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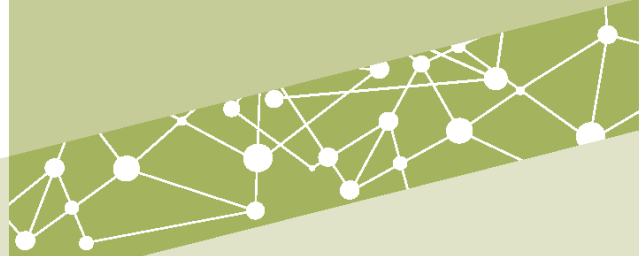
AdvancED®
Engagement
Review Report

AdvancED® Performance Accreditation

» Results for:

Lowndes County School System
Valdosta, Georgia

Table of Contents

Introduction

AdvancED Performance Accreditation and the Engagement Review

Accreditation is pivotal to leveraging education quality and continuous improvement. Using a set of rigorous research based standards, the accreditation process examines the whole institution—the program, the cultural context and the community of stakeholders—to determine how well the parts work together to meet the needs of learners. Through the AdvancED Accreditation Process, highly skilled and trained Engagement Review Teams gather first-hand evidence and information pertinent to evaluating an institution's performance against the research-based AdvancED Performance Standards. Using these Standards, Engagement Review Teams assess the quality of learning environments to gain valuable insights and target improvements in teaching and learning. AdvancED provides Standards that are tailored for all education providers so that the benefits of accreditation are universal across the education community.

Through a comprehensive review of evidence and information, our experts gain a broad understanding of institution quality. Using the Standards, the review team provides valuable feedback to institutions that helps to focus and guide each institution's improvement journey. Valuable evidence and information from other stakeholders, including students, also is obtained through interviews, surveys and additional activities.

As a part of the Engagement Review, stakeholders were interviewed by members of the Engagement Review Team to gain their perspectives on topics relevant to the institution's learning environment and organizational effectiveness. The feedback gained through the stakeholder interviews was considered with other evidences and data to support the findings of the Engagement Review. The following chart depicts the numbers of persons interviewed representative of various stakeholder groups.

Stakeholder Groups	Number
Superintendent	1
Board of Education Members	7
System & School Leaders	38
Teachers	81
Parents	31
Community Members	18
Students	176
Total	352

Once all of the information is compiled and reviewed, the team develops the Engagement Review Report and presents preliminary results to the institution. Results from the Engagement Review are reported in four ratings represented by colors. These ratings provide guidance and insight into an institution's continuous improvement efforts as described below:

Color	Rating	Description
Red	Needs Improvement	Identifies key areas that need more focused improvement efforts
Yellow	Emerging	Represents areas to enhance and extend current improvement efforts
Green	Meets Expectations	Pinpoints quality practices that meet the Standards

Color	Rating	Description
Blue	Exceeds Expectations	Demonstrates noteworthy practices producing clear results that exceed expectations

AdvancED Continuous Improvement System

The AdvancED Continuous Improvement System (CIS) provides a systemic fully integrated solution to help institutions map out and navigate a successful improvement journey. In the same manner that educators are expected to understand the unique needs of every learner and tailor the education experience to drive student success, every institution must be empowered to map out and embrace their unique improvement journey. AdvancED expects institutions to use the results and the analysis of data from various interwoven components for the implementation of improvement actions to drive education quality and improved student outcomes. While each improvement journey is unique, the journey is driven by key actions. AdvancED identifies three important components of a continuous improvement process and provides feedback on the components of the journey using a rubric that identifies the three areas to guide the improvement journey. The areas are as follows:

Commitment to Continuous Improvement	Rating
The institution has collected sufficient and quality data to identify school improvement needs.	Meets Expectations
Implications from the analysis of data have been identified and used for the development of key strategic goals.	Meets Expectations
The institution demonstrates the capacity to implement their continuous improvement journey.	Meets Expectations

Continuous Improvement Journey Narrative

Lowndes County School System (LCSS) provided evidence of establishing a clear direction for continuous improvement. The Engagement Review Team reviewed ample evidence regarding the system's commitment to defining, maintaining and strategically pursuing continuous processes to support improved levels of student achievement. The Board of Education leads the system and school-level leadership in the strategic planning process and ensures that board policies and procedures pave the way for continuous improvement efforts to occur. Evident by a myriad of documents, the continuous improvement process is firmly grounded in the system's vision, "Working together to empower, challenge, and inspire-***One Lowndes***!"

The system's planning process resulted in a five-year Strategic Plan that was developed in collaboration with the governing board, system leadership, school leadership, parents, and community members. The five-year plan has three target areas that align with the system's highest impact areas of need. Each summer board members, administrators, teachers, parents, and community members participate in Data Retreats to establish system and school improvement plans that include SMART goals, measurable objectives, and strategies with clear timelines to chart progress, growth, and achievement for all students. During the retreat, data team members examine data and give feedback to help promote system-wide success. This process is continued throughout the year with monthly meetings. The Superintendent also conducts monthly meetings with system and school leaders to share information and consider recommendations for improving the school system.

Each school in the system develops a school-wide improvement plan at the annual Data Retreat whereby data analysis is used to identify goals aligned with the system's vision. All stakeholders are involved throughout the process in a variety of ways including surveys, parent meetings, and school improvement meetings. The Teaching and Learning team conducts school visits to review school progress targets and improvement plans. School administrators receive feedback data from classroom observations made as a part of the site visits. This level of accountability leads to a more effective implementation of the system's vision and mission.

In the Superintendent's presentation to the team, he shared the current status of the system, where the system had been, and where the system is headed. Details regarding LCSS in 2013 and 2018 were shared, and plans for

2023 were noted. Highlights of 2018 included a formal teacher induction program, the adoption of a facilities plan and a process to maximize state funding to build quality instructional facilities, and the expansion of the 1:1 computing devices in grades 3-6 with plans to expand across grades 3-12 by 2020. *One Lowndes* in 2023 includes a learning culture that promotes student achievement for all students, increased stakeholder engagement, a high-quality and diverse staff, and an in-house aspiring leaders program.

Even though the administration is intentional about establishing a clear direction for the system and school leaders, each school has been given the autonomy to select those programs and activities that they think will bring about improved learner outcomes. System level staff members have worked with school leaders to identify their areas of academic priority, specific to their students' needs and aligned to the system's strategic plan. Evidence indicated a focus on aligning time, instructional resources, and accountability measures to having a measurable impact on those areas deemed to be most important for students, staff, and families.

 School leadership teams are guided by the system leadership in the improvement process in numerous ways: large and small group discussion; professional learning communities; state assessments; local formative and summative assessments, et al. Data trends and implementation practices are further monitored by system leaders via school visits, artifact reviews, and face-to-face meetings. Expectations for improved professional practices are demonstrated by discussions in multiple ways to include Data Retreats, monthly meetings, and written communication.

During interviews with system and school leaders, the team learned that the system has adopted the philosophy that improvement in classroom instruction is the key to improving student learning. When asked about expectations for quality teaching to occur, the top two responses were "to collaborate with colleagues and to use data to differentiate instruction." When asked about how confidence as a leader is demonstrated, the top three choices were "setting goals to improve and achieving them; being open to new programs and practices; and seeking opinions of others before making decisions." "Improvement is a result of our deliberate and intentional planning efforts," said one leader.

The system has aligned and allocated human, fiscal, and material resources to support the continuous improvement process. Policies and practices are coordinated to support improvement priorities. Every stakeholder group interviewed by the team demonstrated engagement and collective commitment to the improvement process. When asked about improvement evidence, stakeholders cited such accomplishments as the system's overall academic performance being higher than 88 percent of other Georgia school systems; the four-year graduation rate at 90 percent being higher than 74 percent of other Georgia systems; 70.5 percent of graduates being college-ready; and the 2017 Financial Efficiency Star Rating being 4.5 out of 5. As one leader stated, "We are a school system that is blessed with quality staff. We now need to focus our improvement efforts on better meeting the needs of every segment of our diverse student population." Another said, "We are not where we want to be, but our focus on achieving excellence will get us there."

AdvancED Standards Diagnostic Results

The AdvancED Performance Standards Diagnostic is used by the Engagement Review Team to evaluate the institution's effectiveness based on AdvancED's Performance Standards. The diagnostic consists of three components built around each of the three Domains: **Leadership Capacity**, **Learning Capacity** and **Resource Capacity**. Point values are established within the diagnostic and a percentage of the points earned by the institution for each Standard is calculated from the point values for each Standard. Results are reported within four ranges identified by the colors representing Needs Improvement (Red), Emerging (Yellow), Meets Expectations (Green), and Exceeds Expectations (Blue). The results for the three Domains are presented in the tables that follow.

Leadership Capacity Domain

The capacity of leadership to ensure an institution's progress toward its stated objectives is an essential element of organizational effectiveness. An institution's leadership capacity includes the fidelity and commitment to its purpose and direction, the effectiveness of governance and leadership to enable the institution to realize its stated objectives, the ability to engage and involve stakeholders in meaningful and productive ways, and the capacity to implement strategies that improve learner and educator performance.

Leadership Capacity Standards		Rating
1.1	The system commits to a purpose statement that defines beliefs about teaching and learning, including the expectations for learners.	**Exceeds Expectations**
1.2	Stakeholders collectively demonstrate actions to ensure the achievement of the system's purpose and desired outcomes for learners.	**Exceeds Expectations**
1.3	The system engages in a continuous improvement process that produces evidence, including measurable results of improving student learning and professional practice.	**Exceeds Expectations**
1.4	The governing authority establishes and ensures adherence to policies that are designed to support system effectiveness.	**Exceeds Expectations**
1.5	The governing authority adheres to a code of ethics and functions within defined roles and responsibilities.	**Meets Expectations**
1.6	Leaders implement staff supervision and evaluation processes to improve professional practice and organizational effectiveness.	**Exceeds Expectations**
1.7	Leaders implement operational processes and procedures to ensure organizational effectiveness in support of teaching and learning.	**Exceeds Expectations**
1.8	Leaders engage stakeholders to support the achievement of the system's purpose and direction.	**Exceeds Expectations**
1.9	The system provides experiences that cultivate and improve leadership effectiveness.	**Exceeds Expectations**
1.10	Leaders collect and analyze a range of feedback data from multiple stakeholder groups to inform decision-making that results in improvement.	**Exceeds Expectations**
1.11	Leaders implement a quality assurance process for its institutions to ensure system effectiveness and consistency.	**Meets Expectations**

Learning Capacity Domain

The impact of teaching and learning is the primary expectation of every system and its institutions. The establishment of a learning culture built on high expectations for learning, along with quality programs and services, which include an analysis of results, are all key indicators of the system's impact on teaching and learning.

Learning Capacity Standards		Rating
2.1	Learners have equitable opportunities to develop skills and achieve the content and learning priorities established by the system.	Emerging
2.2	The learning culture promotes creativity, innovation and collaborative problem-solving.	Emerging
2.3	The learning culture develops learners' attitudes, beliefs and skills needed for success.	Meets Expectations

Learning Capacity Standards		Rating
2.4	The system has a formal structure to ensure learners develop positive relationships with and have adults/peers that support their educational experiences.	Emerging
2.5	Educators implement a curriculum that is based on high expectations and prepares learners for their next levels.	Meets Expectations
2.6	The system implements a process to ensure the curriculum is aligned to standards and best practices.	Meets Expectations
2.7	Instruction is monitored and adjusted to meet individual learners' needs and the system's learning expectations.	Meets Expectations
2.8	The system provides programs and services for learners' educational future and career planning.	Exceeds Expectations
2.9	The system implements processes to identify and address the specialized needs of learners.	Meets Expectations
2.10	Learning progress is reliably assessed and consistently and clearly communicated.	Meets Expectations
2.11	Educators gather, analyze, and use formative and summative data that lead to demonstrable improvement of student learning.	Meets Expectations
2.12	The system implements a process to continuously assess its programs and organizational conditions to improve student learning.	Emerging

Resource Capacity Domain

The use and distribution of resources align and support the needs of the system and institutions served. Systems ensure that resources are aligned with its stated purpose and direction and distributed equitably so that the needs of the system are adequately and effectively addressed. The utilization of resources includes support for professional learning for all staff. The system examines the allocation and use of resources to ensure appropriate levels of funding, sustainability, and system effectiveness.

Resource Capacity Standards		Rating
3.1	The system plans and delivers professional learning to improve the learning environment, learner achievement, and the system's effectiveness.	Meets Expectations
3.2	The system's professional learning structure and expectations promote collaboration and collegiality to improve learner performance and organizational effectiveness.	Exceeds Expectations
3.3	The system provides induction, mentoring, and coaching programs that ensure all staff members have the knowledge and skills to improve student performance and organizational effectiveness.	Emerging
3.4	The system attracts and retains qualified personnel who support the system's purpose and direction.	Exceeds Expectations
3.5	The system integrates digital resources into teaching, learning, and operations to improve professional practice, student performance, and organizational effectiveness.	Exceeds Expectations
3.6	The system provides access to information resources and materials to support the curriculum, programs, and needs of students, staff, and the system.	Exceeds Expectations
3.7	The system demonstrates strategic resource management that includes long-range planning and use of resources in support of the system's purpose and direction.	Exceeds Expectations
3.8	The system allocates human, material, and fiscal resources in alignment with the system's identified needs and priorities to improve student performance and organizational effectiveness.	Exceeds Expectations

Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool® (eleot®) Results

The eProve™ Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool® (eleot®) is a learner-centric classroom observation tool that comprises 28 items organized in seven environments aligned with the AdvancED Standards. The eleot provides useful, relevant, structured, and quantifiable data on the extent to which students are engaged in activities and/or demonstrate knowledge, attitudes, and/or dispositions that are conducive to effective learning. Classroom observations are conducted for a minimum of 20 minutes. Results from eleot are reported on a scale of one to four based on the degree and quality of the engagement.

eleot® Observations	
Total Number of eleot® Observations	**81**
Environments	**Rating**
Equitable Learning Environment	2.68
Learners engage in differentiated learning opportunities and/or activities that meet their needs	2.20
Learners have equal access to classroom discussions, activities, resources, technology, and support	3.36
Learners are treated in a fair, clear and consistent manner	3.47
Learners demonstrate and/or have opportunities to develop empathy/respect/appreciation for differences in abilities, aptitudes, backgrounds, cultures, and/or other human characteristics, conditions and dispositions	1.70
High Expectations Environment	2.77
Learners strive to meet or are able to articulate the high expectations established by themselves and/or the teacher	2.95
Learners engage in activities and learning that are challenging but attainable	3.02
Learners demonstrate and/or are able to describe high quality work	2.23
Learners engage in rigorous coursework, discussions, and/or tasks that require the use of higher order thinking (e.g., analyzing, applying, evaluating, synthesizing)	2.84
Learners take responsibility for and are self-directed in their learning	2.81
Supportive Learning Environment	3.34
Learners demonstrate a sense of community that is positive, cohesive, engaged, and purposeful	3.30
Learners take risks in learning (without fear of negative feedback)	3.21
Learners are supported by the teacher, their peers and/or other resources to understand content and accomplish tasks	3.35
Learners demonstrate a congenial and supportive relationship with their teacher	3.49
Active Learning Environment	2.88
Learners' discussions/dialogues/exchanges with each other and the teacher predominate	3.02
Learners make connections from content to real-life experiences	2.51
Learners are actively engaged in the learning activities	3.32
Learners collaborate with their peers to accomplish/complete projects, activities, tasks and/or assignments	2.67
Progress Monitoring and Feedback Environment	2.63
Learners monitor their own learning progress or have mechanisms whereby their learning progress is monitored	2.33
Learners receive/respond to feedback (from teachers/peers/other resources) to improve understanding and/or revise work	3.10
Learners demonstrate and/or verbalize understanding of the lesson/content	3.06
Learners understand and/or are able to explain how their work is assessed	2.01

eleot® Observations	
Total Number of eleot® Observations	**81**
Environments	**Rating**
Well-Managed Learning Environment	3.38
Learners speak and interact respectfully with teacher(s) and each other	3.51
Learners demonstrate knowledge of and/or follow classroom rules and behavioral expectations and work well with others	3.43
Learners transition smoothly and efficiently from one activity to another	3.28
Learners use class time purposefully with minimal wasted time or disruptions	3.28
Digital Learning Environment	2.27
Learners use digital tools/technology to gather, evaluate, and/or use information for learning	2.49
Learners use digital tools/technology to conduct research, solve problems, and/or create original works for learning	2.30
Learners use digital tools/technology to communicate and/or work collaboratively for learning	2.01

eleot® Narrative

The Engagement Review Team conducted 81 classroom observations during the onsite Engagement Review using the eleot® instrument. The team observed classrooms at all grade levels from kindergarten through grade 12 and in all content areas. The overall average eleot® rating was 2.87 on a 4.0 scale. The Well-Managed Learning Environment with an average rating of 3.42 and the Supportive Learning Environment with an average rating of 3.34 were the highest rated environments. The Digital Learning Environment with an average rating of 2.09 was the lowest rated environment.

With the highest ratings being in the Well-Managed Learning Environment, team members observed students who were respectful of their teachers and of fellow students. Students at the five schools that were visited demonstrated knowledge of and followed classroom rules. As students transitioned from activity to activity and center to center in some classrooms, as well as during the change of classes at the upper levels, the transitions were smooth and efficient. In approximately 82 percent of the classes observed, class time was used purposefully with minimal wasted time.

The high ratings for the Supportive Learning Environment were a result of students demonstrating a strong sense of community that was positive and cohesive. Students were willing to take risks in learning without fear of negative feedback. They exhibited a congenial and supportive relationship with their teachers. When the team asked students how they would describe a typical day at school, the top two responses were, "Every day is a good day" and "I have everything I need to learn." When asked about the teachers from whom they learned the most, the majority of the students responded that their teachers know their personal strengths and weaknesses in learning and care about them.

Active Learning Environment's average rating was 2.88 as students in approximately 83 percent of the classrooms observed were actively engaged in the learning activities. Students in 76 percent of the classrooms observed were having discussions/ dialogues/exchanges with each other and the teacher. Evidence of students making connections from content to real-life experiences was observed in approximately 63 percent of classrooms observed. Examples included third graders who were using technology to explore classrooms in other countries and make comparisons to their classroom. They had communicated with students in Indonesia on this particular project. Secondary students in a French class were presenting Café Skits (with no scripts) in which they had two customers and a waiter. The class had a rubric to determine all required components of the skit.

With the High Expectations Learning Environment, the overall average rating was 2.77. In approximately 77 percent of the observations, students were engaged in activities and learning that were challenging but attainable.

The overall average rating for learners being engaged in rigorous coursework that required the use of higher order thinking was 2.87. In approximately 71 percent of the classes, students were engaged in coursework, discussions, and/or tasks that required the use of higher order thinking (e.g., analyzing, applying, evaluating, synthesizing). Examples of questions used by teachers were: can you see a possible solution to….; what was the turning point in the story; what would happen if….; and do you think….is a good or a bad thing? The area of High Expectations needing the most improvement in Lowndes County Schools was learners being able to describe high quality work. Even with the use of rubrics, numerous students had difficulty telling observers how they were using the rubric to determine what high quality work looked like.

An average rating of 2.68 for the Equitable Learning Environment was a result of students being treated in a fair, clear and consistent manner. They also had equal access to classroom discussion, activities and support. With the average rating for differentiation at 2.20, there was a noticeable need for more opportunities and/or activities to meet the learning needs of all students. There were numbers of classrooms in which students were in whole group activities completing the same assignments that were not varied depending on understanding of content or student needs. When interviewed, 87 percent of the teachers stated they used a blend of whole group and small group instruction most of the time. Only 55 percent of the students interviewed said their teachers mixed the class activities with whole and small group most of the time. Approximately 32 percent of student interviewees responded that teachers used whole group activities almost all the time.

Progress Monitoring and Feedback Environment had an average rating of 2.63.Team members frequently observed students receiving feedback about their learning to improve their understanding and/or to revise their work. Most students were able to verbalize an understanding of the lesson/content. The lowest rated area of Progress Monitoring was students not understanding and/or able to explain what methods would be used to assess their work. When asked 'How do you know you are learning, 71percent of the students stated it was when they got their grades on their tests.

Digital Learning was the lowest rated environment at 2.27. There was technology equipment in every classroom where the team observed, but it was being used by students in only 57 percent of the classroom observations. In those classrooms, some students were gathering information, conducting research, solving problems, and creating original works for learning. In approximately 50 percent of the classrooms, students were using technology in collaborative settings. Examples of student use of technology included such examples as graphing calculators in math classes and classroom sets of laptops in elementary, middle and high school classes. In the student interviews, 89 percent stated they used technology when working on projects or presentations. Almost 58 percent of the students interviewed said they used technology to look up something on the internet.

In conclusion, the Engagement Review Team found well-managed and supportive learning environments throughout the system. The team found that classrooms had an atmosphere of mutual respect between students and teachers, as well as among students. Students demonstrated positive attitudes about learning and exhibited knowledge of classroom rules. Analysis of eleot® data coupled with interview polling results confirmed that differentiation, helping students understand and/or be able to explain how their work is assessed, and more effective integration of digital tools for student learning are areas needing improvement.

Findings

The chart below provides an overview of the institution ratings across the three Domains.
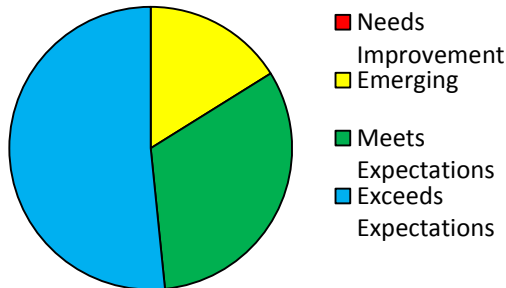
Rating	Number of Standards
Needs Improvement	0
Emerging	5
Meets Expectations	10
Exceeds Expectations	16

Legend:
- Needs Improvement
- Emerging
- Meets Expectations
- Exceeds Expectations

Powerful Practices

Powerful Practices reflect noteworthy observations and actions that have yielded clear results in student achievement or organizational effectiveness and are actions that exceed what is typically observed or expected in an institution.

Powerful Practice #1

The LCSS promotes an inclusive organizational culture based on a shared vision, trust, collaboration and unity (*One Lowndes*) that permeates the entire community.   (1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.7))

Primary Standard: 1.1

Evidence:

In the Superintendent's opening presentation to the team, he quoted the mission of LCSS as being a learning community striving for excellence every day with a vision of working together to empower, challenge, and inspire-*One Lowndes*! Visits to the central office and five of the eleven schools revealed an abundance of evidence in support of *One Lowndes*. Posters were prominently displayed in every facility; many students were wearing t-shirts with the motto; all publications included the motto, vision, and mission; and every stakeholder interviewed mentioned the *One Lowndes* motto. A system strategic plan had been developed in collaboration with the governing authority, system and school leadership, parents, and community members. Every school focuses on continuous improvement and the clear understanding that teaching and learning are grounded in a shared set of beliefs.

Of the 176 students who were interviewed, all were quick to share their pride in the school system. Approximately 77 percent of all students interviewed stated that every day is a good day at school, as well as saying they have everything they need to learn. Every school has the same motto, mascot, and school colors, indicating a "sense of one" across the system. Elementary students shared that they could not wait to be a "big Viking".

Eighteen community members and 31 parents were interviewed, and the majority discussed the *One Lowndes* motto and passionately shared a common feeling of pride and unity. These external stakeholders told of the open door policy at each school and how leadership listens to concerns and uses their feedback to make informed decisions. The passage of a Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST) to fund a new high school, middle school, two elementary schools and renovate other schools, as well as having hundreds of business and community partnerships, is evidence of the unity and support that permeate the entire community.

The two highest rated learning environments based on 81 classroom observations in kindergarten through grade 12 were Classroom Management and Supportive Learning. Students spoke and interacted very respectfully with teachers and each other. They followed classroom rules and behavioral expectations and worked well with others. Students also demonstrated a sense of community that was positive, cohesive, and purposeful. Teachers supported students, and there was a very congenial and supportive relationship between teachers and students.

Board members shared a common vision for the system and had confidence in the Superintendent and leadership team. One board member stated, "The Superintendent and leadership respond to the challenge of moving the system forward." Another shared, "We agree to disagree but, in the end, we accept the charge to lead the system to bigger and better things. We are committed to always doing better." Collectively, the governing body agreed with other stakeholders in the pride they have in being *One Lowndes*.

Stakeholders shared such success stories as the school system being one of the top ten in the state; students are performing above the state averages in almost every academic area; financial efficiency is completely in line with the high achieving academic status; and Climate Surveys are at high levels of satisfaction with all stakeholder groups. In addition to the pride shared about academics, finances, and facilities, many stakeholders wanted the team to know how "together" the community was because of the success of the sports teams and how the entire community comes together in the high school stadium that seats over 11,000 people for a given football game. "The successes of LCSS are directly proportionate to the support and encouragement provided by the Board of Education, the Superintendent, staff, parents and community. Because of the collaboration, trust, and unity that have been established, we are striving for excellence every day as *One Lowndes*," shared a dedicated Viking.

Powerful Practice #2
The superintendent and system administration are highly-qualified, dedicated and visionary leaders who support and encourage collaboration and shared leadership, resulting in evolving professional practices and organizational effectiveness consistent with the system's purpose and direction.   (1.7, 1.8, 1.10)

Primary Standard: 1.7

Evidence:
LCSS's mission is to be a learning community striving for excellence every day. The vision is "working together to empower, challenge, and inspire-*One Lowndes*!" This vision had been branded over the past five years, and every stakeholder group made reference to being *One Lowndes*. When asked how *One Lowndes* became the motto of the schools and the community, everyone mentioned the leadership of the superintendent and system leadership as the persons leading the charge.

The superintendent and system leaders were seen as the catalysts that shape the culture of the system. "They lead by example," stated a stakeholder. "The superintendent's directive is that we must do what is best for children," stated a system leader. When the team interviewed the superintendent, he shared, "If it matters, it needs to be measured."

"Leadership from the instructional department at the system level is exceptional," stated an internal stakeholder. "They are supportive, highly visible in the schools, and lead the charge that positively impacts the educational efforts in the classroom and the entire system," stated another stakeholder.

When asked about financial stability and resource management, every stakeholder group mentioned the skill set of the finance director. Many were quick to share with the team that the finance director's strength was based on his former experience as an educator in the system prior to becoming the finance director. Without exception, the board members, school leaders, teachers, parents, and community members noted the skilled, hard-working and dedicated leadership team at the central office. One interviewee stated, "I do not think you could find a stronger trio than our superintendent and two assistant superintendents. They know their business."

Interviews and artifact reviews indicated that system leadership is focused on improvement and has a structured support system that includes annual data retreats and monthly reviews with administrators. The Comprehensive Needs Assessment and the District Strategic Plan are detailed documents developed in collaboration with the governing body, system and school leadership, parents, and community members. The Teaching and Learning Team conducts school site visits to review school progress targets and improvement plans. Although principals have autonomy to implement various improvement strategies within their buildings, the system leadership is continually working together to challenge and inspire the schools.

Staff repeatedly shared that collaboration and open communication, as modeled by the superintendent and system leadership, are norms of the school system. "Our commitment to Lowndes County Schools is personal," stated a teacher who told of many who have never left their home community. "When you have strong, committed leaders, you want to give it your best," shared another teacher. One board member stated, "I have complete confidence in the superintendent and the leadership team. All decisions are based on putting kids first."

Powerful Practice #3
The school system administers a clearly defined, collaborative, data-driven resource management process that ensures efficient distribution of resources to support teaching and learning.
(3.5, 3.6, 3.7, 3.8)

Primary Standard: 3.7

Evidence:
Strategic planning and collaborative conversations across the school system have allowed the system to maximize all resources. The system utilizes a grassroots budgeting process and involves administration and staff at the school level and central office. Major strides have been accomplished with the budget within the last five years as the system has moved from a time when it was critical to stop the "financial bleeding" to a time when the General Fund Budget is now at approximately $85 million with a reserve fund balance of almost $16 million. LCSS is now ranked in the top ten in Georgia with a Financial Stability Rating of 4.5 on a 5.0 scale. In the Comprehensive Needs Assessment process of 2017, a rating of Exemplary was earned on the well-established budget process that allows input from departments and programs and is driven by the needs of the schools and system.

A five-year facilities plan has just been completed and includes the construction of a new high school, a middle school, two elementary schools, and renovation plans for other schools. The students and staff have benefited from the continuous commitment of the Board of Education to provide facilities and technology equipment to support instruction and system operations. All available funds have been leveraged-local, Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST), federal programs, and grants- to fulfill the mission of the school system.

The system's goal of providing a safe, clean, and healthy environment that is most conducive to student learning is evidenced by the beautifully landscaped grounds, immaculate school buildings, and warm and inviting classrooms with an abundance of student work displayed. In the Comprehensive Needs Assessment for 2017, the system had an Exemplary rating for the ongoing, proactive maintenance of facilities and equipment.

The school system partners with several colleges and universities, serves as a student teacher training site, and has access to qualified teaching candidates. LCSS's most recent teacher retention rate was at 89.3 percent as compared to the state average of 83.3 percent. Every school has numerous support positions to include academic coaches, counselors, nurses, and School Resource Officers. Parent Involvement Liaisons and social workers also support student and family needs.

The system's wireless network is a foundation for instruction with mobile devices and is the result of the board's commitment of $1 million in SPLOST funds combined with $800,000 in federal e-rate funds since 2014. The wireless network enabled a vast expansion in student access to individual devices with a 1:1 initiative in existence in grades 3-6 and plans to extend personally-assigned devices to all students in grades 3-12 by 2020.

Over 400 community and business partners are documented with contributions to *One Lowndes*. Community Partners in Education (CPIE) helps schools develop partnerships that support schools and students. Lowndes Education Improvement Foundation (LEIF) is a non-profit, community-based organization dedicated to promoting excellence in Lowndes County Schools.

Interviews and surveys substantiated the strength of LCSS's allocation of resources to align with identified needs and priorities. Approximately 77 percent of all students interviewed stated that they have all the materials needed to learn. "When you look at our academic success of being above the state average with graduation rate, Georgia Milestones, and SAT, it is because we use our resources wisely," shared an internal stakeholder. "With our superintendent, finance director, and assistant superintendent for instruction leading the charge, Lowndes County School System is awesome in putting the resources where they need to be to get the job done," stated a system leader.

Improvement Priorities

Improvement priorities are developed to enhance the capacity of the institution to reach a higher level of performance and reflect the areas identified by the Engagement Review Team to have the greatest impact on improving student performance and organizational effectiveness.

Improvement Priority #1
Develop, implement and monitor a system-wide instructional process to ensure more rigorous, differentiated, and personalized learning opportunities that promote student reflection and goal setting.   (2.1, 2.2, 2.3)

Primary Standard: 2.1

Evidence:
As the team examined the documents and artifacts provided as evidence for the System Quality Factors Diagnostic, a number of priority areas was noted in the Comprehensive Needs Assessment of 2017 and the Strategic Plan. Increasing rigor in instructional expectations was given as one of the root causes for increasing academic achievement and student growth on standardized assessments. A lack of rigor in daily instruction and high expectations across all content areas were reported trends across the school system. The Strategic Plan had as one of the system goals to ensure common assessments/assignments and evidence-based instructional practices align to the rigor of the standards to include critical thinking, collaborative problem solving, creativity, and inquiry-based learning.

Overall, standardized test scores for Lowndes County Schools are impressive. Yet, in the analysis of the results, the team found only one area of growth in the percentage of students performing at the Distinguished Level on the Georgia Milestones End of Grade (EOG). That area was in science which showed growth from 12 percent in 2016 to 14 percent in 2017. The other three content areas (English/Language Arts, mathematics and social studies) showed no change or a decrease in the percentage of students performing at the Distinguished Level. On the End of Course (EOC) assessments at the secondary level, American Literature, Biology, Economics, and Physical Science results decreased in the percentage of students performing at the Distinguished Level.

On the End of Grade (EOG) assessments in the middle grades, the Students With Disabilities (SWD) subgroup did not meet the performance targets in any of the four content areas (ELA, mathematics, science, and social studies). For English/Language Arts, the Black, Hispanic, and SWD students did not meet the state or the subgroup performance targets. The White students met the state but not the subgroup performance targets in ELA on the EOG. On the End of Course (EOC) assessments at the secondary level, the SWD subgroup did not meet the state or subgroup performance targets in 7 of the 8 EOC courses. Black students did not meet the state or subgroup performance targets in 4 of the 8 EOC classes.

The eleot® observations by the Engagement Review Team provided additional evidence regarding the need to develop the capacity for using system-wide quality instructional strategies. Based on 81 classroom observations across the system in kindergarten through grade 12, the average team rating for Progress Monitoring Environment was 2.63, Equitable Learning Environment was 2.68, and High Expectations was 2.77 on a 4.0 scale. Differentiation was rated at 2.20 with learners engaged in differentiated learning opportunities and/or activities in only 67 percent of the classes observed. Only 50 percent of the students were able to explain how their work was assessed. In only 56 percent of classes observed could students demonstrate and/or describe high quality work.

Artifacts, interviews, and observations revealed some components of instructional processes in support of student learning; however, a structured, aligned instructional framework that is implemented with fidelity, intensity, consistency, and quality was not evident to the team. Based on the interviews with 38 system and school leaders, the team found very little evidence of a system-wide instructional framework. Schools had autonomy in most instructional areas and most persons interviewed stated that the system had targeted areas such as Lexile growth and improvement in writing but there was not an agreed upon system-wide instructional framework. When interviewed, the high school principal stated," Our subject area departments are in different places with rigor." The middle school principals said they shared a common lesson plan format but there was not a system-wide lesson planning format/ process. The system-level administration shared some non-negotiables about professional learning communities but stated that there was not an instructional framework or a common set of instructional expectations for the entire system.

Improvement Priority #2
Adopt and implement systematic and systemic processes and procedures to continuously evaluate programs, services, and organizational conditions to improve student learning across the school system. (2.9, 2.10, 2.12)

Primary Standard: 2.12

Evidence:
With a system of over 10,000 students, 11 schools and approximately 1,400 employees, documented and formalized evaluation processes are needed for all programs and initiatives. Continuous data gathering and analysis are critical elements in the system's quest for continuous improvement. When asked, the majority of the leaders at the system and school levels quoted two major system-wide goals and those were to improve Lexiles and to improve writing. All internal stakeholders stated that schools could choose their training methods that they felt would work at their particular school. "The only non-negotiable is that schools must use data to back up their decision," stated an administrator.

When reviewing instructional materials, the team found that all elementary schools used the Journeys program for reading and the Eureka program for mathematics. The only common formative assessments used were 'Performance Matters' for English/ Language Arts in grades 2-5 and 'Front Row' for mathematics in grades 1-5. In all other areas, the instructional and assessment decisions were left to the individual schools.

Team members inquired about written procedures and processes used to evaluate the effectiveness of the various instructional programs and assessments being used at the various schools. No documentation was found regarding the evaluation of either. In addition, there was no documentation of a formal review process for common assessments, benchmarks, curriculum maps and pacing guides. In fact, in the system's Comprehensive Needs Assessment Report for 2017, it was noted that professional development lacks consistency on specific academic needs.

In assessing systematic and systemic processes and procedures for Lowndes County Schools, the team found very limited evidence to indicate a formalized process and procedures for common grading existed. Even within the same department at a given school, inconsistent grading practices were found. In addition, interviews with system and school leaders revealed no common process or procedures for developing, submitting or reviewing lesson plans. The only common lesson plan format was noted at the Title One schools.

System leadership indicated a review of usage and growth reports for such supplemental educational programs and assessments as iReady, STAR, Front Row, Performance Matters, and USA Test Prep. Yet, there was no evidence of a formalized process to evaluate the effectiveness of these programs and assessments.

An induction, mentoring and coaching program for new teachers and those new to the system had been established and was assigned to two principals for implementation. When asked why that was not coordinated at the system level and how the effectiveness of the program was determined, most stakeholders could not provide any documented evidence. One teacher stated, "We only meet about once every 9 weeks because the two principals are busy." System leaders shared their desire to start an Aspiring Leaders program again since 8 of 11 principals could retire within the next five years. There was no evidence as to what had happened to the Aspiring Leaders program that existed several years ago and why it had not continued.

As an accredited school system committed to building capacity to improve and sustain student learning, LCSS must continuously evaluate its programs, services, and organizational conditions. The commitment to systematic and systemic processes and procedures will stimulate and improve effectiveness and efficiency throughout the school system.

Accreditation Recommendation and Index of Educational Quality™ (IEQ™)

The Engagement Review Team recommendsto the AdvancED Accreditation Commission that the institution earns the distinction of accreditation for a five-year term. AdvancED will review the results of the Engagement Review to make a final determination, including the appropriate next steps for the institution in response to these findings.

AdvancED provides the Index of Education Quality™ (IEQ™) as a holistic measure of overall performance based on a comprehensive set of standards and review criteria. A formative tool for improvement, it identifies areas of success as well as areas in need of focus. The IEQ is comprised of the Standards Diagnostic ratings from the three Domains: 1) Leadership Capacity; 2) Learning Capacity; and 3) Resource Capacity and the results of eleot classroom observations. The IEQ results are reported on a scale of 100 to 400 and provides information about how the institution is performing compared to expected criteria.

Institution IEQ	347.14

Conclusion Narrative

The team identified several pervasive themes that emerged during the time spent in the school system. It was obvious to the team that a strong sense of community exists in the school system. Every person interviewed mentioned the spirit of collaboration and how it is such a joy to be a part of the caring culture in LCSS. A genuine care and concern for students was evident in a system known community-wide as *One Lowndes*. The existence of a sense of pride and a commitment to shared values were heard repeatedly as an integral part of the success of the public schools in LCSS.

The findings from the 81 classroom observations regarding a well-managed and supportive learning environment were indicative of the caring culture of the entire school system. The well-managed and supportive learning environments were observed in classrooms at all grade levels from kindergarten through high school. Students spoke and interacted respectfully with teachers and peers and readily followed classroom rules.

The strong, visionary leadership theme was characterized by the superintendent, as well as system administrators.

They all have a clear direction and remain focused on the mission of the school system. The visionary leaders work well with the Board of Education, system and school staff, community members, and parents. The strong relationships create a caring culture that values collaboration and communication. The entire administrative team from the central office to the school level was characterized as a leadership team that works well together and is very accessible to stakeholders. The importance of building relationships was evidenced in all interviews with both internal and external stakeholders. In addition, the proactive and persistent communication efforts of the leadership team result in meaningful stakeholder involvement and a sense of pervasive ownership and investment from stakeholders and families.

The school system has maintained its finances and all other resources extremely well in recent years with a fund balance of approximately $17 million. A five-year facilities plan has been developed with plans to construct a new high school, a middle school, two elementary schools and renovations to other facilities. The system-wide wireless network is the foundation for instruction with mobile devices. The system is 1:1 in grades 3-6 with plans to extend personally-assigned devices to all students in grades 3-12 by 2020. As a part of its strategic plan, the system plans to create a comprehensive system-wide multi-year plan for sustainable growth and scheduled replacement of hardware and software. Such findings are indicative of an effective system that has a clear direction and stays focused on the mission of being a learning community striving for excellence every day.

The themes of visionary leadership, commitment to shared values, a caring culture, a sense of pride, a clear focus on the mission and vision, persistent communication efforts, community investment, strategic resource management, and a genuine commitment to improve emerged during the review process. These themes permeate the entire school system and will be the forces that LCSS can build upon to bring about student success and organizational effectiveness.

The system recognizes its challenges and has activities already planned to better focus on success for all students. Although the school system has enjoyed success in graduation rate and student achievement, documentation to provide more rigorous and differentiated learning opportunities for all students are needed. In addition, the school system needs to develop and implement systematic and systemic processes and procedures to continually evaluate the programs, services, and organizational conditions to improve student learning. To address these challenges, the school system is implementing system-wide protocols to drive collaborative data usage at the domain level to inform instruction and implementing Professional Learning Communities at each school. Some initiatives and formative assessments have been evaluated but more formalized, documented processes and procedures are necessary to ensure sustainable improvement.

Using the Improvement Priorities as a road map can form a foundation for growth and improvement. The Improvement Priorities are the things that the team identified as preventing the school system from being as effective as it could be in meeting the system goal of continuous improvement. Fully implementing high expectations for all learning environments and implementing formalized, documented system-wide processes and procedures for evaluating effectiveness can have a major impact on improving student performance and system effectiveness. By addressing these identified actions, the school system may enhance its capacity to reach a higher level of performance and find success for every student.

Next Steps

The results of the Engagement Review provide the next step to guide the improvement journey of the institution in their efforts to improve the quality of educational opportunities for all learners. The findings are aligned to research-based criteria designed to improve student learning and organizational effectiveness. The feedback provided in the Accreditation Engagement Review Report will assist the institution in reflecting on their current improvement efforts and to adapt and adjust their plans to continuously strive for improvement.

Upon receiving the Accreditation Engagement Review Report the institution is encouraged to implement the following steps:
- Review and share the findings with stakeholders.
- Develop plans to address the Improvement Priorities identified by the Engagement Review Team.
- Use the findings and data from the report to guide and strengthen the institution's continuous improvement efforts.
- Celebrate the successes noted in the report
- Continue your Improvement Journey

Team Roster

The Engagement Review Teams are comprised of professionals with varied backgrounds and professional experiences. All Lead Evaluators and Engagement Review Team members complete AdvancED training and eleot® certification to provide knowledge and understanding of the AdvancED tools and processes. The following professionals served on the Engagement Review Team:

Team Member Name	Brief Biography
Dr. Cheryl Allread	Dr. Allread's career spans over 45 years. She retired from Marion County Schools in South Carolina after having taught math and science for 7 years, serving as principal for 11 years, as assistant superintendent for instruction for 11 years, and as district superintendent for 7 years. After retirement from 36 years working in Marion County, she began working as a consultant with the S.C. State Department of Education, serving as Liaison for low-performing schools/Palmetto Priority Schools. She also conducted academic audits, served as principal mentor, and served as a leadership coach in instructional supervision. Dr. Allread currently serves as Field Consultant for AdvancED in S.C. and works as Lead Evaluator for AdvancED in schools and systems across the United States and internationally, as well as continuing to work as a consultant with schools and systems in instructional supervision.
Ms. Wendy Porter	Wendy Porter has been an educator in the Effingham County School District in Georgia for 27 years. She taught middle school science for 15 years before becoming the Academic Science Coach. Mrs. Porter served 8 years as the system testing coordinator and is now currently serving as the Curriculum Coordinator for the school system. She has a Bachelor's in Secondary Science Education, a Master's in Educational Leadership from Georgia Southern University, and an Education Specialist in Educational Leadership from Mercer University. Mrs. Porter has served as a team member on numerous AdvancED system and school reviews in Georgia.

Team Member Name	Brief Biography
Ms. Laura Grimwade	Laura Grimwade currently serves as Director of Research, Assessment, and Accountability for the Rockdale County Public School System in Conyers, Georgia. Laura holds a Specialist Degree in Educational Leadership from Georgia State University. She has 26 years of experience as an educator working in diverse public school settings as a secondary math teacher, teacher support specialist, technology trainer, instructional lead teacher, K-12 math coordinator, staff developer, mentor, and education consultant. Her responsibilities and expertise include: systems change efforts, curriculum and instruction, design and evaluation of professional development, federal programs, formative and summative assessments, CCRPI, and data analysis and reporting. Laura has also been working for the College Board as a math consultant and mentor for new consultants since 1999.
Ms. Blue Huggins	Blue Huggins currently works as the Director of Curriculum and Instruction for Barnwell School District 19 in Blackville, South Carolina. As Director, her job entails overseeing all K-12 curriculum and development, teacher evaluation, and professional development. Additionally, she functions as the Induction and Mentoring and Read to Succeed coordinator for the school system. During her 27 years of experience, Ms. Huggins has worked as a high school assistant principal, curriculum specialist at the elementary and high school level, Title I Facilitator, English/Language Arts coordinator, Literacy Coach, Reading Interventionist, Teacher Specialist on Site for the SC Department of Education, graduate instructor and classroom teacher. She has earned a M.Ed. in Educational Administration and Leadership from Winthrop University, a M. Ed. in Reading from the University of South Carolina, and a B.S. in Elementary Education from Francis Marion University.
Mr. R. Steven Jones	R. Steven Jones is in his fourth year as Principal of Northeast Health Science High School in Bibb County School District, Georgia, after having looped with his students from Appling Middle School where he was principal the prior 4 years. During Mr. Jones' 20 years in education, he has served 3 years as an elementary principal, 6 years as a middle school principal, and 4 years as a high school principal. Mr. Jones currently holds an Ed. Specialist degree from the University of West Georgia with a focus on school improvement. He also holds a Bachelor's degree from Albany State University and a Master's degree from Georgia College and State University. Mr. Jones is experienced with school accreditation as two of his schools completed the review process while he was principal.
Mr. Jeff Garthwaite	Jeff Garthwaite taught middle school American History and Civics and served as a middle school assistant principal and principal. Following retirement, he returned as coordinator for the school system's Department of Juvenile Justice schools and Title I private and parochial schools. He was then assigned as principal to a rural school with Pre K through grade 8 and charged with improving the school's failing state grade in Florida. Mr. Garthwaite has presented a variety of educational workshops at national, state, and local conferences, focusing on middle school topics and educational leadership. He has been a consultant within a corporate educational partnership, providing professional development services to high school and middle school principals across several states. He has also provided educational consulting and professional development services to several Florida charter schools. Mr. Garthwaite served as a state Regional Director on the Florida League of Middle Schools' Executive Board. He has served on AdvancED Engagement Review Teams for schools and systems in Florida, Georgia, and North Carolina.

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About AdvancED

AdvancED is a non-profit, non-partisan organization serving the largest community of education

professionals in the world. Founded on more than 100 years of work in continuous improvement,

AdvancED combines the knowledge and expertise of a research institute, the skills of a management

consulting firm and the passion of a grassroots movement for educational change to empower

Pre-K-12 schools and school systems to ensure that all learners realize their full potential.