



**Report of the  
Special Review Team for  
DeKalb County School District  
Stone Mountain, Georgia**

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**Review Dates:  
October 17-19, 2012**

# Special Review Visit Report

## Introduction

### Special Reviews

At any point during an accreditation cycle, a Special Review may be conducted in response to complaints or information about the institution and/or its system (district, board, or corporation) to investigate adherence to the AdvancED Standards and accreditation 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.

This report is the result of a Special Review that was conducted due to formal complaints made against the DeKalb County School District, which, if true, impact the system's ability to meet the Standards required for accreditation.

The accreditation status of DeKalb County School District and its schools has been Accredited On Advisement since January 2011 following a Special Review by AdvancED/SACS CASI and two subsequent reviews in October 2011 and March 2012. AdvancED/SACS CASI has received numerous additional complaints since March 2012 from a variety of sources alleging that the DeKalb County Board of Education has continued to violate the AdvancED Standards and accreditation policies, state law, and its own policies.

Most of the complaints sent to AdvancED/SACS CASI referenced AdvancED Standard 2: *Governance and Leadership* and AdvancED Standard 4: *Resources and Support Systems*.

A Special Review Team was appointed to conduct an investigative evaluation of the DeKalb County School District on October 17-19, 2012. The team's purpose in visiting the DeKalb County School District was to gather information and evidence needed to determine if the school system is in violation of AdvancED Standards for Accreditation including, but not limited to, Standard 2: *Governance and Leadership* and Standard 4: *Resources and Support Systems*.

### **AdvancED Standard 2: Governance and Leadership**

The system operates under governance and leadership that promote and support student performance and school effectiveness.

- 2.1 The governing body establishes policies and supports practices that ensure effective administration of the system and its schools.
- 2.2 The governing body operates responsibly and functions effectively.
- 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.
- 2.4 Leadership and staff at all levels of the system foster a culture consistent with the system's purpose and direction.
- 2.5 Leadership engages stakeholders effectively in support of the system's purpose and direction.

#### **AdvancED Standard 4: Resources and Support Systems**

The system has resources and provides services in all schools that support its purpose and direction to ensure success for all students.

- 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.
- 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.
- 4.3 The system maintains facilities, services, and equipment to provide a safe, clean, and healthy environment for all students and staff.
- 4.4 The system demonstrates strategic resource management that includes long-range planning in support of the purpose and direction of the system.
- 4.5 The system provides, coordinates, and evaluates the effectiveness of information resources and related personnel to support educational programs throughout the system.
- 4.6 The system provides a technology infrastructure and equipment to support the system's teaching, learning, and operational needs.
- 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.

### **Activities of the Special Review Team**

In preparation for the review, the Special Review Team reviewed letters and e-mails of complaints, school board meeting minutes, school board meeting videos, newspaper articles, school board policies and reports from the previous AdvancED/SACS CASI teams.

During the visit, the Special Review Team members conducted numerous interviews with various individuals from the DeKalb County School District and stakeholders and reviewed other relevant documentation. The team held extensive interviews with 50 individuals, including nine board members, the Superintendent, two Deputy Superintendents, the Chief Legal Officer, the Chief Financial Officer, the Chief Human Resources Officer, the Chief Operations Officer, the Chief Strategic Officer, the Chief Information Officer, the Associate Superintendent, five Regional Superintendents, 16 principals, four additional employees, and six community stakeholders. Also, written information received from board members and community stakeholders was reviewed by the Team.

### **Findings**

The DeKalb County School District has undergone several changes in recent years. A new Superintendent has been leading the school system for the last year, following the interim Superintendent who was in place during the AdvancED/SACS CASI review in January 2011.

Although three new members will be joining the Board in January, there has been a consistent division on the current Board. Such divisions are negatively impacting the Board's ability to govern effectively and consequently impacting the functioning of the school system. Additionally, the team verified through interviews that the new board members are following in the current Board's footsteps by acting individually and misinterpreting their roles and responsibilities already.

Based upon the information collected and reviewed, the Special Review Team found sufficient evidence to support a finding that the actions and behaviors of the DeKalb County Board of Education are in violation of AdvancED Standards and policies and its own established policies. Whereas the DeKalb County Board of Education provides governance and establishes policies and direction for the school system, the actions and behaviors of the Board impact the effectiveness of the school system and its ability to meet the Standards for Accreditation.

Multiple instances of violations of the following Standards and Indicators by the DeKalb County Board of Education are outlined below. However, the instances and examples cited in this report are not the complete listing of activities by the Board that are in violation of the AdvancED Standards and Indicators. The pattern of violations is too extensive to be fully identified herein and this report will provide only a representative sample of the Board's conduct.

## **Standard 2**

The system operates under governance and leadership that promote and support student performance and school effectiveness.

**Indicator 2.1:** The governing body establishes policies and supports practices that ensure effective administration of the system and its schools.

- a. While most board members were able to describe what the role and responsibilities of the Board should be, as a whole board members' actions are not consistent with those descriptions and definitions. During interviews, board members cited examples of issues indicating that board policies and practices are not implemented in a manner to fully support the effective operation of the system and its schools. The Board's failure to support the effective operation of the system and its schools can be evidence by the following examples:

The system has policies and procedures that determine school assignments for the students of DeKalb County. The ability of the staff to adhere to the assignment policies is important for the effective operation of the system. Despite well-established policies, board members routinely supersede these policies and demand that staff make special school assignments for students based upon a number of factors including, but not limited to, meeting the athletic demands of schools within their election districts. These special demands cause upheaval in the system, breakdown the chain of command, and create inefficiencies within the system, all of which waste valuable resources and support the public perception that the system operates under different rules for various groups of people. Further, this type of communication and micro-management is a direct violation of the DeKalb County School Board Policy BH, Board Code of Ethics and Policy BBI, Board-Staff Relations.

This type of inappropriate behavior is not limited to communications with district staff. There is a consistent pattern of direct communication between school level staff and board members. Even during the week of the External Review Team's visit, board members and members-elect were just dropping by "their" schools because they were in the neighborhood. Board members routinely by-pass the chain of command and communicate directly with school personnel. The parental concerns that board members receive are communicated directly to school level personnel. Board members inform the school personnel when they agree or disagree with the school personnel's decision. In a recent example, a board member communicated to a principal that the board member "had her back" on a recent decision by the principal. This type of communication and the fact that the board member did not adhere to the policies concerning chain of command and communication continues to perpetuate and condone an environment of preferential treatment, micromanagement, and intimidation by board members.

During the October 1, 2012 board meeting, board members engaged in a lengthy discussion regarding the reestablishment of a bus route for Coralwood. Despite the fact that the route had been one of five such routes cancelled prior to the beginning of school as part of the budget discussion and implementation of the efficiency transportation plan, the members of the Board rescinding the prior policy decision based upon the complaints of this particular set of parents. The Board seemed ready to take on the role of the administration in wanting to micromanage even the redrawing of the bus routes in a manner that was contrary to the Board approved budget and transportation plan. Clearly, the Board is ignoring the difference between governing the system and managing the operations of the system.

Another example, involves an issue that has arisen in relation to Policy DJE – Purchasing, which specifies the following: All purchases and contracts under \$100,000.00 shall be reported to the Board monthly for information only, reflecting vendor, goods or services purchased, amount of purchase, and the name(s) of staff member(s) who signed the approval.

The board chair requested a report to document compliance with the policy. In turn, the Superintendent has indicated that the system's technology structure and software are not designed to provide the detailed report without extensively revamping the database. Reportedly, producing the report would require excessive staff time that would ultimately interfere with job performance in the delivery of services to staff and students. Meanwhile, the board chair unilaterally made an arbitrary decision, without further discussion and direction by the full Board, to set a new, lower floor for purchases for which the Superintendent needed to submit a report. It appeared that the Board and administration had reached a stalemate in resolving the issue, but rather than initiating the policy revision process to rectify the dispute, the board chair attempted to create a work around solution. This type of resolution without appropriate policy vetting, approval, and implementation leads to lack of clear requirements for the direction and oversight of fiscal management at all levels of the system. Further, it appears that the Board adopted Policy DJE – Purchasing without exploring the feasibility or impact of its implementation. This is just one example of a pattern of behavior in which individual Board members attempt to redesign the reports being provided by the staff to the Board. Even when the staff or Superintendent inform the

individual board member that the reports cannot be created or redesigned without excessive staff time and cost, individual board members justify the micromanagement of the system's report forms and processes as a result of the Board's past failure to provide effective financial oversight of the system. Therefore, the Board's past failures are being used to justify its current micromanagement of the system. There is a consistent pattern by which the Board as a whole is bypassed and directives to staff are routinely given by individual board members based upon the individual board member's interest.

- b. While policies provide requirements for fiscal management, Board practice has not demonstrated effective oversight of fiscal management as exemplified by the district's current deficit spending. An artifact distributed by a board member showed that the district would incur a five-year total disbursement of approximately \$54 million over budget in just three areas of operation. The three areas of financial vulnerability are textbooks, utilities, and legal fees and legal counsel (from at least two firms). In addition, a financial report (Video 2 – Work Session and Business Meeting, September 10, 2012) revealed that the general fund unaudited balance on July 1, 2012 was at a negative \$24.5 million.

During interviews, descriptions of the budget-making process were unclear and inconsistent. The board chair did not differentiate between having a balanced budget and operating the system in a manner that adheres to said budget. When asked about the potential negative balance in the general fund the response by the board chair was simply, "But we have a balanced budget." When confronted with the fact that the Board had a balanced budget in previous years but that the failure of the system to implement the budget with fidelity and a lack of proper Board oversight and poor decision-making had resulted in unprecedented overages for the system, board members did not have a good explanation. The fact that the system had under-budgeted millions for utilities and legal work during the past several years was not properly explained. In addition, the system incurred approximately \$12 million dollars in debt for new textbooks, yet numerous interviews revealed that no one could identify any school that had received new textbooks and it was reported that nearly all schools were struggling with ways to repair old textbooks with no resources allocated for said purpose.

Numerous interviewees confirmed that the decisions made in balancing the budget were reached with little or no consideration of the educational impact of said decisions. Examples of this failure to consider the educational impact in its budget process can be seen in the Board's decision to cut the funding of early learning paraprofessional positions, IB and AP testing, and other decisions that have a clear educational context in direct contradiction to the stated Mission and Goals of the school system. It also appeared that the district does not keep its monetary deficit in the forefront of its actions (see Video 2 – Work Session and Business Meeting, September 10, 2012). Decisions are made without a clear goal of keeping expenditures within the range of what the budget will allow. Approvals of expenditures are sometimes made with an approach of "we will find the additional money somewhere," rather than a short- and long-term, well-planned approach. This conclusion is further evidenced by the discussion of the board members during their consideration of the Coralwood bus route issue mentioned above.

- c. Evidence supported a finding that board members intimidate staff and attempt to direct the activities of staff members. There is a general feeling that many of the board members feel that principals within their respective voting districts are “their” principals, and they treat them as such. In addition to the previously cited example, one instance includes an employee leaving work crying and distraught after an explosive interaction with a board member. This type of behavior is a violation of the Board’s policies and Code of Ethics and further breaks down the chain of command. Additional examples of board members becoming very involved in managing day-to-day activities are listed elsewhere in this report.
- d. Based on interviews, Human Resource policies and practices are not communicated clearly in writing or verbally. Examples were cited where certain board members have not adhered to policies related to promotions, transfers, and salaries for district office staff as well as elementary, middle, and high school principals. Interviews revealed that there have been instances where promotions have been given to individuals who are highly favored by a board member and not on the basis of merit or qualification. Instances have been cited where Human Resource policies and procedures, including salaries, have been implemented in an inconsistent manner leading to distrust and suspicion across the school system.

Various forms of evidence confirmed that there is Board interference in hiring considerations. One example includes an email dated August 24, 2012 from the board chair to the Superintendent containing the subject line: Candidate for TAPP Program. The email from the board chair to the Superintendent read in part, “This is the individual I referred to the program that I asked you about, with his strong background and personal demeanor I feel that he would be a great candidate to work with our kids in our schools while filling one of our critical needs areas. Please know that I have met this young man and he is the brother of one of our Board... I would appreciate any assistance that you could provide.” This email confirms and supports the common belief of many stakeholders that there exists a problem with nepotism and preferential treatment in the hiring practices of the DeKalb County School District.

Based on evidence from numerous interviews, several board members continue to make harassing calls and visits to schools. There was frequent mention of board members who make special requests of district office staff, bus drivers and teachers, making threats to fire them if they do not comply with their individual requests. It was reported that individual board members have made requests to place people in certain positions, hire who they insist should be hired or provide allowances for certain parents. These interviewees used terms like fear, harassment, and intimidation to describe the behaviors of board members. In one interview, the individual stated that one board member threatened a teacher with getting him/her fired, quoting the board member as saying, “You don’t know who I am.” Those interviewed consistently expressed that board members have created a level of animosity, and that both teachers and principals operate in fear.

Interviewees described a feeling of hopelessness across the district that it is useless to bring issues to the Board and expect fairness and professionalism, when they witness behavior from board members who routinely exhibit unprofessionalism and unethical

behavior. As reflected in an email from a board member dated September 24, 2012, it is the Board itself who engages in behaviors that violate district policies and board roles and responsibilities. The Board models a negative behavioral image that affects leaders and staff throughout the district. Unfortunately, because these behaviors are not exemplary, they are counterproductive to the work of the district and especially the schools. Many board members voiced distress that the training and heightened oversight had only resulted in a temporary improvement in the behavior of the members of the Board and that they had admittedly regressed back to their previous patterns of behavior.

**Indicator 2.2:** The governing body operates responsibly and functions effectively.

- a. The Board operates in a dysfunctional manner in several areas based on information shared during interviews with various board members and stakeholder groups. Among the areas are human resources, chain of command, communication, decorum and professionalism. Information gathered during the on-site review revealed that the Board has failed to implement a process to evaluate its decisions and actions to ensure that they are in accordance with defined roles and responsibilities, free of conflict of interest, and aligned with a formally adopted code of ethics.
- b. Board members brazenly disregard the policies set forth for the effective operation of the school system. During interviews, one board member specified that the decorum of board members improved more consistently when they were meeting regularly regarding their roles and responsibilities. As soon as the coaching and monitoring process became less frequent, the Board's behavior began to deteriorate to less acceptable levels of performance. Board members have begun to revert more frequently to improper decorum among themselves and with other stakeholders, therefore, despite their training; they are knowingly violating their governing policies. Although board members have participated in conflict resolution sessions for the past few years, they display what was described as abhorrent behavior including yelling at each other during board meetings. Despite numerous complaints by board members against other board members, there was no evidence that any members had been censored in accord with Policy BH – Board Code of Ethics. Further, the team could find no evidence of a precise communication plan to inform all staff/stakeholders about the code of ethics, board member responsibilities, or conflict of interest guidelines.
- c. Despite various trainings regarding how boards operate collectively rather than individually, interviews and videos of board meetings indicated that members are still behaving and operating with a philosophy of individual autonomy on behalf of his/her election district. Throughout vast numbers of emails reviewed by the Team and confirmed repeatedly during the interviews, board members operate for their individual constituents and not for the district as a whole. The Board acknowledged receiving quality and relevant professional development; however, after approximately a year of trying to apply the knowledge regarding the roles and responsibilities of a Board, the Board reverted to previous behaviors that did not illustrate professionalism and respect for one another or their positions as members of a governing board.

Evidence collected from various emails, videotapes of board meetings as well as board member and stakeholder interviews support a finding that members of the Board do not

demonstrate professionalism, respect for each other, or knowledge of their role and responsibilities. For instance, the Board consistently addresses issues that clearly should be addressed by the Superintendent and her staff. The constant questioning and demand for special information, both as part of their meetings and outside of said meetings, by board members of district office staff about the day-to-day operation of their work is clear confirmation that there is at best little or no understanding or at worst blatant disregard for the separation of roles and responsibilities between the Board and district staff, even after having gone through extensive training.

In board meetings, individual board members lash out at each other, interrupt one another when speaking, and interrogate district staff in what can be perceived as an intimidating manner. Questions appear to be more related to the board member's individual election district and not representative of the school system as a whole, further illustrating how the Board fails to operate as a collective ("we") Board. An example of this can be observed in the Board's questioning of staff regarding the Coralwood bus issue discussed on October 1, 2012. The board members' questions to the staff displayed a suspicion and lack of trust for any information provided by the staff. If there were any answers that might contradict an email received by a constituent, the staff member was charged with providing evidence supporting their response. The voicing of constant suspicion by board members of the information being provided by the staff deteriorates public trust and negatively impacts the effective operation of the system. It encourages the public to ignore the chain of command and immediately seek redress for any issues directly with the Board. This escalates complaints and compromises the staff's ability to handle matters to a reasonable resolution without fear that the Board is going to intervene and instruct staff to ignore or change policy to placate its constituency.

**Indicator 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.

- a. It was reported and verified by the team that there was a blatant disregard for maintaining a clear distinction between the roles and responsibilities of the Board and those of system and school leadership. Information obtained during the interviews, a review of board meetings, and board members' emails indicate a consistent pattern of activity wherein board members routinely cross the line between functioning as a board member as opposed to a district administrator.
- b. In addition to members of the public reaching out to individual board members, pockets of staff continue to contact board members for the resolution of problems when issues arise rather than adhering to the chain of command. An example of board members' failure to adhere to the policies of Board governance that restrict the power and authority of board members to instances when the Board is convened as a group, can be seen in recent actions concerning the transportation budget and compensation issues. A board member met with transportation workers to discuss issues related to salaries. A discrepancy existed in the daily hours that bus drivers actually work and the hours for which they were being compensated. Rather than referring these individuals to the proper administration official, the board member, in person, and the board chair, remotely via radio, conducted a discussion with the transportation staff members. At the Board of Education Called Meeting on August 31, 2012, the chair commended the

board member for attending a meeting earlier with transportation workers. The staff shared their concerns about this interference with the board chair who in turn provided the information to the Superintendent. The proper course of action would have been for the board members to redirect the transportation staff to meet with district administrative staff. The Board would have the ability to require the district administrative staff to report back in front of the whole Board regarding the meeting. This approach would insure transparency and equal access to information for all board members, while respecting and supporting the role of the Superintendent and her staff.

- c. During an interview with a school principal, the principal stated that the principal viewed the role of the board member representing the principal's school as a position of individual power. The principal stated that the school community and school staff had a similar view. The principal candidly stated that the teachers at the principal's school are fearful of the Board and their board member. The principal voiced concerns over the undue influence of the Board in previous principal selections and assignments. In addition, the principal shared emails from the board member in question that were sent directly to the principal's teachers in violation of Board policy.
- d. The External Review Team reviewed countless email communications between various board members, district staff, the Superintendent, and various other stakeholders. These communications evidenced a consistent pattern of disregard for the role of the Board and district staff. The emails contained constant demands for information outside of the Board meetings, special requests for the individual board member's schools and "constituents" in their election districts, and even a demand by one board member that the district staff provide the board member with at least one weeks' notice of any meetings that the district staff intend to hold in the board member's election district. This request was further reinforced by the board member letting the Superintendent know that said board member has connections with local elected officials and other sources within the election district. These sources keep the board member aware of any activity the district staff conducts within said election district. Many of these communications are direct violations of the Board's policies and negatively impact the District's chain of command as well as undermine the autonomy of the Superintendent and her staff to manage the day-to-day operations of the District without undue interference from the Board. The sheer volume of demands and requests coming from the board members outside of the Board structure adversely affects the District's ability to operate effectively and causes an incredible waste of staff time and resources that should be dedicated to improving student performance and not meeting the whims and private agendas of the individual board members.
- e. During the course of the External Review Team visit, it was widely reported that board members-elect, who will take office on January 1, 2013, are already visiting "their" schools and thereby perpetuating the culture of interference and ignoring the autonomy of the staff in its day to day operation of the system and schools.

**Indicator 2.4:** Leadership and staff at all levels of the system foster a culture consistent with the system’s purpose and direction.

- a. Decisions and actions seldom support continuous improvement as indicative of the Board’s behavior after hours of investment in their professional development. During interviews, board members used pronouns like “I,” “me,” and “mine.” Shared leadership does not appear to be a culture that exists between and among board members in having a united approach in support of the purpose and direction of the system. The district staff and school staff are often driven by the demands of individual board members’ numerous inquiries, visits, and telephone calls, all which distract and interfere with the staff’s focus on improving instruction and student performance. One stakeholder described the Board as “not academically focused” and referring to the board meetings, she said, “there is nothing going on in those meetings that focuses on the best interests of the schools as a whole.” Board members and stakeholders were specifically asked to recount the Board’s discussion of the educational impact that the approved budget cuts would have on the system’s students and how the Board weighed the educational needs of the students in crafting this year’s budget. The interviewees confirmed that despite the stated vision and mission of supporting academic achievement and student learning, there was little to no discussion of the educational impact the budget cuts would have on the district’s students.
- b. It was apparent from information received during interviews and from videos of board meetings that the district lacks a culture characterized by collaboration and a sense of community among all stakeholders. Board members and staff have varying degrees of information about factors that impact continuous improvement throughout the district as well as the district’s educational program and general operation. Communication is an ongoing challenge that impedes the quality of the District’s operation. Due to the actions of board members outside of the meetings, members have varying levels of information. Board members routinely clarify other member’s misinformation or faulty conclusions based on the misinformed member’s lack of information of which only the other member is privy to the correct information. This continues to reinforce a culture of distrust and interferes with the effective governance of the Board.
- c. Interviews with staff indicate that there exists a culture of fear. These staff members referenced how they were fearful of retribution by the Board if their statements or comments could be connected to them. During one interview, the person interviewed broke into tears and repeatedly stated that he/she was fearful to say anything. He/she indicated that he/she and his/her staff consistently receive communication and direction from members of the Board who issue directives and require status updates related to work being done in his/her department. Numerous staff members indicated that this culture of fear and Board interference was negatively impacting their work and the effective operation of the school system.

**Indicator 2.5:** Leadership engages stakeholders effectively in support of the system’s purpose and direction.

- a. Board members individually communicate with various stakeholders as evidenced by their visits to schools and emails to school personnel, district personnel, and members of the community. This steady flow of frequent and largely inappropriate communication limits the time for school and district staff to provide optimal service to students. The Board spends an inordinate amount of time on adult issues and little to no time communicating or voicing support of the educational vision and mission of the system. A review of the board meetings provided little evidence of the Board’s concern for the academic well-being of the district’s students and a constant focus on the adults serving the system. This focus on the issues of the adults interferes with the system being able to meet even the most basic of student needs. This was evident in all the confusion surrounding the system’s inability to address the issue of inadequate and decrepit textbooks. Most stakeholders were unaware that the Board had established a \$25 million line of credit for the purchase of new textbooks and had borrowed approximately **\$12 million from the line** to pay for past textbook purchases. This was surprising to nearly every school level staff person and stakeholder interviewed. Furthermore, school level staff commented that they had not received any new textbooks and that school personnel had to supply glue and other materials to repair their own textbooks for students because of a lack of funds for said repairs. The board chair stated that he did not know if the books that were purchased with the borrowed money ever reached the classroom. The team could not find any evidence that new textbooks were ever received.
- b. Information collected during this review supports the fact that the district has persistent communication problems without an operational plan to work collaboratively and effectively with appropriate and varied representatives from stakeholder groups. There is a pervasive feeling of fear and retaliation by many employees if they attempt to adhere to the chain of command in communicating with board members. After reviewing videos of board meetings, it is apparent that stakeholders do not think they have opportunities to participate as partners to help shape decisions, provide input and receive feedback, and work collaboratively on system and school improvement efforts. During interviews, stakeholders indicated decisions are consistently made by board members without consideration of the value of stakeholder participation.

**AdvancED Standard 4: Resources and Support Systems**

The system has resources and provides services in all schools that support its purpose and direction to ensure success for all students.

**Indicator 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.

- a. Current policies, processes and practices do not clearly demonstrate how the system hires qualified support staff. The system’s failure to adhere to current policies, processes and practices in the hiring of some employees by not performing a thorough background check does not support the system’s purpose and direction for providing

services in all schools and educational programs. For example, a new hire had multiple indictments, including abuse of special needs adults, identity fraud, aggravated assault, and exploitation of the elderly (March 2012, Grand Jury Report). Also, see the email from the board chair referenced previously in this report.

- b. Evidence from interviews raised questions about the system's and school leaders' use of a formal, systematic process to determine the number of personnel necessary to support the district's and schools' purposes, educational programs, and continuous improvement. The internal, systematic process was unclear, and it appeared that the district determined staff allocations for schools without sufficient input from school leaders. This practice resulted in staffing shortages that in some instances were later resolved through the staff-leveling process or as a result of the initiative of an administrator to fully staff a school. Reportedly, schools did not provide input into the staff projections for this school year. This can also be seen in the Board's decision to eliminate over 200 early learning paraprofessional positions during the budget process, despite all the research that supports the importance of early learning as the foundation of future student success. According to interviews with stakeholders and board members, this decision was made with little or no discussion as to the educational impact of such a reduction in staff.

**Indicator 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.

- a. The District Budget Committee consists of members of the DeKalb County Board of Education. Having board members lead and manage the Budget Committee responsible for developing the budget is a prime and significant example of board members assuming administrative duties. When some board members develop, adopt, direct the use of, and monitor the budget, they fail to segregate duties that are necessary to ensure the proper checks and balances in any financial system. Evidence from documentation and interviews clearly demonstrate that board members knowingly developed budgets that over represented revenues and underrepresented or did not sufficiently account for expenses. These actions repeated over the past five years have led to depletion of the school district's financial resources and serious deficiencies in supporting the educational program.
- b. Interviews and artifacts revealed that the system is dealing with a financial crisis. The district has exhausted its reserve funds and is operating with a severe monetary deficit. In utilizing options to secure material and fiscal resources to meet the needs of all students and improve the effectiveness of the system, the district established in 2009 a textbook leasing program with Bank of America for a \$25 million credit line to purchase textbooks. Reportedly, the credit line has been capped at \$12.5 million, a debt that the system plans to repay over a period of seven years. The Board adopted the action item for the Termination of Acquisition Fund for Textbook Leasing Program. Schools benefitting from the purchase and distribution of the textbooks could not be identified as confirmed in the Video – Board of Education Meeting September 10, 2012.

Additionally, through interviews, the team was unable to identify any schools that benefitted from textbook purchases. Stakeholders made several references to repairing

textbooks and redistributing existing textbooks, but they did not provide any information about newly purchased textbooks. The Board has not received a report in relation to the status of textbooks in the district. There is purportedly a plan to incorporate the use of e-books. However, reports indicate that the district is not wireless, and only approximately 35 percent of the schools currently have some level of wireless connectivity.

- c. Principals were told two weeks before the first day of school that money would not be available to repair textbooks. This led to schools not having textbooks available for distribution at the beginning of school. Some schools made the decision to maintain classroom sets of books because not enough were available for individual students. Others purchased glue and attempted to repair the books themselves. When asked if the district provided guidance as to how to communicate with parents regarding this issue, they responded they received no guidance. Schools made their own decisions about what and how to communicate with parents about this issue. Some schools sent no communication and waited to respond to individual parents.
- d. Another prominent issue is the availability of equitable resources and opportunities to attain challenging learning expectations and meet the educational needs of all students in the system. A north/south geographical division of the county also constitutes an economic, equity and racial divide, which is further exasperated by the actions of the board members. These are significant impediments and issues related to creating and sustaining improved instruction and effective operations of the district. These long-term, ongoing issues impede concentration on achieving the purpose and direction of the system and its schools. The actions of the board members perpetuate divisiveness thus limiting the ability of the district to address these issues. The Board's divisiveness results in a continued failure to leverage the power achieved by a unified Board to create and implement policies and procedures that will facilitate the success and achievement of all the district's students. Their actions interfere with the development and nurturing of a collaborative spirit that is essential for developing a positive internal and external community of support for student learning and district effectiveness. These are significantly overt issues in efforts related to instruction and operations that having a profound impact on student learning.
- e. The excessive amount of resources used to pay legal fees, purported to be approximately \$11 million annually, can be better served in the classroom to ensure that the system's curriculum provides equitable and challenging learning experiences so that all students have sufficient opportunity to develop learning, thinking and life skills that lead to success in their future. For example, interviews revealed that some schools do not have funds to support field trips to provide students with additional methods of learning. It was reported that the cost for field trips is consistently under-budgeted at \$1.6 million while the actual cost is \$10 million. Additionally, approximately \$14 million was budgeted for bussing students to and from school while the actual cost is around \$20 million. The Grand Jury Report (March 2012) raises questions regarding the cost-effectiveness and appropriateness by which the Board spends millions of dollars in excess of the budget on legal fees. The Report further revealed that the Board had no process in place to review legal bills nor did the Board have policies and procedures to determine what the representing law firms could charge the Board or what they could not charge the Board. Goal Four of the District, which was approved by the Board, was

“To ensure fiscal responsibility in order to maintain safe and healthy learning environments that support academic programs, resources, and services” (District Website). However, there is abundant evidence to indicate that fiscally responsible policies and practices need to be improved to ensure that financial resources are allocated to meet the financial obligations of a school system that focuses on the needs of students.

**Indicator 4.3:** The system maintains facilities, services, and equipment to provide a safe, clean, and healthy environment for all students and staff.

The system is failing to meet the needs of all students and staff. The perpetual schism on the Board inhibits its members from working together to meet the facilities, services, and equipment needs of the District. With each board member attempting to secure resources for their individual election district and thereby placing the demands of “their” constituency before those of the school system, as a whole, the Board continues to fail to enact and support policies that will deliver a safe, clean and healthy environment for all students and staff throughout the District.

**Indicator 4.4:** The system demonstrates strategic resource management that includes long-range planning in support of the purpose and direction of the system.

There is evidence that even board members have identified the Board’s fiscal oversight problems. There is a long email chain between two board members ending September 18, 2012 regarding the nature of the board’s financial challenges. One board member states that there is evidence of the board’s fiscal mismanagement over the last 5 years. The evidence includes 1) severe under-budgeting of items with a well-documented, stable experience over time and 2) providing no budget for common yearly expenses. The board member points out that one cannot simultaneously believe that their previous budgets were accurate providing for the building of reserves and also acknowledge that there is a deficit. The other board member replies, “...you continue to let your opaque notions, prejudices, and politics cause you to reject truths and facts as negligible.” Later in the email thread, he goes on to say that he has more confidence in the findings of the bond raters, external auditors, bankers, and SACS than he does in the other board member’s “opaque opinions.” Given the extent of the problems identified in the recent findings of the external auditors, facilities and infrastructure issues, textbook shortages and other resource management issues identified herein, it is extremely disconcerting that the Board cannot reach a consensus over the simple fact that they have not been successful in the financial oversight and strategic planning of the system’s resources.

Additionally, the district’s current policy and procedure associated with drawing attendance zones as well as closing or opening new schools is poorly constructed and ineffectively administered. The result has been community outrage, confusion, and feelings of abandonment. The current policy and procedure does not provide for community input prior to Board consideration of any plan. Also the current policy gives the Board the ability to modify, revise or ignore any plan recommended by the administration. This allows individual board members the ability to barter with each other for votes to amend the attendance zones to satisfy individual or constituent

groups of people in the county rather than establishing a proper infrastructure based on the needs of all students in the county.

**Indicator 4.6:** The system provides a technology infrastructure and equipment to support the system’s teaching, learning, and operational needs.

From information elicited during interviews, the system has failed to provide a modern, fully functional technology infrastructure, appropriate equipment, and a highly qualified technical support staff to meet the teaching, learning and operational needs of all stakeholders throughout the system. With only approximately 35 percent of the system’s schools equipped with some level of connectivity, the current technology system is woefully inadequate to support the complex needs of a large school system especially in anticipation of future requirements of the state-wide assessments. Additionally, district software systems are not integrated within the system to ensure that staff can work effectively and efficiently in a collaborative manner for operational effectiveness. Further, the team found no evidence that the system and school personnel have developed and implemented a technology plan to continuously improve technology services, infrastructure, and equipment. The continued struggle between board members to obtain as much as they can for “their” constituents and schools, indicates that it is unlikely that the Board will adopt or support a strategic plan or policies to meet this indicator.

## Accreditation Status

Based on the findings of the Special Review Team and review and action by the AdvancED Accreditation Commission, AdvancED concludes that DeKalb County School District is in violation of AdvancED Standard 2: *Governance and Leadership*, Indicators 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 2.5, and Standard 4: *Resources and Support Systems*, Indicators 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.4, and 4.6. In accordance with AdvancED policies, the DeKalb County School District has been placed in the accreditation status of **“Probation”** until December 31, 2013. A Monitoring Review shall be conducted no later than May 31, 2013 to assess the progress made in complying with the Required Actions set forth below. The school system must submit an Institutional Progress Report, including evidence of actions taken, no less than three weeks prior to the Monitoring Review. The school system must complete the Required Actions listed in the following section, report back to AdvancED on the completion of the Required Actions by filing a second Institutional Progress Report and host a second Monitoring Team on or before December 31, 2013 to ascertain the District’s compliance with the following Required Actions and AdvancED standards, indicators, policies and protocols.

## Required Actions

The DeKalb County School District must fully address the Required Actions that are still in effect from previous AdvancED/SACS CASI review teams as well as new Required Actions developed by this Special Review Team as follows:

1. Devise and implement a written, comprehensive plan for unifying the DeKalb County Board of Education so that the focus can become serving the needs of the children of the DeKalb County School District.
2. Ensure that all actions and decisions of the DeKalb County Board of Education are reflective of the collective Board and consistent with approved policies and procedures and all applicable laws, regulations and standards, rather than individual board members acting independently and undermining the authority of the Superintendent to lead and manage day-to-day operations.
3. Establish and implement policies and procedures that ensure segregation of duties of the governing board and that of the administration including the elimination of Board working committees which result in board members assuming administrative functions that should be the responsibility of appropriate staff.
4. Implement and adhere to fiscally responsible policies and practices that ensure the DeKalb County Board of Education will adopt and ensure proper implementation of budgets within the financial means of the school system and that support the delivery of an educational program that meets the needs of the students.

DeKalb County School District also must complete the Required Actions outlined in the March 2012 Quality Assurance Review report. The outstanding Required Actions from that report are as follows:

5. Establish and enforce a policy that board members honor the chain of command when communicating with stakeholders.
6. Ensure a robust district diagnostic assessment program (universal screener, progress monitoring probes, and benchmarks included) that is a systematic and a regular component of the district's comprehensive assessment system, includes a variety of formative assessment tasks and tools to monitor student progress, and provides school personnel access to the State Longitudinal Data System.
7. Establish a formal change management process for new system initiatives (vision, mission, strategic plan, curriculum, benchmark assessment, etc.) to address development, implementation, timeline, monitoring, communication and evaluation effectiveness. This process should be in accordance with state regulations and guidelines.
8. Conduct an internal audit on the available technology across all schools in order to identify areas of need with the intent to allocate appropriately throughout the district.

Support this action by researching appropriate training for teachers and staff to ensure technology's effective use in daily instruction.

9. Communicate to stakeholders the differences between programs and financial resources available to schools.
10. Enroll all students (K-12) in Parent Portal and communicate with parents this action to work more closely with them. Establish policy for timely Parent Portal updates by teachers. Also provide students with tools to monitor their success.

Additionally, DeKalb County School District must complete the Required Actions outlined in the January 2011 Special Review Team report and subsequently marked In Progress on the Accreditation Progress Report submitted by the school system in October 2011. The Required Action from that report still to be completed is stated as follows:

11. Re-establish the district's strategic planning team for the purpose of effectively implementing the DeKalb County School System Strategic Plan to guide the direction of the district.

## **Next Steps - Using and Acting On The Report**

A copy of this report is sent to the Superintendent. The Superintendent is responsible for sharing this report with the Board and community. The DeKalb County School District shall use the report to guide its improvement efforts. The DeKalb County School District is accountable for addressing the Required Actions identified in this report within the specified timeline. The AdvancED Georgia office is available to provide assistance, if needed.

The DeKalb County School District must request that a Monitoring Team be appointed by AdvancED/SACS CASI to make an on-site visit to assess the progress of the school system in meeting the Required Actions listed above. The Monitoring Visit should be scheduled to occur no later than May 31, 2013. All expenses of the Review Team pertaining to the Monitoring Visit are the responsibility of the system. Additionally, the system will be required to submit an Institutional Progress Report documenting progress relative to all Required Actions outlined in this report. A template for completing the Progress Report will be provided by the AdvancED Georgia office. The Institutional Progress Report must be submitted to the AdvancED office in Alpharetta, Georgia no less than three weeks prior to the on-site Monitoring Visit.

## Closing Comments

The DeKalb County Board of Education has been afforded ample opportunity to come into compliance with the AdvancED Standards and Indicators as well as their own policies. Despite attempts of various experts and organizations to bring about sustained change in the culture and operation of the Board of Education, the extensive efforts, costs and resources expended in this endeavor appear to have been wasted. By admission of the very board members that received the training and opportunity to change the culture and pattern of behavior, the efforts of the members have been in vain. While the system was in a state of monitoring and consultation, some progress was noted. However, as soon as the monitoring concluded and the members were left to self-regulate, their old patterns of behavior re-emerged. The failure of the Board to effectively govern the system is having severe consequences on the system's current and future operation. If this pattern of poor governance is not corrected immediately, thousands of DeKalb County students will be negatively impacted for years to come.

The findings of the special Grand Juries, the internal audit, findings of the AdvancED External Review team, and admissions of the board members, staff and stakeholders leave little doubt as to the extreme dysfunction of the DeKalb County Board of Education. The board members' blatant disregard for their own policies and procedures, lack of respect for each other and the staff, and failure to properly govern the system is having a devastating impact on the quality of the educational experience being delivered to all students in DeKalb County. In interviews, board members repeatedly indicated the need to meet the demands of their constituents in order to get re-elected. The priority should not be the re-election of board members. The sole focus should be establishing and sustaining an effective governing body that ensures the educational success of all current and future students. Until such time as the board members begin to place the educational needs of all students in DeKalb County Schools before those of individual students, constituents and other stakeholders in "their" election districts, the system will continue to fail to meet its mission and vision to provide a quality education for all students. The community stakeholders must demand that the Board authentically and effectively implement and sustain the changes necessary to ensure that this system begins the difficult process of repairing the dysfunction so that the governing board can focus on meeting the needs of all students. All current and future students of DeKalb County have the right to expect this much from the adults that have sought to govern over their futures.

## About AdvancED

### Background

Dedicated to advancing excellence in education worldwide, AdvancED provides accreditation, research and professional services to 30,000 institutions in 74 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:

- **Meet the AdvancED Standards and accreditation policies.**  
Institutions demonstrate adherence to the AdvancED Standards 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.
- **Engage in continuous improvement.**  
Institutions implement a plan of continuous improvement focused on improving student performance and organizational effectiveness.
- **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 once every five years. The team evaluates the institution's adherence to the AdvancED Standards of Quality and accreditation policies, assesses the efficacy of the institution's improvement process and methods for quality assurance, and provides Powerful Practices, Opportunities for Improvement, and 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 visits may be conducted during this time to ensure that the institution is making progress toward the Required Actions.

### A Process of Continuous Improvement

The AdvancED Accreditation Process engages the institution 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.