Make the Mark.

Family and Community Engagement Internal Audit – Report #FY25-05

plante moran | Audit. Tax. Consulting.
Wealth Management.

Contents

March 11, 2025

Connie Brown, CPA, CIA, CRMA
Executive Director, Internal Compliance
Atlanta Public Schools
130 Trinity Avenue
Atlanta, GA 30303-3624

Dear Connie,

Plante Moran has completed consulting services for Atlanta Public Schools ("APS") consisting of an internal audit over the Family and Community Engagement function, as summarized in our professional services agreement dated May 15, 2024, and statement of work dated October 25, 2024.

We were not engaged to conduct an audit with the objective of expressing an opinion on APS's internal control environment. Accordingly, we do not express such an opinion. Had we performed additional procedures, other matters might have come to our attention that would have been reported to you.

This report is solely for the information and use of the management and the Atlanta Public Schools Board of Education and is not intended for use by anyone other than these specified parties.

We would like to recognize and thank the management and staff of APS for their cooperation and courtesy extended to us throughout this process.

Sincerely,

Matthew Bohdan, CPA, CIA
Engagement Partner

Troy A. Snyder, CICA
Relationship Partner

Executive Summary

Project Overview & Background

The Atlanta Public Schools ("APS") Audit Committee approved an internal audit of the Family and Community Engagement function's internal controls per the 2024-2025 risk assessment and internal audit plan on June 27, 2024. The Office of Internal Compliance ("OIC") engaged Plante Moran to perform an internal audit of the Family and Community Engagement function.

Objective & Scope

Plante Moran evaluated the Family and Community Engagement function's internal controls, focusing on the Office of Family Engagement, Office of Strategy & Engagement, Office of Communications, and the Board of Education for the 2023-2024 school year. Specifically, we assessed District policies, procedures, and practices in alignment with APS Board policy and applicable federal and state regulations through sample-based testing and inquiry. Our audit objectives included reviewing the alignment of actual practices with Board policy and departmental procedures, identifying internal controls to support effective engagement with external stakeholders, and identifying gaps and recommendations to mitigate risk to the District. Further details regarding the audit objectives tested can be found on page 5 of this report.

Methodology

To evaluate the adequacy of the policies, procedures, and practices in place, Plante Moran performed the following:

1. Assessed the application and communication of Board policies, standard operating procedures, and regulations which govern the Family and Community Engagement function.
2. Evaluated training materials and guidelines established and communicated to staff related to:
   a. Board policies, standard operating procedures, and regulations.
   b. Communications with the public, media, social media, or other external communications.
3. Evaluated the roles and responsibilities established by the District for engagement with stakeholder groups. Understood how these roles and responsibilities are communicated to staff.
4. Assessed timeliness of communication with community stakeholders through the Let's Talk platform.

Summary of Themes

The table below highlights overarching thematic areas of strength and development that were identified during audit fieldwork.

No.	Area	Theme
1	Effective Communication and Stakeholder Engagement	The organization demonstrates expertise in implementing Board policies, standard operating procedures, and regulations across its daily operations, project management, and stakeholder interactions, ensuring clear communication with staff. They have established well-defined roles and responsibilities for engaging with stakeholder groups, fostering strong relationships and collaboration. Additionally, comprehensive training and guidelines for communications with the public, media, social media, and other external channels are effectively communicated to staff, promoting consistency and professionalism in external interactions.
2	Timeliness of Response to Community Stakeholders	The organization encounters challenges in providing timely responses to Let's Talk dialogues due to the absence of an escalation workflow, independent oversight of responses, and mandatory training on the platform. This has led to inconsistencies in addressing dialogues promptly, despite the expectation of a 5-day response time per standard operating procedures. These inconsistencies pose significant risk, including a decrease in stakeholder trust in the District's ability to address concerns effectively and lower community engagement in school initiatives. It also could lead to negative public perceptions and public relations issues. Addressing this gap is crucial to promote timely communication with the community and maintain strong relationships with all stakeholders.

Detailed Audit Results

Approach

Plante Moran conducted a comprehensive evaluation of the District's policies and procedures related to family and community engagement. This assessment focused on their completeness, clarity, and compliance with applicable federal and state regulations. Additionally, Plante Moran evaluated the documentation of these processes to ensure alignment with the District's policies and established procedures. Our testing included inquiry and sample-based testing to assess the following audit objectives:

No.	Audit Objective Descriptions	Conclusion
1	Document the application of Board policies, standard operating procedures, and regulations governing the Office of Family Engagement and Office of Strategy & Engagement functions. Identify how these policies and procedures are communicated to staff.	Effective
2	Verify that the District has established roles and responsibilities for engagement with stakeholder groups. Understand how these roles and responsibilities are communicated to staff.	Effective
3	Verify that training and guidelines have been established and communicated to staff relating to communications with the public, media, social media, or other external communications.	Effective
4	Select a sample of Let's Talk responses to ensure responses were provided in a timely manner.	Ineffective

Summary of Findings and Recommendations

Our observations below are based on corroborative inquiry with APS personnel and inspection of sample documentation. In response to our observations, recommendations are included for the District's consideration on how to resolve gaps where internal controls were not in place, internal controls were not designed effectively, or opportunities exist to reduce risk to the District.

Each recommendation was rated high, moderate, or low based on priority in terms of impact on the process, internal controls, or efficiency of operations.

1. **High priority** indicates that the finding requires immediate attention, and the recommendation may have a significant impact on risk mitigation.

2. **Moderation priority** indicates that the finding should be addressed timely, and the recommendation may have a meaningful impact on risk mitigation.

3. **Low priority** indicates that the finding should be addressed as time and resources permit, and the recommendation may have a low impact on risk mitigation.

The following table summarizes the findings identified through the audit.

High Priority	Moderate Priority	Low Priority	Total Findings
2	0	0	2

The table below summarizes the findings and related recommendations identified through the audit:

No.	Observation	Recommendation	Priority
1	Per Board policy "Regulation BBBA-R(1): Board Member Duties - Community Relations", Let's Talk dialogues must be responded to within 5 business days. Topic Owners, who are individuals assigned to respond to dialogues, did not respond within 5 business days from the date of receipt for 20% of samples tested. Additionally, the platform's escalation workflow for past-due dialogues was disabled and is awaiting reinstatement by the new Superintendent.	1. Re-enable the automated past-due escalation workflow and reminder notifications to prompt staff to respond timely to assigned dialogues. Consider removing the ability for staff members to disable automatic reminders to promote accountability and timely responses. 2. Consider developing key performance metrics related to response compliance to encourage timely communication. Examples include the percentage of dialogue responses initiated within the 5-day policy, average response time for initial dialogues, average response time to close dialogues, number of overdue responses per month, as well as stakeholder satisfaction ratings based on response timeliness and quality. 3. Consider developing internal feedback channels, such as quarterly meetings with Topic Owners regarding Let's Talk workflows and processes. Feedback collected may include bottlenecks, inefficiencies with navigation and use of the platform, as well as enhancement suggestions to promote responsiveness and effectiveness. 4. Consider updating existing Let's Talk training program to include Board policies regarding response timeliness, roles and responsibilities of Topic Owners, as well as quality of communication to promote consistent and effective responses. This training should be provided to existing Let's Talk Topic Owners, and any new Let's Talk Topic Owners onboarded in the future.	High

Management Response #1:

Recommendation 1.1: Response: The implementation of the updated escalation workflows, along with the launch of the district chatbot, will significantly enhance response times and is expected to deflect approximately 60% of dialogue submissions.

Recommendation 1.2: Response:

   a. Note: The average Let's Talk dialogue response time is currently 2.4 days and APS current dialogue age is 3.6 days.

   b. Initiate weekly performance metrics reports for past-due dialogues and topic owners.

   c. Initiate monthly performance metrics reports for all users.

   d. Launch a quarterly reward program for the best-performing team, along with refresher training during office hours.

Recommendation 1.3: Response:

   a. Initiate a quarterly reward program to recognize the best-performing team, promoting responsiveness and a positive user experience.

   b. Offer quarterly refresher training during office hours, incorporating a dedicated segment for collecting feedback and recommendations from users.

Recommendation 1.4: Response:

   a. The Let's Talk Project Manager is collaborating with APS and Let's Talk/K12 Insight to develop a new user training module on the APS video training platform, ELiS.

   b. A request is pending for the Let's Talk New User training video from K12 Insight.

   c. A meeting is scheduled with HR to facilitate the process of uploading training videos to ELiS, ensuring it is established as a mandatory employee training module.

   d. Upon receiving the video embedding code and assessment questions, the Let's Talk Project Manager will upload the training video into ELiS.

Implementation Date:

 1.1: Implementation Date:

    a.   March 7, 2025 – Chatbot Launch

    b.   June 1, 2025 – Workflow Implementation

1.2: Implementation Date:

    a.   April 1, 2025 – Activation of Weekly Performance Metrics

    b.   April 29, 2025 – Activation of Monthly Performance Metrics (including top user recognition and office hours refresher training)

1.3: Implementation Date: April 29, 2025 – Launch of the quarterly reward program and refresher training, including the feedback segment.

1.4: Implementation Date:

    a.   March 6, 2025 – ELiS training session with HR

    b.   March 10, 2025 – Due date for receiving the video embedding code and assessment questions

    c.   March 14, 2025 – Upload of training videos into ELiS

    d.   July 1, 2025 – Let's Talk New User Training officially mandated for all employees

Responsible for Implementing Recommendation:

1.1: Responsible for Implementation: The Let's Talk Project Manager will submit the updated escalation workflow list to the Let's Talk/K12 Insight implementation team via the APS Let's Talk Client Success Manager.

1.2: Responsible for Implementation: The Let's Talk Project Manager will be responsible for sharing the weekly and monthly performance metrics reports.

1.3: Responsible for Implementation: The Let's Talk Project Manager will share this information with all Let's Talk users via a Let's Talk campaign and employee newsletters.

1.4: Responsible for Implementation:

    a.   The Let's Talk Project Manager will submit the updated leadership workflow list to the Let's Talk/K12 Insight implementation team via the APS Let's Talk Client Success Manager.

b. The APS Let's Talk Client Success Manager is responsible for providing the video embedding code and assessment questions.

c. The Let's Talk Project Manager will upload the training video onto ELiS.

d. The Let's Talk Project Manager will schedule the mandatory training start date in ELiS.

e. The Let's Talk Project Manager will communicate training details to all Let's Talk users via a Let's Talk campaign and employee newsletters.

No.	Observation	Recommendation	Priority
2	While Board policy mandates responses to Let's Talk dialogues within 5 business days, there is not an established policy or standard that mandates a specific timeframe to resolve and "close" Let's Talk dialogues. 8% of Let's Talk dialogues tested were marked as "Closed" without providing a response to the inquirers.	1. Develop a standard to establish an appropriate length of time for Topic Owners to resolve assigned dialogues, such as 10 business days from the date the dialogue was received. Establish clear guidelines and criteria for what constitutes a complete and accurate response to promote consistency. These standards and guidelines should be captured in Standard Operating Procedures ("SOPs") and provided to all Topic Owners via onboarding training. 2. Conduct quarterly reviews of Let's Talk dialogues to promote timeliness of closing responses, completeness and accuracy of responses, and quality of communication. Quarterly reviews should be performed by an independent team from the respondent team. For example, the Let's Talk Project Manager from the Office of Strategy & Engagement should review all dialogues for which they are not the Topic Owner. If the Project Manager is the Topic Owner, the Chief Strategy Officer or an independent member of the Office of Strategy & Engagement should review the dialogues.	High

Management Response #2:

Recommendation 2.1: Response: The Let's Talk SOPs will outline detailed step-by-step procedures for:

    a. Responding to a dialogue

    b. Reassigning a dialogue

    c. Merging dialogues

    d. Closing a dialogue

Additionally, the SOPs will:

    a. Define the roles and responsibilities of a Topic Owner versus a Team Member.

b. Incorporate standard guidelines for response and resolution timeframes.

c. Ensure thorough training for staff on SOPs.

d. Monitor performance against set standards and regularly review/update procedures as needed.

e. Ensure all processes are digitally accessible via the Let's Talk Admin app for easy reference and usability.

Updated Escalation Workflow:

a. Day 1: Reminder to Team

b. Day 2: Reminder to Topic Owner

c. Day 3: Escalate to Owner's Supervisor/Director; change priority status for increased visibility and urgency

d. Day 4: Escalate to Division Chief

e. Day 5: Escalate to Deputy Superintendent

Response Time Guidelines:

a. Initial response to resolution: 5 business days, except for dialogues requiring additional customer information.

b. Customer follow-up timeframe: 2-3 business days to respond before the dialogue is closed.

Recommendation 2.2: Response: The implementation of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and quarterly meetings/refresher sessions will promote the timeliness of closing dialogues and enhance the quality of communication across the district and community.

Implementation Date:

2.1: Implementation Date:

a. June 1, 2025 – Updated workflow implemented

b. Week of June 23, 2025 – SOPs provided to the Strategy Chief for review

c. July 1, 2025 – SOPs made available for submission to the district for Let's Talk users

2.2: Implementation Date: April 29, 2025 – Launch of the quarterly reward program and refresher training, including a feedback segment.

Responsible for Implementing Recommendation:

2.1: Responsible for Implementation: The Let's Talk Project Manager will develop the Let's Talk SOPs for APS with approval from the Strategy Chief.

2.2: Responsible for Implementation: The Let's Talk Project Manager will communicate this initiative to all Let's Talk users via a Let's Talk campaign and employee newsletters.

Appendix

Atlanta Public Schools Family and Community Engagement Internal Audit Process Narrative

Organizational Structure and Responsibilities for Family and Community Engagement

The Family and Community Engagement function at Atlanta Public Schools ("APS") is structured to effectively implement and oversee family engagement strategies, policies, and standards across the District. The function is primarily led by the Executive Director, Family and Community Engagement, who is responsible for managing the overall strategy and providing direct support to school and department leaders. The Executive Director works cross-functionally with various District departments and collaborates with community and parent-led organizations to integrate best practices. They also assist in the strategy, design, and facilitation of stakeholder engagement meetings.

Supporting the Executive Director is the Program Manager, who oversees the Carver Cluster and Partner Schools. The Program Manager is responsible for program planning, training, and the strategic direction of family engagement initiatives. Additionally, the Program Manager provides coaching and data support to the Family Engagement Leadership Teams ("FELTs") at schools. They also design and facilitate professional development and serve as a liaison to internal and external stakeholders.

The function also includes several Family Engagement Liaisons, each assigned to specific clusters or schools. These liaisons play a crucial role in planning, developing, and providing strategic direction to FELTs and parent liaisons within their assigned clusters. Parent Liaisons who serve as the bridge between parents and the school, organize and facilitate parent groups, develop educational workshops, and prepare instructional materials. Parent liaisons also reach out to local businesses for student incentives, host classes for parents, and provide advocacy services. To ensure they are well-equipped for their roles, the FELTs provide parent liaisons with comprehensive training on effective communication, academic standards, and organizing school-wide parenting initiatives. They also offer guidance on the Continuous Improvement Plan Family Engagement strategy, provide technical support to Title I and non-Title schools, and offer targeted professional learning to parent liaisons and other staff. Additionally, they share District and community resources with schools to support family engagement efforts.

External Communications Channels

The District's External Communications function plays a crucial role in maintaining effective communication with the general public and various community stakeholders. The following communication channels are used to ensure clear, consistent, and timely communication:

1. **Media Relations:** The media relations team, led by the Director of Media and Media Relations Manager, handles inquiries from both local and national media. They manage a high volume of requests throughout the year, which can pertain to District-specific events or broader issues affecting adjacent school districts. The team has established standard operating procedures ("SOPs") for schools to forward media inquiries directly to the media relations office, promoting a centralized and consistent response.

2. **Board of Education Communications:** The communications team also supports the Board of Education by sending out communications on their behalf. This includes collaborating with the Board Office and working with the Let's Talk platform, which serves as a public feedback vehicle. While Let's Talk and open records requests are not directly managed by the communications team, they provide input into the responses.

3. **Social Media:** APS utilizes several social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), LinkedIn, YouTube, and Nextdoor. They maintain separate accounts for English and Spanish-speaking audiences. The team has developed social media protocols based on Board policy and provides training to senior leadership and directors. Social media posts are planned at least two weeks in advance and are reviewed by an internal editorial board and the original requester before being published. In the event of an emergency, exceptions to this process can be made to ensure timely communication.

4. **Newsletters and Blogs:** The APS external newsletter, APS Now, is sent out weekly and includes District-wide content relevant to students, parents, and schools. It highlights good news, resources, and activities within the District. The newsletter is available in both English and Spanish. Additionally, the APS Today blog covers various events and features articles on students, teachers, and other stakeholders.

5. **Website Management:** The communications team manages the District and school-specific websites. Requests for website updates are submitted through a communications request form and tracked using Monday.com, a project management tool. Each school has a communications ambassador who liaises with the central communications team and receives training on managing their school's website and social media.

6. **Crisis Communications:** The crisis communications team, consisting of key members from the communications and media relations teams, handles urgent situations such as safety incidents, inclement weather, and facility issues. They use a GroupMe chat for real-time coordination and have template messages for various scenarios. Communications are sent out in both English and Spanish through Infinite Campus, following an approval process involving relevant Chiefs and the Superintendent.

7. **Community Engagement Support:** The communications team supports community engagement efforts by providing translation services, print collateral, presentations, and videos for community meetings. They also produce public service announcements ("PSAs") to address important issues and collaborate with external agencies, such as the local police and fire departments, for joint communications.

"Let's Talk" Platform

The Let's Talk platform is a tool for Atlanta Public Schools, designed to enhance communication and engagement with families, students, staff, and the broader community. The process begins when a community member submits an inquiry or concern through the Let's Talk platform, which can be accessed via the main homepage of the APS website, individual school-specific webpages, and department-specific webpages. Each submission is categorized by topic, such as employment, family engagement, or school-related issues, and is automatically routed to the appropriate department or individual responsible for that topic.

Upon submission, the designated Topic Owner receives a notification via email and within the Let's Talk app, ensuring prompt awareness of new dialogues. If the Topic Owner is unavailable or the submission requires further expertise, it can be reassigned to another team member or escalated to senior management authorities within the department.

The District encourages all Topic Owners to provide initial responses to all submissions within 48 hours but no later than five days from the date of receipt, as mandated by Board policy "Regulation BBBA-R(1): Board Member Duties - Community Relations". The platform allows for internal collaboration, enabling team members to seek input from colleagues or supervisors before responding to promote accurate and professional communication.

The Let's Talk platform provides robust tracking and reporting features, allowing APS to monitor the status of all submissions, identify trends, and generate reports regarding dialogue volume and response times. The Project Manager, Office of Strategy & Engagement, oversees the platform's functionality, ensuring that all topics have assigned owners and that no submissions remain unresolved. Overall, Let's Talk centralizes all communication, making it easier for APS to manage and respond to dialogues efficiently, improving accountability, and providing data-driven insights to inform policy decisions and resource allocation. This platform fosters a culture of transparency and responsiveness, strengthening the relationship between the District and the community it serves.

Thank you.

plante moran | Audit. Tax. Consulting. Wealth Management.

Matthew Bohdan, CPA, CIA

Engagement Partner
248.223.3619
matthew.bohdan@plantemoran.com

Troy Snyder, CICA

Relationship Partner
248.223.3273
troy.snyder@plantemoran.com