



Monitoring Review Report

DeKalb County School District
Stone Mountain, Georgia

#215065

November 1-3, 2023

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Introduction

The Monitoring Review was conducted on November 1-3, 2023, for the DeKalb County School District (DCSD); a three-member team conducted the on-site follow-up review. The purpose of the Monitoring Review was to assess the district's progress toward addressing the Cognia Performance Standard 1.5 from the previous Accreditation Protocol and the Directives aligned to the Standard from the Monitoring Review conducted November 8-11, 2022.

In preparation for the Monitoring Review, the team reviewed the Institution's Progress Report that was submitted in response to the findings and areas of improvement from the November 2022 Monitoring Review Report and other related documentation provided by the district. In addition, the team reviewed recorded school board meetings from February 2023 through October 2023 as part of the evidence to assess how the district was addressing the findings associated with the previous review.

During the review, the team engaged in the following activities:

- Meetings with the institution superintendent, district-level administrators, and building-level administrators.
- Interviews with stakeholders, including school board members and the community.
- Review of evidence.
- Report preparation.

The table below identifies the stakeholder groups, and the number interviewed during the Monitoring Review.

Interviews Conducted	
Newly Appointed Superintendent	1
Regional Superintendents	5
Selected School Principals	6
School Board Members	7
Community Members	2
Total	21

Findings

The Monitoring Review Team used the findings from the team's review, activities, and evidence to assess the progress the district has made toward the Cognia Performance Standard (1.5), as listed in the report. The findings of the Monitoring 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

Context

As cited within previous accreditation reports, the DeKalb County School District has experienced a steady change in leadership since 2013. Since then, there have been six superintendents, with two being interim and two being dismissed by the Board in 2013. At the time of the Monitoring Review, a newly appointed superintendent had been in that position since July 2023.

The April 2022 Accreditation Engagement Review resulted in the district's earning the continuous status of **Accredited** for a five-year term. However, the results from the review revealed that the school board practices were not currently meeting the expectations for Cognia Performance Standard 1.5, "*The governing authority adheres to a code of ethics and functions within defined roles and responsibilities.*" Based on this finding, an on-site Monitoring Review was conducted in November 2022. The outcome revealed that the Board's actions did not adequately satisfy expectations for Cognia Performance Standard 1.5. As a result, a subsequent Monitoring Review was scheduled for November 2023.

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

Findings

The Monitoring Review Team sought to assess the Board's ability to work collectively for the good of the district, determine the public perception of how the Board functions, and ascertain the working relationship between the Board and district staff, particularly the newly hired superintendent.

Specifically, the team reviewed artifacts and conducted interviews to gauge the progress made toward meeting the following Directives from the November 2022 Monitoring Review Report:

Directives:

- Review and renew board member commitment to the vision and mission of the DeKalb County School District and board member role and responsibility regarding the overall success of the district and learning outcomes for all students.
- Engage in a thoughtful and reflective review of recent Board Self-Assessment results to determine areas of focus and next steps.
- Examine current structures in place that support efficient and effective Board operations.
- Ensure meetings are conducted following the prescribed procedures outlined in *Robert's Rules of Order*.
- Determine and commit to adhering to processes as outlined in the Board Handbook when board members are not following policy or the principles of the district.

By interviewing stakeholders, reviewing the district's response to the Directives, and observing recorded board meetings, the review team determined the Board is committed to responding to the findings and implementing the necessary processes to move forward as a cohesive unit. Board members were passionate about their role, and most assumed immense responsibility for adhering to established policies and procedures. Based on interviews with community members, district leadership, and principals, the Board is more focused on working together for the benefit of the district and, in particular, for student success.

Once the district received the previous Monitoring Review Report from November 2022, district board members participated in a retreat in February 2023 to review the report and address findings and areas of improvement within the report. In keeping with the Directives, recommendations, and findings of the Monitoring Review Report, the retreat's agenda topics included the following:

- Reviewing *Robert's Rules of Order* to guide "deliberation do's and don'ts."
- Elevating the "Norms" the Board created to guide interactions and practices.
- Revisiting the Board Self-Assessment for areas requiring attention and improvement.
- Unpacking Cognia's feedback from the previous Monitoring Review Report for opportunities to improve the Board's function.
- Reinforcing critical tasks that the Board aims to accomplish in 2023.
- Receiving the Interim Superintendent's Progress Report and discussing insights.

- Developing a consensus list of potential superintendent candidates for interviews.

In addition to the retreat in February 2023, board members reviewed and discussed the findings from the November 2022 Monitoring Review Report during the April 19, 2023, regularly scheduled business portion of the board meeting. Member comments were predominantly in agreement with the findings and suggested greater accountability on their part to ensure effective, efficient operations as a "whole" board.

Reporting of progress will be presented for each Directive from the previous Monitoring Review Report:

Directive One

- *Review and renew board member commitment to the vision and mission of the DeKalb County School District and board member role and responsibility regarding the overall success of the district and learning outcomes for all students.*

The Board participated in retreats facilitated by an external consultant in February 2023 and October 2023. The intent of these retreats was to align their interactions and governance practices over the last 12 months to establish a foundation for defining goals to improve Board governance in regard to recommendations made in the November 2022 Monitoring Review Report.

With the appointment of the new superintendent, a process is now in place to review and revise the district's strategic plan. With the start of this new leadership in July, the district personnel and the Board have begun working collectively to develop a strategic plan reflecting a revised vision and mission to guide the purpose and direction of the district. According to the district's response to the prior Monitoring Review Report, district personnel plans to participate in quarterly reviews of the progress of current initiatives and action steps to determine progress in meeting the district's performance targets. Goals currently established for the strategic plan include student success with equity and access, stakeholder engagement and communication, staff effectiveness, culture and climate, and facilities maintenance and improvements. The goals expressed within the Board Member Handbook include the statement that Board action will be guided by a commitment to the goals embedded within the strategic plan. These goals include the following areas:

- *Goal Area I: Student Success with Equity and Access*
- *Goal Area II: Stakeholder Engagement*
- *Goal Area III: Staff Efficacy and Excellence*
- *Goal Area IV: Internal and External Communication*
- *Goal Area V: Organizational Effectiveness and Efficiency*

According to the district's response to the 2022 Monitoring Review Report, policies are reviewed annually. Further, the Board engaged in a productive discussion about its approach for policy revisions during the April 19, 2023, business meeting. District leadership and board members are encouraged to reconcile the strategic goals and formulate a well-defined approach, including action steps and key measures to ensure effective and impactful processes.

The incoming superintendent has identified a MIRACLES framework, which the Board has endorsed. This improvement strategy is designed to drive action for the district's strategic plan to ensure all students receive an equitable and high-quality education. The acronym represents the following:

- **M**otion toward equity;
- **I**mproved instructional core;
- **R**elevant and rigorous curriculum of study;
- **A**tttract and retain high-quality staff;
- **C**ommitment to accountability;
- **L**earning environments that support student success;
- **E**stablish expected targets driven by results; and
- **S**ound fiscal stewardship.

To communicate the new initiatives to the public, the district has developed documents and publications, conducted town hall meetings, and produced and aired video clips promoting greater awareness of the district's improvement goals. The review team was able to view the video clips presented by each regional superintendent providing details supporting each tenet.

Each board member has participated in state-mandated training provided by the *Georgia Association of School Boards*, emphasizing the importance of the roles and responsibilities of the Board. The collective feedback from all the interviewed stakeholders indicated a greater level of unity among the majority of the board members. The review team encourages the members to continue their efforts to build unity and a collaborative working relationship to support the overall success of the district's commitment to continuous improvement, organizational effectiveness, and successful student outcomes.

Directive Two

- *Engage in a thoughtful and reflective review of recent Board Self-Assessment results to determine areas of focus and next steps.*

The artifacts submitted for the Monitoring Review Team's review referenced the Board's annual self-assessment discussed during the two-day Board Retreat on February 21-22, 2023. All board members had an opportunity to provide input regarding the self-assessment document, with most completing the questionnaire. Board members were asked to rate themselves on a four-point scale, with four being the highest level (I have full mastery of this expectation) to the lowest number one (I am working to meet this expectation) using the following criteria:

- Board Interactions
- Communications and Constituent Interactions
- Interaction with the District Staff
- Interpersonal Relationships
- Time Management
- Media and Public Relations

The results were reviewed by the Board two weeks before the review team's arrival. According to board member interviews and a review of the self-assessment document responses, goal setting from the results of the self-assessment was based on the Board's collective responses.

The impact of the self-assessment had mixed reactions from board members. One board member, for example, stated that it appeared to be a rushed process. Another member shared that they would have liked the Board to have delved deeper; however, the board member was not surprised by the overall results of the evaluation. During an interview, another board member could not provide feedback on the self-assessment evaluation because only one week's notice had been given before the Board convened. Because board members expressed previous concerns about the timely notification of actions for consideration, the review team strongly suggests that adherence to the first two self-assessment criteria - board interactions and communication - become a routine part of the internal and external functions of board operations. Timely notification of items for consideration should alleviate any board member's concerns that items are rushed or that their input is not fully respected or valued.

As stated earlier within the report, the board's discussion took place two weeks prior to the team's arrival. Based on the timing of this discussion, the review of the self-assessment, subsequent response, and goal setting are in their infancy stages. The leadership of the Board is encouraged to continue this process with input from all members. Serious consideration should be given to advancing results into tangible actions to support the Board's efforts to perform its duties efficiently and effectively. Each of these criteria regarding the self-assessment results could lead to the Board's determining whole board training and individual professional learning needs and sessions in key areas to strengthen the Board's knowledge and skills and commitment to student success and staff effectiveness by collaborating with leaders to uphold the district's goals and to drive continuous improvement.



Each board member is elected to represent one of the seven regions in the district. According to the 2022 Monitoring Review Report, a perception of "single-mindedness" previously existed that caused board members to advocate for their region instead of working together as a team and using one voice for the betterment of the district as a whole. During interviews with each board member, the review team noted a changed perception and a more focused effort to work cohesively as a team due to the previous Monitoring Review Report findings. The Board is to be commended for taking several measures to establish policies and procedures that enhance effective board governance and move toward more cohesiveness. Most members have participated in the retreats and training sessions to address the findings of the previous report.

Directive Three

- *Examine current structures in place that support efficient and effective Board operations.*

During the Monitoring Review, the district shared a copy of the 2020-2023 Board Member Handbook as an artifact for the team to review. The Board developed and approved the handbook on July 13, 2020. Board members participated in a retreat in February 2023 to review the Board Member Handbook and its policies. From the review of evidence and interviews, the review team noted that the Board consistently reviews and develops policies as required. A review of the policy manual indicates that policies define the Board's responsibilities. According to interviews with board members and a review of the February and July 2023 Board retreat meeting minutes, board members are working with the *Georgia Association of School Boards*, the Board's general counsel, and an external consultant to revise the Board's operational handbook. Based on interviews and a review of the interagency emails, the prevailing sentiment among board members was for the revision of policies to occur before revising the handbook.

The Board adheres to the code of ethics policy found on pages 38-40 of the Board Member Handbook. Every year each board member submits a signed acknowledgment of this commitment. Additionally, the Board operates under Policy BAB: School Board Governance (Last Reviewed: May 14, 2015) for Culture and Values. This policy states, "The board members have dedicated themselves to assuring a culture of collaboration, transparency, and continuous learning exist among each of them. In addition, the Board is working to ensure that they value open communication and input and prioritize the best interests of the classroom as most important." The School Board participates in the required board member training as expected by Georgia law. Interviews with board members supported their efforts of working as a cohesive body, as referenced within the policy. While the review team recognizes that the Board has demonstrated improvement in its effective board operations, the team recommends that the board members continue setting aside their sole focus on their own regions and focus their efforts on governing together in the overall best interest of the school system as a whole.

Directive Four

- *Ensure meetings are conducted following the prescribed procedures outlined in Robert's Rules of Order.*

The Board secured the services of its general counsel to serve as the Board's parliamentarian. As a provision of the policy, board members participated in a retreat for the purpose of goal setting, the board's leadership and its principles, and essential board protocols. The work resulted in the revision of the board policy BH – Board Code of Ethics to support the Board's goal of ensuring that its meetings are orderly to eliminate the possibility of violating the Board's code of ethics. When asked, board members could discuss the importance of the revised policy related to the code of ethics and cite the process for sanctioning policy violators.

The team noted that school board meetings tend to be lengthy at times. Based on the viewing of recorded board deliberations and interviews, the review team noted some duplication of efforts between the board's work sessions and the board meetings. The nature and length of meetings may vary depending on the school calendar or sometimes the legislative calendar. Members shared that the legislative items are sometimes contentious, which will often determine the tone and temperament of board members during meetings. However, the Board would work more efficiently if there was a clearer differentiation between the activities of the work session and those of the board meetings.

Weekly meetings occur between the superintendent and board leadership (chair and vice-chair). This group is responsible for developing the board meeting agenda items. Interviews with board members indicate that they receive weekly communications from the superintendent to keep them informed of current events and a copy of the weekly newsletter the superintendent produces for the system staff.

The Board has worked collaboratively with the newly appointed superintendent to conduct town hall meetings to increase community engagement and build awareness of the various initiatives and activities occurring within the district. Recognizing that board members sometimes have differing opinions, it is the expectation that members are to be professional and collaborative in resolving or moving beyond those differences, focusing primarily on areas of common interest to support the district's priorities for improvement. In deference to protocol and the line authority, the Board's voice to the public and various media should be the board chair. In service to the school district and its students and staff, it is essential for all members of the Board to publicly support the district's continuous improvement efforts and its organizational effectiveness and speak with one voice as a unified board.

Directive Five

- *Determine and commit to the following processes as outlined in the Board Member Handbook when board members are not following policy or the principles of the district.*

The Board still has to update many of its policies; however, it has developed actions to improve its overall operational efficiency and effectiveness and established sanctions for members who violate processes and procedures regarding their code of ethics. The Board had not yet completed other critical policy revisions at the time of the 2023 Monitoring Review. As the Board completes revisions, members are encouraged to examine a system of reflection that evaluates how the Board functions, how it achieves consensus, and how the public perceives its actions in this regard. Moving forward, board members must fully understand their significant role as the district's governing authority and in building and sustaining community relations. It is incumbent upon every board member to continue setting aside *personal* agendas and focusing their efforts on governing together in the best interest of the school district and its students and staff.

Immediately preceding the review team's arrival at the district, a local media outlet printed the dissenting comments of a board member. Interviews with board members and district staff indicated that the information shared had been discussed within the confines of the executive session. The team was informed that the Board then followed its policy for addressing board member violations.

The Board has made strides to create a culture of cohesiveness and conduct the business of the district effectively. Board members, community representatives, and district staff expressed a feeling of progress and movement in a positive direction by the Board for the betterment of the district as a whole. Because of this and other actions taken by the Board, the review team has determined that the Board has increased its capacity to adhere to its code of ethics and function within its defined roles and responsibilities, aligning with Cognia Performance Standard 1.5.

Insights from Monitoring Review

Based on the Monitoring Review Team's findings, Cognia concludes the DeKalb County School District has met expectations for Cognia Performance Standard 1.5. The Board is to be commended for the strides made to become a more cohesive, productive group. Public perception reflects the hard work that the members have undergone to generate positive messaging and put the needs of the students and staff first.

Interviews with all current board members indicate that each member is highly committed to what they perceive their role to be and to support the district's overall success. District staff and school-based leadership are encouraged to support the Board as it continues to find stability toward continuous improvement and revision of relevant policies.

The Board is encouraged to carefully review the recommendations in this report, develop means and methods to hold themselves accountable, and devise systems of review and progress monitoring to



ensure their effectiveness at all times. As policies and procedures are revised and integrated into the board's functions and actions, it will certainly impact the future of the district's students and positively affect public perception of the district.

The Monitoring Review Team acknowledges the efforts of the Board, the superintendent, and other stakeholders throughout the system in addressing the Directives outlined in the previous Monitoring Review Report. This work has resulted in noteworthy progress in establishing a culture that embraces trust and mutual respect among the district and community stakeholders.

Next Steps

Upon receiving the Monitoring Review Report, the district is encouraged to implement the following steps:

- Review and share the findings with stakeholders.
- Ensure the Board fully implements effective board governance best practices from professional learning sessions.
- Continue revising the Board Member Handbook.
- Regularly revise and update policies and procedures to ensure all are current and relevant.
- Host its routine Accreditation Engagement Review prior to **June 30, 2027**, since the district **has met the expectations** for Cognia Performance Standard 1.5.