



**Report of the
Monitoring Review Team for
Atlanta Public Schools**

**Review Dates:
September 26-27, 2011**

About AdvancED® and NCA CASI/SACS CASI

Background

Dedicated to advancing excellence in education worldwide, AdvancED provides accreditation, research, and professional services to 27,000 institutions nearly 70 countries. AdvancED provides accreditation under the seals of the North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement (NCA CASI) and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Council on Accreditation and School Improvement (SACS CASI).

The Accreditation Process

To earn and maintain accreditation, an institution must:

1. Meet the AdvancED Standards and accreditation policies.

Institutions demonstrate adherence to the AdvancED Standards and accreditation policies, which describe the quality practices and conditions that research and best practice indicate are necessary for educational institutions to achieve quality student performance and organizational effectiveness.

2. Engage in continuous improvement.

Institutions implement a process of continuous improvement focused on improving student performance and organizational effectiveness.

3. Demonstrate quality assurance through internal and external review.

Institutions engage in a planned process of ongoing internal review and self-assessment. In addition, institutions host an external Quality Assurance Review team at least once every five years. The team evaluates the institution's adherence to the AdvancED Accreditation Standards and policies, assesses the efficacy of the institution's improvement process and methods for quality assurance, and provides commendations and Required Actions to help the institution improve. The institution acts on the team's Required Actions and submits an Accreditation Progress Report at prescribed intervals following the Quality Assurance Review. Monitoring visits may be conducted during this time to ensure that the institution is making progress toward the Required Actions.

Special Reviews

At any point, a Special Review may be conducted in response to complaints or information about the institution and/or its system (district, board, or corporation) to determine adherence to the AdvancED Accreditation Standards and policies. The institution and/or its system must respond to the Required Actions of the Special Review Team. Monitoring Teams may be sent to the institution and/or its system at regular intervals to ensure that progress is being made toward the Special Review Team's Required Actions. Both Special Review Teams and Monitoring Teams are empowered to make accreditation recommendations based upon evidence obtained during said visit.

A Process of Continuous Improvement

The AdvancED Accreditation Process engages institutions in a continuous process of self-evaluation and improvement. The overall aim is to help institutions be the best they can be on behalf of the students they serve.

Monitoring Visit Report

Introduction

In the fall of 2010, the Atlanta Public School Board requested the assistance of AdvancED/SACS CASI in addressing current challenges, including issues regarding the leadership of the Board and the ability of its members to work together. In doing so, board members, individually and collectively, indicated to AdvancED/SACS CASI staff that their inability to work together was affecting their capacity to govern effectively. In addition, key administrative staff, including the Superintendent, confirmed the inner struggles of the Board and expressed concern about the Board's ability to govern effectively.

As a result, AdvancED/SACS CASI appointed a Special Review Team (SRT) to visit the school system on December 9-10, 2010 to determine if the alleged actions and behaviors of the board members were in violation of the AdvancED Standards for Accreditation and policies including, but not limited to, Standard 2: *Governance and Leadership*. Based on the findings of the Special Review Team and subsequent review by the Georgia AdvancED State Council, AdvancED concluded that there was substantial evidence indicating violation of AdvancED Accreditation Standard 2 and therefore placing the high schools in the accreditation status of **“Accredited Probation”**. The Special Review Team's report contained six specific Required Actions for the Atlanta Public Schools to address. The school system was required to submit two progress reports, one in May 2011 and another in September 2011, outlining the progress made on each of the Required Actions.

AdvancED/SACS CASI appointed a Monitoring Team to visit the Atlanta Public School System for the purpose of determining the school system's progress toward addressing Required Actions from the Special Review Team Visit on December 9-10, 2010. The Monitoring Visit took place on September 26-27, 2011. The purpose of this report is to outline the findings of that Monitoring Team. For each Required Action, the Monitoring Team provides a progress status rating and a summary of findings. Directives provided by the Monitoring Team serve to guide next steps, and Recommendations help to ensure that Atlanta Public Schools continues to sustain the progress it has made to date.

Activities of the Monitoring Team

In preparation for the visit, the Monitoring Team reviewed the institution's progress report and related documentation. Once on-site, the team engaged in the following activities:

- Interviewed no fewer than 29 stakeholders including school board members, system-level and building-level school administrators, legal counsel, members of community support organizations, private sector business support persons, facilitators and mediators who have worked directly with the Atlanta Public School Board, and state and local government officials;
- Artifact review; and
- Team deliberations and report preparation.

The Monitoring Team used the findings from these activities and evidence reviewed to assess the progress the institution has made toward addressing the Required Actions given by the Special Review Team of December 2010.

Findings

The Monitoring Team’s findings are organized by each of the Required Actions given by the Special Review Team. For each Required Action, the Monitoring Team provides a progress status rating, summary of findings, directives to guide next steps, and recommendations to help ensure that Atlanta Public Schools continues to sustain the progress it has made to date.

REQUIRED ACTION 1: Develop and implement a long term plan to communicate with and engage stakeholders in the work of the school system to achieve the Board’s mission for educating the students of Atlanta Public Schools (APS). The plan should focus on efforts that will regain stakeholders’ trust and confidence in the governance and leadership of Atlanta Public Schools.

Progress Status: Please indicate the progress the institution has made toward addressing this Required Action.

	Completed - All necessary and appropriate actions have been taken and evaluated. The institution has documented evidence that supports fulfillment of the Required Action.
X	In Progress - The institution is currently engaged in actions and processes but has yet to fully implement steps necessary to address and/or complete the Required Action.
	Has Not Addressed - The institution has not taken any action at this time.

Based on information obtained from interviews and review of artifacts and progress reports, the Monitoring Team concluded that APS has made commendable progress toward completing Required Action 1 with a need for sustained implementation to regain stakeholder trust and confidence.

Extensive work by the Community Engagement Committee as well as the development of a strong and viable Communications Plan (April 25, 2011) were organized and designed to open lines of communication within the school system using a multi-media approach, including but not limited to: board member-sponsored Town Hall Meetings, APS Facebook page, APS Twitter feed (@APSupdate), recorded (You Tube) video messages to APS students, and school system website capability to receive and respond to stakeholder questions with timely feedback (External Hotline). The communications/community engagement initiatives developed by APS hold “the potential” for regaining stakeholder’s trust and confidence in the school system.

Given the results of the CRCT investigation, the restoration of credibility and trust of the school system is a significant challenge. As such, the school system also must take steps to ensure the validity and reliability of achievement data at the high school level including the graduation rate. The Board of Education and system leadership must continue their current efforts to restore stability and position the system to move forward in a positive and effective manner.

Directive

The Atlanta Public Schools must sustain this effort to improve communication with all stakeholders in order to regain the trust and confidence in the governance and leadership of the school system. The issue of sustainability rests on the word and integrity of the APS Board and with an enlightened and engaged public. One interviewee made a poignant observation in assessing the overall progress of the APS Board: “They took SACS CASI seriously and with a compliance mentality. Are they done yet? NO. Have they made progress? YES.” The Monitoring Team agrees.

REQUIRED ACTION 2: Secure and actively use the services of a trained, impartial professional mediator who will work with the board members to resolve communication, operational and personal issues impeding their effectiveness as a governing body.

Progress Status: Please indicate the progress the institution has made toward addressing this Required Action.

X	Completed - All necessary and appropriate actions have been taken and evaluated. The institution has documented evidence that supports fulfillment of the Required Action.
	In Progress - The institution is currently engaged in actions and processes but has yet to fully implement steps necessary to address and/or complete the Required Action.
	Has Not Addressed - The institution has not taken any action at this time.

Based on information obtained from interviews and review of artifacts and progress reports, the Monitoring Team concluded that APS has completed Required Action 2 and commends the school system on its work in this area.

The Special Review Team that conducted the December 2010 visit confirmed the inner struggles of the Board and expressed concern about the Board’s ability to govern effectively. One of the requirements that the team felt would help the Board to understand each other and the barriers that were impeding their effectiveness to govern was securing the services of a mediator to help resolve the issues.

In March of 2011, APS secured the services of a mediator from The Fanning Institute, a public service and outreach institution of the University of Georgia. Representatives from the Institute met with the Board and staff to assess Board priorities, goals, and objectives and develop a mediation process or work plan. One member of the mediation team began attending board meetings to assess board member interactions. The mediator’s observations reflected some of the issues identified during the AdvancED/SACS CASI Special Review Team visit. For example, the history of personal statements, individual actions of board members, and collective (i.e. majority) decisions of the Board created an environment that included: personal distrust and hostility, difficulty having thoughtful deliberation, and a present and past focus – not a future focus. In addition, the difference between the public perception and the reality of the Board’s productivity emerged during the Special Review Team interviews conducted during the December 2010 visit. Following individual meetings with each board member, the mediation team met with the full Board during a project meeting to debrief from the individual interviews and design the next stages of the mediation process.

The mediation team indicated the following issues required attention: the role of the consent decree in determining the current status of leadership, who speaks for the Board, the difference between vigorous debate and dysfunctional discourse, public perception of the essential work of the Board, and the relationship of the Board to the Superintendent and the Superintendent's cabinet and other employees. Moving forward, mediation will be approached through three avenues – public board meetings, one-on-one sessions, and capacity building training and coaching opportunities. Board members participated in additional sessions, as necessary, with the mediators to clarify these issues and individual questions and to discover additional concerns that may not have been raised during the meeting of the full Board.

The mediators also performed an in-depth analysis of organizational documents and placed particular focus on policies that might be identified by the board members as potential sources of conflict in their interpretation or implementation. This analysis moved the Board forward in addressing Required Actions #3, #4, and #6.

From the start of this process and going forward, the Board has been committed to the mediation process and eager to be actively engaged. They understood that working with the mediator would provide evidence to the community and SACS CASI, through their behavior in meetings, voting patterns, and agendas that they could successfully work together on behalf of students.

Following implementation of the mediation process (and prior to extending the contract with the mediation team), a wrap-up was conducted by the mediators. In addition, an assessment of the impact of the use of the mediation process was conducted at that time. A survey of both board members and public observers was one way that effectiveness was measured. Survey results showed that progress has been made in improving the effectiveness of the Board as a governing body. Also, after working through the mediation process, the Board issued the following statement:

“After months of working tirelessly to move beyond the actions that brought us to the brink of our accreditation being revoked, we have unanimously agreed that we must put our students first. We understand the consequences of our actions and have decided to elect new leadership that has the full support of the board. While some may see this as evidence of the challenges that our board continues to face, rest assured that the new election is a move in the right direction, for the right reasons, for the right people... our students. Also know that this election is genuine and represents a pathway back to governing Atlanta Public Schools as we did when we were recognized as the 2009 school board of the year.”

Recommendation

The Board has extended the contract with The Fanning Institute to have them available in case of issues that they find difficulty in dealing with appropriately. During interviews, respondents were pleased with the progress the Board has made in effectively governing the school system. Most of them, however, also were afraid that after the requirements from SACS CASI were completed, the improvement would not be sustained. In order for APS to further gain and maintain the confidence of all stakeholders, the Board must sustain the improvement it has made in the governance of the school system.

REQUIRED ACTION 3: Ensure that the actions and behavior of all board members are aligned with board policies, especially those related to ethics and chain of command and AdvancED/SACS CASI standards.

Progress Status: Please indicate the progress the institution has made toward addressing this Required Action.

	Completed - All necessary and appropriate actions have been taken and evaluated. The institution has documented evidence that supports fulfillment of the Required Action.
X	In Progress - The institution is currently engaged in actions and processes but has yet to fully implement steps necessary to address and/or complete the Required Action.
	Has Not Addressed - The institution has not taken any action at this time.

The members of the Monitoring Team observed that the continuing accreditation of the schools in Atlanta, Georgia is highly regarded and a source of pride among the community. Under the guidance of Interim Superintendent Errol Davis, the Atlanta School Board has created infrastructural changes to shore up its actions and behavior. In this light, the Board has participated in a profusion of professional development, professional meditation sessions, and policy revisions for all Board policies in response to Required Action #3. The Board contracted with the Center for Reform of School Systems; Brock, Clay, Calhoun and Rogers LLC, Attorneys at law; and The Fanning Institute. The Board, through the work of the Committee of the Whole (i.e. The SACS CASI Workgroup), has begun to live the practices embedded in their policies, honor chain-of-command processes, and adhere to professional conduct protocols. The Monitoring Team found that the Board and school system leadership have made progress resulting in improvement. Based on interviews with board members and stakeholder groups, as well as recently adopted policies and the multitude of artifacts and documentations provided, it is apparent that the behavior and actions of the Atlanta School Board since the last visit are more closely aligned to their governance policies and AdvancED Accreditation Standard 2.

A number of the interviewees expressed a need for the Board to maintain the support of third party facilitation, and executive coaching, to ensure the institutionalization of the new Board behavior. Without this guidance there is an underlining fear that members of the Board will slip back into the old behavior. One example of this can be seen at the September 12, 2011 Board Meeting. A resolution to approve the membership of the Ethics Commission was added to the agenda toward the end of the board meeting for formal action. The Board voted to approve this resolution even though neither staff nor board members had time to vet it. It was later determined by legal counsel that board policy had not been followed and that the content contained in the resolution needed to be revised to stagger the terms of Ethics Commission members. To correct this breach, the resolution will need to be rescinded at the next board meeting and a new resolution will be coming forward to correct the previous action. A breach of this nature creates disruption and unnecessary injury to the work and reputation of the Board and school system. Such behaviors breed fear, mistrust, and confusion, among board members, school system staff and community stakeholders. It is imperative that policymakers and school system leaders avoid actions, behaviors and practices that do not align with policy for all of the aforementioned reasons.

It is clear to the members of the Monitoring Team that the Atlanta School Board has made good progress in meeting this Required Action; however, there is still much work to do to strengthen the cohesiveness and functionality of the governance-leadership team. In order to see the true measures of governance thrive in Atlanta, the Board must stay the course. They must continue to work cooperatively and build their individual capacity to sustain a culture that promotes effective governance and professional operations for the benefit of their students.

Directive

The Monitoring Team recognizes the school system on its work in this area. To ensure that the actions and behavior of all board members withstand the test of time, it is incumbent upon the superintendent to guide the Board and continue to help them sustain and preserve an overall environment that benefits the school system as a whole. Transparent governance and leadership will continue to build public trust.

REQUIRED ACTION 4: Review and refine policies to promote the processes that are needed to achieve the Board’s Mission in the education of the Atlanta Public School students. The board members shall provide evidence that they have refocused all of their energies on improving the teaching and learning processes for all their students.

Progress Status: Please indicate the progress the institution has made toward addressing this Required Action.

X	Completed - All necessary and appropriate actions have been taken and evaluated. The institution has documented evidence that supports fulfillment of the Required Action.
	In Progress - The institution is currently engaged in actions and processes but has yet to fully implement steps necessary to address the Required Action.
	Have Not Addressed - The institution has not taken any action at this time.

The Board Policy Manual was examined by the Board, with technical support and professional development from two well-regarded agencies in the field: the Center for Reform of School Systems (CRSS) and Brock, Clay, Calhoun and Rogers LLC. Following the initial review, policy gaps were identified. Using a detailed action plan through a series of meetings and work sessions, the Board enacted appropriate policy revisions.

The Monitoring Team examined evidence including a high level and detailed plan of action, core beliefs, an outline and work schedule of policy activities, a charter review, policy updates, stakeholder interviews, and a summary of changes made as a result of the policy review effort. The Board reviewed, revised and approved changes to 16 policies, accepting three policies for first reading. All policies were aligned with the existing charter, as evidenced by a matrix established for this purpose.

In particular, interviews with the superintendent, system administrators, a member of the mediation team of The Fanning Institute, and board members strongly suggest that Board behavior and the collective capacity of the Board to govern and focus on the core work of the system has improved significantly. Numerous stakeholders report a significant improvement in the decorum and behavior of the Board, and the school system progress report shows a stated

commitment to refocus board meeting agendas and actions from internal Board issues toward effective operation of the schools.

Evidence indicates that the Atlanta Public Schools Board of Education has shown compliance with this Required Action to review and refine board policies and refocus its energy on teaching and learning. Therefore, the Monitoring Team finds the Board of Education has met the desired outcomes of this Required Action. The Monitoring Team commends the Board on their diligence and hard work toward the goals and aims of this Required Action and admonishes the Board to build upon its accomplishments toward sustainability and continuous improvement.

REQUIRED ACTION 5: Develop and implement a process for selecting a superintendent that is transparent during all phases, engages public participation, and demonstrates integrity throughout the total process. The final selection of the superintendent should require more than a simple majority vote of approval by the Board.

Progress Status: Please indicate the progress the institution has made toward addressing this Required Action.

X	Completed - All necessary and appropriate actions have been taken and evaluated. The institution has documented evidence that supports fulfillment of the Required Action.
	In Progress - The institution is currently engaged in actions and processes but has yet to fully implement steps necessary to address and/or complete the Required Action.
	Has Not Addressed - The institution has not taken any action at this time.

Prior to the December 2010 AdvancED/SACS CASI Review Team visit to APS, the superintendent, Dr. Beverly Hall, had announced her pending retirement, effective June 2011. In light of the governance difficulties on the Board and the pending retirement of the superintendent, the Team charged the Board with meeting Required Action 5 (above).

The Board developed and implemented a process for selecting a new superintendent. The process included hiring an executive search firm that engaged public participation and demonstrated integrity throughout the process. The search firm held personal interviews and focus groups involving 145 stakeholders. Additionally, an on-line survey was implemented and received 1,624 stakeholder responses from a good cross-section of administrators, board members, community members, faculty, parents, support staff, and students (APS Leadership Profile Report, May 02, 2011).

The Board agreed early-on that a new superintendent should not be appointed on anything less than a 7-2 vote, constituting compliance with the SACS CASI requirement that the final selection of the superintendent should be by more than a simple majority vote.

On June 14, 2011, the Board announced three finalists for the superintendent position. Approximately one month later, on July 11, the APS Board officially suspended the superintendent search for various legitimate reasons. On June 20, the Board unanimously (9-0) appointed Mr. Erroll Davis, Jr., former Chancellor of the University System of Georgia, as the interim-superintendent. On July 7, Mr. Davis was offered and accepted the position of APS superintendent until June 30, 2012.

Mr. Davis’ leadership, at a critical time in APS history, has been not only professional and effective, but also has provided a “firm hand” on the wheel. In a short time, Mr. Davis has exhibited strong and successful leadership by not only effectively leading APS, but also by defining the proper roles of leadership and governance. The Monitoring Team applauds the selection of Mr. Erroll Davis as superintendent of schools.

The opinion of this Monitoring Team is that APS has completed the Required Action 5 and commends the school system on its work in this area. Going forward, the Board should restart its superintendent search process inasmuch as Mr. Davis is serving as an interim with a contract expiring June 30, 2012. With this in mind, the Board has already begun a visioning process. The Board’s Superintendent-Search Visioning Committee (Mr. McDaniel, Ms. Harsch-Kinnane, Mr. English, and Mrs. Meister) will be conducting deliberations with an eye toward helping the Board define the type of individual they will look for in the next new permanent school superintendent. Recognizing that contract lengths can change, the Board appears to be forward-looking to the time when they will again need to develop and implement a process for selecting a superintendent that is transparent, engages public participation, and demonstrates integrity.

Recommendation

The Monitoring Team recommends the Board continue its commitment/agreement to electing a new permanent superintendent on a vote of not less than 7-2.

REQUIRED ACTION 6: Work directly with the State of Georgia to address the inconsistencies in the Atlanta Independent School System Charter so as to ensure alignment with system policies and governing Board actions.

Progress Status: Please indicate the progress the institution has made toward addressing this Required Action.

X	Completed - All necessary and appropriate actions have been taken and evaluated. The institution has documented evidence that supports fulfillment of the Required Action.
	In Progress - The institution is currently engaged in actions and processes but has yet to fully implement steps necessary to address the Required Action.
	Have Not Addressed - The institution has not taken any action at this time.

The Monitoring Team examined evidence that included a plan of action addressing the six Required Actions set forth by SACS CASI, the Charter Policy Review, the Charter for the Atlanta Independent School System (now Policy AA), and a summary of policy revisions resulting from the review. There is substantial evidence that the Board has examined policy relating to school board operations (section B) and, in particular, policies pertinent to the existing charter. Further, identified conflicts of intent and/or material omissions have been noted and rectified through board action. Technical assistance in policy matters was provided by the Center for Reform of School Systems (CRSS) and Brock, Clay, Calhoun and Rogers LLC. Given the fact that some policy matters are greater in reach and impact than others, requiring more time, discussion, and energy to develop common understanding and consensus, additional support was provided by The Fanning Institute Mediation Team. Planning, collaboration, and

collegiality are reflected in interview comments from board members on recent policy matters brought for formal action.

The Monitoring Team finds that the Board has addressed the inconsistencies between system policies and governing board actions and the Atlanta Independent School System Charter. Therefore, the Monitoring Team considers this Required Action as completed and commends the Board for its diligence and hard work in this area.

Recommendation

The Monitoring Team strongly recommends that the Board continually examine its policies for alignment with the vision, mission, and goals of Atlanta Public Schools. The Monitoring Team further recommends that the Board examine the system Charter (Policy AA) in light of best practices and new legislation and take action to make any modifications that may be necessary.

Conclusion

Repeatedly, interviewees mentioned the proper functioning of the Board of Education had improved, but that work remained to be accomplished in this area. It appears to the Monitoring Team that APS board members have, for the most part, put personality differences aside and have begun focusing on the proper role of the Board. This singular achievement by the Board places them on the right path to successfully regaining the trust and confidence of their community.

Several interviewees expressed cautionary concern about whether the APS Board's improved functioning would continue after the "bright lights" of SACS CASI, the Governor's Office, the Mayor's Office, and the State Board of Education have been extinguished. This issue of sustainability raises concern. Parents, government leaders, and others should be responsible for making clear to their Board that they expect these improved behaviors to continue in the future.

The Monitoring Team observed, however, many positive and strong improvements made by the APS board and leadership. The Board has put in place several procedures that should insure sustainability of their proper functioning. These procedures include, but are not limited to the following:

- Board's extended commitment to working with the Center for Reform of School Systems (CRSS) and Brock, Clay, Calhoun & Rogers in the Board's continuing review and alignment of school board policies (August 15, 2011);
- Board's one-year contract (March 2011) with the University of Georgia's Fanning Institute to provide mediation services;
- Board's formalized policy review process assigned to the APS Chief of Staff;
- Board Resolution (September 12, 2011) stipulating the APS Board approves specified trainers to fulfill the requirements of Senate Bill 84, which is designed to address school board member training in Georgia;
- Board adoption of the Georgia School Boards Association (GSBA) Standards for Local Boards of Education;
- APS Chairperson's fair assignment of committee responsibilities to members of the Board focuses them on the legitimate educational issues that need attention;

- Board's commitment to Town Hall meetings is documented, according to data received by the Monitoring Team. Town Hall meetings have been held in Districts 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5, but not District 6.

The Monitoring Review Team determined that Atlanta Public Schools has completed four of the six Required Actions set forth by the December 2010 Special Review Team. The school system has documented its processes that support fulfillment of the mandated actions. Evidence showed that the Board, superintendent, and staff made a focused effort to comply with the Required Actions set forth by the December 2010 Special Review Team. With the system's improved results, the team determined that sufficient support systems exist to facilitate moving the governance team's professional demeanor and school system's processes to the level of being systemic. Directives under Required Actions 1 and 3 serve to guide next steps, while recommendations provided in this report are designed to help the school system sustain its efforts over a period of time. The school system may discuss these directives and recommendations with AdvancED to gain assistance and support in directing its efforts. As a result of this Monitoring Visit, including a comprehensive review of evidence, the Monitoring Review Team recommended, and the AdvancED Georgia Council voted to accept, an accreditation status of **Accredited on Advisement**.

The school system will be expected to continue its work on Required Actions 1 and 3, as well as to adhere to recommendations that have ongoing implications to sustain its accomplishments. Stakeholders clearly indicated support for sustaining changes that have occurred. To provide evidence in sustaining its progress, APS will submit a detailed follow-up Institution Progress Report by September 30, 2012. The school system will identify and document – in a narrative format – steps taken since the September 2011 Monitoring Visit to address Required Actions 1 and 3 and the recommendations set forth in this report and to sustain compliance with all other Required Actions of the December 2010 Special Review Team report. As a part of this progress report, APS will include board meeting agendas, board meeting minutes, verification that minutes were made publicly available, and other supporting evidence. To facilitate the review process, the school system will organize documentation/attachments according to the Required Actions and recommendations to facilitate the evaluation process. The Institution Progress Report should be submitted to the Georgia AdvancED/SACS CASI state office. The documented progress and sustainability of efforts articulated in the aforementioned report will determine further actions and/or a change in accreditation status.