

Describe the school system's size, community/communities, location, and changes it has experienced in the last three years. Include demographic information about the students, staff and community at large. What unique features and challenges are associated with the community/communities the system serves?

Butts County, carved from Henry and Monroe counties in 1825, owes its name to Captain Samuel Butts, a militiaman killed while fighting Creek Indians in the War of 1812. The county seat, Jackson, commemorates another national figure, Andrew Jackson. The other cities within the county are Flovilla and Jenkinsburg. As of the 2010 Census, the population was 23,655. Our community consists of 76.3% high school graduates and 8.1% percent with Bachelor's Degrees or higher. The demographic percentages of the community are approximately 69.9 % white, 28% black, .3% American Indian and Alaska Native, .6 Asian, 1.2% multiracial and 3% Hispanic. The per capita income was \$21, 130 and the median household income was \$49, 339. It was noted in the census that 12.3% were below the poverty level.

Butts County School System (BCSS) consists of 3 elementary schools, 1 middle school, and 1 high school. The system currently (as of November, 2013) serves about 3475 students in grades Pre-K through 12th grade. The system employs 465 staff members, 29 administrators, 214 teachers, and 63 paraprofessionals. Our teacher retention rate is 83%. We have 95 teachers with Master's Degrees, 60 with Specialist Degrees, and 3 with Doctorate Degrees. We operate with a \$24.78 million budget with a fund balance of approximately \$5.5 million as of June 2013. The current millage rate is 19 mills.

We are very proud to host a diverse student body that we feel represents our community and also demonstrate the changing face of our new global economy. Currently, the ethnic percentages of our students are:

Latino 3%

American Indian 1%

Asian 1%

Black 32%

White 60%

Multi-Racial 3%

3-Year Changes

In January 2011, three years ago, the school system experienced an accumulation of radical changes in leadership, funding and finance, community collaboration, and curriculum and instruction.

Change #1--Leadership:

In January 2011, two new board of education members were elected to our five-member board of education. In addition, a few months later, the entire Central Office business and human resource staff was reorganized. Six months later, the school system changed three out of its five principals, changed finance directors, and added a new director of operations and deputy superintendent. In October of that same year, the superintendent of four years retired and left the system and moved out of the community. In December of 2011, a new superintendent from outside of the county was hired by the board of education. Then, by July of 2012, the assistant superintendent of curriculum/instruction had retired, the director of operations resigned and moved out of the county, and a new Executive Director of Operations was hired from outside of the county.

The challenge through all this change was to ensure that best practices and processes that were already going well did not recede or cease just because new people were in place in so many positions. At the same time, considering the significant amount of change, it was also important for the new district leadership team to take appropriate time to self-assess and form relationships before making radical changes in system actions and planning.

Change #2--Funding and Finance:

Every year since 2002, all school systems in Georgia have received what the state previously named as "Austerity Cuts." From 2002 to 2009, these cuts ranged between \$187,000-\$704,000 on any given year. These cuts were very real in the sense that the money was earned by our system to use for teacher salary and instructional programs for our children, but it was withheld by the state, whose constitutional duty is to fund a quality basic education for all students in GA. Since we did not receive full funding, boards of education all throughout the state were faced with the difficult decision to either cut programs and personnel...or raise property taxes in Butts County. Our board has had to do both since that time, but to the credit of our board and staff, we have not allowed these cuts to damage our school system for the long-term. In fact, in many ways, our school system has improved results in spite of these cuts.

In fiscal year 2010, the state austerity cut skyrocketed to \$1,999,465 and then in 2011, it rose again to \$2,318,829. Since that time, the state funding cut has been at least \$2 million per year. This has amounted to a financial barrier like we have never seen in our community for all stakeholders: children, staff, parents, and taxpayers. Our leadership mission then is to always make the best of these circumstances and keep the children first while protecting the staff and taxpayers as much as possible for economic growth. Navigating this tightrope has not always been easy, but the economic recession has given us an opportunity to become more efficient and make better use of our resources.

Since 2011, the school system has reduced force by over 50 positions, many of them teachers and administrators. Our school system staff members have also experienced reduction in pay through

furloughs, contract-day cuts, and supplement reductions. In 2011, certified staff had twelve furlough days, in 2012 we had zero, in 2013 we had six, and in 2014 we currently have ten. All administrators received an additional cut of \$1,000 this current year, and teachers received a cut in local supplements of up to \$1,000. Obviously, the constant reality of salary and job cuts have affected the morale of our staff members, but to their credit, they have continued to serve our community and improve results.

In addition, the lack of funding has caused Butts County, along with several other school systems in Georgia, to reduce the number of instructional days to our system calendar. Four years ago, the state of Georgia changed the requirement for instructional days to provide financial relief to systems who did not have enough funding for 180 full days of instruction. Instead, the new state law provides for 180 “equivalent” days of instruction, as measured by the number of minutes per day in each grade-level.

Our school system currently meets or exceeds these requirements, but our instructional calendar is only 161 days. Thus, Butts County added 20-minutes per day to each school’s schedule, giving us the legal flexibility to reduce the system calendar this year to 161 days of instruction, per state law and state board rule. In making this decision we studied and surveyed the academic results of other school systems in Georgia who had already reduced their calendar in previous years, and they experienced little or no loss in student achievement. With the financial challenges presented by the state’s failure to appropriately fund us, we felt that we had no choice but to follow suit and reduce our calendar as well.

In the long run, we hope the savings will ensure that we hold on to our academic, fine arts, CTAE, and athletic opportunities that our students need so badly to compete in the current economy and become well-rounded adults. We hope this is a temporary change, and as soon as funding is restored, we fully intend to restore the 180-day calendar for our children.

Finally, our board of education courageously raised the millage rate in FY11 from 18 mills to 20 mills. The cap in the state is 20 mills, so the Board of Education literally maximized the amount of local property taxes for our children’s benefit. They received much criticism from tax payers, but the board at that time felt it was necessary for the benefit of all students in Butts County. We were able to reduce the millage rate to 19 mills in 2012 due to the community’s passage of a penny sales tax referendum (E-SPLOST) to help us with expenses for capital projects and for debt relief.

We would also add one other note about local property taxes. Due to the recession and fall of the housing market, property values have plummeted in Butts County since 2009. This has provided a huge challenge because the value of a mill of taxes has dropped so dramatically. Even with our exceptionally high millage rate, we are still earning far less revenue for children than we were three or four years ago. Combined with the state austerity cut, it has presented an exceptional challenge to continue to fund quality programs for children. With that said, as you will see in later artifacts, our student achievement has risen since that time, and we feel we are making the best use of what we have.

Change #3--Community Collaboration:

Over the past 3-5 years, there has been a community awakening in regards to the place of the school system in how it affects quality of life and economic development in Jackson, GA. A great deal of collaboration, partnership, and advocacy from civic groups, other government entities, and even churches, has occurred in our county, especially since 2010.

Butts County is fortunate to have civic groups and other organizations that are very passionate about improving economic growth in our community. A collective realization appears to have occurred over the last several years that if the community is going to prosper economically, our school system must play a major role in that prosperity. Whether it is providing a qualified workforce through our graduating seniors, keeping the tax base attractive for industries to move to Butts County, or improving the quality of life by having a more educated citizenry, the success of BCSS is a crucial factor in the health of our community.

Fortunately, our board of education, district leadership, and community partners have a positive history in the last three years of working together and breaking some of the barriers that many communities experience.

As an example, in 2010 and 2011, one of our civic organizations, Partners for Smart Growth, agreed to partner with BCSS in order to host a community "education summit," a collaborative of people and organizations who shared one goal: improve all of Butts County through improving education in the community. Several stakeholders were involved, and the summit led to later committee work and initiatives that followed thereafter. The community chose to contract with Steve Dolinger from the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education, and he facilitated the sessions over those two years.

One excellent benefit of these two summits was the increased level of communication, awareness, and cooperation that we receive even today from all civic clubs, municipalities, and other organizations.

After the new superintendent entered the school system, Partners for Smart Growth elected not to continue with sponsoring the Education Summit due to their own leadership changes, so the Butts County Chamber of Commerce has agreed to sponsor future collaborations. A new collaboration was then scheduled for December 5, 2013, and it was entitled: Butts County Education—Community Conversation. Approximately 20 parents and 40 community leaders from civic clubs, government entities, and business partners attended to discuss three topics: Early Learning/Literacy, Education Funding, and College/Work-Readiness.

Change #4--Curriculum and Instruction:

In 2010, the school system, using feedback and concerns from the school system stakeholders, reviewed its student data and determined that improvement was needed across the board. Achievement at Jackson High School and the elementary schools specifically was lagging the state average, along with Griffin RESA school systems.

After reviewing previous student achievement data, discipline data, and anecdotal community feedback, a change in the direction of leadership at JHS was made in summer of 2011 to specifically implement strategies to improve student achievement and supervision.

In all of BCSS's schools, a huge and intentional focus on professional collaboration has occurred such that teachers from all three schools are now meeting and sharing together rather than working in silos. Through this collaboration, the system has enacted mandatory alignment of instruction to the Georgia curriculum and frameworks for all content areas in all classrooms, and this subtle, but powerful change has led to improvement in our achievement over the last five years.

Provide the school system's purpose statement and ancillary content such as mission, vision, values and/or beliefs. Describe how the school system embodies its purpose through its expectations for students.

The Butts County School System's Vision Statement for many years has been: "A community where education is a priority." In order for us to make this a focus, our schools are major centers for community activities such as Parent Teacher Organizations, School Councils, Drama and Music programs, Academic Nights, and Athletic Events.

The vision statement is a favorite saying of our Board Chairman of 22 years, and it is oft repeated.

In addition, our Mission Statement is: "To provide an environment where students and adults expect more and become more."

Beliefs of the Butts County Schools are dedicated to the education of all our children. We developed seven expectations, which include:

Expect all students to learn.

Expect quality instruction.

Expect all staff to engage every student actively and positively.

Expect technology to support instruction and operations.

Expect and retain quality staff through support and development.

Expect a measurable improvement in student achievement.

Expect a safe and orderly environment.

In 2012, we added three system-wide strategic goals that work under these vision and mission statements:

Excellence in—

Student Achievement and Success

Organizational Effectiveness

AND

Relationships and Perceptions

(Our acronym for these goals is S.O.A.R.!)

These three strategic goals have been communicated and cascaded to every level of the school system since 2012, and they have provided us with a common vocabulary of "big buckets" to

guide our strategic planning and daily work. Over time, these goals have evolved from just words on a PowerPoint presentation to anchor points for real strategic planning work for BCSS.

Our vision, mission and expectations provide both direction and parameters for our instructional programs, student and staff tasks/activities, and strategic plans.

The roots of “Expect More and Become More” come from the realization that our students are just as talented and capable of learning as any group of children in the nation, and it provides a compass point for our system and school leadership to never fall into the trap of complacency or “good enough.” Thus, “expect more” means that if we raise expectations in all three strategic areas, we will “become more” by accomplishing greater things for not just our children, but for their parents, their business leaders, and their tax payers.

The vision statement can be interpreted in many ways. It can be a vague statement meaning only that education is important, just like paved roads, running water, or mowed grass. Or it can mean literally that the public education system is the crux for all success in the community. All roads of community health run through the education system. We believe the latter.

How do we embody these beliefs and strategic areas literally? You can find evidence that these beliefs are cultural all over our school system, ranging from the subtle to the significant. If you look on our identification badges and websites and handbooks, you will find “Expect More.” If you monitor the administrative activities, you will see they spend a great amount of time and resources on reaching out to the community, whether it is regular presence and presentations in civic organization and government meetings/events, education community collaborative sessions, or continual surveying of parents and staff to get pulse checks of our success. You will see numerous business and civic partners donating their time and resources to our efforts due to our focus on open communication and collaboration. Thus, we ensure that education is always the top “priority” of our community by our willingness to engage the community.

It would be difficult, we think, to find very many of our staff members who disagree with the idea that we are “expecting more” in BCSS. They are working harder and achieving more with less resources than they had five years ago. Whether it is our work in revising and improving system safety plans, technology, facilities, instruction, or customer service, it is our sincere belief that our actions strive toward the ideals by our mission and its sub-statements. As you will probably gather from our staff, expecting more with less is difficult on them. Change is difficult on them. It has not always been easy on them, and we will not pretend to have unilateral agreement in all things. It’s a process we are still continuing as we work to influence a culture of collaboration.

The challenge for any organization is to take the language from the mission poster on the wall and make it a reality in actual practice. We have made progress in that area, and we can improve even more in making the language part of the actual thinking and vocabulary of every stakeholder.

Describe the school system's notable achievements and areas of improvement in the last three years. Additionally, describe areas for improvement that the school is striving to achieve in the next three years.

A. Student Achievement

This is one of our proudest areas in the last three years. While we are not yet where we want to be, our instructional improvement philosophy is “as long as we continue to make progress, we will one day be excellent.” So long-term progress is always our goal, and we feel that Butts County has certainly enjoyed some achievement victories in the last three years. Not only have the passing percentages increased in a majority of areas, but the percentage of students who have “exceeded” (scored at top level) has risen dramatically in many content areas in the last three years.

At the high school level, which was the biggest area of concern three years ago, our students have scored at the highest level of achievement ever recorded on the EOCT (End-of-Course Test) either in 2012 or 2013 in the areas of Biology, 9th grade Math I, 10th grade Math II, 9th grade Literature, and 11th grade US History. In 2013, our students also scored at record levels on the Georgia High School Writing Test (96% overall, 98% first-time test takers, beating the state average). In addition to test scores, we have also increased the number of students in Advanced Placement and Virtual Learning programs, as well as increasing the number of students enrolled in local colleges through dual enrollment. As for the graduation rate, under the old method of computing the graduation rate for AYP, JHS had the highest graduation rate in Butts County history in 2011 (80.1% via the www.gadoe.org). For the new 4-year cohort method adopted recently by Georgia, we are making slight progress, and we expect the Class of 2015 to be our highest ever, based on achievement and current drop-out data. We are excited to report that our 2013 graduation rate rose from 68% to 74.5%, beating the state average. We are VERY proud of our seniors!

Please note additional tables and charts as artifacts of JHS's achievement trend.

At the middle school level, which has historically in the last four years been our strongest achieving grade span, we have continued to see growth in many areas, and we have maintained success in others. In 2013, the school achieved its highest passing percentage ever in 6th grade math, 6th grade social studies, and 7th grade social studies on record. We also beat the state average in 2013 in 6th grade language arts, 7th grade language arts, 8th grade language arts, 8th grade reading, 8th grade math, 7th grade math, 6th grade math, 7th grade social studies, and 6th grade social studies.

Also in the middle school level, we are proud to say that we have enacted a plan for high-achieving 8th graders to earn high school credit in the 8th grade before entering high school. In the 2012-2013 school year, 8th graders had the opportunity to take 9th grade

literature, in 2013-2014 they are taking 9th grade literature and 9th grade physical science, and in 2014-2015 they will take 9th grade literature, 9th grade physical science, and 9th grade coordinate algebra. Students did not have this opportunity in FY2012 or earlier, so this is a significant step in increasing rigor and opportunity for BCSS students. Our intent here is to raise rigor for middle school students at all levels and to encourage more dual enrollment when they attend high school in later years.

Please note additional tables and charts as artifacts of the middle school achievement trend.

At the elementary school level, we are most proud of the idea that we are “breaking down the silos!” This means that we are gradually creating a culture in which staff members from all three elementary schools are encouraged to consistently collaborate and share toward common instructional goals rather than working separately or in competition with each other. This is obviously a process, and we are well on our way (with some bumps and bruises to show for it).

In elementary achievement, our students achieved the highest passing percentages on record in the areas of 5th language arts, 5th grade reading, 5th grade math, 4th grade math, 5th grade science, 4th grade science, 5th grade social studies, 4th grade social studies, and 5th grade writing. We have also increased gifted services and early intervention services through the gifted cluster model, funding gifted certification training for select staff members, and through increased self-contained opportunities in the Early Intervention Program (EIP). Our 3rd grade achievement, however, took a visible drop in achievement last year. This is concerning to us, and we have spent the year evaluating it.

Please note additional tables and charts as artifacts of the elementary level achievement trend.

In terms of areas we need to improve, we have several commonalities across the grade levels. While we have enjoyed progress, we feel that much more is to be gained in passing and exceeding percentages on standardized testing. While test scores are not our ultimate goal, we feel that if we improve student learning through better alignment, increased rigor, and improved instruction for differing needs of all students, our test scores will improve for all students. We feel strongly that our kids can do even more, and there are several strategies we are using to improve our student achievement.

The first need for growth is continued and improved focus on alignment of instruction to the actual curriculum in all classrooms. We feel that needed improvement in instructional alignment to assessed curriculum is a contributing cause of our historical achievement gaps, and conversely we also feel that efforts to increase alignment in BCSS have played a significant role in the exciting progress we have already witnessed in the last 3 years.

Our professional learning efforts are now focused on collaboration and consistent focus on the GPS/CCGPS as we develop unit plans, benchmarks, and student tasks. In order for us to continue to improve, this focus on alignment must continue, and we must improve the capacity of our staff to make instructional decisions at the classroom level based on student formative data.

The second strategy we are enacting is a professional learning focus on “Authentic Literacy” and “Rigor” in the classroom. If alignment is “what we teach” (to quote Mike Schmoker), then using best practices in literacy and rigor are “how we teach.” All of our schools and our system administration have been participating in professional learning and monitoring of authentic literacy strategies since summer of 2012, and these strategies include writing across the curriculum, focused reading of texts across the curriculum, and involving students in high-level critical analysis and argumentation of their learning. We have also created and implement a system-wide “instructional framework” across all grade levels. This professional growth of capacity is a gradual process, and we will continue to build our capacity in this area.

The third strategy, which is related to the former, is improving “administrative monitoring” of best practices in BCSS. A large portion of our professional learning at the system level has been centered around building capacity of principals and school-level administration in effectively monitoring whether professional learning is actually being implemented at the classroom level...and then what steps to take if improvement is needed. While we have improved much in this area, we still have more capacity to build in the next 2-3 years before we can transition to maximum potential.

In specific instructional areas needing improvement, our data clearly shows that our students are trailing the state in the percentage of passing and exceeding on many state tests. While we have improved, the strategies noted above are designed to ensure this progress continues so that we meet our potential. Our Georgia Growth Model data verifies this need for improvement, and we are trying to use Jim Collins’ advice to “face the hard reality” to build urgency for improvement amongst our staff.

Realistically, the school must continue focus on the noted best practices to increase achievement, specifically in literacy, math, and science. Also, we are measuring the current levels of differentiation of instruction via our classroom awareness walks. Data from these walks point to a need for increased and improved focus and implementation of differentiation of instruction to meet all students’ needs.

B. Customer Service and Communication

In 2012, we concentrated intentional effort to improve our community perceptions of customer service within and without the school system. Members of the Board of Education and members of the community consistently expressed a wish for

improvement in access to better communication, system responsiveness, and service from all schools and offices.

As a result, we changed our phone system to ensure that a live voice answers the phone, provided expectations for positively answering the phone, changed our email settings so that parents had greater access to emailing staff members, created a community Facebook page that currently has over 1,100 subscribers, and purchased an automatic calling and email system to increase communication with parents. We also have utilized the “Parent Portal,” which is an online tool for parents to view their children’s grades and assignments on a day-to-day basis. In the last two years, we have advertised this more frequently to our parental community, and we have directed principals to monitor teacher compliance with faithfully updating grades for parent benefit.

One of our three strategic goals is “Excellence in Relationships and Perceptions.” The reason this is a strategic goal is so that we never forget areas of customer service and so that we continue to take intentional steps to preserve positive community relationships and collaboration. Our school system can only get stronger if we have more productive relationships and involvement with our stakeholders, and we see this as a continued growth goal for us in the next three years.

C. Facilities and Instructional Environment

In the winter of 2011/2012, the Board of Education enacted a referendum for the E-SPLOST penny sales tax to improve facilities in our school system. Over many years, the school system had insufficient funds to properly maintain facilities at a level of excellence, and the facilities had deteriorated greatly. We feel this had a negative impact on learning, safety, and morale among students and staff. In March 2012, the community voted by a 2-1 margin to allow the penny sales tax, which would provide specifically for renovation and construction at JHS, repair and maintenance of facilities and equipment in BCSS, and an upgrade of technology infrastructure and equipment throughout our program.

The E-SPLOST program has led to a new facility plan that has been approved by the state Department of Education, and we have already completed Phase I of the renovation to Jackson High School (summer of 2013). We have also started Phase II, which will replace HVAC systems and provide 14 new classrooms (including new a new CTAE classroom) to JHS.

In addition, we have put our facilities on an improved and more frequent painting and maintenance rotation, and we are gradually repairing and improving the function and aesthetics of facilities at all of the schools, athletic facilities, and offices to make them sufficient for services for decades to come. This has been a huge victory for our community, and much progress has occurred already.

Finally, we have invested over \$2.0 million in infrastructure for technology. This upgrade includes increasing our bandwidth by five times over the previous levels (over 100 mb/s total from only 15 mb/s), upgrading servers and switches, and purchasing new computers and other electronic devices for instruction.

One important action that we are taking to ensure this extra funding continues in years to come is to improve our communications with the community as to how their tax money is benefitting children and taxpayers. We conduct a great deal more communication and marketing methods than in the past, such as newspaper articles, Facebook posts, and monthly radio addresses at the local radio station. We hope that by improving and increasing our communications and transparency to community stakeholders, they will be more willing to support our efforts in the future so that we have continual cycle of action, evaluation, and growth in all areas of our school system.