



Gwinnett County Public Schools

Suwanee, Georgia

March 6-9, 2022

Monitoring Review Report

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Monitoring Review Report

Introduction

This report summarizes the findings of the Monitoring Review held on March 6-9, 2022, for Gwinnett County Public Schools. The purpose of the Monitoring Review was to review the district's progress toward addressing the Cognia Performance Standards, Improvement Priorities, Directives, and Recommendations from the Special Review held on June 13-17, 2021.

Activities of the Monitoring Review Team

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

- Meetings with the superintendent, governing body members, business and community leaders, and parents
- Interviews with stakeholders representing the superintendent, five board members, twenty-one business and community representatives, and nineteen parents
- The district's response to the Special Review Report, board meeting agendas, self-assessments, Board Norms, Code of Ethics, revised board policies, board training plan, sign-in logs, and training agendas
- Observations of recorded board meetings, work sessions, and retreats
- Review of evidence
- Team deliberations and report preparation

The Monitoring Review Team used the findings from these activities and evidence to assess the district's progress toward the Cognia Performance Standards as listed in the report below.

Findings

The Monitoring Review Team's findings are organized by each Performance Standard previously rated by the Special Review Team as Insufficient or Initiating. For each cited Standard, the Monitoring Review Team provides an updated rating followed by a summary of findings and Directives to guide the 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
1.4	The governing authority establishes and ensures adherence to policies that are designed to support system effectiveness.	Improving

Improvement Priority 1

Conduct with immediacy, a review and revision, where applicable, of board policies and procedures required by state legislation and state board rules and regulations to ensure that the Board and school district are in compliance.

Directives:

- Complete a thorough review of all school board policies and procedures to ensure that all are congruent with current state legislation.
- Develop and communicate a formal approval process for school board policies and procedures to ensure all comply with state school board rules and regulations and state legislation.
- Identify a trainer or facilitator who has expert knowledge regarding Robert's Rules of Order to conduct board member training sessions (e.g., remotely, in person).

Findings

The team reviewed board policies and accompanying processes and confirmed, through the recorded video of board meetings and work sessions conducted on September 23, 2021, that a review of board policies had occurred. Minutes and recorded video of the board meeting showed several discussions of board policies and the processes through which approval is granted. Work sessions conducted on August 23, 2021, and November 8, 2021, included a review of the amended policies. During interviews, board members shared that all policies are dated and timestamped when the Board takes action (e.g., reviewed, revised) during meetings.

According to the district's policy and procedures process, there should be an annual audit of policies and administrative procedures. The team verified the audit occurred by watching the recorded video of the board meeting on January 22, 2022. Further, the following policy revision process was published on the district's web page:

"Gwinnett County Public Schools has an established process for reviewing and revising where applicable, board policies and procedures to ensure that the Board and school district are in compliance with and that policies reflect changes to state legislation and state board rules and regulations. Policy BCAB calls for the Gwinnett County Board of Education to annually review and reaffirm the district's Board policies. In addition, Policy BD requires the Board to maintain current written policies that are consistent with Board action and administrative decisions, requiring the Board to review and update its policies on a continuing basis. This policy also addresses the development, adoption, and dissemination of school district policies."

Interviews with the superintendent and board members and a review of the district's website showed the Board developed and communicated a formal approval process for school board policies and procedures to ensure compliance with state school board rules and regulations and state legislation. The district has established and clearly communicated procedures to ensure that the process is ongoing as evidenced by Policy BCAB, which calls for the Board to annually review and reaffirm its policies. In addition, Policy BD requires the Board to maintain current written policies and review and update its policies continually. Policy BD also addresses the development, adoption, and dissemination of policies. Policies BCAB and BD outline the process for continuous review to ensure compliance with all applicable state, federal, and local policies.

The team confirmed through board meeting agendas and board member interviews that the Board contacted the Georgia School Boards Association (GSBA) to conduct special training sessions, including the Review of Norms and Completion, Transitions and Entry of the New Superintendent, Robert's Rules of Order, Implementing and Enforcement of Norms, Revised Ethics and Conflict of Interest Policies, Self-Assessments, and Roles and Responsibilities. These trainings were conducted from September through November 2021, and all board members participated. When asked about the outcome of these trainings, members cited improved relationships, ability to amicably disagree, and use of appropriate measures to conduct the district's business. Subsequently, a schedule of trainings was established for 2021, inclusive of Robert's Rules of Order. If trainings had been established for the 2022-2023 year, that information was not provided to the team.

The following excerpts are incorporated in the recently adopted board norms, and board members are expected to comply and affirm the training regarding ethics, observing lines of authority, and Robert's Rules of Order:

“Be recognized by the Board Chair before speaking, following Roberts Rules of Order.”

“All requests for information should be managed through the superintendent.”

“Be mindful on posting about politics on their board representative social media page.”

While board policy BBE states that the board attorney shall serve as the parliamentarian, stakeholders and board members indicated that there is not an official parliamentarian. The team found no evidence to support the practice of an active parliamentarian. Conversely, not all board members were confident that the board attorney has been officially designated as such. His seating placement during meetings is not in direct contact with the chair; rather, he sits in the audience.

Recommendations:

- Affirm the services of the Board's attorney as the parliamentarian to formally act in this capacity to assist in the efficient and effective functions and operations of board meetings. This will eliminate any ambiguity about responsibility for the role.

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

Improvement Priority 2

Establish and publish the roles, responsibilities, and functions of the superintendent and board members to ensure that future board training comprehensively addresses these practices and focuses on ethics and conflicts of interest to promote optimal organizational effectiveness.

Directives:

- Finalize and approve board meeting norms that the Board and superintendent are currently developing, including norms related to board roles and responsibilities, conflicts of interest, ethics, and parliamentary procedures. The approval of norms also should promote interaction that is positive, civil, constructive, polite, courteous, professional, and appropriate in interacting with each other, conducting school board meetings, and using communication tools such as social media.
- The Board should identify or develop and implement an assessment tool and process, at least annually, for objectively self-evaluating the execution of its collective roles and responsibilities.
- The Board and the superintendent should review and revise current policies for ethics and conflict of interest and require school board members to acknowledge that they have read, understand, and commit to abiding by the policies.
- The Board should seek training to build collegiality, promote positive interaction among board members, and implement best practices from training with fidelity and quality.
- Establish a method to routinely collect, analyze, and use stakeholder perception data to provide the Board feedback about its effectiveness in implementing its roles and responsibilities and supporting the district's continuous improvement priorities.

Findings

The Board developed norms during a training facilitated by the Georgia School Board Association (GSBA) and approved the Board Norms during the board meeting on October 21, 2021 (board meeting recording 32:49-35:54). A copy of the Board Norms is published on the district website for public review. Board members shared with the team that although a tenuous process, the development of the Board Norms has enhanced collaboration and produced mutual respect and accountability among board members. One board member said it took the Board six months to develop the new Board Norms, but the process allowed them to get to know one another. Viewing subsequent board meeting videos (November 18, 2021, and January 20, 2022) indicated that members were following the established norms and conducting business with more productivity and efficiency.

Interviews with board members and the superintendent confirmed that on November 8, 2021, all board members had participated in training on the Code of Ethics and Conflict of Interest conducted by the Georgia School Board Association (GSBA). The team verified board member participation through a review of the training agenda and sign-in logs. The team also found that board members signed the state form acknowledging the Code of Ethics (July 2021).

To promote positive interactions, the superintendent, named just after the Special Review was conducted on June 13-16, 2021, has held one-on-one meetings with each board member to develop relationships. To prioritize future actions, the superintendent said that he asked the Board whether they were a governance team of five plus one or a governance team of six. According to the superintendent, all board members concurred that the latter was the intent. Interviews with the board members and the superintendent revealed positive progress and the belief that consensus can be reached when

conducting business. Board members repeatedly shared with the review team that they might not always agree, but they can come together to get things done. According to board member interviews, the relationship among board members is civil, and communication between the board members and the newly selected superintendent is productive. The superintendent noted that he and the Board are working to achieve diversity of thought and voice equity. He stated that his number one priority was building relationships with board members. All board members indicated that they had a good working relationship with the superintendent.

The team examined evidence to determine the degree to which the Board had established a method for collecting, analyzing, and using perception data for feedback about the Board. The team found that during the January 27, 2022, board training session, members reviewed the January 2022 Self-Assessment results. Additionally, the Board reviewed a GCSD-developed document titled Board Training Reflections on Perception Data to determine its strengths, areas for growth, opportunities, and next steps. This document includes a compilation of survey results. Community members reported changes in board members, making comments to the team describing how board members are encouraging community input, showing that community voice matters, being more cohesive than in previous months, working together, and showing respect to each other and that board meetings are less disruptive and more organized.

The district has an instrument entitled the Governance Team Self-Assessment, which addresses the standards in the governance domains, strategic planning, board and community relations, policy development, board meetings, personnel, financial governance, and ethics. Feedback is presented in graphs for the Board to use to make recommendations for improvement. While the Governance Team Self-Assessment document was extremely comprehensive, the team could not ascertain the actions taken as a result of these recommendations by reviewing the provided evidence.

Through interviews with the superintendent and board members and a review of the district's website, the Monitoring Review Team found evidence to validate that Directive 2 (Standard 1.5) regarding self-assessment has been satisfactorily addressed. Supporting evidence included board meeting recordings September 23, 2021, and January 20, 2022.

Interviews with community members also revealed that board members seem to show noticeable mutual respect during board meetings. Parent interviews indicated that meetings are more orderly, and more attention is given to the Robert's Rules of Order procedures than during previous board meetings and work sessions. One board member stated that relationships have deepened because of the training. A review of recorded board meeting videos from September 23, 2021, November 18, 2021, and January 20, 2022, confirmed board members demonstrated respectful interactions. However, during interviews one stakeholder suggested that new board member training be completed prior to a board member taking office.

Recommendations

- Establish an annual plan that shows intentional trainings to ensure board members continuously comply with their identified roles and responsibilities, adhere to the Code of Ethics, and demonstrate collegiality.
- Develop and implement accountability measures to prevent possible violations of Code of Ethics/conflicts of interest as well as the newly developed Board Norms.

Insights from the Monitoring Review

The Monitoring Review Team acknowledges the progress that the Gwinnett County Public Schools has made in responding to the Directives from the June 13-16, 2021, Special Review. The careful review of documents and interviews confirm the efforts of the district to address the cited improvement priorities with satisfaction. Based on our review, the team recommends:

- Affirm the services of the Board's attorney as the parliamentarian to formally act in this capacity to assist in the efficient and effective functions and operations of board meetings. This appointment will eliminate any ambiguity about responsibility for the role.
- Establish an annual plan that shows intentional trainings to ensure board members continuously comply with their identified roles and responsibilities, adhere to the Code of Ethics, and demonstrate collegiality.
- Develop and implement accountability measures to prevent possible violations of Code of Ethics/conflicts of interest as well as the newly developed Board Norms.

When asked by the team what actions board members needed to do to be successful, responses included focus on the needs of the children, engage in strategic planning, focus on policy change and development to meet the needs of our children, continue to improve communication within the community, and maintain and strengthen our mutual respect. These actions would move the board forward and provide a guide for future actions. It is the belief of the Monitoring Review Team that the district has satisfactorily addressed the Improvement Priorities and Directives from the previous Special Review. The district and board members are strongly encouraged to continue the actions set forth in this report.

Accreditation Recommendation

Based on the findings of the Monitoring Review Team, Cognia concludes that Gwinnett County Public Schools has met Standard 1.4 and Standard 1.5. The district is complimented for its progress and commitment to meeting the accreditation standards on behalf of all learners in the district.

Next Steps

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

- Review and share the findings with stakeholders.
- Regularly revise and update policies and procedures to ensure all are current and relevant.
- Develop an approach to manage the recommendations within this report.