Report of the
Quality Assurance Review Team
for
Cherokee County School System
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Quality Assurance Review Report

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**About AdvancED and NCA CASI/SACS CASI**

**Background.** Founded in 1895, the North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement (NCA CASI) and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Council on Accreditation and Schools (SACS CASI) accredit public and private schools and districts in 30 states, the Navajo Nation, Latin America, and the Department of Defense Schools worldwide.

In 2006, NCA CASI, SACS CASI, and the research and development arm of the accrediting associations, the National Study of School Evaluation, unified to form AdvancED. Dedicated to advancing excellence in education, AdvancED provides accreditation, research, and professional services to 23,000 schools in 65 countries, serving 15 million students.

NCA CASI and SACS CASI serve as accreditation divisions of AdvancED. Through AdvancED, NCA CASI and SACS CASI have defined shared, research-based accreditation standards that cross state, regional, and national boundaries. Accompanying these standards is a unified accreditation process designed to help schools, school districts, and educational service agencies continuously improve.

**The Accreditation Process.** To earn and maintain accreditation from NCA CASI or SACS CASI, school districts and their schools must:

1) **Meet the AdvancED Standards and Policies for Quality School Systems.** School districts demonstrate adherence to the seven AdvancED standards and policies which describe the quality practices and conditions that research and best practice indicate are necessary for school districts to achieve quality student performance and organizational effectiveness.

2) **Engage in continuous improvement.** School districts and their schools implement a continuous improvement process that articulates the vision and purpose that the school district is pursuing (vision); maintains a rich and current description of students, their performance, school and district effectiveness, and the school community (profile); employs goals and interventions to improve student performance (plan); and documents and uses the results to inform what happens next (results).

3) **Demonstrate quality assurance through internal and external review.** School districts and schools engage in a planned process of ongoing internal review and self-assessment. In addition, school districts host an external quality assurance review team once every five years. The team evaluates the school district's adherence to the AdvancED quality standards, assesses the efficacy of the school district's improvement process and methods for quality assurance, and provides commendations and required actions to help the school district improve. The team provides an oral exit report to the school district and a written report detailing the team's required actions. The school district acts on the team's required actions and submits a progress report two years following the review.

NCA CASI and SACS CASI accreditation engages the entire school district community in a continuous process of self-evaluation and improvement. The overall aim is to help school districts and their schools maximize student success and improve organizational effectiveness.
Introduction to the Quality Assurance Review

Purpose. The purpose of the Quality Assurance Review is to:

1. Evaluate the school district's adherence to the AdvancED quality standards and policies.
2. Assess the efficacy of the district's improvement process and methods for quality assurance.
3. Identify commendations and required actions to improve the district and its schools.
4. Make an accreditation recommendation for review by the national AdvancED Accreditation Commission.

A key aim of the Quality Assurance Review is to verify that the school district is operating with institutional integrity - that it is fulfilling its vision and mission for its students.

School District Preparation. To prepare for the Quality Assurance Review, the school district and the community complete the AdvancED Standards Assessment Report. The report engages the district in an in-depth self-assessment of each of the seven AdvancED standards. The school district identifies and describes the evidence that demonstrates that it is meeting each standard. Through this internal review, the school district examines how its systems and processes contribute to student performance and school district effectiveness.

Summary of Team Activities. The Quality Assurance Review Team is led by an AdvancED certified District Lead Evaluator and comprised of professionals from outside the school district. The team reviews the findings of the school district's internal self-assessment, conducts interviews with representative groups of stakeholders, reviews student performance data and other documentation provided by the school district, and observes practices and daily operations. The team engages in professional deliberations to reach consensus on the school district's adherence to the standards for accreditation. The team provides an oral exit report and prepares a written Quality Assurance Review Team Report designed to help the school district and its schools improve.

The Quality Assurance Review Team Report. Following the visit, the review team completes the Quality Assurance Review report. After review by a nationally-trained reader, the report is submitted to the district. The report contains commendations and required actions for improvement.

Using the Report - Responding to the Required Actions. The school district uses the report to guide its improvement efforts. The school district is held accountable for addressing the required actions identified in the report. The AdvancED State Office is available to assist the school district in addressing the required actions. Following the Quality Assurance Review Team visit, the school district must submit a progress report detailing the actions and progress it has made on the team's required actions. The report is reviewed at the state and national level to ensure the school district is addressing the required actions.

Accreditation Recommendation. The Quality Assurance Review team uses the findings from the onsite visit to make an accreditation recommendation that is reviewed by the AdvancED Accreditation Commission. Accreditation is granted by the AdvancED Accreditation Commission and communicated to the school district following action from the commission.
Summary of Findings


During the visit, members of the Quality Assurance Review Team interviewed 91 administrators, 121 teachers, 27 support staff, 120 parents and business partners, 83 students, and 7 Board of Education members for a total of 449 stakeholders. In addition to meeting with district personnel and stakeholders, the team visited 8 schools within the school district. During the school visits, team members interviewed school stakeholders, observed classrooms, and reviewed relevant school artifacts. The team also reviewed documents, student performance data, and other artifacts provided by the district. Specifically, the team examined the district's systems and processes in relation to the seven AdvancED standards:

1. Vision and Purpose
2. Governance and Leadership
3. Teaching and Learning
4. Documenting and Using Results
5. Resource and Support Systems
6. Stakeholder Communications and Relationships
7. Commitment to Continuous Improvement

The AdvancED standards focus on systems with a school district and systematic methods of attaining high student performance and organizational effectiveness. The power of the standards lies in the connections and linkages between and among the standards. The Quality Assurance Review Team used the AdvancED standards to guide its review of the school district, looking not only for adherence to individual standards, but also for how the school district and its schools function as a whole and embody the practices and characteristics of a quality school district.

Through its examination of the school district's adherence to the standards, the Quality Assurance Review Team prepared reports on each standard, highlighting strengths and suggestions for improvement specific to each standard. These reports can be found following this summary.

The Quality Assurance Review Team also examined the effectiveness of the district's methods for quality assurance. The team reviewed the district's practices and methods to monitor and document improvement, provide meaningful feedback and support across the district, ensure that AdvancED standards are met and strengthened, and regularly collect, use, and communicate results. The team's findings in this area can be found following the standard reports.

The team used the standard reports and quality assurance findings to identify common themes, significant accomplishments, and pressing needs facing the district. These became the basis for the overall commendations and required actions that are provided below. The commendations and required actions should serve as the focus for the district as it acts on the team's findings. They represent the areas that the team believes will have the greatest impact in helping the district further its improvement efforts. The standard reports and quality assurance findings can be used to help reinforce and enrich the district's understanding of the commendations and required actions.
Commendations

The Quality Assurance Review Team commends the Cherokee County School System for the following strengths and accomplishments. While additional strengths are noted in the detailed review of each standard that appears later in this report, the commendations listed below are the strengths that the team believes are most deserving of being highlighted.

Commendation 1

Commendation Statement:
The district has established and maintains strong collaborative partnerships among stakeholder groups and schools and community agencies to support teaching and learning across the district.

Evidence:
The Cherokee community, families and citizen volunteers, as well as district and school staffs are committed to the success of their students and seek to be well-informed and proactive in the school district. The district has established strong working relationships with the Cherokee County Chamber of Commerce, local businesses, and civic organizations. Multiple businesses are active partners with the district and various school sites, understanding the mutually beneficial and satisfying rewards attached to such partnerships. The Quality Assurance Review (QAR) team learned of a wide variety of communications efforts which further strengthens the multi-tiered collaborative initiatives. These include traditional communications such as handbooks, newsletters, school-based websites (ASPEN), informational flyers, phone calls and email. In addition, the district is progressive in providing parents with technology-based communication opportunities such as the parent portal, school-based blogs, and web-cam conversations. Face-to-face communication opportunities exist through multiple means such as school councils, availability of staff for parent meetings, open forums at school board meetings, ad hoc committees, and public forums.

Rationale:
Because of the district’s efforts to provide multiple methods to communicate with parent and community stakeholders, there is a prevailing sense of community ownership in the district’s quest to provide a high-quality education for their children. These deep, collaborative relationships serve as an important vehicle to support district goals and ensure that students remain the centerpiece of overall district mission and strategy.

Commendation 2

Commendation Statement:
The district has developed and maintains a technology-rich learning environment which directly supports and enhances instructional delivery, provides related system of professional learning, and actively engages students to prepare them for success as members of a 21st Century global society.

Evidence:
The district maintains a state of the art technology center to provide the necessary infrastructure and oversight of technology resources. During interviews, parents expressed an appreciation for opportunities provided for their children to be highly-functional digital learners. “The use of technology in our classrooms promotes high quality instruction and effective learning,” stated parents. Teachers consistently recognized and were appreciative of the advanced technology available in their classrooms as well as the corresponding technology training offered them. Classroom observations consistently substantiated that students have numerous and varied opportunities to utilize technology as tools that support exploration, research, and creativity. Interviewees also noted the rapid turn-
around of technology work orders by the technology support technicians indicating that technology equipment is superbly maintained within the district. Instructional technology specialists are continually seeking new ways to support classroom teachers in their quest to maximize instruction using technological resources and to expand data access and communication opportunities for district and school staffs.

Rationale:
Providing state of the art technological resources and the corresponding personnel and training to support teaching and learning is an essential component in preparing today’s students for success at the next level. The effective use of instructional technology to support teaching and learning is vital to afford students relevant opportunities to learn and function successfully in a technology-rich society.

Commendation 3

Commendation Statement:
The district maintains a culture of high expectations that sustains high student achievement and prepares students for success in a globally competitive 21st Century.

Evidence:
The district’s long term District Strategic Plan the eight Major System Priorities serves as the framework to guide the direction of the school system. The implementation of the Principal’s Handbook clearly articulate expectations related to the day to day operations of the schools. The creation of the Innovation Zones provides a systemic and systematic framework and platform for Pre-K -12 vertical articulation and peer review of continuous improvement processes. The Superintendent’s Leadership Academies provide direction for the development of teacher and administrative leaders within the district.

Rationale:
The district’s intentional and relentless focus on the creation and strategic implementation of specific systems and processes designed to support its Major System Priorities has created a collaborative culture that over time has contributed maintaining a high level of student achievement and success.

Commendation 4

Commendation Statement:
The strong visionary leadership of the Superintendent, Board of Education, district administrators, and school leaders collectively fosters a culture of improvement for teaching and learning throughout the district.

Evidence:
The district leadership consistently demonstrates a strong commitment to sustaining a culture of excellence. The Superintendent and Board of Education demonstrate the capacity to stay within their roles to ensure effective governance and leadership. They act as responsible stewards of the district’s resources by systematically aligning resource allocation with the district’s mission and priorities. They provide multiple and varied means for stakeholders to provide input. In addition, the district systematically provides information to the community in a timely manner via the Annual Report, Renaissance Report, and First Day Facts.

Rationale:
Leadership practices that systematically and authentically engages and support stakeholders across all categories results in the strong commitment to increase student achievement and ensure the overall effectiveness of the district.
Required Actions

In addition to the commendations, the Quality Assurance Review Team identified the following required actions for improvement. The team focused its required actions on those areas that, if addressed, will have the greatest impact on improving student performance and overall effectiveness of the school district. The Cherokee County School System will be held accountable for making progress on each of the required actions noted in this section. Following this review, the school district will be asked to submit a progress report on these required actions. The district should refer to the detail provided in the standard reports for guidance and greater depth on the required actions.

Required Action 1

Required Action:
Review and annually update the Five Year Strategic Plan to clearly define timelines and clarify the means to monitor progress and evaluate effectiveness in achieving goals and objectives

Evidence:
The district is committed to systematically ensuring its system priorities are met. The Strategic Plan articulates the objectives to accomplish the major system priorities and while the action steps are clearly identified, timelines are ambiguous and open-ended and the specific means to monitor and evaluate progress are not uniformly clearly identified.

Rationale:
Clarifying timelines, monitoring, and evaluation mechanisms would maximize the effectiveness of the district’s efforts to bring its Strategic Plan to fruition.

Required Action 2

Required Action:
Develop and include as part of the annual review and update of the Five Year Strategic Plan, a comprehensive professional development plan that identifies the alignment of professional learning with system priorities, strategic planning, and school improvement planning along with the means to measure its effectiveness in meeting teaching and learning goals.

Evidence:
The district currently successfully provides numerous opportunities for professional learning. It maintains a current Professional Development calendar on the intranet portal for employees that lists available offerings. However, there is no corresponding Professional Development Plan (PDP) that systematically identifies alignment with district and school improvement priorities and further identifies the means to measure its effectiveness in meeting district and school learning goals.

Rationale:
A comprehensive Professional Development Plan that clearly and strategically identifies and aligns professional learning with major system priorities and provides the means to evaluate its effectiveness in achieving student learning goals benefits the overall effectiveness of the district and increase the district’s capacity to ensure that
resources invested in professional learning achieve intended results.

**Review of AdvancED Standards for Quality Schools:** The team reviewed the district's adherence to each of the AdvancED standards. The findings from this review are provided in the next section of this report.

**Next Steps**

The school district 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 commendations section to maximize their impact on the school district.
3. Develop action plans to address the required actions made by the team. Include methods for monitoring progress toward the required actions.
4. Use the report to guide and strengthen the school district's efforts to improve student performance and district effectiveness.
5. Two years following the Quality Assurance Review, submit the Accreditation Progress Report detailing progress made toward addressing the required actions. The report will be reviewed at the state and national level to ensure that significant progress is being made toward the required actions. Lack of progress can result in a change in accreditation status.
6. Continue to meet the AdvancED accreditation standards, submit required reports, engage in continuous improvement, and document results.

**Celebrating Accreditation**

Following the visit, the Quality Assurance Review Team submits an accreditation recommendation to AdvancED for review and action at the national level by the AdvancED Accreditation Commission, which confers accreditation and communicates it to the school district. Upon receiving its accreditation, the school district should celebrate its achievement with the community. Flags, door decals, diploma seals, and other related items can be ordered from the website to help you share your accomplishment with your community.

**Summary**

The accreditation process engages the school district, its schools, and community in an ongoing journey of continuous improvement. The next steps in this journey are to build on the commendations and address the required actions noted in this report. Doing so will enable the school district to advance in its quest for excellence and deepen the fulfillment of its mission for all students.
Standards for Accreditation

The primary requirement for accreditation is that the district demonstrates that it meets the seven standards for accreditation. The findings of the Quality Assurance Review Team regarding the standards for accreditation are summarized on the following pages.

The Quality Assurance Review Team divided into standard teams to review each standard and prepare a standards report summarizing the team's findings. These standard reports, along with the quality assurance findings that follow these reports, provided the basis for the team's identification of over-arching commendations and required actions presented earlier in this report. The reports submitted by each team are provided on the following pages for the district's review and use. Each report reflects its respective team's unique voice, perspective, and deliberations. The reports can be used to help enrich and deepen the district's understanding of the overall commendations and required actions.

Standard 1: Vision & Purpose

**Standard:** The system establishes and communicates a shared purpose and direction for improving the performance of students and the effectiveness of the system.

**Description:**

The district’s 2010-2014 Strategic Plan, adopted October 2010, and reviewed in August 2011, contains the district’s mission, belief statements, eight major system priorities, and 12 goals with accompanying action steps. Although administrative staff make up a majority of the members on the district’s Strategic Planning Committee, teachers and parents consistently expressed, through interviews and surveys, they are satisfied with the opportunities provided them to give input on the direction of the district.

Every stakeholder group interviewed was generally aware of the mission and purpose of the district, as well as the district’s eight major system priorities. Teachers, students and parents consistently expressed support of and commitment to the achievement of the mission and priorities. Although stakeholders are aware of the mission, they were consistently unable to identify the essential elements (what do you expect of contributing citizens, for example) that make up the district’s comprehensively stated purpose. A review of the format of the mission statement to separate out the essential components and reduce the density of the text could lead to an increased level of stakeholder understanding of and strengthen their commitment to its fruition.

A wide variety of district and school publications, as well as the website, consistently includes the district’s mission and priorities. Progress toward meeting the district’s goals is systematically reported in the Annual Report of District Progress. In addition, periodic status reports are provided to the Board, staff and public as work proceeds on priorities and assessment data becomes available. The district’s website provides readily available and timely information.

The district’s system wide goals are in the form of eight major system priorities. These priorities provide the foundation and rationale for the twelve objectives identified in the strategic plan. Each objective has action steps, along with timelines and evaluation measures. The district’s strategic plan timelines are very broad; for instance, the terms ‘ongoing’, ‘annually’ and 2011-12’ are prevalent throughout the action
steps. Responsibility for action steps is not delineated, and the means of evaluation are not clearly articulated.

The district maintains a current and comprehensive profile which includes but is not limited to, demographics, student performance data, the current status of major district initiatives and next step initiatives of each school. Profile information is communicated via a variety of venues including, but not limited to, the Strategic Plan, Annual Report of Progress, the “First Day Facts: 2011-12”, and the “Renaissance” report.

The Quality Assurance Review (QAR) Team found evidence through interviews and review of artifacts that the system’s vision and priorities consistently guide as decision making across the district. This includes the teaching and learning process, as well as the strategic direction of schools, departments, and service. School improvement plans are clearly based on the district’s strategic statements and school strategies are aligned with the district’s overall plan. Ensuring the fruition of the district’s mission and priorities guides all decision making related to developing the annual budget, updating the technology plan, developing handbooks, and so on. The priorities and mission further guide agenda building and discussions for staff and stakeholder meetings and committee work, and are the basis for administrator job targets. The mission and priorities provide a sense of purpose and direction across all levels of the system.

The current vision/purpose and system priorities have been in existence for approximately 13 years. The district reviews and updates the strategic plan annually. The plan and annual reviews are presented to and approved by the Board of Education. The QAR Team’s review of the 16 Belief Statements reveals that seven of the 16 use the verb ‘should’. As the beliefs are reviewed over time, the district might consider replacing ‘should’ with ‘would’ in these seven belief statements which would more clearly communicate to stakeholders the prevailing system-wide high expectations.

**Strengths - The team noted the following successful practices deserving of recognition:**

- Stakeholders overwhelmingly support the accomplishment of the district’s mission and major system priorities.
- District leadership uses multiple means and methods to gather input from its stakeholders related to the direction of district.
- The current status of the district and the progress being made in accomplishing its goals is consistently and frequently communicated through a variety of printed and electronic venues.

**Opportunities - The team offers the following opportunities for improvement in this standard area:**

- Provide more specificity to areas of the Five-Year Strategic Plan in order to provide additional clarity and understanding for stakeholders.

**Finding:** Based on the evidence reviewed, the Quality Assurance Review Team has assigned the overall assessment level of "Highly Functional," indicating that the Cherokee County School System has met the accreditation requirements for the "Vision & Purpose" standard.
Standard 2: Governance & Leadership

Standard: The system provides governance and leadership that promote student performance and system effectiveness.

Description:

The relationship, responsibilities, and roles of the board and superintendent are well-defined and clearly stated in the eight major board/system priorities and mission statement. Interviews with system leaders, administrative and support staff, teachers, parents and community stakeholders indicates strong stakeholder support of the superintendent’s visionary leadership style and effective stewardship of district resources.

The establishment of policies and procedures, as acknowledged by the Superintendent and board members, is the responsibility of the seven-member Board of Education with members elected to four-year terms with the option for re-election. The district also includes a high school student to represent the student perspective to the Board. The student attends all Board meetings. Artifacts of board minutes and policies provide evidence of a proactive and collaborative working relationship between board members, superintendent, district and school leaders with an overarching focus on student achievement and success and the fruition of the district’s mission and priorities.

The district utilizes multiple mediums to communicate policies and procedures to stakeholders. These include, but are not limited to, emails, the Aspen Student Information System, instructional meetings, administrative meetings, and the district website. The district distributes the comprehensive Parent/Student handbook annually. The handbook contains pertinent district policies and school information. The handbooks are also electronically available on the district website. Artifact review and interviews substantiate district personnel are highly knowledgeable of and ensure compliance with state and federal laws and regulations.

Interviews with board members reveal, and artifact review substantiates, comprehensive professional training for the Board is provided. This training includes orientation, access to numerous state and local training sessions and at least eight annual professional development opportunities provided by the district. In addition, Board members are active in the Georgia School Board Association (GSBA) attending local meetings, training sessions, and annual meetings of the organization. Interviews across stakeholder groups consistently reflect the superintendent and board lead transparently.

The Principals Handbook developed and consistently implemented by the district, provides a well articulated and consistent framework that guides the day-to-day management of school site operations. The district provides numerous opportunities for stakeholder input into the decision-making process. Stakeholder surveys are systematically used by the district to solicit feedback and guidance. The superintendent annually appoints numerous ad hoc committees comprised of district employees, school leaders and community/business partners in education, parents and students for input during periodic policy, and school improvement plan reviews. For example, the Ad Hoc Agenda Preparation Group (APG) meets with the superintendent prior to board meetings to review the agenda and offer recommendations. The Ad Hoc Budget Committee convenes monthly and stakeholder interviews reveal
that budget priorities from each department are stringently reviewed to ensure resource allocation aligns with the district mission and board priorities. Interviews with stakeholder groups also reveal strong support for the currently configured Innovation Zones.

The Board and district have retained local legal services. In addition to providing legal counsel and oversight, the attorney conducts training for the board. System records indicate that the board carries adequate insurance with resources to protect district property and selected district personnel. Official financial audits and budget reviews reveal the district complies with all generally accepted accounting practices (GAAP), maintains adequate operating capital and is currently solvent. Long-range financial planning and budgeting practices are zero based and inclusive of school site leaders. Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST) initiatives, millage rate recommendations and municipal bond sales are presented to the voting public for consideration and support. The district’s commitment to maintaining a strong and viable instructional program grounded in research based instructional strategies and methods was evidenced when budget cuts were required. Interviews and artifact review demonstrate the district leadership strives to make thoughtful and deliberate data based decisions to avoid budgetary reductions that could negatively impact instructional programs to the greatest extent possible.

Stakeholders across all categories indicate strong, unwavering commitment to increasing student achievement and the overall success of the district. Evidence includes dynamic school improvement plans aligned with district goals, monthly principal meetings. These contribute to a collaborative climate dedicated to ensuring student success and an optimum level of organizational effectiveness. School-based professional learning communities are promoted by the district wherein professionals collaborate and connect student learning needs with appropriate instructional strategies. A calendar of professional learning reveals that certification, induction, and mentoring programs, as well as content specific professional learning experiences are provided. The implementation of web-based, collaborative, visual learning tools such as PD 360 and ‘Teach 21’ are additional mechanisms utilized to support school-based and district-level professional learning. However, the team found no evidence of a comprehensive and formalized professional development plan that clearly articulates the connections the professional learning provided has with the major district priorities and strategic plan. A systemic and systematic professional learning plan would strengthen the district’s current professional learning offerings.

Strengths - The team noted the following successful practices deserving of recognition:

- The district leadership demonstrates a strong commitment to sustaining a culture of excellence and stay within their respective roles to ensure effective governance and leadership.
- The Cherokee County community exhibits a high level of support and respect for district and school leaders.
- The district has developed strong, collaborative relationships among stakeholders throughout the district and stakeholders are actively engaged in decision making at the system and school levels..
- The district leadership acts as responsible stewards of the district resources. The district systematically aligns resource allocation and budget decisions with the district’s mission and priorities. Consequently, this has provided fiscal stability to the district during periods of austerity and fiscal uncertainty.

Opportunities - The team offers the following opportunities for improvement in this standard area:

- Develop and publish a formalized district-wide employee professional development plan that clearly aligns the connections with the major district priorities and strategic plan.
Finding: Based on the evidence reviewed, the Quality Assurance Review Team has assigned the overall assessment level of "Highly Functional," indicating that the Cherokee County School System has met the accreditation requirements for the "Governance & Leadership" standard.

Standard 3: Teaching & Learning

Standard: The system provides research-based curriculum and instructional methods that facilitate achievement for all students.

Description:

The district articulates clearly defined expectations for academic progress. It utilizes the Strategic Plan (2010-14), the Board of Education’s Educational Accountability and School Improvement Policy, and the eight system priorities to guide the instructional and operation direction of the system and its schools. Artifact reviews substantiate the district’s commitment to establishment and maintenance of a collaborative culture of teaching and learning dedicated to meeting the instructional needs of all students. District Priorities articulate the need to develop and implement internationally competitive Student Performance Standards (GPS). For the past 11 years, the schools have implemented Cherokee County School District Student Performance Standards. These Standards are an extension of the Georgia Performance Standards. The district called together teachers across the system to develop curriculum maps in all core academic areas to align with the Student Performance Standards. The curriculum maps provide a consistent framework for instructional delivery and support the systematic implementation of the Standards.

Data Management Teams are operational in all district schools. In addition, academic coaches are assigned to Title I schools. The coaches, along with the Data Management Teams, assist with interpreting and analyzing student performance data. The results of this analysis are used to inform decisions related to teaching and learning and school improvement initiatives. The focus being to successfully meet individual student needs. The district promotes the Professional Learning Communities structure to provide a collaborative framework and format for job embedded professional learning. While some school leaders and teachers identified Professional Learning Communities(PLC) were in place, interviews did not confirm a consistent implementation across the system.

Schools strive to engage students in the learning process through diversified teaching and learning strategies. A high percentage of schools have embraced the strategies of Learning Focused Schools and have provided teachers training in this model. Those schools not utilizing the Learning Focused Schools model are required by the district to implement instructional delivery models that meet the diverse learning needs of its students. These expectations increase the district’s capacity to meet the diverse learning needs of its students. In addition, the QAR Team noted through artifact review and classroom observations multiple researched based interventions in place at all schools to address student learning needs. Examples include, but are not limited to, Success Maker for Mathematics, Credit Recovery, Unit Recovery, K-1 Orton Gillingham. In addition the district implements the Co-Teaching model for Special Education students. The district has strategically provided an array of Advanced Placement (AP) course. As a result, it has realized a significant increase in AP course enrollment. Students have access to a clearly defined and strategically implemented Career Pathways Course of Study. The district’s requirement of a Senior Graduation Project demonstrates its commitment to rigor and relevance. Seniors conduct research, produce a product, and makes an oral presentation before the Career Pathway Review Board made up of school,
business, and community volunteers.

The district utilizes multiple measures of student progress that include benchmark assessments, progress monitoring, teacher developed formative assessments, Criterion Reference Competency Test (CRCT), End of Course Test (ECOT), Georgia High School Graduation Test (GHSGT) and Advance Placement (AP) results. An individual Point Plan is developed and implemented for students not meeting standards. This is a fluid Plan designed to guide the child’s instruction for a determined period of time. The Plan is reviewed and revised at regular intervals by teachers and modified as needed. Students needing additional support are also provided the opportunity for tutoring before school, during lunch, or after school.

Interviews and artifact review reveal the Superintendent has recently proposed, for Board consideration, an Academies Model designed to promote a wider array of school choice. Proposed conceptual models include the Cherokee Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) Academies, Cherokee Fine Arts Academies, Cherokee Technical High School Academy, and Cherokee International Baccalaureate (IB) Academy. These would be implemented over the course of the next three years.

The district has developed and implemented a comprehensive three year Technology Plan. This Plan guides the district’s allocation of material resources and personnel to ensure students across the district have equitable access to instructional technology. The district provides a dedicated district leadership position and has established a state of the art technology facility to ensure it provides the infrastructure and technical expertise necessary to support the successful infusion of technology. Classroom observations consistently revealed K-12 teachers utilizing technology as an instructional tool. Students across grade levels demonstrated a high degree of competence in using technology in their learning.

**Strengths - The team noted the following successful practices deserving of recognition:**

- The district articulates clearly defined expectations for academic progress and provides the corresponding material and personnel resources necessary to promote student success.
- District leadership is committed to ensure it meets the diverse learning needs of all students. It systematically provides multiple strategies and program to provide intervention and support for struggling students.
- The district has strategically provided an array of Advanced Placement Course. As a result, it has realized a significant increase in AP course enrollment.
- The district has developed and implemented a comprehensive three year Technology Plan that guides the district’s allocation of material resources and personnel to ensure students across the district are provided equitable access to instructional technology.
- The Superintendent’s proposal to consider the Academy model for school choice directly aligns with the district’s mission and strategic priorities and will increase the district’s capacity to meet the diverse learning needs of students.

**Opportunities - The team offers the following opportunities for improvement in this standard area:**

- Review current structures and monitoring practices related to Professional Learning Communities to ensure consistent implementation across the district.

**Finding:** Based on the evidence reviewed, the Quality Assurance Review Team has assigned the overall assessment level of "Highly Functional," indicating that the Cherokee County School System has met the accreditation requirements for the "Teaching & Learning" standard.
Standard 4: Documenting & Using Results

Standard: The system enacts a comprehensive assessment system that monitors and documents performance and uses these results to improve student performance and system effectiveness.

Description:

The district continues to build a comprehensive assessment system by using a variety of valid measures which are intended to monitor and improve student achievement for all students. District documentation shows summative data are gathered through state tests such as the Criterion Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT), Georgia Alternative Assessment (GAA), Georgia Writing Assessments (3, 5, 8, 11), Georgia Kindergarten Inventory of Developing Skills (G-KIDS), Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to-State for English Language Learners (ACCESS), End of Course Tests (EOCT), and Georgia High School Graduation Tests (GHSGT). Furthermore, the district collects additional monitoring data by using AIMSweb, Dynamic Indicator of Basic Literacy Skills (DIBELS), USA Test Prep, and Success Maker.

Based on summative and formative data, the district determines a yearly focus with regard to teaching and learning. The district is focused on the mastery skills guided by the Georgia Performance Standards using English Language Arts (ELA) and math benchmarks, universal screeners, and state assessments for directing school improvement plans. District policies and procedures guide test administration, grading practices, goals and objectives for instructional programs, and attendance procedures.

All schools utilize district-wide benchmark assessments and/or on-line state assessments, as well as teacher-made assessments based upon the Georgia Performance Standards (GPS) and on the district curriculum maps. The district provided evidence of procedures and data utilization forms used to direct data conversations on the strengths and weakness of student performance. Vertical Team Meetings, Grade Level Meetings, Content Area Meetings, and Data Review Teams are utilized to evaluate data and inform corresponding instructional and organizational continuous improvement decisions.

Stakeholder interviews and artifact review reveal achievement test data are explained to parents at elementary and middle school parent conferences. The superintendent has led the district in a discussion of issues associated with achievement data, such as district success in meeting Annual Yearly Progress (AYP). A compilation of achievement data comparing the district to other similar districts within the state and nation has been developed. The district compares its state testing results to similar Georgia districts as well as the nation using the student performance results from the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS), Advanced Placement Exam (AP), Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), and American College Test (ACT). The QAR team did not find evidence of a corresponding to review and analyze trend data at the district level to identify achievement gaps for all subgroups. While subgroups may be small within local schools, they are identifiable at the district level and the analysis of data can be useful in identifying strategies that can be implemented across the district to increase student achievement, especially in the area of mathematics.

The team noted several successful practices. These include, but are not limited to, the wide variety of district achievement data available for use in determining goals for improved student performance, assessment directives and expectations are clearly communicated throughout the district, and assessment data has been distributed to teachers for analysis and used in planning for instruction.

Schools are using Response to Intervention (RTI) tiers to target strategies for student support. During the
school visits, teachers stated that the RTI process assisted them in identifying student needs especially those students who fall in specific subgroups where achievement gaps exist.

A variety of methods are employed to communicate student performance such as websites, newsletters, parent-teacher conferences, and the ASPEN parent portal website. The Parent Portal is an online service available for all parents of students in grades 3–12 and provides access to assignments and up-to-date grades. District staff and parents consistently commented on the ease of access to ASPEN regarding student progress.

The district administers created math and ELA benchmark assessments to determine student progress on grade level math standards in grades 3-8. Each nine weeks, the schools prepare a quarterly Impact Check to determine progress and the corresponding adjustments needed in strategies, goals/objectives, materials, or professional learning, or in assessment tools. The Impact Checks are discussed at each school by design or content teams and student learning is emphasized in teams, subject areas, and departments. The district reviews the Impact Checks and provides responses to schools as well as any needed support. The Impact Check becomes a part of the school’s School Improvement Plan and is noted in the “Results” section.

The district is involved in Georgia’s Race to the Top and as a result is in the beginning stages of developing unit assessments in all content areas. This process will leverage the district to drill down to the classroom level and monitor student understanding across the district in units of instruction at all grade levels as well as monitor the progress of schools across the district.

**Strengths - The team noted the following successful practices deserving of recognition:**

- The collection and analysis of multi-year trend data regarding student achievement and system effectiveness is communicated throughout the district and used to assist in improving instruction and student achievement.
- The system utilizes effective and varied communication systems to communicate student academic performance to parents, students, and community partnerships.
- There is a strong commitment from the district staff to improve student achievement and benchmark student progress throughout the year.

**Opportunities - The team offers the following opportunities for improvement in this standard area:**

- Commit all schools to a common standard of achievement across the district to promote consistent teaching, learning, and assessment at the district, school, and classroom levels. To ensure equity in expectations for all schools, teachers, and students, analyze disaggregated student assessment data across the district.
- Establish a process to review and analyze trend data at the district level to identify achievement gaps for all subgroups.

**Finding:** Based on the evidence reviewed, the Quality Assurance Review Team has assigned the overall assessment level of "Operational," indicating that the Cherokee County School System has met the accreditation requirements for the "Documenting & Using Results" standard.
Standard 5: Resource & Support Systems

Standard: The system has the resources and services necessary to support its vision and purpose and to ensure achievement for all students.

Description:

The district has sufficient human, material, and fiscal resources to implement a curriculum that provides services to ensure that students achieve high expectations for learning consistent with the district’s vision and purpose. Consistent with Board Policy GBC, the district implements well established processes to recruit, employ, retain, and mentor both professional and support staff to fulfill appropriate roles and responsibilities. “Attracting, retaining, and training the best teachers, principals and support staff” is a major system priority presented in the Five Year Strategic Plan (2011-2015) reviewed by the QAR team. Many highly qualified candidates are attracted to Cherokee County and apply for employment in the district’s schools. The district offers competitive instructional salaries and provides a progressive, competitive, and affordable Benefits Program for employees articulated in the Allocations/Salary Handbook. Central Office staff, principals, and teachers described employment procedures to include a review of the teacher’s endorsements, strengths and weaknesses, a criminal history check, reference check, supervisory check, review of required certification, and once selected, the new hire participates in the district’s new employee orientation program. Documents indicate that the district provides eleven, one-half days of training for new employees during the 2011-12 school year. Additionally, new employees participate in an orientation program covering such topics as personal Standards, Crisis Management (Emergency Response Plans), Health and Safety, and Policy and Procedures. Employment procedures for classified positions are included on the district’s “Employment Opportunities” website. The Mentor Program Manual describes the Beginning Educator Support and Training (BEST) Program created by the district to offer new teacher induction through quality professional development aimed at meeting the needs of the beginning teacher. Teachers interviewed who had participated in the program, praised it highly.

During interviews, district administrators stated that all teachers are highly qualified. And, the document, “Cherokee’s Renaissance in Education (1999-2011), references the associate degrees earned by paraprofessionals including those who have pursued and obtained Bachelor Degrees and are currently teaching in the district, the partnerships with colleges and universities enabling the district to train 600 student teachers, and certifications of food service managers and assistant managers. Consistent with provisions in the District Five Year Strategic Plan, and presented in the District School Improvement Plan (2008-11), the district has designed and implemented a process to evaluate and improve professional development for all faculty and staff. The district maintains a current Professional Development training calendar on its Intranet Portal for all employees. The site lists upcoming events such as Getting Started with PD 360, 2011-12 Gifted Endorsement Cohort and other Endorsements, Piedmont College Educational Specialist in Teacher Leadership, and Correlation of Apex Math to new GPS math courses. Although the schedule of training programs for employees listed on the portal is extensive, there is no corresponding system-wide professional development plan that aligns with school improvement goals, or clearly articulates the connections with the major system priorities, strategic plan, and the professional learning offered.

An important training option for teachers seeking teacher leadership positions shared with the QAR team by administrators, teachers, and other stakeholders is the Superintendent’s Leadership I Program. The
program provides systemic structures to systematically develop teacher leadership. The 2011-12 cohort class listing and schedule of meetings was available for review. During interviews, teachers who had participated in the Leadership I Program, praised it as a valuable professional growth experience.

The vision for technology use is a major system priority and as described in the current Three-Year Technology Plan provides for “professional development opportunities to ensure all district teachers are technologically adept and fully integrate technology literacy standards as specified by the Georgia Professional Standards (GPS).” To that end, the district has offered Teach 21 Endorsements to numerous teachers to support them in integrating technology in 21st Century Classrooms.

The district’s Five-Year Strategic Plan states that the district will “provide additional staff as needed for growth and to meet school district’s needs and objectives.” Information provided by central office administrative staff indicates that elementary school class enrollments average fewer than 23 students in grades K-3, and under 28 in fourth and fifth grades. The 2011-12 tentative budget has as its primary goal “the allocating of resources and personnel needed to maintain and enhance student achievement in all subjects and at all grade levels.” As stated in that budget proposal, “it reflects another year of the most financially challenging time periods with which the school district has ever had to cope in preparing annual budgets for consideration by the Board of Education.” A summary statement in that budget proposal further states, “the tentative 2011-12 Budget addresses the School District’s most critical and most immediate instructional, operational and support needs; and it ensures that our most current facility needs are addressed, as well.” The proposed budget provides for total revenues and Expenditures of $527,037,778.

Based upon a review of artifacts and documents, and through interviews with stakeholders, the QAR team became aware of how the district through the leadership of the superintendent and the Annual Budget Committee comprised of district administrators and lead Innovation Zone principals, systematically engage in long-range budgetary planning to ensure that sufficient resources are allocated to support the district’s vision and programs, and to implement plans for ongoing improvements. The Education Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (Ed-SPLLOST), authorized by Cherokee County voters, has provided funds for numerous school construction projects completed or now underway since 2001. A local sales tax referendum to continue that tax base is placed on the November 8, 2011 for voter renewal after five years of collection. The Five-year Facility Plan systemically and systematically guides the district in projects including New/Replacement Schools, and Additions and Renovations.

The district Five Year Strategic Plan provides for an annual financial audit by an independent auditing firm and to continue to audit school student activity accounts on site in efforts to ensure that all financial transactions are safeguarded through proper budgetary procedures and audited accounting measures. In support of those efforts, Cherokee’s Renaissance in Education Report 1999-2011 states that “in the last 10 years, the School District has not received an audit finding or irregularity in annual reviews of its financial records by an outside, independent accounting firm.” Accordingly, the school district has received excellent Bond Ratings from rating agencies of Standard and Poor’s Financial Services and Moody’s Investor Services, according to that report.

“Insuring that all students and staff have a safe and secure environment for teaching and learning” is a priority presented in documents such as the Five Year Strategic Plan, and the Annual Report of District...
All stakeholders interviewed perceive their schools as maintaining safe environments for students and staff. The emphasis on ensuring a safe learning environment for students and staff is articulated in the Student/Parent Handbook which contains general notices, policies, and information pertaining to health, safety and welfare issues for students and staff. Included in that document is a letter to parents and students from the superintendent in which he states, “This handbook contains the approved discipline code that governs student behavior and outlines the positive, progressive and remedial measures prescribed to ensure a safe and productive learning environment.”

The district maintains current information on its comprehensive website pertaining to Crisis Response Training. On-site assessments have been completed on all middle and high school sites involving local public safety agencies and school safety coordinators. In the same manner, Crisis Response exercises involving the Cherokee County Sheriff’s Office, local law enforcement agencies, fire departments and school staff are conducted annually at a designated school to assess the overall response and provide feedback to reinforce best practices. The district continues to review and revise its policies and procedures to meet the needs of schools.

Safety/Security Plans are presented in the Locally Required Plans (Section 7) of each school’s School Improvement Plan reviewed by the QAR team. Those plans articulate details regarding daily operating procedures, Crisis Response Team activities, equipment inventories, Tornado and Fire Drill information, and Code Red and Code Yellow notices for secondary schools.

Plans for maintaining and improving district sites, facilities, and equipment are presented in numerous documents. The district Five-Year Facility Plan for New/Replacement Schools, Additions and Renovations presents a schedule of projects and timelines which are dependent upon such factors as the SPLOST revenue levels and other funding sources. The district Five Year Strategic Plan Objective 12 presents action steps and guidelines to provide adequate facilities for student population growth and to maintain all school facilities. In the same manner, the Three-Year Technology Plan provides for continuous improvement of technologies to sustain and support 21st century learning practices such as the district-specific process referred to as the Teach 21 Endorsement Program. Furthermore, the district is actively engaged in assessing and delivering tools for expanding instructional resources beyond the classroom school and district boundaries. Goal 5 in that three year plan presents strategies that provide for the “district’s teaching and learning community to utilize multi-faceted, connected infrastructure comprised of hardware, software, cloud-based resources and digital content that will provide whenever/wherever assess.”

Consistent with district wide focus, school improvement plans describe technology infrastructures and equipment currently available for staff, teachers, students and parent access. Classrooms are networked with local area networks (LAN), the internet, equipped with a laser printer, and with access to a color laser printer. Schools are equipped with computer labs and a media center enhanced with a fiber optic network. Additional equipment presented in that plan include Promethean boards in classrooms, and the availability of digital cameras, Avery Keys, CD burners, wireless keyboards, In Focus Projectors, Portable hand-held scanners, and palm pilots.

To improve teaching and learning, faculty and staff have access to school extranet sites giving access to various links for programs, services, documents, and folders. Additionally, School Improvement Plans
contain lists of software used to improve student achievement. Classroom observations conducted by the QAR team consistently substantiate the integration of instructional technology in district classrooms. The district website contains numerous documents that articulate the provision and coordination of support services to meet the health, counseling, nutrition, safety, co-curricular, transportation and special learning needs of all students.

The Student-Parent Handbook references student assistance and support programs with connections to the school’s counseling services. Each school’s profile and Locally Required Plans describe numerous support services including: AIMSweb classes for gifted students, English for Speaker of Other Languages (ESOL) pull-out model small group instruction, the elementary schools Early Intervention Program, the continuum of services for special education services, services of Speech pathologists, and 504 Plans developed through the SST Process. The Response to Intervention (RTI) with the Student Support Team including the important role of parents is included in numerous documents and was referenced during interviews with teachers, and other stakeholders.

The QAR team learned through a review of district artifacts and documents, and interviews with staff and other stakeholders how the district treats parents and other community-based stakeholders as true partners in the educational process. This includes home and community support services such as the Partners in Education Program coordinated by the Cherokee Chamber of Commerce Program. Community programs include numerous Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) sponsored programs, Cub and Boy Scouts, Daisies, Brownies, Girl Scouts, and programs offered by churches, public libraries, hospitals, and Target. School-based support services include Response to Intervention (RTI) which requires parental contact and support. Schools coordinate educational activities with the home through teachers and the media specialist. To ensure that support services continue to meet the needs of the district and its stakeholders, school councils address the priority of increasing parental and community involvement and treating all stakeholders as partners in the educational process.

Strengths - The team noted the following successful practices deserving of recognition:

- The district has implemented a systematic and highly effective budgetary planning process under the leadership of the superintendent and the Ad Hoc Budget Planning Committee to ensure that the allocation of sufficient resources align with the district’s mission and priorities and addresses the learning needs of all students.
- The district fosters a safe learning environment that is recognized and supported by all stakeholders.
- The district functions as a highly competitive community that employs only highly qualified teachers and staff who are dedicated to preparing all students with 21st Century Skills.
- The district has established strong partnerships with parents and community stakeholders to support students as learners.
- The district has developed and maintains technology infrastructure and instruction providing students with the skills necessary to address international standards of competition for the 21st Century.

Opportunities - The team offers the following opportunities for improvement in this standard area:

- Develop and implement a professional development plan that identifies instructional strategies for teachers and supports staff in meeting school based school improvement goals.

Finding: Based on the evidence reviewed, the Quality Assurance Review Team has assigned the overall
assessment level of "Operational," indicating that the Cherokee County School System has met the accreditation requirements for the "Resource & Support Systems" standard.

Standard 6: Stakeholder Communications & Relationships

Standard: The system fosters effective communications and relationships with and among its stakeholders.

Description:

The district works diligently and strategically to promote effective internal and external communication with its stakeholders. District administrators continue to enhance opportunities to promote communication and community involvement of its stakeholders in strategic planning and school improvement. Stakeholder interviews across all categories consistently revealed a high level of support regarding the district’s continuous improvement process as well as the operation of the schools and school district. This effort is carried out through regular meetings of staff and school administrators, scheduled meetings with school administrators and district leadership committees, on-going communication between the superintendent, the school board, the district, and the schools, email communication between all school departments, news letter distribution to parents and community members, parent-teacher conferences, and the distribution of the district report card. In addition to the school district financial and school improvement plans, the district disseminates an Annual Report of Progress and an Executive Summary of District Activity. Student academic performance results are published throughout the district on the system website. Expectations for student learning and district and school goals for improvement are communicated via the utilization of the district website and student /parent portals. Parents interviewed consistently commented on their appreciation for the communication with their teachers. The forms of communication mentioned include return phone calls, e-mails, and provide phone numbers. Appreciation was expressed for the district website and the distribution of board and committee meeting minutes.

Stakeholders across all categories commented during interviews on the familial environment within their schools. Most parents, community members, school board members, and teachers described caring faculty and staff who “really know” the students and are interested in their success in school. The teachers collaborate to assist struggling students to help them reach their potential. Alternative education programs for “at-risk” students who have access to on-line course offerings supported by certified faculty who provide flexible grouping and direct instruction. The evening School provides programs to students who had difficulty with a traditional program format or who had dropped out of high school. This program provides the opportunity to enroll as a full time evening school student to finish the requirements for a high school diploma. The Senior Project, a community based, career oriented event, includes an oral presentation to a review board consisting of business, community, and school volunteers.

All groups interviewed consistently referenced the positive climate in the district. Many Systemic Partnership Agreements between the school district and outside agencies have been approved by the school board. Schools, through collaboration with the Cherokee County Chamber of Commerce, have more than 200 additional business connections. The Piedmont Migrant Education Agency is employed to provide additional educational and support services to migrant and non English speaking families and children. The superintendent created the Superintendent’s Ad Hoc School Council Representative Committee comprised of parents and community members from each school. Additionally, Innovation Zones were established to promote communication and continuity between high schools and feeder
schools within education regions of the district. Public perception, of those interviewed, is positive and favorable. Although most stakeholders interviewed feel included and involved in the decision making process, there are some who believe that they should be more involved in the process. District personnel are aware that input must be representative of the entire community and not only those who frequent the schools. There is a clear and prevailing demonstration of pride in the students, faculty, and administration of the district.

**Strengths - The team noted the following successful practices deserving of recognition:**

- The stakeholders share and are committed to the values and expectations of the district.
- The district utilizes multiple and varied strategies to communicate with and gather input from stakeholders. Examples include the use of stakeholder perception surveys, Superintendent’s Ad Hoc Committees, school councils, The Annual Report of District Progress, the Renaissance Report, First Day Facts, and district and school websites.
- The district has developed strong collaborative partnerships with numerous community stakeholders, including the Piedmont Migrant Education Agency and Chamber of Commerce that support student achievement.
- The district develops and promotes a strong family-like rapport among faculty, students, and community that fosters a safe and welcoming learning environment.

**Opportunities - The team offers the following opportunities for improvement in this standard area:**

- Build upon current strategies to enhance parent involvement at all levels.

**Finding:** Based on the evidence reviewed, the Quality Assurance Review Team has assigned the overall assessment level of "Operational," indicating that the Cherokee County School System has met the accreditation requirements for the "Stakeholder Communications & Relationships" standard.

**Standard 7: Commitment to Continuous Improvement**

**Standard:** The system establishes, implements, and monitors a continuous process of improvement that focuses on student performance.

**Description:**

The district’s mission and vision has not changed in the past twelve years, as noted by the superintendent and district leadership, but has been annually reviewed by the Strategic Planning ad-hoc committees and the Board of Education. The mission and vision is filtered through the district’s major system priorities that are also annually reviewed and align all components of operations within the district. There are eight system priorities that connect the work delineated by the Strategic Plan and each School Improvement Plan. The Strategic Plan is made up of thirteen objectives and is systematically reviewed by individual departments, ad-hoc committee, the superintendent, and finally the Board of Education. Although the district engages stakeholders in decision making, interviews reveal limited engagement for multiple stakeholder groups in the strategic planning at the district level since the mission and vision has not been changed for the past twelve years. The changing demographic occurring in the district may indicate a need to conduct a more inclusive review of the current mission and vision to ensure that the district continues to effectively address the complex demands of successfully meeting the achievement needs of a more diversified student population. The Strategic Plan articulates the objectives to accomplish the major system priorities identified by the district leadership, and while the action steps are clearly identified, timelines are
ambiguous and open-ended. Having clear timelines would maximize the effectiveness of the plan and help to ensure that objectives come to a conclusion.

The district profile and annual review of progress is articulated through the Annual Report and Renaissance documentation. The profile is updated and revised and reflects the rapid growth and changing demographics occurring in the district. The district is committed to systematically implementing the Accountability Policy based on Effective Schools research. This policy focuses the district’s planning in the following areas; data-driven and outcome-based school improvement planning, school councils, student performance standards for all core subjects, a Strategic Plan, system priorities, and an annual report on school and district progress.

Every school has a school improvement plan (SIP) that goes through a rigorous peer review internally each year as well as a nine week impact report presented at Innovation Zone meetings and submitted to the district office. The Innovation Zones are vertical representation of K-12 schools within a geographic area that meet monthly. During these zone meetings operational concerns, student performance data, and ideas for student programming are discussed and can result in the creation of a Zone Improvement Plan (ZIP), which is then reflected in every school improvement plan for schools within that Innovation Zone. The Innovation Zones function as a collective vertical and horizontal conversation on student performance, school improvement planning and initiatives. The motto for one Innovation Zone is, “the tassel is worth the hassle,” which demonstrates an effective method to emphasize the importance of graduation with the elementary and middle level buildings. The multi-layered approach to school improvement through building level school councils, Innovation Zone teams, peer review system, and ad-hoc committees ensures that all individual schools align their objectives to the eight system priorities and thirteen objectives of the Strategic Plan. The use of impact reports and the adaptability of a ZIP when needed demonstrate the flexibility required aligning current student needs and demands as well as future achievement gaps.

There are several ad-hoc committees, school councils, and school improvement teams that engage stakeholders in the continuous improvement process. Effective structures are in place for stakeholders to give feedback and respond to survey inquiries by the district. The ad-hoc committees function to provide two-way communication of district directives and provide feedback on progress. The ad-hoc structure has proven to be an effective method to keep communications transparent across the district.

Artifact review and interviews reveal the district has achieved outstanding student achievement scores and is only now starting to face some achievement gap issues in the areas of student with disabilities and ethnic populations. The biggest obstacles appear to be in how to stretch and push achievement scores presently in the eighties and nineties. The district utilizes a variety of communication systems to inform the community regarding how the scores are calculated and used for accountability.

The dwindling per pupil funding from the state level reinforce the need to use grant funding for professional development which requires research based programs. The use of Race to the Top (RTTT) funding and other funding sources allow the district to provide quality professional development. The district excels with the creation of internal professional development opportunities which are communicated via a monthly calendar. The district uses a systematic internal process to make decisions on how to allocate funding for professional development. The team did not find evidence of a comprehensive professional development plan designed to show a connection to the system priorities and strategic plan. This would enhance an already outstanding system of offerings and work to ensure the district strategically provides professional learning with the highest likelihood to address current and changing student learning needs and meet district priorities.
The district utilizes numerous communication tools to monitor and communicate results to the community and families. The ASPEN student information system contains grading, attendance, and testing results. The district also has a comprehensive website and share point system for external and internal information gathering, as well as traditional “backpack” flyers, newsletters, and bilingual versions of the same. The district is innovatively exploring the use of Facebook and Twitter to communicate effectively with all stakeholders. Stakeholder interviews reveal parent and student portal for information is a popular locale and the transparency of communication about building and district level information and use of technology is appreciated by the community.

The district level structures and organization to review and evaluate the effectiveness of all elements of the continuous improvement cycle are systematically utilized. The First Day Facts documentation is an effective companion document for the profile and comprehensively and succinctly provides a “State” of the district report and brings relevant information together in one document. The district excels in gathering, communicating, and using student performance data for school improvement planning. It has developed and sustained a tradition of academic excellence over the past twelve years under the visionary leadership of the superintendent and the Board of Education along with strong leadership from building principals. The systems and organizational structures in place strategically position the district as it faces the continual stresses of rapid growth, changing demographics, and declining resources. The key to continuous improvement was voiced by a principal, “Our Superintendent expects and demands the best from our families, the best from our staff, there is the expectation to stretched and challenged at Cherokee County.”

Strengths - The team noted the following successful practices deserving of recognition:

- The district has an effective system-wide continuous improvement review process that includes, internal peer review, Innovation Zone improvement plans, a system level priority filter, annual reporting, renaissance documentation, a five year strategic plan and results, and school improvement plans strongly aligned with district priorities and goals
- The Innovation Zones have functioned as an effective K-12 articulation for building leadership and the structure has reinforced the goal of graduation for every student within that zone and successful transition to the next level.
- The pervasive use of technology has catapulted the effectiveness of two-way communications within the large geographic boundaries of the district. Parents commend the transparency and immediacy of information at the building and district level.

Opportunities - The team offers the following opportunities for improvement in this standard area:

- Implement a comprehensive plan that clearly articulates the connections between the major system priorities and the strategic plan.
- Review and evaluate the Strategic Plan annually paying attention to timelines, monitoring of progress and evaluating results.
Finding: Based on the evidence reviewed, the Quality Assurance Review Team has assigned the overall assessment level of "Highly Functional," indicating that the Cherokee County School System has met the accreditation requirements for the "Commitment to Continuous Improvement" standard.
Quality Assurance Findings

The Quality Assurance Review Team examined the effectiveness of the district's methods for quality assurance. The team reviewed the district's practices and methods to monitor and document improvement, provide meaningful feedback and support across the district, ensure that AdvancED standards are met and strengthened, and regularly collect, use, and communicate results. The team provides the following findings in this area.

Description

The district’s long term District Strategic Plan and the eight Major System Priorities serve as the framework to guide the direction of the school system. The Strategic Plan will guide the district for five years (2010-14). The Strategic Plan identifies clear objectives, however, timelines are vague and the means to monitor progress and the mechanisms for evaluating results are not clearly stated throughout the document.

The district engaged in the internal review of the AdvancED Standards for Quality School Systems. The Superintendent’s Ad Hoc SACS CASI Planning Committee, which was made up of representative stakeholders across the district and from the community, led the process. The Committee generated evidence to support the level of adherence to each of the Standards and this information was shared with the Board of Education and school based leaders for their reaction and feedback. Interviews and artifact review evidence the process was inclusionary.

Every School Improvement Plan (SIP) includes a reference to each of the AdvancED Standards for Quality Schools. This practice systematically promotes awareness of the School Standards and integrates them into the school’s continuous improvement planning. The district has multiple layers of monitoring related to the SIPS. Impact Checks are conducted every nine weeks at the school level and include a review of progress and identify the corresponding adjustments in instructional strategies. The Impact Checks are submitted to the Office of School Improvement for review and comment. The Innovation Zone principals conduct Peer Reviews of School Improvement Plans. In addition, each school’s Data Management Team analyzes performance data and utilizes the results to guide instructional decisions and make necessary adjustments to strategies identified in the School Improvement Plan. These processes provide systematic oversight for the development and monitoring of the continuous improvement process at the school level.

Stakeholder interviews and artifact review substantiate the district utilizes multiple and varied vehicles to solicit stakeholder input, provide access to data, and report progress in meeting goals. The district utilizes multiple surveys to glean stakeholder perceptions and the Superintendent’s system of Ad Hoc Committees further ensures transparency in decision making. The Data Warehouse which contains student performance data and ensures that teachers and administrators have ready access to relevant student information. Print copies of the District’s Strategic Plan, Annual Report, First Day Facts, and Renaissance in Education Report are distributed and also displayed on the district’s comprehensive website.

Strengths

- The district’s Strategic Plan and System Priorities clearly establish a directional framework for assuring the alignment of continuous improvement efforts to guide the accomplishment of the district’s improvement goals.
- The School Improvement Plans are strongly aligned with the district’s Strategic Plan.
- The nine-week Impact Checks provide a systemic and systematic process to monitor progress in meeting School Improvement Plan goals.
The district utilizes multiple and varied vehicles to solicit stakeholder input and report progress.

**Opportunities**

- Identify specific timelines and means to monitor progress and the mechanisms for evaluating results in meeting the system’s strategic goals and objectives.
Schools Visited

The Quality Assurance Review team visited the following schools during the visit to the Cherokee County School System on 10/30/2011 - 11/02/2011.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Address</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Zip Code</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>River Ridge High School</td>
<td>400 Arnold Mill Rd</td>
<td>Woodstock</td>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>30188-2834</td>
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<tr>
<td>Little River Elementary School</td>
<td>3170 North Trickum Road</td>
<td>Woodstock</td>
<td>Georgia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chapman Intermediate School</td>
<td>6500 Putnam Ford Road</td>
<td>Woodstock</td>
<td>Georgia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dean Rusk Middle School</td>
<td>4695 Hickory Road</td>
<td>Canton</td>
<td>Georgia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Freedom Middle School</td>
<td>10050 Bells Ferry Road</td>
<td>Canton</td>
<td>Georgia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cherokee High School</td>
<td>930 Marietta Highway</td>
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<td>Kleven Boston Elementary School</td>
<td>105 Othello Drive</td>
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<td>Georgia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Avery Elementary School</td>
<td>6391 East Cherokee Drive</td>
<td>Canton</td>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>30115</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conclusion

The commendations and required actions in this report are designed to focus the school district on those areas that will have the greatest impact on student performance and system effectiveness. While powerful in potential, the commendations and required actions only have meaning when acted upon by the school district and its schools. The strength of this report lies in the school district's commitment to using the findings to continuously improve. The key is action. The school district is encouraged to use the report as a call to action, a tool to sustain momentum in the ongoing process of continuous improvement.

The team identified required actions for improvement that the school district will need to address. Following this review, the school district will be required to submit a progress report summarizing its progress toward addressing the team's required actions.

The Quality Assurance Review Team expresses appreciation to the district leadership, members of the professional staff, students, parents and other community representatives for hosting the review team. The team wishes the district and its students much success in the quest for excellence through SACS-CASI-GA accreditation with AdvancED.
Appendix

Quality Assurance Review Team Members

- Dr. Donna James, Chair/Lead Evaluator (AdvancED North Carolina)
- Colonel Scott Mahone, Vice Chair (Mercer University)
- Mrs. Dorothy R. Blackwell, Team Member (Waverly Community Schools)
- Ms. Nancy A. Billingsley, Team Member
- Mr. David Corey, Team Member
- Dr. Catherine Magouyrk, Team Member (Douglas County School System)
- Mr. Mervin L. Miller, Team Member (Berrien Springs Public Schools)
- Dr. Frances Sampson, Team Member (Richmond County School System)

AdvancED Standards for Quality School Systems

The AdvancED Standards for Quality School Systems are comprehensive statements of quality practices and conditions that research and best practice indicate are necessary for school districts to achieve quality student performance and organizational effectiveness. As school districts reach higher levels of implementation of the standards, they will have a greater capacity to support ever-increasing student performance and organizational effectiveness. Each of the seven standards listed below has corresponding indicators and impact statements which can be accessed at www.advanc-ed.org.

Vision and Purpose
The system establishes and communicates a shared purpose and direction for improving the performance of students and the effectiveness of the system.

Governance and Leadership
The system provides governance and leadership that promote student performance and system effectiveness.

Teaching and Learning
The system provides research-based curriculum and instructional methods that facilitate achievement for all students.

Documenting and Using Results
The system enacts a comprehensive assessment system that monitors and documents performance and uses these results to improve student performance and system effectiveness.

Resource and Support Systems
The system has the resources and services necessary to support its vision and purpose and to ensure achievement for all students.

Stakeholder Communications and Relationships
The system fosters effective communications and relationships with and among its stakeholders.

Commitment to Continuous Improvement
The system establishes, implements, and monitors a continuous process of improvement that focuses on student performance.