

Report of the
External Review
for
Rabun County School System

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US

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Date: November 3, 2013 - November 6, 2013



North Central Association 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) are accreditation divisions of AdvancED.

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Introduction to the External Review

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 student performance 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 includes Powerful Practices and Opportunities for Improvement identified by the External Review Team, as well as observations about Student Performance, the Learning Environment, and Stakeholder Feedback.

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. Before implementation, 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, identification of Powerful Practices and Opportunities for Improvement related to each of the standards (if appropriate), and a description of the evidence examined by the External Review Team.

The AdvancED Standards and Indicators are the first of three primary areas of evaluation for AdvancED's Performance Accreditation model. Using indicator-specific performance levels, the External Review Team evaluates the degree to which the institution meets each indicator on a scale of 1 to 4. The scores assigned to the indicators are averaged to arrive at a single score. This score, along with scores from evaluations of student performance and stakeholder feedback, will be used to determine the accreditation status of the institution.

Average Indicator Score for this Institution	3.0
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Standard 1: 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.

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 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 that are aligned with the institutions' vision and supported by internal and external stakeholders. These expectations serve as the focus for assessing student performance and overall institution effectiveness.

Standard 1			
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.			
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 • District purpose statements - past and present • Survey results • Examples of communications to stakeholders about the district's purpose (i.e. website, newsletters, annual report, student handbook) • Observations • Minutes from meetings related to development of the district's purpose and direction • Accreditation Report • Overview by System Superintendent • Overview by Standards and School Improvement team 	3.0

Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
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"> • Agendas and/or minutes that reference a commitment to the components of the schools' purpose statements • Examples of school purpose statements if different from the district purpose statement • Examples of written stakeholder communications or marketing materials that portray the school purpose and direction • Accreditation Report • Interviews 	3.0
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 • Examples of schools' continuous improvement plans • Accreditation Report • Statements or documents about ethical and professional practices • Statements of shared values and beliefs about teaching and learning • The district strategic plan 	3.0
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 • Accreditation Report • Examples of schools continuous improvement plans • Observations 	3.0

Standard 2: The system operates under governance and leadership that promote and support student performance and system effectiveness.

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 educational institution leadership research, Leithwood and 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 their 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 communities to attain continuous 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 institutional 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's experience gained through evaluation of best practices has indicated 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 2			
The system operates under governance and leadership that promote and support student performance and system effectiveness.			
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"> • Student handbooks • Staff handbooks • Accreditation Report • District operations manuals • Communications to stakeholder about policy revisions • Superintendent Interview Board Interview Teacher Interviews Board Policies 	3.0

Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
2.2	The governing body operates responsibly and functions effectively.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Governing authority minutes relating to training • Proof of legal counsel • Governing authority training plan • Assurances, certifications • Accreditation Report • Findings of internal and external reviews of compliance with laws, regulations, and policies • Interviews • Governing authority policies on roles and responsibilities, conflict of interest • Governing code of ethics 	3.0
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 • Interviews • Social media • Accreditation Report • Stakeholder input and feedback • Agendas and minutes of meetings 	4.0
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 • Interviews • Examples of decisions in support of the schools' continuous improvement plans • Examples of decisions aligned with the district's purpose and direction • Accreditation Report 	3.0

Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
2.5	Leadership engages stakeholders effectively in support of the system's purpose and direction.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accreditation Report • Interviews • Comprehensive Local Education Implementation Plan Goals • Comprehensive Local Education Implementation Plan Minutes 	3.0
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 • Accreditation Report • Governing body policy on supervision and evaluation • Job specific criteria • Supervision and evaluation documents with criteria for improving professional practice throughout the system and student success noted • Representative supervision and evaluation reports 	3.0

Powerful Practices

Indicator

1. The Rabun County Board of Education allows and encourages the system and school leadership to work toward improving student learning by giving them the autonomy to manage the day-to-day operations of the schools.

2.3

There is a clear distinction between the roles and responsibilities of the school board and the school administration. Through interviews with the superintendent, board members, building administration, teachers, and parents, it was evident that the school board does not interfere with the daily operations of the school. This allows building leadership to make decisions that are in the best interest of the students. In addition, the board's evident trust of the superintendent carries over into the entire school community, fostering confidence among stakeholders and staff. Evidence indicates clearly that the board is committed to the students of Rabun County. The phrase, "Whatever is best for the students" rings true for this governing body.

Standard 3: The system's curriculum, instructional design, and assessment practices guide and ensure teacher effectiveness and student learning across all grades and courses.

A high-quality and effective educational 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 that include strong communication skills, knowledge of content, and knowledge of how to teach the content. The institution'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, J., Kunter, M., Blum, W., Brunner, M., Voxx, T., Jordan, A., Klusmann, U., Krauss, S., Nuebrand, M., & Tsai, Y., 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, J., Brown, R., Choi, S., & Thomas, S., 2008). According to Marks, Louis, and Printy (2002), staff members who engage in "active organizational learning also have higher achieving students in contrast to those that do not." Likewise, a study conducted by Horng, Klasik, and Loeb (2010), concluded that leadership in effective institutions "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 that a successful institution implements a curriculum based on clear and measurable expectations for student learning. The curriculum 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 3
The system's curriculum, instructional design, and assessment practices guide and ensure teacher effectiveness and student learning across all grades and courses.

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 • Student work across courses or programs • Lesson plans • Observations • Posted learning objectives • Enrollment patterns for various courses and programs • Accreditation Report • Course Syllabus Curriculum maps and pacing guides Descriptions of instructional techniques Primary and Elementary Levels Common Grading policy within buildings 	3.0
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"> • Accreditation Report • Interviews • Teacher evaluation criteria relating to prescribed instructional designs and proprietary practices • Curriculum writing process • Lesson plans aligned to the curriculum • Pacing guides Progression charts Superintendent Overview Standards-based report cards K-2 	3.0

Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
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 • Examples of teacher use of technology as an instructional resource • Findings from supervisor formal and informal observations • Student work demonstrating the application of knowledge • Teacher evaluation criteria relating to prescribed instructional designs and proprietary practices • Interviews • Accreditation Report 	3.0
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 • Accreditation Report • Peer or mentoring opportunities and interactions • Administrative classroom observation protocols and logs • Interviews • Professional development offerings and plans tied to the prescribed education program, instructional strategies, developmentally appropriate practices, and student success 	2.0

Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
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"> • Common language, protocols and reporting tools • Agendas and minutes of collaborative learning committees • Calendar/schedule of learning community meetings • Interviews • Peer coaching guidelines and procedures • Evidence of informal conversations that reflect collaboration about student learning • Examples of cross curricular or program projects, interdisciplinary instruction, and classroom action research projects • Accreditation Report • Formative Instructional Practices 	3.0
3.6	Teachers implement the system's instructional process in support of student learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examples of learning expectations and standards of performance • Interviews • Accreditation Report • Samples of exemplars were used but not across the system Units of study curriculum maps Formative Instructional Practice Training 	3.0

Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
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"> • Accreditation Report • Descriptions and schedules of mentoring, coaching, and induction programs with references to district and school beliefs and values about teaching and learning • Records of meetings and informal feedback sessions • Observations • 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 • Teacher KEYES Portal PD 360 	3.0

Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
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 • 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 • Accreditation Report • 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 • Samples of exemplars used to guide and inform student learning • Performance Based Report Cards K-2 title I and Parent Involvement Notes Power School Call System 	3.0
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"> • Accreditation Report • Interviews • Master schedule with time for formalized structure • Teachers as Advisors at the high school Middle School just implemented looping Advising program Ratio of adults to students across the system are small 	2.0
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 • Accreditation Report • Policies Student Handbooks 	2.0

Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
3.11	All staff members participate in a continuous program of professional learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation tools for professional learning • District quality control procedures showing implementation plan for professional development for district and school staff • Accreditation Report • Interviews • Professional Learning Surveys 	3.0
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 • Interviews • Accreditation Report • Data used to identify unique learning needs of students • Migrant Program Documentation Special Education Documentation After School Programs Response to Intervention English Second Language programs 	3.0

Standard 4: The system has resources and provides services in all schools that support its purpose and direction to ensure success for all students.

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, D., Rudo, Z., Schneider, C., & Smith-Hansen, L., 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 the 30,000 institutions in the AdvancED network that a successful institution has sufficient human, material, and fiscal resources to implement a curriculum that enables students to achieve expectations for student learning, meets special needs, and complies with applicable regulations. The institution employs and allocates staff members 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 members to improve their effectiveness. The institution ensures compliance with applicable governmental regulations.

Standard 4			
The system has resources and provides services in all schools that support its purpose and direction to ensure success for all students.			
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"> • Accreditation Report • District budgets or financial plans for the last three years • Observations • District quality assurance procedures for monitoring qualified staff across all schools • School budgets or financial plans for last three years • Interviews • Documentation of highly qualified staff 	4.0

Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
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 • Accreditation Report • Examples of efforts of school leaders to secure necessary material and fiscal resources • Examples of school calendars • Interviews • Alignment of school budgets with school purpose and direction • Alignment of district budget with district purpose and direction • Facilities plan 	3.0
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"> • District quality control procedures showing the monitoring of compliance with district expectations for school facilities and learning environments • Interviews • Observations • Accreditation Report • Example systems for school maintenance requests • Documentation of compliance with local and state inspections requirements • Policies, handbooks on district and school facilities and learning environments • Example maintenance schedules for schools • School safety committee responsibilities, meeting schedules, and minutes • Example school records of depreciation of equipment 	4.0

Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
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"> • Interviews • Policies, handbooks on district and school facilities and learning environments • Accreditation Report • Five year facilities plan • Facilities strategic plan (Land Swap with National Forest Service) 	3.0
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"> • Interviews • Accreditation Report • Data on media and information resources available to students and staff • Schedule of staff availability to assist students and school personnel related to finding and retrieving information 	3.0
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"> • District technology plan and budget to improve technology services and infrastructure for the district-level and school-level • Assessments to inform development of district and school technology plans • Accreditation Report • Interviews • Examples of school-level technology plans and budgets to improve technology services and infrastructure to students and staff • Technology Survey • Moodle 	3.0

Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
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 • Student assessment system for identifying student needs • Accreditation Report • Rubrics on developmentally appropriate benchmarks; e.g. early childhood education • Social classes and services, e.g., bullying, character education • List of support services available to students 	3.0
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"> • List of services available related to counseling, assessment, referral, educational, and career planning • Accreditation Report • Description of IEP process • Interviews • Description of referral process 	3.0

Powerful Practices**Indicator**

1. Rabun County School System hires licensed teachers as para-professional in an effort to recruit, employ and retain the best possible staff.

4.1

Besides using social media, university partnerships, job fairs, the service center, and their website to post openings, Rabun County School System has created a process where they hire licensed teachers as para-professionals within their system. Para-professionals are trained in the formative instructional practices and help provide instruction to students. This gives the district the opportunity to identify the prospective teachers skill level and to match them to appropriate longer term positions in the future. The district uses social media, university partnerships, job fairs, and their employment posting website to identify new hires. The district has developed clear policies to guide them in staff acquisition. The district has a firm commitment to a low pupil to adult ratio (lower class size). A guiding theme for staffing may be paraphrased as "what is best for the student is best for the district." The district continues to have a 100% highly qualified certified staff. Additionally the district provides each K-3 classroom with a paraprofessional. The district also demonstrates its strong belief in early childhood education by locally funding a Pre-K classroom. Even during difficult economic times the district provided (and continues to provide) staffing for a fine arts program including music, technology education, physical education and art beginning at the Pre-K level for all students in the district. Funding is provided for teachers to attend workshops, classes, and other professional development. The district also funds the cost of certifying AP teachers at the secondary level.

2. Rabun County School Systems facilities, services, and equipment are safe, clean, and provide a healthy environment for all staff and students.

4.3

Visits to the individual buildings verified they were safe and welcoming to all stakeholders. All of the buildings were pristine in their appearance. Administration, staff, and students vocalized their pride and sense of responsibility in keeping the buildings clean and safe. The campus sits on top of a mountain where they have designed, built and maintained their own road system. The leaders of each school provide clear and delineated Safety and Improvement Plans that are current and well understood by all staff and students. The administration and superintendent conduct frequent walk throughs to insure a safe and clean environment. The frequent presence of the School Resource Officer (SRO) leads to an even greater sense of safety and security. All survey and interview responses substantiate the highest levels of satisfaction.

Standard 5: 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.

Systems with strong improvement processes move beyond anxiety about the current reality and focus on priorities and initiatives for the future. Using results, i.e., data and other information, to guide continuous improvement is key to an institution's success. A study conducted by Datnow, Park, and 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, J., Pane, J., Barney, H., & Christina, R., 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 institutional 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).

Through ongoing evaluation of educational institutions, AdvancED has found 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 5			
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.			
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"> • Interviews • Accreditation Report • Evidence that assessments are reliable and bias free • Student Learning Objectives State Longitudinal Data System CRCT - State Testing Benchmarking with Think Gate Progress Monitoring aligned with Response to Intervention Universal Screening STAR Reading and Math 	3.0

Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
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"> • Accreditation Report • List of data sources related to district effectiveness • List of data sources related to student learning, instruction, program effectiveness, and conditions that support learning • Comprehensive Local Education Implementation Plan 45 day action plans College and Career Readiness Performance Index Response to Intervention Written protocols and procedures for data collection and analysis 	3.0
5.3	Throughout the system professional and support staff are trained in the interpretation and use of data.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accreditation Report • Professional learning schedule specific to the use of data • Documentation of attendance and training related to data use • Observations • Interviews 	3.0
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 • Accreditation Report • Agendas, minutes of meetings related to analysis of data • Description of process for analyzing data to determine verifiable improvement in student learning • Examples of use of results to evaluate continuous improvement action plans • Evidence of student readiness for the next level • Evidence of student growth • Evidence of student success at the next level • College and Career Readiness Performance Index 	3.0

Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
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"> • Minutes of meetings regarding achievement of student learning goals • Accreditation Report • Communication plan regarding student learning, systems that support learning, and achievement of school improvement goals to stakeholders • 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 • Interviews 	3.0

Opportunities for Improvement

Indicator

1. Provide all school leaders, professional and support staff rigorous professional development related to the evaluation, interpretation, and use of data to change instruction.

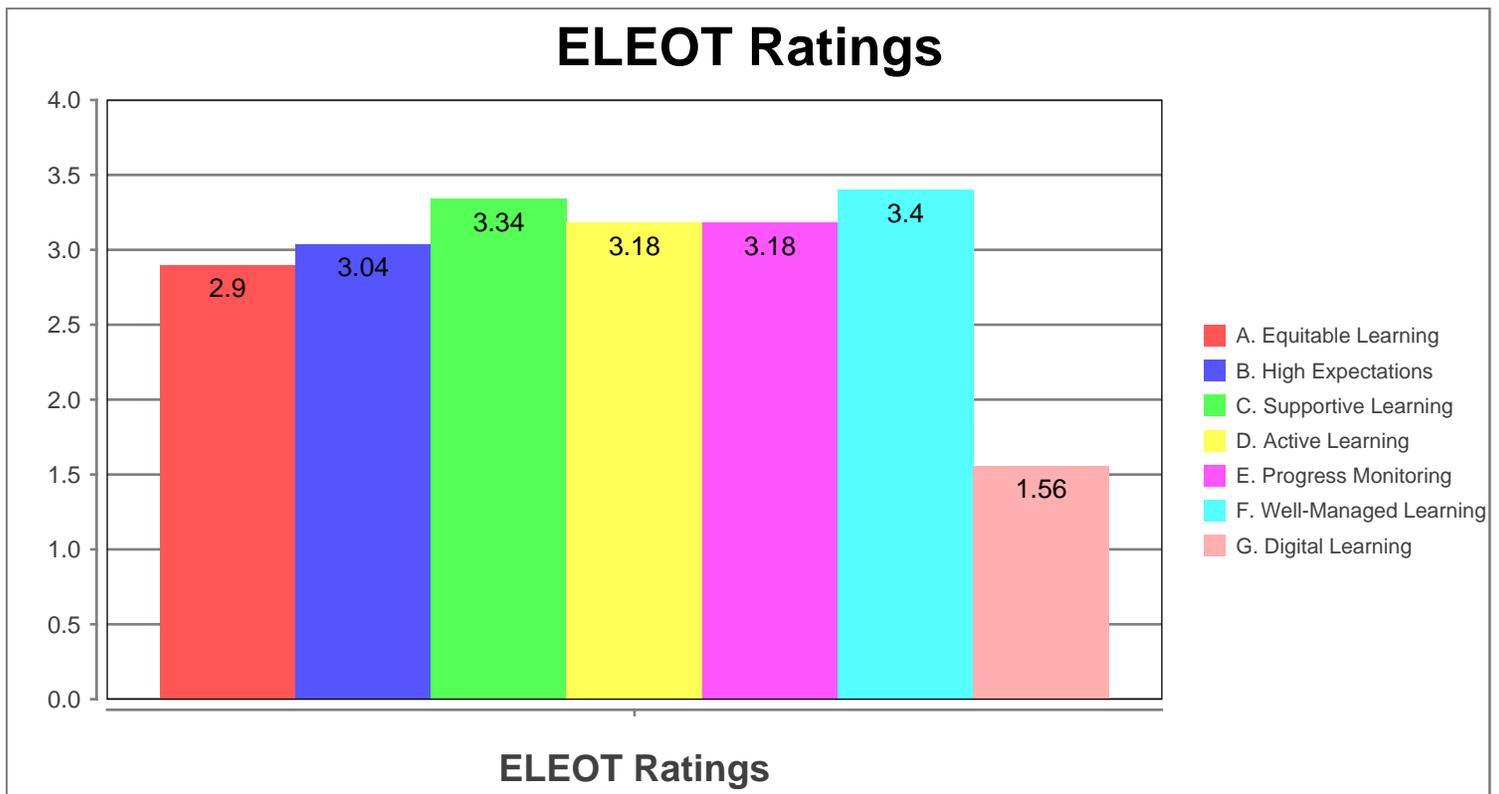
5.3

The district currently gathers student formative and summative assessment data throughout the system at all grade levels. Examination of these practices and feedback from stakeholders indicate a strong need for systemic processes to be implemented in the use of this data to monitor results, adjust and differentiate instruction for students, and make decisions regarding programmatic changes. Common data analysis tools are often used with the district's benchmarking program; however, there is a need to provide in-depth professional learning to all professional and support staff on the interpretation, and use of these results to change instruction. Teacher interviews indicate that the interpretation and use of current benchmarking results provided through Thinkgate are not consistent across the system. Professional learning will enhance and support the district's Response to Intervention program and will enhance student achievement at all levels.

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 four-point scale. The following provides the aggregate average score across multiple observations for each of the seven learning environments included in ELEOT.



Student Performance

Student Performance on assessments is the second of three primary areas of evaluation for AdvancED's Performance Accreditation model. Institutions are asked to collect and analyze student performance data, then submit the data and the analyses to the External Review Team for review. The External Review Team evaluates the quality of the assessments used by the institution, the degree to which the institution properly administered the assessments, analyzed and acted on the results, and the overall performance of students using a set of rubrics. Results of that evaluation are reported below.

Student Performance Evaluation	
Evaluative Criteria	Performance Level
Assessment Quality	2.0
Test Administration	3.0
Quality of Learning	3.0
Equity of Learning	2.0

Stakeholder Feedback

Stakeholder Feedback is the third of three primary areas of evaluation in AdvancED's Performance Accreditation model. The AdvancED surveys are directly correlated to the AdvancED Accreditation Standards and Indicators; they provide not only direct information about stakeholder satisfaction but also become a source of data for triangulation by the External Review Team as it evaluates indicators.

Institutions are asked to collect and analyze stakeholder feedback data, then submit the data and the analyses to the External Review Team for review. The External Review Team evaluates the quality of the administration of the surveys by institution and the degree to which the institution analyzed and acted on the results. Results of that evaluation are reported below.

Stakeholder Feedback Evaluation	
Evaluative Criteria	Performance Level
Questionnaire Administration	1.0
Stakeholder Feedback Results and Analysis	3.0

Individual Institution Results

AdvancED requires internal and external stakeholders from each individual institution within the system to evaluate their institution on the AdvancED Standards for Quality Schools, student performance, and stakeholder feedback. The following table provides the results of those self-analyses. Higher scores indicate higher perceived performance on each of the measures. The range of possible scores for each of the institutions within the system are 1 (low performing) to 4 (high performing).

Institution	Indicator Averages	Questionnaire Administration	Stakeholder Feedback Results and Analysis	Assessment Quality	Test Administration	Quality of Learning	Equity of Learning
Rabun County Elementary School	3.33	4.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0
Rabun County High School	2.85	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	2.0
Rabun County Middle School	2.82	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0
Rabun County Primary School	3.24	4.0	4.0	3.0	4.0	3.0	3.0

Other System Institutions

The following institutions did not complete the required Accreditation Report for this External Review.

Institution	Institution
Rabun Gap Community School	South Rabun Elementary School

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 External Review at the Rabun County School System in Clayton, Georgia took place from November 3rd to November 6th, 2013. Five members served on the accreditation team from both outside and inside the state. In preparing for the visit, the team lead evaluator was in contact with the superintendent from the district to agree upon the expected outcomes of the visit, to plan the schedule, and to ensure the necessary artifacts would be available for the team's review prior to the arrival on-site.

The district leadership team and teachers completed the district's self-assessment. Administrators, teachers, and para-professionals completed each school's self-assessment. The schools self-assessment information was "rolled up" to the district leadership to complete the district's self-assessment. All staff had a working knowledge of the self-assessments at both the district and school levels. Based on parent and community interviews, it was difficult to determine whether the self-assessments or the process was shared with many stakeholders outside of the school system. Interviews revealed Rabun County residents take great pride in their community, students, teachers and schools. In the completion of the self-assessment the individuals were open about the quality continuous improvement practices that are in place and in the areas the district is still working toward excellence. District leadership was open and forthcoming with the team about areas in which they hope to see growth as they move forward in their journey. Visits to the buildings and classrooms validated use of a deep level of instruction tied directly to student learning and skill. All staff supports the Rabun County Schools Plan and Initiatives as they are vested in working to develop their strategies and skills in order to permeate all aspects of the system for their students.

The External Review team was able to speak with 162 stakeholders in the district including 11 administrators, 116 teachers and support staff, 23 parents, and 5 board members. The team also was pleased to observe 47 classrooms in the elementary, middle and high schools.

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.

It was evident from the presentations, interviews, observations and a review of artifacts that there is a commitment across the district to providing students with the best education possible. The External Review team noted that a strong sense of community and positive culture permeates the district. The External Review team was impressed with the common theme that came from every group interviewed, "Rabun County Schools do not sit on the sidelines." This theme was heard not only from within the system but from parents and community members.

There seems to be a collective way things are done in the Rabun County School System. There is great trust put on the superintendent. Students, parents, staff, and the members of the school board all noted that the superintendent, has "great personal vision and is masterful in developing relationships. The superintendent "has been very deliberate in presenting ideas to stakeholders and to include them in the decision making of the district wide efforts through visits to the schools for town hall meetings. Interviews with stakeholders revealed that the superintendent, "has had and brought to fruition many visions that seemed impossible for Rabun County."

By bringing ideas to the stakeholders concerning initiatives and taking questions, the superintendent has created a "shared connectedness" among stakeholders and predominately the school board. The shared connectedness has brought forward a learned set of behaviors that is common knowledge to all participants and is serving to build a learning organization where the focus and energy for ongoing professional learning is building stronger across the system. The shared system of meanings, behaviors, and efforts to improve instructional mastery are spiraling across the system.

In order to hold the creative tension and to broaden the impact among more stakeholders the system leadership may want to once again bring forward the central work in an effort to ensure the instructional fidelity goes deeper within all classrooms and is solid across all schools. This could be viewed as an opportunity to celebrate the accomplishments and to reset the hold on the staff's energy.

The sense of pride that exists in this community seems to stem from a long rich history where generations of citizens and staff have worked to improve the education and economy of Rabun County residents. One parent said, "Our superintendent is visible and accessible and he knows the importance of building relationships and has an understanding of the people, the past, the present and the economy of Rabun County."

The school board has a solid understanding that their personal visions do not automatically become the organization vision. There is great trust between the school board and the superintendent. The board's evident trust of the superintendent carries over into the entire school community, fostering confidence among stakeholders and staff. The phrase, "Whatever is best for the kids" rings true for this governing body. There is a clear distinction between the roles and responsibilities of the school board and the school administration. The superintendent appreciates the service of the board and he works hard to inform them and educate them in their responsibilities. Through interviews with the superintendent, board members, building administration, teachers and parents, it was evident that the school board does not interfere with the daily operations of the school. Parents expressed, there is no need to circumvent the identified chain of command, as it was well known that shared responsibility exists within the system. There is a high level of trust at all levels and an understanding of the roles and responsibilities of staff. The school district seems to operate from a "mindset to serve."

Staff and stakeholders indicated that the superintendent and the building administrators are active and visible, and they ask, "How can we help you?" The superintendent, central office and building administrators have great respect for the teachers and they realize the staff has taken on several large initiatives. The administration realizes the initiatives fall largely on the shoulders of the teachers. Rabun County School System is involved in Race to the Top, Investing in Educational Excellence, Formative Instructional Strategies, aligning their instruction to the Common Core Standards, and using the Accreditation framework to drive their efforts toward continuous improvement. Rabun County Schools is a high performing school system that has been on the forefront of educational reform in the state of Georgia. As one of 26 Race to the Top districts in the state, the system has had

a part in developing evaluation practices and instructional assessments aligned with the implementation of Common Core Georgia Performance Standards which began in 2012-13.

The External Review team noted strong instructional practices in most classrooms. Primary and Elementary schools exhibited strong evidence of best practices such as, writer's workshop, guaranteed and viable curriculum, common assessments, learning targets, student feedback, guided reading instruction, inquiry based math practices, use of math manipulatives, and collaboration among teachers. Especially noteworthy is the support staff available K through third and fourth through sixth grade. It was revealed through interviews and overviews that some of the para-professional staff hold teaching credentials and are hoping to secure teaching positions within the system. Through observations and interviews it was not evident which para-professionals were not the certified teachers. Para-professionals have a solid understanding of common core standards and instructional best practices. Daily intervention support is provided to at risk students by all staff.

Observers witnessed implementation of student learning targets in both the middle and high school along with traditional lecture style delivery of instruction. Observers noted the high school utilized graphic organizers and use of data to provide "Wildcat time". A shared commitment to the success of their students has led to one of the state's highest high school graduation rates, an improvement of 30% in the last 10 years.

Throughout the district the focus has been placed on teacher instruction that will meet the needs of every learner. The staff is not asking for programs that will provide the "magic bullet" to fix the student outcomes. Most of the staff is focused on student contact and instruction, and realize that will have the greatest impact on student achievement. Data concerning the progress of students is presented and students receive programmatic interventions to try to increase academic performance. Anecdotal progress toward district initiatives is regularly reported to the governing board, and the board asks the leadership team to reflect on the work being done at the schools. This healthy under-girding of professional teaming provides the district with the mechanism to examine the district's current reality.

The district is at the point to begin further data analysis to inform the actual instructional practices inside the classroom, so every student receives deeper personalized instruction that is consistent across the system. The External Review team did see some evidence of prevalent use of classroom strategies that involve students in their own learning; however, it was not consistent across buildings. It is important that everyone knows this is a time to be celebrated as there are many systems that work and work to never achieve the sense of common shared vision that Rabun County School System has achieved to this point.

The External Review team saw evidence of some forms of program evaluation for both academics and operations. District K-12 alignment could build upon the current instructional efforts and help to expand these practices deeper within buildings. Rigorous data analysis should be used in all facets of the system to monitor progress toward goals and measure the effectiveness of services provided, interventions employed, and strategies implemented.

There seem to be many resources, programs and materials to support the needs of children. The district has a budget plan that is regularly audited. There is a conservative approach in budgeting and spending across the system. The crisis management plan, behavior intervention plans, and availability of School Resource Officers all provide evidence of the commitment to ensure a safe campus. The district has a commitment to hiring, mentoring and retaining a highly qualified and dedicated teacher core. Interviews with parents, school board members,

administrators and students provided a shared recognition for the teaching core. It was indicated by some stakeholders that a need exists to ensure the consistency between buildings as students transition to the next level.

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.

The learning environment in the Rabun County School System is robust and active. Average ratings for the first of the six areas ranged from 2.90 to 3.40 on a 4-point scale. This indicates substantial consistency in the environments of Equitable Learning Environment (2.90), High Expectations Environment (3.04), Supportive Learning Environment (3.34), Active Learning Environment (3.18), Progress Monitoring and Feedback Environment (3.18), and Well-Managed Learning Environment (3.40). Positive learning environments were observed more prominently in three of the four schools.

The Digital Learning Environment was observed to be at a rating of (1.56). The team focused on how students were functioning, rather than on teaching practices. Where technology was used, it was primarily by teachers, rather than the learners. Primary school students who did have access to computers and iPads in their centers generally would work in small groups or individually and appeared highly engaged in the digital environment.

The External Review team found every level of the Rabun County School System is committed to its mission to serve and develop students. The process of shared leadership, open communication, and planning efforts provide a transparent accountability system at all levels. The staff's commitment and trust in each other is found within the community. Students, staff, parents, and community members have a strong sense of pride. Several parents told the External Review team in interviews that, "We are here to help our children. This is a great place to raise children." Special thanks to Rabun County for their hospitality and professional attitude toward continuous improvement observed through the system and with all stakeholders. Great appreciation goes out to Jan Pearce and Laverne Beck for coordinating the preparations for the visit, and to your teams who spent the past several months working toward this review.

The External Review team would like to acknowledge the hard work and of all of the Rabun County School System staff in their efforts of pursuing the many state initiatives. The Required Actions are written to assist the district in moving along the path of continuous improvement that has already been chartered. The External Review team sees the required actions as sequential, ways to spread the existing efforts in a more systematic and systemic manner. Interviews revealed staff is dedicated to continually improving. Stakeholders repeatedly said, "we do not sit on the sidelines in Rabun County!" This dedication is a testament to their mission and passion to serve children.

In the past, accreditation reviews resulted in an accreditation recommendation on status. Labels such as advised, warned, probation, or all clear were used to describe the status of a school relative to the criteria. Beginning with school year, 2013-14, AdvancED is introducing a new framework to describe the result of an accreditation review.

Consistent with the modern focus of accreditation on continuous improvement with an emphasis on student success, AdvancED introduces an innovative and state-of-the-art framework for diagnosing and revealing institutional performance called the Index of Education Quality (IEQ). The IEQ is comprised of three domains of performance: 1) the impact of teaching and learning on student performance; 2) the leadership capacity to govern; and 3) use of resources to support and optimize learning. Therefore, your institution will no longer receive an accreditation status. Instead, your institution will be accredited with an IEQ score. In the case where an institution is failing to meet established criteria, the accreditation will be under review thereby requiring frequent monitoring.

The three domains of performance are derived from the AdvancED Standards and Indicators; the Analysis of Student Performance; and the Engagement and Involvement of Stakeholders. Within each domain institutions will be able to connect to the individual performance levels that are applied in support of the AdvancED Standards and evaluative criteria. Within the performance levels are detailed descriptors that can be a valuable source of guidance for continuous improvement. Upon review of the findings in this report, institutional leaders should work with their staff to review and understand the evidence and rationale for each Required Action as well as the corresponding pathway to improvement described in the performance levels of the selected Indicator.

The IEQ provides a new framework that recognizes and supports the journey of continuous improvement. Your institution's IEQ is the starting point for continuous improvement. Your actions for improvement that have a positive impact will be reflected in your IEQ score.

IEQ Institutional Score: 300

Teaching and Learning Impact: 295
(Standards 3 and 5; Student Performance Criteria)

Leadership Capacity: 292
(Standards 1 and 2; Stakeholder Engagement Criteria)

Resource Utilization: 325
(Standard 4)

The External Review team recommends that Rabun County School System be accredited by the AdvancED Accreditation Commission for a five-year term of accreditation.

Required Action

1. Develop a systemic process to monitor and support the improvement of instructional practices.

Related Indicator or Assurance: 3.4

Description:

The Rabun County School System has worked hard to develop a culture of high expectations for student learning that is supported by quality instructional practices. Rabun Coounty School System has demonstrated its commitment to pushing for improving the quality of its instruction by participation in Georgia's Race to the Top and Innovation in Educational Excellence. A systemic process by the district to formally and consistently monitor instructional practices will ensure continued growth as the system validates best practices in all of its classrooms. The implementation of a system process to monitor instructional practices will provide insight into the current instructional strategies being utilized across the system, ensure fidelity, and allow for examination and evaluation of the effectiveness of these various strategies. The system can then provide targeted professional learning support to enhance and improve in any area found lacking as evidenced by the systemic monitoring.

2. Establish a system process that provides each student with an adult advocate who supports that student's educational experience.

Related Indicator or Assurance: 3.9

Description:

The school system provides for low student: teacher ratios at Rabun County Primary School and Rabun County Elementary School, in addition to, the Teachers as Advisor program at Rabun County Middle School and Rabun County High School. Interviews with teachers and students and the examination of the district's mission provided evidence that Rabun County School System places a high priority on building relationships between adults and students. A formal process will ensure a one-to-one relationship and provide support, advocacy, and guidance throughout the system to strengthen the overall capacity. As a result, students receive extra help and guidance from a dedicated adult which contributes to educational success.

3. Develop and standardize grading practices that align systematically across grade levels and courses.

Related Indicator or Assurance: 3.10

Description:

The system has a common grading scale, where each building creates the common practice for student grading. A structured process and alignment across the system would benefit stakeholders. Parent interviews revealed they are proud of the "high bar" set by the Rabun County School System grading scale. Teacher and

student interviews indicate that how students are graded and upon what criteria, varies from building to building. Grading procedures vary regarding how certain elements are included or weighted (such as homework, Accelerated Reader, late work, etc...). Conversations are occurring between buildings informally, about a student "Redo/Resubmit," plan. Formalize dialogue about grading criteria and best practices for measuring student performance. Clearly defined criteria across the system based on mastery of standards and skills may benefit students and increase outcomes.

Part III: Addenda

The External Review Team

Lead Evaluator:

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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 addressing 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 appropriate state, national, and/or international levels 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 that confers accreditation 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, and 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 (NWAC) that was founded in 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.

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

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