



Report of the Special Review Team for Collier County School District Naples, Florida

Findings and Recommendations presented to:
Dr. Dennis Thompson, Superintendent
Mrs. Linda Abbot, Board Chair

**Review Dates:
June 3-4, 2008**

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AdvancED is the parent organization of the North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement (NCA CASI), Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Council on Accreditation and School



Improvement (SACS CASI), and the National Study of School Evaluation (NSSE).
NCA CASI and SACS CASI serve as accreditation divisions of **AdvancED**.

Table of Contents

	Page Number
About AdvancED and SACS CASI	1
Introduction and Background:	
Special Review Team Process and Collier County Schools	2
Findings of the Special Review Team	5
Accreditation Recommendation and Next Steps	10
Closing Comments	11
Appendix A: Summary of 10 Required Actions	12

About AdvancED and SACS CASI

Background

Founded in 1895, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Council on Accreditation and Schools (SACS CASI) and the North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement (NCA CASI) accredit public and private schools and districts in 30 states, the Navajo Nation, Latin America, and the Department of Defense Schools worldwide.

In 2006, NCA CASI, SACS CASI, and the research and development arm of the accrediting associations, the National Study of School Evaluation, unified to form **AdvancED**. Dedicated to advancing excellence in education, **AdvancED** provides accreditation, research, and professional services to 23,000 schools in 65 countries, serving 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, school districts, and educational service agencies continuously improve.

The Accreditation Process

To earn and maintain accreditation from SACS CASI, school districts and their schools must:

- 1) **Meet the AdvancED Standards for Quality School Systems.** School districts demonstrate adherence to the **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 two years following the review.

SACS CASI/**AdvancED** 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 and Background

Special Review Team and Collier County Schools

A Special Review Team (SRT) was appointed by **AdvancED** and the Council on Accreditation and School Improvement of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS CASI) to conduct an onsite visit to the Collier County School District in Naples, FL on June 3-4, 2008. A key aim of **AdvancED's** Special Review Team process is to verify that the school district is continuing to meet the three pillars of accreditation and is operating with institutional integrity – that it is fulfilling its vision and mission for its students and other stakeholders.

The purposes of Collier County's Special Review Team were to:

1. Conduct an investigation of progress made during the 2007-08 school year in meeting Recommendation #1 made by the Quality Assurance Review Team that conducted Collier County's District Accreditation visit from April 15-18, 2007. Stipulated in the April 2007 report was the point that SACS CASI would deploy a team back to the district no later than the end of the during 2007-08 school year to review progress made in meeting Recommendation #1.
2. Describe findings related to Recommendation #1 and relevant evidence supporting those findings.
3. Provide specific recommendations for improvement, as pertinent, to address the findings of the investigation.
4. Make an accreditation recommendation for review by the national **AdvancED** Accreditation Commission.

The Quality Assurance Review Team Visit in April 2007

The quality assurance review team that visited the district in April 2007 formulated evidential findings and a strong recommendation relevant to the **AdvancED** District Accreditation Standard 2 on **GOVERNANCE AND LEADERSHIP**, which notes that

A quality system provides for and promotes stability in the leadership, governance and organizational structure which include a focus in developing and maintaining a vision; an emphasis on improving student learning; and support for innovative efforts that produce desired results.

While the Governance and Leadership Standard describes through indicators quality practices in the areas of school board governance and district leadership, most concern arose about how the district's Board of Education was meeting the governance indicators, which are listed below:

In fulfillment of the standard, the system operates under a governing board that:

- Adopts written policies and procedures that promote the effective operation of the system that include clearly defined lines of authority, relationships, and accountability which support the mission, beliefs and goals of the system;
- Permits the administrative team of the system to implement policies and procedures without interference;
- Establishes policies and procedures that recognize and preserve the executive, administrative, and leadership prerogatives of the head of the system and the schools; and
- Implements policies and procedures that provide for the orientation and training of the governing board.

In its final report the quality assurance team in 2007 addressed concerns about the board's operation and effectiveness as a governing body when applying *District Accreditation Standard 2, indicators on Governance* in its first recommendation. The complete recommendation is as follows:

In its operations at all sites and within all departments the district has created “learning communities” as a philosophical approach aimed at enhancing its ability to pursue the district’s mission and vision, and model the district’s beliefs. Given this, the District School Board of Collier County (the governing board) has the opportunity to enhance its own effectiveness by conducting a comprehensive and thorough review of its policies and operations as described in three needed actions.

1. The board shall do a self-evaluation of its performance, identifying its strengths and challenges as a governing body.
2. The board shall develop an in-house effectiveness training program with the specific objective of improving its ability to work as a governing body.
3. The board will work with the superintendent to complete a comprehensive external review of its policies with specific attention to those policies that may be subject to multiple interpretations. Specifically, those policies must be subject to review and refinement that make reference to the roles of the board and the management team, and align specifically with the district initiatives as described in the district’s strategic plan.

Additional salient information about this recommendation can be found within the body of the complete written report sent to the Superintendent in May 2007.

Because of the 2007 quality assurance review team’s report and the recommendation for a re-visit the following school year to assess progress made in meeting the conditions of that report’s Recommendation #1, the **AdvancED** Accreditation Commission approved Collier County for District Accreditation, with a status of **WARNED**.

Having received an accreditation status of **WARNED** for 2007, the accreditation status options available to the Special Review Team in June 2008 were:

- Accreditation (clear)— a written Accreditation Progress Report on all 2007 QAR team recommendations; report during 2009-2010,
- Accreditation **Warned** (year 2)--a follow-up visit or a written report pertaining to progress made in meeting Recommendation #1 as stipulated in the 2008 SRT report; visit or report during 2009-10, or
- Accreditation **Probation**—mandatory follow-up visit pertaining to progress made in meeting Recommendation #1 as stipulated in the 2008 SRT report; visit during 2009-2010.

Activities Conducted by the Special Review Team (SRT) in June 2008

In preparation for the onsite visit, the SRT members studied a written summary of evidence assembled by the district that included school board policies and procedures, meeting agendas and minutes, district communication devices such as *The Collier Communicator*, DVDs of school board meetings, and district web site references. During the two-day onsite visit the SRT reviewed additional documentary evidence and artifacts including more board minutes, draft revisions of District School Board of Collier County policies, and an additional DVD of board training. The SRT conducted interviews with

- the Superintendent and seven of his management team
- four out of five board of Education members (one member was hospitalized and not available)
- 17 school level administrators representing district K-12 schools
- the School Board Attorney
- by conference call with one staff member from the North East Ohio Learning Association (NEOLA), the external consulting firm that worked with the district on policy revision and some board training
- a senior legislative assistant from the FL legislature, and
- eight community stakeholders including some parents.

To encourage community stakeholders to provide input, the SRT asked the district to advertise in the local newspapers for written statements. The statements were to give specific evidence about progress being made by the board in the three specific governance areas being investigated, as noted on page 3 of this report. Six written statements were received by the SRT, read individually by each team member; the SRT as a whole discussed the evidence provided and the relevance of the letters' statements to its investigation.

Findings of the Special Review Team

The SRT took precautions to ensure that all findings could be directly linked to available evidence in the print and electronic artifacts provided by the district. In addition, information provided through personal accounts gleaned during interviews and submitted written statements received during the two-day onsite visit were used. The SRT maintained its focus on evaluating evidence of actions or behaviors relative to the three areas of governance stipulated in the 2007 District Accreditation report. It should be noted that the District School Board of Collier County adopted a resolution (March 20th, 2008) in support of the SRT's visit and SACS CASI/**AdvancED** district accreditation.

Context

The quality assurance review team who visited Collier County schools in 2007 was impressed that *“in its operations at all sites and within all departments (the school district) has created ‘learning communities’ as a philosophical approach aimed at enhancing its ability to pursue the district’s mission and vision, and model the district’s beliefs.”* (QART Report for Collier County Schools, April 2007, page 20) Given this, the team communicated that the school board was being given the opportunity through serious response and collaborative action to the team’s recommendation on governance. The team believed that, by giving the board such an opportunity, it could face and collaboratively address its governance problems, enhance its own effectiveness, more model effective boards’ man-ship, and demonstrate support for the district’s ‘learning community’ culture.

The SRT who visited the district in June 2008 was duly impressed that the schools and central office departments are maintaining a focus on continuous improvement planning and learning communities. The schools and central office are held to high standards of performance and are accountable; they are expected to plan, implement, assess, and are results-accountable in relation to expectations. Their quality processes continue to be systemic across the district, and, as the last year has demonstrated, have provided operational stability during a tumultuous time of change within the district (i.e., departure of the previous superintendent and several senior central leadership staff).

Because of the context in which Collier’s schools and central departments are continuing to operate, the SRT believed, and evidence clearly indicated, that the District School Board of Collier County likewise should be held to accountable for and expected to model the expectations for continuous planning, implementation, and accountability to which those they govern are held.

Such then is the context within which the SRT describes its findings and states next steps needed for the district and its school board.

Summary of Findings

1. The board shall do a self-evaluation of its performance, identifying its strengths and challenges as a governing body.

The SRT found evidence that the school board had initiated a review of its performance. The first efforts to review performance occurred during a training session with representatives from NEOLA®, an Ohio-based consulting firm. A videotape of this session provided insights into the perceptions of board members of the strengths and inadequacies of the manner in which the board functions as well as some of the interpersonal dynamics among individual board members. However, this conversation was never brought to conclusion or consensus by listing specific strengths and targeting specific inadequacies on which the board might target and plan for their collective growth.

Interviews with stakeholders in a wide variety of positions within the school district and community resulted in the SRT gaining a clear perspective that stakeholders perceive and describe board governance as “dysfunctional”. Noted, however, were some comments indicating that the board was making small improvements in its performance as a governing body. One such comment indicated that some movement from “allegiance” voting to more “issue” voting has occurred; members of the SRT perceived that the change was very likely the result of efforts by the Superintendent who meets with individual board members each week for “after actions’ review” of board meeting performance.

Within a few weeks of the SRT visit, and much later than had been intended by the 2007 quality assurance review team, the board completed a “Self-Evaluation Tool for the School Board”. This instrument was developed through collaboration of the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) and the National Association of School Boards (NASB). The version of this instrument used by the board was revised somewhat, through board input after looking at similar instruments used for self-evaluation of other business organizations. Results of this survey were shared at two board meetings. At the first meeting, board members were asked to assess the needs identified and to bring their recommendations for possible areas of training to the next meeting of the board. At the second meeting, a compilation of results was shared, and comments were made about trends in board performance that had been identified by a couple of board members. Identification of trends is an important part of comprehensive improvement planning, and such data are useful to the development of an improvement plan. Again, however, the SRT team found no evidence that the board had taken the necessary next step to identify specific strengths and weaknesses, nor had a plan been developed to address those needs.

The SRT found little evidence that the board viewed itself as having any responsibility for modeling the leader behaviors, planning processes, and accountability for actions to which other leaders in the

district are held responsible. High quality school districts promote the development of effective leadership at all levels, including from individual members of the board.

Based on the preponderance of evidence regarding ***“The board shall do a self-evaluation of its performance, identifying its strengths and challenges as a governing body”*** the SRT finds the District School Board of Collier County has made minimal progress in the identification of its strengths and inadequacies. To continue making progress in meeting this recommendation, the board shall:

- Identify specific strengths and challenges/inadequacies of performance of the board as a governing body and prioritize the challenges/inadequacies in terms of need for improvement.
- Develop a written plan for the provision of training board members in effective board's man-ship.
- Avail themselves of opportunities to practice (in an environment that encourages reflective learning) shared decision-making with feedback on individual performance as a collaborative member of the board.
- Model effective leader behavior and hold itself (the Board) accountable for practicing the “learning community” behaviors it purports to support from other school and district leaders.

2. The board shall develop an in-house effectiveness training program with the specific objective of improving its ability to work as a governing body.

The SRT found evidence that the District School Board of Collier County has made minimal effort to comply with the intent of this recommendation. Individually, board members have the opportunity to attend training sessions offered by other agencies; as a group, the board has participated in only two training sessions during the 2007-08 school year.

The first training session was conducted by **NEOLA** in November of 2007. A review of the video revealed that the session dealt with community perceptions, understanding of structures and processes, understanding of the difference between listening to respond and listening for understanding, and Board-Superintendent relationships. Through interviews and review of artifacts, the SRT determined that the session did not produce a list of strengths or priority topics for future training needs.

The second training session was conducted recently (May 20, 2008) by the Florida School Boards Association (FSBA). The agenda included: a board self-assessment, creating a good governance team, school board ethics, and board/superintendent relationships. All board members, as well as the Superintendent and School Board Attorney, were in attendance. This training session produced more discussion and participation by board members who seemed to be interested in establishing an atmosphere of conducting the school business in a civil and efficient manner. Even though the topics depict parameters necessary for school board development, no evaluation or follow-up has taken place.

Stakeholder interviews verified that there was a need for additional training for the board members. Evidence gathered through these interviews revealed that one of the activities that seem to have made things a little better has been the weekly one-on-one meetings between the Superintendent and board members. However, most stakeholders agreed that the training that has occurred this school term has not created improvement in the creation of a good governance team.

In considering the preponderance of evidence to determine compliance with the recommendation ***The board shall develop an in-house effectiveness training program with the specific objective of improving its ability to work as a governing body***, the SRT determined that even though the board has participated in some training, the board has not developed a training program and has no future training planned. To continue making progress and comply with this recommendation, the board shall:

- Complete a self-evaluation of the board's performance identifying strengths and challenges as a governing body. Based on the data gathered from this activity, an effective training **program** shall be developed, which includes a process to ensure that training will not be random acts or reactive.
- Prepare a specific written improvement plan (Collier County Schools' Board Training Program) that shall include goals, activities, trainers, timeline, resources, and assessment. (An excellent resource may be the FSBA training material, which may help in the development of a scope and sequence for the training plan.)
- Implement the training plan and measure the results to determine the extent to which board member performance and behavior meets expectations.

3. The board will work with the superintendent to complete a comprehensive external review of its policies with specific attention to those policies that may be subject to multiple interpretations. Specifically, those policies must be subject to review and refinement that make reference to the roles of the board and the management team, and align specifically with the district initiatives as described in the district's strategic plan.

There is clear evidence that the District School Board of Collier County has performed a review and is revising its current collection of board policies. In contracting with NEOLA the board has done an extensive review of each area of current policy. NEOLA is a consulting firm with a national reputation that specializes in assisting school boards in reviewing and developing policy. The current contract between the District School Board of Collier County and NEOLA also calls for yearly policy updates when appropriate.

Video evidence provided to the SRT documented a training and review process with the board that focused on policy change and development. A comprehensive digest of policies are scheduled for adoption following Florida Law that outlines procedures for policy adoption. Currently the schedule calls for adoption as early as August 21, 2008 and no later than September 18, 2008.

Interviews with the NEOLA consultants indicated that progress has been made in the board's understanding of a thorough overhaul of all its policies. As noted in the Quality Assurance Review of April, 2007, most policies had not been revised or examined in the last 30 years.

The SRT noted that new policies that make reference to the roles of the board, superintendent and the management team soon will be in place. Stakeholder interviews noted that, since the board either ignored or violated some of its policies in the past, there is further need for the board to spend time acquainting itself with the newly developed set of policies.

Evidence derived from interviews with individual board members, the superintendent and the management team indicates that the relationship between the board, the superintendent and the management team are making progress with the board shifting to take on less of a management role. Stakeholder interviews indicated a perception that board members are currently in the process of developing an understanding of the upcoming policy changes that will clearly separate the roles of policy making and management. It was the consensus of the review team that progress has been made in this area, but since policy adoption has not been completed, there are additional activities that must be completed to meet this section of the original 2007 recommendation.

To continue making progress and meeting this recommendation the District School Board of Collier County shall:

- Continue to review and educate themselves on the policy changes, particularly in the area of board and superintendent/management team relations; in conjunction with this, develop and employ a written communication plan, which includes an implementation time line for educating themselves, staff and the public.
- Conduct meetings of the board and demonstrate individual board member behavior aligned with the district's new policies.
- Align policy and district initiatives as described in the existing district strategic and operational plans.

The complete review and overhaul of all board policies has provided an opportunity for both the board and the superintendent/ management team to focus on improved governance of the district with clear and defined role expectations.

NOTE---All successful and effective organizations must have policies and procedures that provide for a systematic plan of operation and direction for conducting the business of the organization. It is particularly important for schools within a school district such as Collier County to have the security and direction that comes with clearly defined policies and procedures, and when such

policies and procedures are outdated, ignored or circumvented by the local board of education; it does affect the efficient, effective operation of the schools. Furthermore, it is not the intent of the Governance Standards of SACS CASI/**AdvancED** to question the authority, decisions and actions of the board of education that are in keeping with its own adopted policies and procedures as well as applicable federal and state laws and procedures. For this district and its schools to be accredited and maintain accreditation, local board of education policies must be developed, implemented, and periodically updated by the governing board of the district.

Recommendation: Collier County District Accreditation Status, June 2008

Based on clear, compelling and documented evidence, the SRT found that, while making some progress in addressing Recommendation #1 of the 2007 QAR team report, the Collier County School District has not met the SACS CASI/**AdvancED** Standard on Governance and Leadership. Therefore, the Team recommends that the district's accreditation status continue as Accredited **WARNED**.

The SRT recommends that the Collier County Schools host another SRT charged with investigating progress made in meeting the findings of the 2008 SRT (i.e., those requirements described on pages 6-10 and summarized on pages 13-14 of this report). The district must demonstrate and provide solid evidence that it has made substantial progress and/or completed meeting all required actions by the time of the next SRT. The next SRT visit must occur after January 30th, but no later than March 15th, 2009.

The 2009 SRT's findings will result in an Accreditation Status recommendation. Depending on the preponderance of the evidence in those findings, the status will be CLEAR, or PROBATION, or LOSS OF ACCREDITATION for the Collier County School District and all of its schools.

Using and Acting on the Report

A copy of this report is sent to the superintendent within 30 days of the SRT visit. The Collier County School District shall use the SRT report to guide its response to the findings and its improvement efforts. The district is held accountable for addressing the actions identified in this report. SACS CASI/**AdvancED** is available to assist the district in addressing the action steps therein stipulated.

Accreditation Recommendation

The SRT based its report and accreditation recommendation on its findings. This report and recommendation is reviewed by the **AdvancED** National Accreditation Commission, which makes

the final decision on the district's accreditation status and next steps. The next meeting of the Commission is June, 2008 in Tempe, Arizona. Following action by the National Accreditation Commission the President/CEO of **AdvancED**, Dr. Mark Elgart, will communicate the Commission's final decisions to the district.

Closing Comments

AdvancED recognizes and appreciates the commitment that is required of those who serve as members of school boards, and applaud the contribution that boards make to the education of the nation's students. Most school board members spend a tremendous amount of time working to ensure that quality education services are provided to the children entrusted to their service.

Quality school boards recognize that there is an orderly process that must be followed in the operation of a quality school district. Defining the roles and responsibilities of board members, the superintendent, and administrative staff have been carefully developed over time to ensure that focus is placed on improving the educational welfare of students. For those involved, every action and every behavior, whether positive or negative, reflects upon that focus.

Throughout this country there are thousands of school board members who positively impact the quality of education by following established operational policies and procedures, serving without fanfare or recognition as they work **together** in orderly fashion to achieve systemic improvement goals established to benefit students.

AdvancED applauds quality school boards and their members who honor the position with which they are entrusted. Conversely, **AdvancED** believes that school boards and their members should be called to task when their actions serve to violate or otherwise diminish the public trust and principles of effective boards' man-ship. It is not the role of **AdvancED** to assess motivation. However, research and practice have shown that a school board that successfully guides school leaders toward attaining the district's mission, meets the expectations of its many stakeholders, and achieves **AdvancED** District Accreditation does so through the orderly process of governance, collaboration, and integrity in all action and behavior.

The SRT recognizes Collier County schools' long history of accreditation and providing quality educational services for its students. The SRT firmly believes that the District School Board of Collier County wishes to contribute greatly to continuing that success. However, the governance issues discussed in this report, as well as those in the preceding 2007 Quality Assurance Review Team report, require serious, collaborative and timely action, because they have the tremendous potential for negatively impacting the quality of the Collier learning community for students, staff, and all other stakeholders.

Members of the Special Review Team for Collier County Schools, June 2008

Dr. Michael Bugenski, Michigan
Dr. James Doud, Florida

Dr. Billy Floyd, South Carolina
Dr. Lucy Hayden, Georgia

Appendix A: *Summary of 10 Required Actions **

***It is the intention of SACS CASI/AdvancED that any required actions that include developing or implementing an action plan for improving the District School Board of Collier County must include the following planning components—performance goals or expectations for participants, specific strategies or activities to be implemented, defined timelines and responsible parties, and methods of evaluating or determining outcomes in terms of the performance goals/expectations.**

“The board shall do a self-evaluation of its performance, identifying its strengths and challenges as a governing body”

The District School Board of Collier County shall

1. Identify specific strengths and challenges/inadequacies of performance of the board as a governing body and prioritize the challenges/inadequacies in terms of need for improvement.
2. Develop a written plan including a time line for the provision of training board members in effective board's man-ship.
3. Avail themselves of opportunities to practice (in an environment that encourages learning) shared decision-making with feedback on individual performance as a collaborative member of the board.
4. Model effective leader behavior and hold itself accountable for practicing the “learning community” behaviors it purports to support from other school and district leaders.

“The board shall develop an in-house effectiveness training program with the specific objective of improving its ability to work as a governing body.”

The District School Board of Collier County shall

5. Complete a self-evaluation of the board’s performance identifying strengths and challenges as a governing body. Based on the data gathered from this activity, an effective training **program** shall be developed, which includes a process to ensure that training will not be random acts or reactive.
6. Prepare a specific written improvement plan (Collier County Schools’ Board Training Program) that include goals, activities, trainers, timeline, resources, and assessment. (An excellent resource may be the FSBA training material, which may help in the development of a scope and sequence for the training plan.)
7. Implement the training plan and measure the results to determine the extent to which board member performance and behavior meets expectations.

“The board will work with the superintendent to complete a comprehensive external review of its policies with specific attention to those policies that may be subject to multiple interpretations. Specifically, those policies must be subject to review and refinement that make reference to the roles of the board and the management team, and align specifically with the district initiatives as described in the district’s strategic plan.”

The District School Board of Collier County shall:

8. Continue to review and educate themselves on the policy changes, particularly in the area of board and superintendent/management team relations; in conjunction with this, develop and employ a written communication plan, which includes an implementation time line for educating themselves, staff and the public.
9. Conduct meetings of the board and demonstrate individual board member behavior aligned with the district’s new policies.
10. Align policy and district initiatives as described in the existing district strategic and operational plans.