



Gwinnett County Public Schools

Suwanee, Georgia

June 13-16, 2021

Special Review Report

#215139

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Special Review Report

Introduction

This report summarizes the findings of the Cognia™ Special Review conducted remotely on June 13-16, 2021, for Gwinnett County Public Schools in Suwanee, Georgia. Gwinnett County Public Schools (GCPS) serves more than 179,000 students in pre-kindergarten through the twelfth grade. There are 138 schools, including ten special schools within the district.

The review was conducted in response to complaints about the district. The complaints primarily focus on the Gwinnett County Board of Education upholding its duties as a governing body and selected members adhering to their roles and responsibilities. The following items are representative examples of concerns specified within the complaints regarding board members:

- Exhibit a lack of understanding regarding their roles and responsibilities as members of the Board.
- Do not demonstrate collegiality for their differences or work cohesively to promote student achievement and the district's success.
- Do not adhere to the Code of Ethics.
- Have allowed discrimination to take place against students of color for discipline infractions.
- Make decisions that seem unethical and discriminatory regarding the use of social media.
- Have not been responsive to a downward trajectory in student achievement within the district.

The nature of the complaints suggests that Gwinnett County Public Schools may not be adhering to the selected *Cognia Performance Standards for School Systems*, as listed within this report. This report is organized around those cited accreditation standards.

Activities of the Special Review Team

In preparation for the Special Review, the Cognia Special Review Team examined the district's written responses submitted to Cognia regarding the alleged complaints, current website information, recordings of board meetings, and documentation provided by the district via eProve™ Workspace. During the review, the team engaged in the following activities:

- Conducted individual interviews with the five school board members and the superintendent.
- Conducted additional interviews with stakeholder groups representing the following: 15 district staff members, 17 principals, 28 teachers, 19 students, 22 parents, and 17 community members, totaling 124 stakeholder interviews.
- Reviewed evidence that included the following: numerous documents and resources supplied by the district and online recordings of board meetings, minutes, work sessions, and special called meetings.

Report Preparation and Findings

The Special Review Team used the findings from these activities and evidence to assess adherence to each of Cognia's Performance Standards as presented in the report.



Findings

The Special Review Team's findings are organized by each of the cited Cognia Performance Standards. For each standard, a rating is provided followed by a Summary of Findings. Priorities for Improvement and Directives are provided for any standard rated as *Insufficient* or *Initiating*. Recommendations are provided for any standard rated as *Improving* or *Impacting*. The findings of the Special Review Team are reported within four ranges identified by the colors below:

Color	Rating	Description
Red	Insufficient	Identifies key areas that need more focused improvement efforts
Yellow	Initiating	Represents areas to enhance and extend current improvement efforts
Green	Improving	Pinpoints quality practices that meet the standards
Blue	Impacting	Demonstrates noteworthy practices producing clear results that exceed expectations

Leadership Capacity Standard		Rating
1.4	The governing authority establishes and ensures adherence to policies that are designed to support system effectiveness.	Initiating

Improvement Priority 1

- **Conduct, with immediacy, a review and revision, where applicable, of board policies and procedures required by state legislation and state board rules and regulations to ensure that the Board and school district are in compliance.**

Findings

The Gwinnett County Board of Education has a rotating cycle of policy reviews whereby affected policies are formally updated every four years. Interviews with staff, board members, and the superintendent indicated that the policy review is routinely addressed in accordance with requirements by the state legislation or requests by the Board. Additionally, the district contracts with the Georgia School Boards Association (GSBA) to ensure policies are congruent with state legislation.

A review of publicly posted school board policies located on the district's website shows the effective date of policies but does not indicate whether these have been reviewed or revised formally by the Board. As a result, several policies with the most recent effective date of 1998 (i.e., Federal Aid, Naming New Facilities, and Summer Activity and Athletic Camp), at least three with the date of 1980 (i.e., Board Meeting Agenda, Board Meeting Minutes, and Membership in School Boards Association), and at least one with the date of 1976 (i.e., Student Accidents) need to be revised or updated. The Board tabled eight policies currently undergoing a review to allow the new superintendent to provide direction and feedback and the public to provide input.

In interviews, the team learned that the superintendent was serving as the board's parliamentarian. Observations of board meetings confirmed that the Board did not always adhere to Robert's Rules of Order when conducting board meetings. Also, during board meetings, the chair frequently consults the



superintendent about board meeting processes and next steps. Professional development and training on Robert's Rules of Order would provide the Board with the proper guidance and support to conduct board meetings in a more effective manner. Additionally, the training would help clarify how the board members can participate in discussions during board meetings through an orderly process and that each board member has a right to know what is occurring at all times during meetings and before action is taken. The team hopes that the Robert's Rules of Order training will help the board carry out its meetings with limited confusion and ensure discussions among board members are conducted using organized processes and procedures.

Directives

- Complete a thorough review of all school board policies and procedures to ensure that all are congruent with current state legislation.
- Identify a trainer or facilitator who has expert knowledge regarding Robert's Rules of Order to conduct a training session(s) with the board members.
- Develop and communicate a formal approval process for school board policies and procedures to ensure all comply with state school board rules and regulations and state legislation.

Leadership Capacity Standard		Rating
1.5	The governing authority adheres to a code of ethics and functions within defined roles and responsibilities.	Initiating

Improvement Priority 2

- **Establish and publish the roles, responsibilities, and functions of the superintendent and board members and ensure that future board training comprehensively addresses these practices and focuses on ethics and conflicts of interest to promote optimal organizational effectiveness.**

Findings

A review of evidence and interview data indicated that some board members have not separated their personal and professional roles and responsibilities. Interviews with the superintendent and school board members and a review of board meeting documents provide evidence that school board members do not always adhere to their roles and responsibilities, which impacts the school district's organizational effectiveness and continuous improvement priorities. The team also found limited evidence indicating that the superintendent's and the school board members' roles and responsibilities were being fully executed, including the appropriate framing of information during community interactions and school board meetings and on official and personal social media platforms. Community stakeholders spoke of the negative impact resulting from board members' actions due to them not fully understanding their roles and responsibilities.

To ensure board members understand their roles and responsibilities and adhere to a code of ethics, board members are required to be trained annually to comply with the Georgia statutory reference, Georgia §20-2-230 (b), mandating that review or orientation training must be provided to board members annually. Pursuant to this, the Gwinnett County School Board requested and participated in Board/Superintendent Team Development and Training, including topics such as 2020-2024 Strategic Initiatives and Priorities and Strategic Directives 2020-2030. Also, past and present board members confirmed that they attended training on February 12-13, 2021, on various topics (e.g., governance team, board and community relations, the strategic plan, high-performing teams, policy development, and ethics).



Additional training also occurred on May 20, 2021, in preparation for the Special Review. Further, the Board was in the process of developing Board Meeting Norms and guiding the activities of the collective board and individual members. Interviews with the superintendent and the five board members affirmed that future training would be scheduled periodically on topics such as the roles and responsibilities of board members. A key professional learning objective for these sessions is for the superintendent and all school board members to work as a cohesive unit within established operational rules and norms.

While board members participated in training on the proper execution of the Board's roles and responsibilities, interviews with district staff members and the superintendent revealed that some board members do not use the appropriate chain of command. Rather, some board members request information from staff members instead of the superintendent. Staff interviews validated that these types of requests occurred frequently, and staff members viewed such requests as directives from board members. One such example occurred on January 13, 2021, when a board member requested human resource data by the end of the business day without an explanation. This request entailed the number of filled and unfilled substitute positions, the number of resignations, and the number of unfilled teaching and bus driver positions with specified timeframes, aggregated by the school. Another example involved a different board member's request on January 8, 2021, that 10 years of data for all Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) complaints and charges, grievances filed, part-time employees and their salaries, and raw staffing data (e.g., certification status, student-teacher ratios, and the number of substitutes by school, grade level, and class) be provided by January 10, 2021, leaving two days to gather and organize these data. The review of subsequent board meeting videos did not indicate how this information was referenced or used.

Additionally, stakeholders expressed concern about the need for board training on its roles and responsibilities. Stakeholder interviews and a review of email correspondence (January 3, 2021) revealed a new board member requesting an emergency board meeting to discuss the district's response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The board member indicated that a second board member also was available for this meeting. The meeting was held on January 4, 2021, even though a Board Policy (Policy BCAB) states that three members must request a special board meeting: "Special Board meetings may be called by the Chairperson or at the request of three or more Board members. Notice of all special meetings shall be given to the members of the Board at least 24 hours prior to the time stated for the meeting to convene." The team also reviewed a follow-up email dated January 5, 2021, from a board member requesting additional meetings to address COVID-19, a pandemic task force, a vote on the board leadership, the superintendent's contract, and board policy review. The email indicated that the board member thought these topics would be considered during the January 4, 2021, meeting but were not.

A review of documents supports that the Board (including the superintendent) has established a structure that addresses conflict of interest. However, the superintendent and school board members provided contradictory evidence about whether board members participate in a process that requires them to declare that each has no conflict of interest. The district adopted the school board Code of Ethics (Policy BH), requiring board members to sign an affidavit promising to comply with the code of ethics. The board members indicated that they signed the code of ethics, whereas the superintendent stated that he was unaware whether the code of ethics was signed and filed.

Board members are required to sign the Gwinnett County Board of Education Policies and Procedures Compliance Sign Off Form, indicating that they promise to adhere to all state laws and procedures. Annual professional development is provided for board members to stay current on the code of ethics and conflicts of interest. The team found evidence that three of the five current board members had signed the Local School Board Governance Annual Training Report for FY2020 dated August 12, 2020. This document lists individual board members' annual hours of training and had areas for board members to affirm that they had no violations of the code of ethics or conflict of interest. Each of these documents is self-reported, signed by the superintendent, and forwarded to the Georgia Department of Education. Finally, from the review of documents, the team discovered that not all board members had completed the FY21 required annual training by the time of the Special Review.



During interviews, some stakeholders expressed concerns about offensive postings and comments on social media by some board members. A review of recorded board meeting videos revealed that during the public comments section, several members of the public referenced one board member's Facebook, TikTok, or YouTube site (Board meetings: March 18, 2021, Timestamps 2:05:45 and 2:15:07; and April 15, 2021, Timestamps 2:28:06 and 2:31:33). A review of the evidence provided to the team revealed that a board member had videos on YouTube and TikTok. However, in an interview, the board member shared that the postings express artistic talent and are replications of others' work. Nevertheless, one of the videos contained unprofessional language and another had racially offensive statements and connotations.

Additionally, stakeholders expressed concern about the content of a board member's Facebook post. Stakeholders reported that the posts were inappropriate and promoted the board member's self-interest. The team reviewed recorded board meetings (March 18, 2021, Timestamps 2:05:45 and 02:15:07; April 15, 2021, Timestamp 02:28:06) and Facebook postings dated December 29, 2020, which were submitted to the team as evidence. The team discovered supportive evidence of the board member marketing personal business and soliciting funds from stakeholders.

Based on the review of evidence, the team also found that the authority of the board chair had been usurped at times by specific board members operating outside of the collective Board. As previously discussed, emails provided as evidence showed that a board member requested an emergency meeting for the Board to discuss how the district would handle rising coronavirus rates. The board chair did not request or attend the special called meeting. Another example of acting outside the collective Board occurred when a Gwinnett County Public Schools teacher created a Check-In Survey. The survey had two components: superintendent leadership and support for in-person classes versus distance learning. A board member subsequently shared the survey via social media and followed up with a Zoom Teacher Forum that was attended by two recently sworn-in (December 19, 2020) board members.

Parent, teacher, and principal interviews indicated that the school board's unprofessional behaviors and actions do not contribute to positive student outcomes. On several occasions, principals and teachers reported the school board's activities as "embarrassing" due to the adverse publicity of board actions and behaviors. Many shared that they would like the Board to "find its way," albeit less publicly. While principals and parents are pleased with the operation of the schools, parents, board members, and community members reported that the Board needed to present a unified front. They shared that collegiality was lost during the coronavirus pandemic. In addition, these stakeholders also noted board meetings were combative, uncivil, and strained and wanted the Board to work on building trust among its members. The prevailing sentiment among those interviewed indicates that just as schools are held accountable for using data for decision-making, the Board should be accountable for its actions as well. While it is appropriate that differences in professional thoughts, ideas, and ideology shape the superintendent's and school board members' dialogue to determine the district's potential educational direction through policy, budgeting, or district priorities, communication among board members should be positive, civil, constructive, polite, courteous, and professional. School board meetings should include discussions, debates, public input, majority votes, and implemented decisions.

The Special Review Team interviewed board members, the superintendent, and district staff members and reviewed board policies and evidence provided by the district and, in conclusion, found limited evidence that the Board has an instrument that collects data for determining the Board's effectiveness.

Directives

- Finalize and approve Board Meeting Norms that the Board and superintendent are currently developing, including norms related to board roles and responsibilities, conflicts of interest, ethics, and parliamentary procedures. The approved norms also should promote interaction that is positive, civil, constructive, polite, courteous, professional, and appropriate in interacting with each other, conducting school board meetings, and using communication tools such as the use of social media.
- The Board should identify or develop and implement an assessment tool and process at least annually for objectively self-evaluating the execution of its collective roles and responsibilities.



- The Board and the superintendent should review and revise current policies for ethics and conflict of interest and require school board members to acknowledge that they have read, understand, and commit to abiding by the policies.
- The Board should seek training to build collegiality, promote positive interaction among board members, and implement best practices from training with fidelity and quality.
- Establish a method to routinely collect, analyze, and use stakeholder perception data to provide the Board feedback about its effectiveness in implementing its roles and responsibilities and supporting the district's continuous improvement priorities.

Learning Capacity Standard		Rating
2.1	Learners have equitable opportunities to develop skills and achieve the content and learning priorities established by the system.	Improving

Findings

The Gwinnett County Public Schools focuses on providing equitable opportunities for all students at both the school and district levels as noted through parent, principal, teacher, and student interviews and a review of district policies (e.g., Complaints and Grievances and Board Procedures) and equity initiatives. The district is committed to educating all students and providing the resources needed to support high-quality teaching and learning, as evidenced by its adoption of Policy BAAE Educational Equity that became effective on April 16, 2020. This policy states, "The Gwinnett County Board of Education is committed to educating all students and provides the resources needed to support high-quality teaching and learning. The district's focus on increasing student achievement, access, and opportunities through the implementation of equitable and inclusive educational and workplace policies and practices reduces barriers and builds the district's capacity to deliver innovative, effective, and culturally responsive services."

In addition, the district hired a chief equity and compliance officer to lead, oversee, and improve learners' opportunities to develop skills and achieve the content and learning priorities established by the district, including addressing barriers and building capacity to deliver innovative, effective, and culturally relevant services by focusing on six key areas:

- Educational Opportunities and Expectations
- Teaching and Learning
- Student Support
- Community Engagement and Partnerships
- Facilities and Assets
- Human Capital, Leadership, and Staff

The district also established equity teams that included 115 members to examine these six key areas and provide improvement suggestions. These teams reviewed 100 procedures and formalized 22 recommendations. In addition, the district invited public input through a survey and hosted educational equity group discussions. The chief equity and compliance officer provides quarterly updates to the Board on the status of strategies to ensure the district is providing equitable learning opportunities.

To meet the needs of students and staff members, the district provided additional resources during the pandemic. Interviews with teachers, parents, principals, and the superintendent revealed the district purchased and provided more than 100,000 electronic devices for students and teachers and distributed more than 19,000 hotspots where needed. Also, the district offers a selection of Advanced Placement courses across all high schools, has 59 career pathways, provides K-12 computer science opportunities, and has established a goal to increase the gifted population across subgroups.



The district uses a variety of ways to close achievement gaps among students. The district's schools, for example, use teacher referrals and academic performance data to identify students who need targeted support due to the learning disruptions during the pandemic. Schools also offer student enrichment and acceleration programs during the summer. In total, 25,000 students were served through the 2021 summer learning program. The district monitors student academic performance and communicates results to stakeholders through its internally developed accountability system, Results-Based Evaluation System (RBES). According to the district website, the Results-Based Evaluation System indicates that "local schools communicate their results with community members through an annual School Accountability Report." Each school also creates a collaborative Local School Plan for Improvement (LSPI) that identifies targeted goals based on student achievement results.

The district employs other ways to ensure all students learn. Teachers engage in professional learning on culturally responsive teaching and the identification of gifted students. For example, according to interviews and the Education Equity Report, one such training is the Gifted 101 framework that involves ongoing professional development to increase the gifted population by three percent. Finally, the district initiated and continues to develop a curriculum framework known as Academic Knowledge and Skills (AKS) that correlates with the Georgia Standards of Excellence and is used throughout the district. The purpose of the AKS is to identify the curricular expectations for all students.

In addition, concerns about student discipline involved allegations that discipline infractions were handled inequitably. The team noted that most discipline issues occurred in middle school. In interviews with teachers, students, and principals, the team also found that discipline concerns are like those at any grade level. In interviews, students reported that specific individuals repeatedly disobeyed teachers and caused most classroom disruptions. Students also stated that teachers initiated many of the discipline referrals and that these referrals were warranted due to student misbehavior.

The district has noticed a slight decrease in district-wide suspensions for African American and Hispanic students. The district's 10-year suspension rate trend data from 2010 to 2019 indicates a three percent decline in the suspension rates for African American students and a two percent decrease for Hispanic students, while the rates for Caucasian and Asian students have remained stable. Also, the district is outperforming the state's percentage of African American students compared to the percentage of discipline incidents logged for these students. For example, a review of the Georgia Department of Education 2020 data (<https://public.gosa.ga.gov/noauth/extensions/DisciplineDashV1/DisciplineDashV1.html>) showed that 36.9 percent of the statewide student population is African American, yet these students make up 55.9 percent of statewide discipline incidents, revealing a 19-percentage point discrepancy. African American students comprise 32.3 percent of the Gwinnett County Public Schools' population and 45.5 percent of the discipline infractions, showing a difference of 13.2 percentage points. The district outperformed the state by 5.8 percentage points.

In November of 2019, the district created a Discipline Code Review Committee to review the discipline code and recommend revisions or needed changes. Working in tandem with the Office of Student Discipline and Behavior Interventions, the committee met six times and generated and presented 11 recommendations to the Board at the April 15, 2021, work session, and final approval occurred on May 20, 2021. The Board has adopted Board Policy JCD Student Behavior Code, which states, "Gwinnett County Public Schools is committed to creating a safe, positive environment for all of our students, staff, parents, stakeholders, and community partners. GCPS will ensure that all students and staff are well-motivated, fully aware of their potential, and dedicated to pursuing excellence in academic knowledge, skills, and behavior. GCPS believes that all children can thrive in a safe learning environment."

The district also reviews disciplinary data regularly. The district's Department of Academic Support's staff provides quarterly discipline reports to the school board, indicating the number of infractions. The discipline infraction rates are disaggregated by special education, regular education, race, and grade level. A comparison of these rates provided by the district and disaggregated by year and quarter indicated that from 2019-2020 to 2020-2021, the district experienced a progressive decline in the number of disciplinary hearings, out-of-school suspensions, and in-school suspensions. Of note, administrators are encouraged to

assign in-school suspensions at a higher rate than out-of-school suspensions to support academic exposure. The reports credit the declining rates to Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), Restorative Practices, Creating Lasting Family Connections (CLFC), peer mediation, counseling, mentoring, strategic scheduling, and student clubs and activities.

Recommendations

- Continue examining student infractions, teacher referrals, and suspension rates disaggregated by special education, regular education, race, and grade level to identify potential trends showing disproportionality and immediately address emerging trends to ensure student misbehaviors are handled equitably.
- Continue addressing equity in all schools, setting high expectations for all students, using data to examine success in closing achievement gaps while increasing student achievement, and providing professional learning opportunities for educators.
- Complete the review of the 11 discipline recommendations generated by the Discipline Code Review Committee, develop an implementation plan, and provide this information to the Board and community.

Learning Capacity Standard		Rating
2.7	Instruction is monitored and adjusted to meet individual learners' needs and the system's learning expectations.	Improving

Findings

From interviews with staff members and a review of the evidence, the team learned that the Office of Research and Evaluation provides comprehensive data analysis tools to monitor school performance data, identify trends, and compare results across schools with similar characteristics and demographics. These tools also help compare benchmark data against data from other comparable districts. Principals and teachers shared that classroom observations and feedback, teacher-developed goals, and school improvement plans are used to determine the school's annual progress. The district's Results-Based Evaluation System is used to ensure ongoing continuous improvement. In conjunction with the Results-Based Evaluation System, each school earns points on the Weighted School Assessment to categorize its annual performance level. These categories include World-Class - Innovation Necessary to Sustain; World-Class - Improvement Plus Innovation Required to Sustain; Approaching World-Class - Improvement Required to Attain; Not Meeting World-Class - Improvement Plus Intervention Required; or Targeted - Organizational Intervention and Management Required. The district allocates additional fiscal and human resources to schools identified as a Targeted School. Targeted schools are required to develop a Targeted School Plan for Improvement (TSPI) in addition to the required LSPI. The schools identified as targeted must submit quarterly reflections indicating actions and progress. The principals' and teachers' evaluations also are linked to these plans.

The evidence provided and obtained through various stakeholder interviews substantiates that teachers use common assessments to gauge student learning on the Academic, Knowledge, and Skills (AKS) and adjust instruction as needed. The district uses the *Schoolnet* online platform to administer its assessments; provide detailed data analysis; and immediately report strengths, weaknesses, mastery, and progress. The *Schoolnet* standards mastery report places students into groups (i.e., beginning, developing, proficient, and distinguished) based on their mastery of the AKS. The *Schoolnet* data disaggregation tool provides teachers with extra time to plan enrichment and accelerate instruction for closing achievement gaps. Teachers shared during interviews that they use the results within their classrooms and collaborate across grade levels to improve teaching and learning. The district has implemented a process that allows students to be retaught content and retake formative assessments. However, according to students and teachers interviewed from various schools, this practice is not consistently implemented throughout the district. As warranted, the



district develops cross-functional teams consisting of department experts who develop an action plan, allocate appropriate resources, and monitor progress toward continuous improvement.

District-level staff spoke of the approaches used to ensure all learners have equitable opportunities to develop skills, master content, and achieve learning goals. Special education gifted and talented, English as a Second or Foreign Language (ESOL), and other students have a district-level division dedicated to providing support and interventions. Students shared in interviews that their teachers were supportive and offered many chances to ensure that they were mastering the content, contributing to classroom discussions and activities, and working on challenging yet attainable assignments. Furthermore, data analysis serves as the basis for general and targeted professional learning for teachers and administrators. The district uses the Professional Development and Evaluator (PD&E) Platform to deliver consistent professional learning across the district. The team has determined that these actions are supporting the district's efforts to ensure all students are successful during the teaching and learning process.

Recommendation

- Continue to consistently implement formative assessment processes where teachers reteach content and students retake formative assessments.

Learning Capacity Standard		Rating
2.11	Educators gather, analyze, and use formative and summative data that lead to demonstrable improvement of student learning.	Improving

Findings

A review of artifacts and stakeholder interview data validated that the district uses multiple data points to support ongoing continuous improvement and increase achievement for all students. Board Policy IJ Balanced Assessment Program states, "The Balanced Assessment System will support instructional planning, school improvement planning, curriculum and program evaluation, district-wide resource planning and decision making, and accountability. The Balanced Assessment System will include national, state, district, and school- and classroom-based components. District oversight and guidance will be provided to support school staff, and data from school-based assessments will be available in the district's assessment platform. Data elements will be used to support graduation- and promotion-related decisions for individual students. Selected assessment data also will be reported to the public annually to promote transparency, shared responsibility for student success, and a focus on results."

Each school must develop a Local School Plan for Improvement (LSPI) that contains measurable goals based on prior student achievement results. Accountability measures to support progress include the principal's self-assessment called the Results-Based Evaluation System, the LSPI, perception surveys, non-academic data tables, academic data tables, the school accountability report, and the weighted school assessment. Results from formative data are monitored and as warranted, serve as the basis for corrective action and plan revisions throughout the school year.

A concern expressed by some stakeholders involved the decline in overall student achievement. The Special Review Team, however, found little evidence to support this decline over the last five years. A review of student performance data provided by the district, including the Iowa Assessments, the Pre-Scholastic Aptitude Test (PSAT), the SAT (formerly the Scholastic Aptitude Test), the ACT (formerly the American College Testing), Advanced Placement (AP) exams, and the Georgia Milestones data indicated a consistent level of performance except in two schools that showed a marked decline. Due to the lack of state testing last year, the district developed formative assessments to gather relevant student data. When pressed during interviews for the data source that showed a decline, stakeholders provided the Niche data (i.e., data



used by realtors to suggest housing areas), but official academic achievement data do not show a similar decline. Principals and teachers shared a variety of approaches for combatting student achievement gaps:

- Conversation, Help, Activity, Movement, Participation, Success (CHAMPS) professional learning community conversations about specific student performance.
- Introduction of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) and Science Technology, Engineering, the Arts, and Mathematics (STEAM).
- Increased number of AP courses, before- and after-school tutorials, Saturday school, summer school enrichment focus, and extended day opportunities for students.

Creating and implementing proactive measures to gather, analyze, and use formative and summative data are essential components of the school district's continuous improvement journey to increase student achievement and educator effectiveness. The team concludes that Gwinnett County Public Schools has employed methods to collect, analyze, and use data and evidence to demonstrate that the district has begun to attain its desired result of successful student achievement outcomes.

Recommendation

- Explore additional options and outlets to share and promote student achievement results throughout the community, which will help prevent miscommunication and misunderstanding of student learning progress.

Resource Capacity Standard		Rating
3.8	The system allocates human, material, and fiscal resources in alignment with the system's identified needs and priorities to improve student performance and organizational effectiveness.	Impacting

Findings

From interviews and the review of evidence, the team found that the district executes processes with quality and fidelity to ensure human, material, and fiscal resources are aligned, allocated, and used based on the identified needs and key priorities. Resource allocations are consistently aligned to the district's identified goals and key priorities. The formula allocations are based on the number of students enrolled, the weighted school assessment, the Local School Plan of Improvement (LSPI), the Targeted School Plan of Improvement (TSPI), and needs assessments. Teachers and principals consistently shared that they have the resources required for teaching and learning. Each school's budget includes a formula-based per-pupil allotment; staff development; special education, gifted and talented, and English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) supplies; textbooks and property inventory management; math and science supplies; middle and high school advisements; instrument repair; interventions; and kindergarten readiness supplies. Plans were instituted to provide post-pandemic support for schools, such as increasing the number of social workers employed by the district, student acceleration and intervention activities, staff pay, and substitutes and clinic workers.

All Gwinnett County Public Schools' staff members complete an annual needs assessment each spring to provide input to identify the resources necessary to implement the schools' goals and priorities. Interviews with the principals and district staff members indicate that the district has a bottom-up approach to resource allocation, allowing principals critical input into the process by implementing a cross-functional team approach for developing the district's budget. During interviews, the principals and district staff members also described a needs-based point staffing allocation process based on enrollment, socio-economic status (SES), mobility rate, and English as a Second Language (ESL) population. This process allows principals to provide critical input and assign staff members at the local school level based on the specific needs of their LSPI or TSPI.



Additionally, district staff interviews revealed that the district uses a per-pupil formula to allocate funds for supplies based on the Supplemental Educational Services (SES) at each school. During interviews with principals, several commented that they always have what they need. They also indicated that an appeals process was in place to request additional resources for needs that arise outside of the regular budget process.

Also, data are collected, analyzed, and used to continually assess the impact of resource use in meeting identified goals and priorities related to the LSPI and TSPI. A Results-Based Evaluation System (RBES) is used at the beginning, middle, and end of each academic year to ensure equitable distribution of resources and consistent alignment to identified goals and key priorities. Results of the RBES are shared at board meetings to ensure that board members are informed on the use of resources to meet identified continuous improvement goals, allowing a determination of a return on investment.

The team observed recorded board meeting videos and found that human and fiscal resources are discussed during board meetings. The human resource director, for example, provides regular updates about personnel issues at board meetings, including the number of vacancies and the number of staff hired within a select period. Board members often ask questions about information in the report.

During the review of the Comprehensive Annual Financial Report for Gwinnett County Public Schools (Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 2020), the team found that the district has been recognized for 33 consecutive years with the Association of School Business Officials' (ASBO) Certificate of Excellence in Financial Reporting. The award certifies the district's comprehensive annual final report (CAFR) for each fiscal year. The award is aligned with principles and standards of financial reporting as recommended and adopted by the Association of School Business Official of the United States and Canada. The award is granted to school districts only after an intensive review of the financial reports by certified public accountants and practicing school business officials. The district undergoes an annual external audit.

Recommendation

- Maintain the current district budget development and allocation of human, fiscal, and material resources; and monitor various initiatives and the operation of the schools and district.

Insights from the Special Review

The Special Review Team for Gwinnett County Public Schools in Suwanee, Georgia conducted a remote review to investigate the complaints regarding the impacted accreditation standards listed within the communication to the district and in this report. As a result, the following insights were gained by the Special Review team:

- District policies should be routinely reviewed, and an approval process must be developed and implemented for all policies to ensure consistency and adherence to state legislation. Board members also should engage in training to ensure they have the knowledge and understanding to adhere to and support the approved policies effectively.
- The Board's actions, roles, and responsibilities are not clearly outlined or adhered to at times. The team found limited evidence that board members hold themselves accountable for adhering or committing to policies that ensure integrity, effective operations, or improved student learning. According to interviews, training was conducted on board roles and responsibilities and the code of ethics; however, the team found that further training in these areas is warranted. Board members should focus on training and establish accountability measures to hold each board member individually and corporately responsible for improving public perception of the Board's leadership.
- The district implements a resource allocation process with quality and fidelity. The process includes consideration of student needs, academic achievement, enrollment numbers, and teacher input.



- Continue examining student discipline infractions, teacher referrals, and suspension rates disaggregated by special education, regular education, race, and grade level to identify potential trends showing disproportionality and immediately address emerging trends to ensure student misbehaviors are handled equitably.
- Identify or develop and implement an assessment tool and process for the Board to objectively self-evaluate the execution of its collective roles and responsibilities on an annual basis.
- The Board should seek training to build collegiality, promote positive interaction among board members, and implement best practices from training with fidelity and quality.

Accreditation Recommendation

Based on the findings of the Special Review Team, Cognia concludes that the district will retain its current **Accredited status** while it addresses the Recommendations, Directives, and Improvement Priorities outlined in this Special Review Report. A Progress Monitoring Review will be scheduled during the 2021-2022 school year to examine the progress made by the district.

Next Steps

The results of the Special Review provide the next steps to guide the improvement journey of Gwinnett County Public Schools in its efforts to improve the quality of educational opportunities for all learners. A copy of this report will be sent to the GCPS Superintendent. GCPS shall use the report to guide its response to the findings and its improvement efforts.

Gwinnett County Public Schools is accountable for addressing the Improvement Priorities and Directives identified in this report. Upon receiving the Special Review Report, GCPS must implement the following steps:

- Review and share the findings with stakeholders,
- Develop plans and take action to address the Improvement Priorities and Directives in this report.
- Use the findings and data from the report to guide and strengthen the institution's continuous improvement efforts,
- Schedule and host a Monitoring Review by **May 2022**. The purpose of the Monitoring Review will be to assess the progress made in complying with the Special Review Team's Improvement Priorities, and
- Submit an Institutional Progress Report no **later** than two weeks before the scheduled Monitoring Review. The report should detail the steps taken, including supporting evidence, to address the Improvement Priorities. A report template will be provided to the institution.

