative structures were in place to determine the extent to which these initiatives are achieving the system's desired results. Formal evaluation of programs and initiatives will provide useful data as to inform decisions relative to their effectiveness and efficiency. The end results will lead to significantly improved student achievement.

4. Expand the planned development and implementation of a "systemic data protocol" to include a review of the current processes and procedures used to collect, analyze, and apply data from multiple sources. Make revisions to ensure consistency throughout the system and include training and follow-up provisions for all staff members as may be appropriate to ensure fidelity of use.

Primary Indicator or Assurance: 5.3

A review of system policies and procedures revealed a lack of written processes and procedures to guide consistent collection, analysis, and application of data, including training in the use of data. In addition, the Superintendent's Overview presentation identified the development of a "systemic data protocol" as one of the continuous school improvement goals of the system which is consistent with the findings of the system's self-assessment and the ERT as related to the performance level of Indicator 5.3

Comprehensive data analysis training and the effective use of data in a consistent manner throughout the system will provide teachers and staff with the tools needed to more effectively inform instruction and decision-making.

Part III: Addenda

Next Steps

The institution should:

1. Review and discuss the findings from this report with all stakeholders.
2. Ensure that plans are in place to embed and sustain the strengths noted in the Powerful Practices section to maximize their impact on the institution.
3. Develop action plans to address the Required Actions made by the team. Include methods for monitoring progress toward the Required Actions.
4. Use the report to guide and strengthen the institution's efforts to improve student performance and system effectiveness.
5. Following the External Review, submit the Accreditation Progress Report detailing progress made toward addressing the Required Actions. Institutions are required to respond to all Required Actions. The Required Actions should be completed before the Accreditation Progress Report is submitted. The report will be reviewed at the state and national level to monitor and ensure that the system has implemented the necessary actions to complete the Required Actions. The accreditation status will be reviewed and acted upon based on the completion of the Required Actions and the resulting improvement.
6. Continue to meet the AdvancED accreditation standards, submit required reports, engage in continuous improvement, and document results.

Celebrating Accreditation

Following the External Review, the Team submits the final report to AdvancED for review and for action by the AdvancED Accreditation Commission, which confers accreditation and upon the institution. Upon receiving its accreditation, the institution should share its achievement with internal and external communities.

About AdvancED

In 2006, the North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement (NCA CASI), the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Council on Accreditation and School Improvement (SACS CASI), both founded in 1895, along with the National Study of School Evaluation (NSSE) came together to form AdvancED: one strong, unified organization dedicated to education quality. In 2011, the Northwest Accreditation Commission (founded 1917) joined NCA CASI and SACS CASI as part of AdvancED. AdvancED is the world's largest education community, representing 30,000 public and private schools and systems across the United States and in 75 countries worldwide and educating 16 million students. The Northwest Accreditation Commission joined the AdvancED network in 2011.

External Review

Richmond County School System

Today, NCA CASI, NWAC, and SACS CASI serve as accreditation divisions of AdvancED. Through AdvancED, NCA CASI, NWAC, and SACS CASI share research-based accreditation standards that cross state, regional, and national boundaries. Accompanying these standards is a unified accreditation process designed to help educational institutions continuously improve.