

**Report of the
Quality Assurance Review Team
for
Sumter County Schools**

100 Learning Lane
Americus, Georgia 31719
United States

**Dennis O. McMahon, Superintendent
Mrs. Donna Minich, Chair, Sumter County Schools
Jesse Cleveland, Chair, Quality Assurance Review Team**

Review Dates: 10/18/2009 - 10/21/2009



North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement (NCA CASI), the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Council on Accreditation and School Improvement (SACS CASI), and the Commission on International and Trans-Regional Accreditation (CITA) are accreditation divisions of AdvancED.

Quality Assurance Review Report

Contents

About AdvancED and NCA CASI/SACS CASI 3

Introduction to the Quality Assurance Review 4

Summary of Findings 5

 Commendations 6

 Recommendations 6

 Next Steps 7

Standards for Accreditation 9

 Standard 1. Vision & Purpose 9

 Standard 2. Governance & Leadership 10

 Standard 3. Teaching & Learning 11

 Standard 4. Documenting & Using Results 12

 Standard 5. Resource & Support Systems 13

 Standard 6. Stakeholder Communications & Relationships 14

 Standard 7. Commitment to Continuous Improvement 16

Quality Assurance Findings 18

Conclusion 19

Appendix 20

 Quality Assurance Review Team Members 20

 AdvancED Standards for Quality School Systems 20

About AdvancED and NCA CASI/SACS CASI

Background. Founded in 1895, 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) accredit public and private schools and districts in 30 states, the Navajo Nation, Latin America, and the Department of Defense Schools worldwide.

In April 2006, the North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement (NCA CASI), the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Council on Accreditation and School Improvement (SACS CASI), and National Study of School Evaluation (NSSE) came together to form one strong unified organization dedicated to education quality. That unified organization, known as AdvancED, creates the world's largest education community, representing 27,000 public and private schools and districts across the United States and in 65 countries worldwide and educating 15 million students.

NCA CASI and SACS CASI serve as accreditation divisions of AdvancED. Through AdvancED, NCA CASI and SACS CASI have defined shared, research-based accreditation standards that cross state, regional, and national boundaries. Accompanying these standards is a unified accreditation process designed to help schools continuously improve.

The Accreditation Process. To earn and maintain accreditation from NCA CASI or SACS CASI, school districts and their schools must:

- 1) Meet the AdvancED Standards for Quality Schools.** School districts demonstrate adherence to the seven AdvancED standards which describe the quality practices and conditions that research and best practice indicate are necessary for school districts to achieve quality student performance and organizational effectiveness.
- 2) Engage in continuous improvement.** School districts and their schools implement a continuous improvement process that articulates the vision and purpose that the school district is pursuing (vision); maintains a rich and current description of students, their performance, school and district effectiveness, and the school community (profile); employs goals and interventions to improve student performance (plan); and documents and uses the results to inform what happens next (results).
- 3) Demonstrate quality assurance through internal and external review.** School districts and schools engage in a planned process of ongoing internal review and self-assessment. In addition, school districts host an external quality assurance review team once every five years. The team evaluates the school district's adherence to the AdvancED quality standards, assesses the efficacy of the school district's improvement process and methods for quality assurance, and provides commendations and recommendations to help the school district improve. The team provides an oral exit report to the school district and a written report detailing the team's recommendations. The school district acts on the team's recommendations and submits a progress report following the review.

NCA CASI and SACS CASI accreditation engages the entire school district community in a continuous process of self-evaluation and improvement. The overall aim is to help school districts and their schools maximize student success and improve organizational effectiveness.

Introduction to the Quality Assurance Review

Purpose. The purpose of the Quality Assurance Review is to:

1. Evaluate the school district's adherence to the AdvancED quality standards.
2. Assess the efficacy of the district's improvement process and methods for quality assurance.
3. Identify commendations and recommendations to improve the district and its schools.
4. Make an accreditation recommendation for review by the national AdvancED Accreditation Commission.

A key aim of the Quality Assurance Review is to verify that the school district is operating with institutional integrity - that it is fulfilling its vision and mission for its students.

School District Preparation. To prepare for the Quality Assurance Review, the school district and the community complete the AdvancED Standards Assessment Report. The report engages the district in an in-depth self assessment of each of the seven AdvancED standards. The school district identifies and describes the evidence that demonstrates that it is meeting each standard. Through this internal review, the school district examines how its systems and processes contribute to student performance and school district effectiveness.

Summary of Team Activities. The Quality Assurance Review Team is led by an AdvancED certified team chair and comprised of professionals from outside the school district. The team reviews the findings of the school district's internal self-assessment, conducts interviews with representative groups of stakeholders, reviews student performance data and other documentation provided by the school district, and observes practices and daily operations. The team engages in professional deliberations to reach consensus on the school district's adherence to the standards for accreditation. The team provides an oral exit report and prepares a written Quality Assurance Review Team Report designed to help the school district and its schools improve.

The Quality Assurance Review Team Report. Following the visit, the review team completes the Quality Assurance Review report. After review by a nationally-trained reader, the report is submitted to the district. The report contains commendations and recommendations for improvement.

Using the Report - Acting on the Recommendations. The school district uses the report to guide its improvement efforts. The school district is held accountable for addressing the recommendations identified in the report. The AdvancED State Office is available to assist the school district in addressing the recommendations. Following the Quality Assurance Review Team visit, the school district must submit a progress report detailing the actions and progress it has made on the team's recommendations. The report is reviewed at the state and national level to ensure the school district is addressing the recommendations.

Accreditation Recommendation. The Quality Assurance Review team uses the findings from the onsite visit to make an accreditation recommendation that is reviewed at the state level and by the national AdvancED Accreditation Commission. Accreditation is granted by the AdvancED Accreditation Commission and communicated to the school district following action from the commission.

Summary of Findings

A Quality Assurance Review Team representing the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Council on Accreditation and School Improvement (SACS CASI), a division of AdvancED, visited Sumter County Schools on 10/18/2009 - 10/21/2009.

During the visit, members of the Quality Assurance Review Team interviewed 56 administrators, 96 teachers, 15 support staff, 68 parents and business partners, 63 students, and 9 Board of Education members for a total of 307 stakeholders. In addition to meeting with district personnel and stakeholders, the team visited 6 schools within the school district. During the school visits, team members interviewed school stakeholders, observed classrooms, and reviewed relevant school artifacts. The team also reviewed documents, student performance data, and other artifacts provided by the district. Specifically, the team examined the district's systems and processes in relation to the seven AdvancED standards:

- Vision and Purpose
- Governance and Leadership
- Teaching and Learning
- Documenting and Using Results
- Resource and Support Systems
- Stakeholder Communications and Relationships
- Commitment to Continuous Improvement

The AdvancED standards focus on systems with a school district and systematic methods of attaining high student performance and organizational effectiveness. The power of the standards lies in the connections and linkages between and among the standards. The Quality Assurance Review Team used the AdvancED standards to guide its review of the school district, looking not only for adherence to individual standards, but also for how the school district and its schools function as a whole and embody the practices and characteristics of a quality school district.

Through its examination of the school district's adherence to the standards, the Quality Assurance Review Team prepared reports on each standard, highlighting strengths and suggestions for improvement specific to each standard. These reports can be found following this summary.

The Quality Assurance Review Team also examined the effectiveness of the district's methods for quality assurance. The team reviewed the district's practices and methods to monitor and document improvement, provide meaningful feedback and support across the district, ensure that AdvancED standards are met and strengthened, and regularly collect, use, and communicate results. The team's findings in this area can be found following the standard reports.

The team used the standard reports and quality assurance findings to identify common themes, significant accomplishments, and pressing needs facing the district. These became the basis for the overall commendations and recommendations that are provided below. The commendations and recommendations should serve as the focus for the district as it acts on the team's findings. They represent the areas that the team believes will have the greatest impact in helping the district further its improvement efforts. The standard reports and quality assurance findings can be used to help reinforce and enrich the district's understanding of the commendations and recommendations.

Commendations

The Quality Assurance Review Team commends the Sumter County Schools for the following strengths and accomplishments. While additional strengths are noted in the detailed review of each standard that appears later in this report, the commendations listed below are the strengths that the team believes are most deserving of being highlighted. The Quality Assurance Review Team commends the Sumter County Schools for:

- **The Sumter County School District has a variety of drop-out prevention and credit recovery initiatives aimed at keeping students in school and increasing the graduation rate.**

The district's data indicate that the graduation rate increased from 55.5 percent in 2008 to 69.1 percent in 2009. Additionally, the attendance rate increased to 96 percent.

As a result of the high attendance rate, the opportunity to attain the mission of graduating all students can be achieved. The high level of attendance creates an opportunity for the system to meet its goal of a higher graduation rate.

- **The district administrative team provides strong leadership toward the attainment of district goals.**

This is evident by supporting comments from district stakeholders.

This leadership team has created a positive focus in all schools.

- **The governance body of the district is well-informed of the district's needs and remains highly committed to accomplishing the task of graduating every student.**

Interviews with the superintendent, district leadership team, and governance body themselves revealed an extremely high level of commitment.

Having a well-informed and committed governance body helps provide for smooth operation of the school district and student success. Their commitment provides for effective two-way communication.

Recommendations

In addition to the commendations, the Quality Assurance Review Team identified the following recommendations for improvement. The team focused its recommendations on those areas that, if addressed, will have the greatest impact on improving student performance and overall effectiveness of the school district. The Sumter County Schools will be held accountable for making progress on each of the recommendations noted in this section. Following this review, the school district will be asked to submit a progress report on these recommendations. The district should refer to the detail provided in the standard reports for guidance and greater depth on the recommendations.

- **Develop a process by which the district can provide professional learning needs to increase student achievement in mathematics for grades K-12. The process must place emphasis on closing the gap between black and white subgroups as well as between regular education students and students with disabilities.**

Through interviews with district leadership and building-level personnel, and through the review of artifacts, the team was not able to identify a common direction.

By providing a clearly articulated plan, the district's effort to strengthen mathematics and to close the achievement gap between all subgroups would be greatly enhanced.

- **Strengthen plans to retain effective, highly qualified teachers.**

The Sumter County Standard Assessment Report (SAR) and interviews with the superintendent and district leadership team indicate the need to retain highly qualified teachers.

Highly qualified teachers strongly impact student learning.

- **Develop and institute strategies that will enhance student enrollment in the school district. The plan should address but not be limited to, strategies to improve the overall school image to stakeholders.**

Interviews with parents, teachers, students, and central office personnel verified that parents are enrolling their children in nearby public and private schools because of an imbalance in the overall school population.

By developing and instituting well-defined strategies that highlight the district's successes, safety, high academic expectations, and student performance, many misconceptions and negative opinions will be dispelled and student enrollment may improve.

Review of AdvancED Standards for Quality Schools: The team reviewed the district's adherence to each of the AdvancED standards. The findings from this review are provided in the next section of this report.

Next Steps

The school district should:

1. Review and discuss the findings from this report with all stakeholders.
2. Ensure that plans are in place to embed and sustain the strengths noted in the commendations section to maximize their impact on the school district.
3. Develop action plans to address the recommendations made by the team. Include methods for monitoring progress toward the recommendations.
4. Use the report to guide and strengthen the school district's efforts to improve student performance and district effectiveness.
5. Following the Quality Assurance Review, submit the Accreditation Progress Report detailing progress made toward addressing the team's recommendations. The report will be reviewed at the state and national level to ensure that significant progress is being made toward the recommendations. Lack of progress can result in a change in accreditation status.
6. Continue to meet the AdvancED accreditation standards, submit required reports, engage in continuous improvement, and document results.

Resources

AdvancED offers a range of resources to support your school district as it acts on the findings in this report. The AdvancED Resource Network, available at www.advanc-ed.org/resourcenetwork, provides an online network of

peer-to-peer practices, best practices, and resources and tools designed to help school districts and their schools with continuous improvement.

Celebrating Accreditation

Following the visit, the Quality Assurance Review Team submits an accreditation recommendation to AdvancED for review and action at the national level by the AdvancED Accreditation Commission, which confers accreditation and communicates it to the school district. Upon receiving its accreditation, the school district should celebrate its achievement with the community. Flags, door decals, diploma seals, and other related items can be ordered from the website to help you share your accomplishment with your community.

Summary

The accreditation process engages the school district, its schools, and community in an ongoing journey of continuous improvement. The next steps in this journey are to build on the commendations and address the recommendations noted in this report. Doing so will enable the school district to advance in its quest for excellence and deepen the fulfillment of its mission for all students.

Standards for Accreditation

The primary requirement for accreditation is that the district demonstrates that it meets the seven standards for accreditation. The findings of the Quality Assurance Review Team regarding the standards for accreditation are summarized on the following pages.

The Quality Assurance Review Team divided into standard teams to review each standard and prepare a standards report summarizing the team's findings. These standard reports, along with the quality assurance findings that follow these reports, provided the basis for the team's identification of over-arching commendations and recommendations presented earlier in this report. The reports submitted by each team are provided on the following pages for the district's review and use. Each report reflects its respective team's unique voice, perspective, and deliberations. The reports can be used to help enrich and deepen the district's understanding of the overall commendations and recommendations.

Standard 1. Vision & Purpose

Standard: The system establishes and communicates a shared purpose and direction for improving the performance of students and the effectiveness of the system.

Description:

Sumter County Schools' (SCS) mission, vision, and commitment statements provide a clear focus for the school district. These are revisited annually as a part of the district's continuous improvement journey with appropriate adjustments being made. All stakeholders are involved in this process. Once completed, the mission, vision, and commitment statements are shared with stakeholders through a variety of avenues and integrated into various meetings and retreats held within SCS. Interviews with district personnel, building staff, students, and stakeholders indicated strong stakeholder knowledge of the district's educational focus. SCS gathers extensive data about the district, its students, and the county in general. This information is used in SCS' planning and decision-making.

SCS ensures the district's mission guides the teaching and learning process through a variety of ways. First, 25 leadership expectations were developed and are annually revisited at a summer leadership institute. These expectations are reviewed and discussed to ensure all administrators understand the purpose. Second, other leadership academies and regularly scheduled departmental meetings provide opportunities to continually revisit the district's mission. Third, the "SCS Way – Ten Steps for Success" drives the mission into the classroom. Principals and teachers use the ten steps to guide instruction and planning. District and building-level Student Performance Teams monitor the implementation of the ten steps through regular walk-throughs with building level study groups and department meetings providing additional opportunities to collaborate about quality instruction.

Strengths - The team noted the following successful practices deserving of recognition:

- Building-level school personnel were able to articulate how they contribute to achievement of the mission and vision, and stakeholders understand the district's desire to achieve its mission.
- Numerous leadership academies, retreats, and other meetings held for administrators and board members provide opportunities to collaborate, review data, and leadership expectations.

Suggestions and Opportunities for Improvement - The team offers the following suggestions and opportunities for improvement in this standard area:

- Analyze the amount of time required of administrators to implement all of the initiatives and expectations in SCS. The 25 Leadership Expectations, the “SCS Way” and other commitments, like SPTs and VATs all require time. While all are worthy, “what gets measured, gets done.”

Finding: Based on the evidence reviewed, the Quality Assurance Review Team has assigned the overall assessment level of "Operational", indicating that the Sumter County Schools has met the accreditation requirements for the "Vision & Purpose" standard.

Standard 2. Governance & Leadership

Standard: The system provides governance and leadership that promote student performance and system effectiveness.

Description:

The Sumter County Board of Education provides governance and leadership for the Sumter County School District that ensures student performance and district effectiveness. The QAR team interviewed community stakeholders, reviewed artifacts, visited six schools, and talked with system administrators of both the central office and schools to determine that the board is involved in all facets of the system’s operation. The board uses committees to maintain focus on its work. Committees include: policy, finance, property, curriculum, technology, and personnel.

The district’s leadership requires all Sumter County Schools to have a school improvement plan aligned with the district’s improvement plan. The district’s plans include goals that are based on current data and that help ensure that all schools are on track.

Through further review of the district’s policies, procedures, and organizational chart, the team determined that equity of learning opportunities exists and supports innovative learning in all elementary schools through academies and early college entrance at the high school level.

The team found evidence through interviews with stakeholders and review of artifacts that the district has a high attrition rate of students to other school districts in the surrounding area. Further, the district experiences a high teacher turnover that requires constant retraining of new teachers.

Strengths - The team noted the following successful practices deserving of recognition:

- The district provides multiple sources of data to monitor student performance and school effectiveness.
- The district provides for unique, innovative learning opportunities in the elementary schools through academies.

Suggestions and Opportunities for Improvement - The team offers the following suggestions and opportunities for improvement in this standard area:

- The board must develop innovative and proactive strategies to retain Sumter County students in the Sumter County District.

Finding: Based on the evidence reviewed, the Quality Assurance Review Team has assigned the overall assessment level of "Operational", indicating that the Sumter County Schools has met the accreditation requirements for the "Governance & Leadership" standard.

Standard 3. Teaching & Learning

Standard: The system provides research-based curriculum and instructional methods that facilitate achievement for all students.

Description:

The elements of teaching and learning, i.e., curriculum and instructional practices, appropriately complement the vision and mission of Sumter County Schools. Expectations for both staff and student performance are well-defined and clearly articulated to all stakeholders.

For review by the QAR team, the district provided written profiles, assessment data, improvement plans, and other documented evidence of district and school-level planning activities. Through the aforementioned documentation as well as interviews, it was apparent that the primary focus of the district is to increase student achievement in mathematics. Math is a district-wide initiative; however, neither written documentation nor interviews with internal stakeholders revealed a clear and systematic plan to address the issue. Review of assessment data indicated significant achievement gaps between the subgroups of whites, blacks, students with disabilities (SWD), and economically disadvantaged. In an effort to address concerns over the performance of SWD, the district has employed an accountability specialist to monitor the progress of this subgroup. Interviews and observations revealed adequate scientifically-based instructional materials and technology. In fact, the degree of accessibility and use of instructional technology in the classrooms is worthy of acknowledgment. There were questions raised during three group interviews regarding the adequacy of technical support to assist teachers with the implementation of instructional technology. Also noted was evidence of the limited differentiated instructional practices. With a standards-based curriculum, emphasis should be placed on differentiating tasks particularly in the area of mathematics. Although professional learning opportunities have been limited by budget constraints, additional training in this area would help the district to reach its primary instructional goal.

Strengths - The team noted the following successful practices deserving of recognition:

- The district utilizes a variety of research-based instruments to assess student progress. These instruments are designed to provide feedback to teachers and students in a timely manner. Data are disaggregated, organized and made available for both district-and school-level personnel for planning and monitoring purposes.
- Designating the four elementary schools as academies, each with a specific curricular theme, has given a unique identity to neighborhood schools by providing avenues for children to explore and develop individual interests.
- To address the instructional needs of those students who do not succeed in the traditional setting, the district provides alternative facilities that are equitably funded and staffed.

Suggestions and Opportunities for Improvement - The team offers the following suggestions and opportunities for improvement in this standard area:

- To enhance the district's ability to address its focus on mathematics achievement, consideration should be given to the development of a strategic plan which includes adequate professional learning in the practices associated with standards-based instruction. The addition of technical support would provide for a more effective utilization of the existing instructional technology.

Finding: Based on the evidence reviewed, the Quality Assurance Review Team has assigned the overall assessment level of "Operational", indicating that the Sumter County Schools has met the accreditation requirements for the "Teaching & Learning" standard.

Standard 4. Documenting & Using Results

Standard: The system enacts a comprehensive assessment system that monitors and documents performance and uses these results to improve student performance and system effectiveness.

Description:

The district uses a variety of assessment data sources, both formative and summative, that are aligned to the district's expectations for student performance to ensure that decisions regarding instruction are data-driven. Test data are provided to teachers in a timely manner and are presented in an easily understood format that allows for comparison over time. Interviews with stakeholders revealed a strong reliance upon data when instructional decisions are made. Data are disaggregated and examined over time to establish trends and to identify gaps in student achievement. In addition, student performance data are presented to parents in the form of Testgate/Elements reports, standards-based report cards, and state test score reports. Interviews with parents indicated that they were appreciative of the efforts the district makes to communicate to them what is expected of their child and the progress their child is making to meet these expectations.

The district has established benchmark assessments aligned to its nine-week expectations for most grade levels and content areas. There is evidence of the use of assessment results to adjust instruction. The implementation of a standards-based report card has proven to be an effective means of communicating both expectations and student performance to parents as evidenced by stakeholder interviews. The team reviewed the district's AYP report, disaggregated test data reports, and Testgate/Elements reports and found that the results were used to affect change in the instructional focus. However, the team did not find evidence to support that comparison data from comparable systems were used to evaluate student and system performance. For example, a comparison of Sumter County's data to neighboring systems could explain why Sumter County parents choose to enroll their children in other districts. While there were some schools and departments with common assessments, the team did not find evidence that frequent common assessments had been implemented district-wide. Having these in place would provide teachers data to make more immediate, effective adjustments to their instruction.

Strengths - The team noted the following successful practices deserving of recognition:

- Testgate/Elements assessment results provide benchmark data related to the district's nine-week expectations and serve as predictors of student performance on state-mandated standardized tests.
- Assessment results are shared with stakeholders in a timely manner and in a format that is easily understood.
- The standards-based report card is an effective method of communicating expectations for student performance and levels of mastery to parents.

Suggestions and Opportunities for Improvement - The team offers the following suggestions and opportunities for improvement in this standard area:

- Compare Sumter County's assessment results to similar districts to evaluate system effectiveness and publicize improvements.
- Investigate methods used to communicate to the community data that articulate the district's improvement.
- Implement a regular schedule of frequent common assessments district-wide to provide additional data to assist teachers in making effective instructional decisions.

Finding: Based on the evidence reviewed, the Quality Assurance Review Team has assigned the overall assessment level of "Operational", indicating that the Sumter County Schools has met the accreditation requirements for the "Documenting & Using Results" standard.

Standard 5. Resource & Support Systems

Standard: The system has the resources and services necessary to support its vision and purpose and to ensure achievement for all students.

Description:

SCS strives to recruit, train, and retain highly qualified professional and support staff. Efforts to retain professional staff include a year-long induction process along with the assignment of a building-level mentor. Unfortunately, retaining teachers in SCS has proven to be a challenge for a variety of reasons. In addition, recent economic issues have caused SCS to cut instructional and support staff. A review of the Professional Learning Plan indicates a lack of training for new teachers in standards-based instruction, a key district initiative. There also is no information within the Professional Learning Plan to utilize data or other means to determine particular professional learning training for teachers.

SCS uses a zero-based budgeting system. Various district administrators provide input into the development of the budget. Based on this feedback with the assistance of the superintendent's recommendations, a preliminary budget is created by the finance director. Once the final budget is determined, the finance director prepares annual allotments for schools, programs and departments. This collaborative process ensures that educational programs and plans for improvements are provided maximum dollars. Annual financial program audits ensure transactions and budgetary processes are appropriately safeguarded.

Maintenance and support personnel are committed to providing a safe and orderly environment. Measures such as fire safety and evacuation plans are examples of the maintenance department's involvement in the creation of an orderly environment. SCS has a five-year master facility plan. There is an extensive Emergency Preparedness Plan, outlining the measures to be taken in the event a crisis occurs. Students interviewed confirm drills are conducted in key safety areas. Other safety measures utilized to protect students include the use of school resource officers and other staff assigned to monitor building safety, locking all doors except the primary entrance, requiring all visitors sign in and wear an identifying badge, and student and staff ID badges. There has been a push to provide SCS with the best technology available. The majority of classrooms have Smart Boards available for teacher and student use.

Classrooms have access to numerous desktop computers. The infrastructure allows parental use of the district's website to access student information, which was highlighted during stakeholder interviews.

SCS has a variety of support services available for students. The school district has nurses, counselors, social workers, graduation coaches, and an attendance officer employed to work with students and parents to help meet the needs of students outside the regular classroom. The nutrition and transportation departments understand their roles in achieving the mission of the district. Other opportunities available for students to support or enhance their education include special education services, extended day and extended year education, co-curricular activities, and several alternative education settings.

Strengths - The team noted the following successful practices deserving of recognition:

- The annual budgeting process is highly collaborative and goes through reviews and feedback opportunities prior to a new fiscal year.
- Student safety is a high priority for SCS. Interviews with students and parents along with team observations indicate multiple layers of protection for students.
- There are many different opportunities of support for SCS students. These include staff members available to help students with issues which can negatively impact learning and the existence of programs for students needing additional support.

Suggestions and Opportunities for Improvement - The team offers the following suggestions and opportunities for improvement in this standard area:

- Design a retention plan which contains non-traditional methods to increase the percent of teachers who return to SCS each year.
- Create a professional development plan which clearly articulates the structure for professional learning opportunities.

Finding: Based on the evidence reviewed, the Quality Assurance Review Team has assigned the overall assessment level of "Operational", indicating that the Sumter County Schools has met the accreditation requirements for the "Resource & Support Systems" standard.

Standard 6. Stakeholder Communications & Relationships

Standard: The system fosters effective communications and relationships with and among its stakeholders.

Description:

The Sumter County Schools have a well-developed system of communication with the community and most especially with the parents of Sumter County students, as indicated in interviews with members of stakeholder groups. Weekly written reports concerning every student within the county sent on a specified day is greatly appreciated by students' families. Information available from the Internet is used by parents to access school information and specific academic information. Some parents and teachers communicate directly using email messages.

As with many school districts, teachers and school personnel indicated the desire for more parental involvement directly at the school sites. However, the teachers are aware of the demands on parents and families of today and that most parents do all that can be done outside of school to help their children.

Documentation and stakeholder interviews indicate the openness of all levels of school personnel in listening with interest to parent and community concerns. Parents spoke positively of being able to approach any member of the Sumter County Schools concerning a variety of issues. Information from stakeholders is solicited by school and central office personnel. The superintendent is known throughout the county as being available for conversation, for soliciting ideas and thoughts of community members, and for involvement in community meetings. The opinions and thoughts of community members are highly valued.

Administrative personnel work with teachers concerning curriculum issues. As a result of this communication and support, teachers and school administrators are willing to try innovative ideas in classrooms and with scheduling.

During interviews and discussions with stakeholders, a variety of other issues were discussed. Parents and students feel that the schools in Sumter County promote safe environments for all. New programs to involve parents are being developed. Presently, many parents are involved with the workings of parent councils and I Care programs in the different schools. Mentor/mentee programs are in place and highly effective at several schools. Parents feel that the elementary and middle schools give a good foundation for achieving the mission of graduating all students. The schools provide positive learning experiences for the students. New programs and their extensions are promoted in some parts of the community. There are concerns about transportation to schools of choice.

Communication and positive relationships stretch throughout the district and county among all stakeholders. However, to help improve the perception concerning the education programs and workings of the schools within the county, the district must develop a plan to promote the successes of the schools. Interviews with stakeholders indicated negative perceptions throughout some areas of the county. This perception may be a contributing factor to a decline in enrollment. Conveying ideas of open communication and safe, orderly, and clean schools to all of the public may help provide positive community perception. Along with this, enrollment could increase, additional resources could become available for use in schools and classrooms, and stakeholder involvement could be increased for positive outcomes.

Strengths - The team noted the following successful practices deserving of recognition:

- Communication throughout the school district is well developed, and information is accessible by all stakeholders.
- Parents appreciate the weekly folders that are sent home with students. The folders, which contain information about the academic work of the student and announcements from the individual schools and school system, are positive steps for open communication.
- Parents praised the availability of information concerning the schools and specific academic issues on the school web site.

Suggestions and Opportunities for Improvement - The team offers the following suggestions and opportunities for improvement in this standard area:

- Develop a plan to showcase the successes of Sumter County Schools.

Finding: Based on the evidence reviewed, the Quality Assurance Review Team has assigned the overall assessment level of "Highly Functional", indicating that the Sumter County Schools has met the accreditation requirements for the "Stakeholder Communications & Relationships" standard.

Standard 7. Commitment to Continuous Improvement

Standard: The system establishes, implements, and monitors a continuous process of improvement that focuses on student performance.

Description:

The district's commitment to the continuous improvement process aligns the work of the district with goals for student learning at each school. The district has outlined a six-step continuous improvement process of analyzing data, identifying causes, selecting solutions, tracking and monitoring progress, adjusting according to indicators, and reporting and celebrating progress. District and school-based Student Performance Teams visit classrooms and meet regularly to review levels of implementation of high impact best practices at schools and in individual classrooms.

The team interviewed stakeholders, reviewed district classroom walk-through expectations, observed in classrooms, and reviewed the district and school-based plans for continuous improvement to gather information regarding consistent and pervasive practices that support a continuous improvement process leading to improved and sustainable student performance. The team found evidence that district and school stakeholders are committed to continuous improvement. However, the district has not developed a focused, strategic plan to address achievement gaps and improve the performance of all students, particularly in mathematics. Subsequently, although school-based continuous improvement plans include goals to address achievement gaps and overall student achievement, the district's process for continuous improvement lacks a clear focus on ongoing professional learning to ensure the transition to fully operational standards-based instruction in grades K-12 and to support sustained student achievement.

Strengths - The team noted the following successful practices deserving of recognition:

- The district has identified a six-step continuous improvement process to guide its work.
- Student Performance Teams are committed to monitoring and providing feedback on classroom instruction.

Suggestions and Opportunities for Improvement - The team offers the following suggestions and opportunities for improvement in this standard area:

- Develop and implement a district-wide strategic plan to address closing achievement gaps and raising overall student achievement.
- Develop and implement a district-wide professional learning plan to ensure the transition to fully operational standards-based classrooms in grades K-12 and to support sustained student achievement.

Finding: Based on the evidence reviewed, the Quality Assurance Review Team has assigned the overall assessment level of "Operational", indicating that the Sumter County Schools has met the accreditation requirements for the "Commitment to Continuous Improvement" standard.

Quality Assurance Findings

The Quality Assurance Review Team examined the effectiveness of the district's methods for quality assurance. The team reviewed the district's practices and methods to monitor and document improvement, provide meaningful feedback and support across the district, ensure that AdvancED standards are met and strengthened, and regularly collect, use, and communicate results. The team provides the following findings in this area.

Description

The district has implemented a six-step process to guide continuous improvement in regards to both student and staff performance. Progress toward improvement is regularly monitored through Student Performance Team visits and reports, regular departmental reports to the board of education, and a mid-year progress check of each school. The team found less evidence of the use of this process, however in terms of other key processes in the district (i.e., budgeting, hiring, transportation, etc.). The district collects data from multiple sources throughout the school year and utilizes the analysis of these results to make decisions. The district has begun the process of having each school annually self-assess its adherence to the standards. Communication of results to all stakeholders is accomplished in a systematic, timely manner and stakeholders' opinions are sought when making decisions.

Strengths

- All schools completed a Standards Assessment Report to determine their level of adherence to the standards. These reports were used to guide the district report.
- The district communicates effectively with its stakeholders and values their input.

Suggestions and Opportunities for Improvement

- Utilize the six-step process for improvement to address all processes within the district, not just student performance.
- Develop clear performance targets for all processes and utilize a monitoring system to determine when targets are being met.

Conclusion

The commendations and recommendations in this report are designed to focus the school district on those areas that will have the greatest impact on student performance and system effectiveness. While powerful in potential, the commendations and recommendations only have meaning when acted upon by the school district and its schools. The strength of this report lies in the school district's commitment to using the findings to continuously improve. The key is action. The school district is encouraged to use the report as a call to action, a tool to sustain momentum in the ongoing process of continuous improvement.

The team identified several recommendations for improvement that the school district will need to address. Following this review, the school district will be required to submit a progress report summarizing its progress toward addressing the team's recommendations.

The Quality Assurance Review Team expresses appreciation to Dennis O. McMahon and Bari Geeslin, members of the professional staff, students, parents and other community representatives for hosting the review team. The team wishes the school and its students much success in the quest for excellence through SACS CASI accreditation with AdvancED.

Appendix

Quality Assurance Review Team Members

- Mr. Jesse Cleveland, Chair
- Mr. Don Turner, Vice Chair (Crisp County School System)
- Mrs. Karen Waldon, Team Member (Austin Road Middle School)
- Mrs. Lisa Franklin, Team Member (Washington County Board of Education)
- Rick Kraus, Team Member (USD 308)
- Ms. Rita McDonald, Team Member (Elkton Elementary School)

AdvancED Standards for Quality School Systems

The AdvancED Standards for Quality School Systems are comprehensive statements of quality practices and conditions that research and best practice indicate are necessary for school districts to achieve quality student performance and organizational effectiveness. As school districts reach higher levels of implementation of the standards, they will have a greater capacity to support ever-increasing student performance and organizational effectiveness. Each of the seven standards listed below has corresponding indicators and impact statements which can be accessed at www.advanc-ed.org.

Vision and Purpose

The system establishes and communicates a shared purpose and direction for improving the performance of students and the effectiveness of the system.

Governance and Leadership

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

Teaching and Learning

The system provides research-based curriculum and instructional methods that facilitate achievement for all students.

Documenting and Using Results

The system enacts a comprehensive assessment system that monitors and documents performance and uses these results to improve student performance and system effectiveness.

Resource and Support Systems

The system has the resources and services necessary to support its vision and purpose and to ensure achievement for all students.

Stakeholder Communications and Relationships

The system fosters effective communications and relationships with and among its stakeholders.

Commitment to Continuous Improvement

The system establishes, implements, and monitors a continuous process of improvement that focuses on student

performance.