



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

**Review Dates:
December 9-10, 2010**

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 in 69 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:

- **Meet the AdvancED Standards and accreditation policies.**
Institutions demonstrate adherence to the AdvancED Standards and accreditation policies, which describe the quality practices and conditions that research and best practice indicate are necessary for educational institutions to achieve quality student performance and organizational effectiveness.
- **Engage in continuous improvement.**
Institutions implement a process of continuous improvement focused on improving student performance and organizational effectiveness.
- **Demonstrate quality assurance through internal and external review.**
Institutions engage in a planned process of ongoing internal review and self-assessment. In addition, institutions host an external 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.

Special Review Visit Report

Introduction

Making a difference in children's lives should be the primary goal of any school board member. Seeing advancement in student achievement, parent participation in schools, and positive community involvement are just a few of the ways board members can measure their school system's success. But these achievements don't come easy. The composition of members on a school board, and their commitment to these objectives, can determine the failure or success of a system. The Atlanta Public School (APS) system is no exception. The Board of Education for APS, which was recognized with the National School Board Association's Urban School Board of Excellence Award as one of the best school boards in the nation last year, is now experiencing difficulty in governing effectively.

In November of 2009, there was a change in the membership of the Board, which has resulted in a paradigm shift in the actions of the Board and contributed to the difficulties facing the Board and the APS schools. In the fall of 2010, the Board requested the assistance of AdvancED/SACS CASI in addressing their current challenges, including concerns regarding who should serve as the leadership of the Board and their ability to work together. In doing so, board members, individually and collectively, indicated to AdvancED/SACS CASI staff their inability to work together and govern effectively. In addition, key administrative staff, including the Superintendent, confirmed the inner struggles of the Board and expressed concern regarding the Board's ability to govern effectively. As a result, AdvancED/SACS CASI sent a letter dated November 1, 2010 that a Special Review Team would 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*.

AdvancED Standard 2: Governance and Leadership

The school provides governance and leadership that promote student performance and school effectiveness.

The system operates under the jurisdiction of a governing board that:

- Establishes policies and procedures that provide for the effective operation of the school
- Recognizes and preserves the executive, administrative, and leadership prerogatives of the administrative head of the school
- Ensures compliance with applicable local, state, and federal laws, standards, and regulations

Only the high schools of the Atlanta Public Schools are accredited by AdvancED/SACS CASI. The accreditation standard on governance applies to each school similarly as the APS Board of Education is the governing body for these schools. Therefore the performance of the APS Board impacts the accreditation status of each and every accredited school under its jurisdiction.

Activities of the Special Review Team

In preparation for the onsite review, the Special Review Team reviewed:

- Policies that have been adopted, revised, or rescinded by the Atlanta Public Schools Board of Education since July 1, 2010.
- Policies concerning the powers and authority of the Superintendent, School Board members and the administration, including any and all proposed changes to said policies since July 1, 2010.
- Board minutes and videos of board meetings since July 1, 2010.
- A copy of the Blue Ribbon Commission report regarding the CRCT investigation. In addition, the team reviewed documentation regarding the Board's review and actions regarding the CRCT investigation.
- Documentation regarding the recent ethics charge against a board member, including the review by the Ethics Commission and the review of the recommendation by the Board of Education.
- The State Charter for APS, as well as legal opinions related to the current issue of Board leadership.

Once on-site, the team engaged in the following activities:

- Interviews with 30 stakeholders representing:
 - The Superintendent of Schools
 - The Board of Education
 - The Leadership Team
 - The Mayor's Office
 - The Chamber of Commerce
 - The Ethics Committee
 - The Atlanta Committee for Progress
 - The Georgia State Board of Education
 - The Blue Ribbon Commission
 - School Administrators
- Review of artifacts listed above
- Team deliberations and report preparation

Findings

Based upon the information collected and reviewed, the Special Review Team found sufficient evidence to support a finding that the actions and behaviors of the institution are in violation of AdvancED Accreditation Standards and policies. The Special Review Team determined through interviews and review of documents that the ability for all members of the Board to work together began to erode during the summer when the Board of Education made a controversial policy change in order to change leadership positions on the Board. In a series of 5-4 votes, the chair and vice chair of the Board were changed. In-house legal counsel, an outside law firm, and the State's Attorney General advised the Board that the change in the policy that resulted in the

change in leadership would be illegal. The Board proceeded to change the policy and ignore the legal advice. This action led ultimately to a lawsuit challenging the legality of the policy change that removed a requirement that the Board must vote by two-thirds majority if members wanted to replace a board chair or vice chair midterm. The change in the policy required only a simple majority.

During interviews with board members, the superintendent, staff, and other stakeholders, the team learned that the judge's ruling on the lawsuit resulted in a consent order that leaves a need for the resolution of inconsistencies between policies and the Charter. It is evident to the Special Review Team that there has not been a comprehensive review and revision of existing board policies to establish congruence with the 2003 Charter revision. A systematic analysis, review, and where appropriate, revision of all board policies should be conducted in light of the 2003 Charter revision and made a part of future board training. Several board members and others stated that while some policies are reviewed and revised periodically, there is general consensus that all policies should receive future review and revision, where needed.

Although the Board of Education has established policies and procedures to provide for the effective operation of the schools, the Board chair circumvented such policies by improperly placing a procurement item on the Board's agenda for approval. The agenda item was a contract for the development of a communication plan by a communications vendor, Alisias Group, despite the fact that this contract had not been properly vetted according to established policy and procedures. Additionally, evidence indicates that the chair authorized work to be done by the Alisias Group prior to Board knowledge or approval. This issue of not following policy and micromanagement by members of the Board threatens the recognition and preservation of the executive, administrative, and leadership authority of the administrative head of the system.

Concerning the issue of micromanagement by the Board, several interviewees stated they had no concrete evidence of micromanagement issues. However, these same interviewees expressed great concern about what has happened on the Board in the last several months. They stated governance is an issue – that in the last two months or so, the Board has become fractured. The fallout is felt within various departments. Interviewees explained that while they used to field employee and community operational questions, the nature of the questions have shifted away from operations and centered almost totally on board governance issues, for example – “what’s happening on the Board?” Comments such as, “the superintendent’s resignation coupled with the division on the Board is causing employee concern” and, “the change of Board Chair has caused immediate negative employee morale” were reported. Questions about the controversy regarding the change in leadership continue to affect the culture of the system and some employees stated that they are embarrassed by the actions of the Board. Some stakeholders stated, in part, “Employees are angry because they see all their hard-work going down the tube,” as a result of in-fighting on the Board. Others stated, in part, “The public is frustrated with the present Board leadership. Everyone wants it resolved.”

Actions by certain board members have eroded public trust and confidence in the Board's ability to properly govern the school district. Also impacting the effective operation of the system is the current chairman's leadership style. Interviewees stated, “The 5, which includes the chairman, have a lack of understanding or willful disregard for good boardmanship.” Additionally, it was stated that, “The Chair is responsible for causing much of the controversy.” Also stated multiple

times by various interviewees was the assessment that the chair has personally staged media events, without Board approval or knowledge, and that such media events were willfully designed to promote his personal agenda. It will be difficult for the APS Board to build public support for the district when board members act in their individual capacity outside of board approval. The dysfunctional nature of the Board can be seen in behaviors such as in-fighting, bickering, failure to adhere to the system Charter, failure to follow in-house legal advice, failure to follow appropriate procurement procedures, and using valuable board meeting time to promote private agendas. These actions and behaviors, coupled with its lack of public focus on improving the learning opportunities for students, has resulted in a situation that works against building public trust.

An additional public trust issue came to light when a board member used his school district-issued charge card to make personal purchases. The board member has demonstrated a complete disregard for following clear system rules and regulations concerning use of his charge card. Not once, but rather twice, his improper use of the charge card came to light. In the first instance, he charged approximately \$65 of personal charges on his school district-issued charge card. He was counseled by the administration, repaid the amount and warned not to do so again. Failing to heed such counseling, the same board member proceeded to log \$855.83 in personal charges on his school district-issued charge card. This time the event became the subject of an ethics complaint, subjecting the board member to an ethics complaint protocol. He admitted his wrongdoing, apologized, repaid the \$855.83, was fined \$2,500, had his charge card revoked, and faced having a Board reprimand read into the Board Minutes. Unfortunately, the APS Board, on a 4 – 4 vote, failed to read into the record the reprimand. This was recorded in the Board Meeting Minutes of October 18, 2010, Agenda Item 7.01. While some members on the Board explained that they knew the official sanction of the board member would take place within 30-days as a matter of law in the absence of an affirmative vote, others on the Board were not knowledgeable of their own ethics procedures. According to in-house counsel, the board member's reprimand became official after the Board failed to take an affirmative vote, but the Board must, according to policy, read into the Minutes the official reprimand, and this issue is expected to be placed on the Board's next agenda. However, failure from the beginning to take action against a board member who has not complied with the Board's own ethics policy is evidence of poor governance and self-management on the part of the Board.

Because of deep distrust issues among board members, board meetings have become contentious, dysfunctional, divisive and ineffective. All of the stakeholders who were interviewed confirmed that there was a "5-4" division among members of the Board. Several interviewees reminded the team that board meetings, since the public fight over control of the Board's Chair position, have been dominated by adult issues, with little or no substantive concern about students.

The APS Board is currently being buffeted by strong and turbulent winds brought on by a Criterion Reference Competency Test (CRCT) cheating scandal [now in the hands of the Georgia Bureau of Investigation, as well as a federal probe], a very public Board fight over control of the Chair position, failure by the Board to take decisive action against a board member who misused his district-issued credit card, and the resulting negative impact on morale of its employees and heightened concern by its stakeholders. In light of all these negative forces, one member of "the

5” failed to see any relationship between what has transpired and the Board’s ability to effectively govern.

What becomes evident is the lack of Board determination to “do the right thing, even though the right thing is not the easiest thing to do.” The public expects their leaders – especially board members – to do what is right and in the best interest of students. And when they do not, the public’s trust is diminished. Particularly vexing to these overall board leadership problems is the fact that this Board has engaged in high-level board training activities provided by nationally recognized corporations and has been previously recognized as a “National Board of the Year.” While the training component is in place, it may be said that the message has not been heard by some with regard to proper board leadership behaviors. When asked if the APS Board has the capacity to get back on track, on its own, the team was told, “It’s going to be tough. There is a complete break-down in trust between board members... Board norms are not being followed.” This lack of trust is further complicated by the failure of the Board to act in accordance with established procedures and protocols and in a transparent and ethical manner.

An area of great concern for the majority of stakeholders interviewed was the Board’s impending responsibility to select a new superintendent. The current superintendent announced her resignation, effective July 2011; therefore, a new superintendent must be employed within the next several months. The Board is strongly encouraged to conduct a national search that engages stakeholders in a transparent and inclusive selection process and provides them with genuine input into the selection process, as opposed to the Board, or a faction of it, controlling the process. Given the deep division on the current Board to formally agree and the need to re-establish consensus and public trust, it is strongly encouraged that the new superintendent should be employed by more than a majority vote.

Accreditation Status

Based on the findings of the Special Review Team and subsequent review by the AdvancED Georgia State Council, AdvancED concludes that Atlanta Public Schools is in violation of AdvancED Standard 2: Governance and Leadership.

In accordance with AdvancED policies, all the high schools under the jurisdiction of the Atlanta Public Schools have been placed in the accreditation status of **“Accredited Probation”** until September 30, 2011, by which time a Monitoring Team shall conduct a Monitoring Visit to assess the progress made in complying with the Special Review Team’s required actions listed in the following section.

Required Actions

1. Develop and implement a long term plan to communicate with and engage stakeholders in the work of the district 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.

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 the effectiveness of the governing body.
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 Accreditation Standards and policies.
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.
5. Develop and implement a process for selecting a superintendent that is transparent during all phases, engages public participation, and demonstrates integrity throughout the process. It is strongly suggested that the final selection of the superintendent should be determined by more than a simple majority vote of approval by the Board.
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.

Next Steps - Using and Acting on the Report

A copy of this report is sent to the Superintendent. The institution shall use the report to guide its response to the findings and its improvement efforts. The institution is accountable for addressing the required actions identified in this report within the specified timeline. AdvancED is available to assist the institution in its improvement efforts.

As follow-up on this Special Review Report, Atlanta Public Schools will be expected to host a Monitoring Team visit by September 30, 2011. Depending on the level of progress in meeting the six required actions identified within this report, recommendations regarding the continuing accreditation status of the schools within APS may be modified at that time. In preparation for the Monitoring Visit, the district must submit two *Institution Progress Reports* to AdvancED/SACS CASI—the first by May 1, 2011 and the second two weeks prior to the Monitoring Visit. Atlanta Public Schools must use the Institution Progress Reports to document all actions taken to address the required actions contained herein. Included with each progress report must be artifacts specifically describing and documenting what has been accomplished as required. AdvancED/SACS CASI is available to assist the district in addressing the action steps therein stipulated. Please contact the Georgia AdvancED/SACS CASI staff to access the template for completing the *Institution Progress Report*. Additionally, the district is responsible for all costs associated with hosting the Monitoring Visit.

Closing Comments

The Special Review Team, appointed by AdvancED to visit the Atlanta Public School System to assess the validity of the problems brought forth and supporting documents, found a school system in the midst of serious turmoil. The Team found the effectiveness of the Atlanta Public School Board of Education is in a state of paralysis. There is mounting evidence that the current Board has not demonstrated the ability to provide positive and effective leadership in moving the school system forward, and it is very evident that the current turmoil is having a detrimental impact on the quality of the educational system, including but not limited to the schools accredited by AdvancED/SACS CASI.

The lack of effective governance and leadership on the part of the Atlanta Public Schools Board of Education in recent months is having significant negative impact on the APS schools' stakeholders including the city of Atlanta. Without a shared vision and the ability to professionally make decisions about what is in the best interest of the students of Atlanta Public Schools, the system is paralyzed to move forward. Community leaders express great concern over the future of the school system, located in the heart of the city, and recognize the long-term affects on the Atlanta community and future APS students. Regardless of individual differences, personal agendas must be set aside and positive actions must be taken for the school system to move beyond the current turmoil.

Focused, collaborative and decisive action must be implemented to ensure the governing body and leadership of the schools and school system are able to complete the required actions before the September 30, 2011 deadline. It is imperative that the Board, in concert with the system leadership, act quickly to bring the community and the school system together at this time. Citizens, parents and children need to be reassured that the commitment, infrastructure, resources and effective leadership of the educational system are in place. No organization can be successful without some degree of conformity to organizational norms of conduct such as those prescribed by the AdvancED Accreditation Standards and the policies and procedures of the schools and school district.