



## **External Review**

### **Florence City Schools**

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction to the External Review Process	1
Part I: Finding	2
Accreditation Standards and Indicators	2
Part II: Conclusion	17
Summary of the External Review	17
Required Actions	21
Part III: Addenda	21
Next Step	21
Celebrating Accreditation	21
About AdvancED	21

## **Introduction to the External Review Process**

Accreditation is a voluntary method of quality assurance developed more than 100 years ago by American universities and secondary schools, and designed primarily to distinguish schools adhering to a set of educational standards. Today the accreditation process is used at all levels of education, and is recognized for its ability to effectively drive student performance and continuous improvement in education.

Institutions seeking to gain or retain accreditation must meet AdvancED standards specified for their institution, demonstrate high levels of or improvement of student performance if applicable, and provide evidence of stakeholder satisfaction with the operation of the institution. The accreditation standards focus on conditions and processes within a system that impact student performance and organizational effectiveness. The power of AdvancED Performance Accreditation lies in the connections and linkages between and among the standards, student performance, and stakeholder feedback.

Institutions participate in an External Review by a team of highly qualified evaluators who examine the institution's adherence and commitment to the accreditation criteria. The External Review is the hallmark of AdvancED Performance Accreditation as it energizes and equips the leadership and stakeholders of an institution to achieve higher levels of performance and address those areas that may be hindering efforts to reach desired performance levels. External Review is a rigorous process that includes examination of evidence and relevant data, interviews with stakeholders, and observations of instruction, learning, and operations.

The AdvancED External Review Team used the AdvancED Accreditation Standards and Indicators and related criteria to guide its evaluation, looking not only for adherence to standards, but also for how the institution functioned as a whole and embodied the practices and characteristics of quality.

Using the evidence at their disposal, the AdvancED External Review Team arrived at a set of findings contained in this report. The report is presented in three sections: Findings, Conclusion, and Addenda.

## Part I: Findings

The Findings section presents the External Review Team's evaluation of the AdvancED Accreditation Standards and Indicators. It also includes Powerful Practices and Opportunities for Improvement identified by the External Review Team, observations of the Learning Environment, as well as Required Actions.

### Accreditation Standards and Indicators

Standards help to delineate what matters. They provide a common language through which an education community can engage in conversations about educational improvement, system effectiveness, and achievement. They serve as a foundation for planning and implementing improvement strategies and activities and for measuring success. AdvancED's Standards for Quality were developed by a committee comprised of effective educators and leaders from the fields of practice, research, and policy who applied professional wisdom, deep knowledge of effective practice, and the best available research to craft a set of robust standards that ensure excellence and continuous improvement. The standards were reviewed by internationally recognized experts in testing and measurement, teacher quality, and education research.

This section contains an evaluation of each of AdvancED's Accreditation Standards and Indicators, conclusions concerning Powerful Practices and Opportunities for Improvement related to each of the standards, and a description of the evidence examined by the External Review Team. Indicators are evaluated and rated individually by the External Review Team using a four-level performance rubric. The Standard Performance Level is the average of indicator scores for the standard.

#### ***Standard 1: Purpose and Direction***

Purpose and direction are critical to successful institutions. A study conducted in 2010 by the London-based Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) reported that "in addition to improving performance, the research indicates that having a sense of shared purpose also improves employee engagement" and that "...lack of understanding around purpose can lead to demotivation and emotional detachment, which in turn lead to a disengaged and dissatisfied workforce."

AdvancED has found through its own evaluation of best practices in 30,000 institutions around the world that a successful institution commits to a shared purpose and direction and establishes expectations for student learning aligned with the institutions' vision that is supported by internal and external stakeholders. These expectations serve as the focus for assessing student performance and overall institution effectiveness.

Standard	Standard Performance Level
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## External Review

Florence City Schools

The system maintains and communicates at all levels of the organization a purpose and direction for continuous improvement that commit to high expectations for learning as well as shared values and beliefs about teaching and learning.		3.25	
Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
1.1	The system engages in a systematic, inclusive, and comprehensive process to review, revise, and communicate a system-wide purpose for student success.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•District purpose statements - past and present</li> <li>•Written District Quality Assurance Review procedures and documents that monitor its schools' adherence to the district purpose and direction</li> <li>•Examples of communications to stakeholders about the district's purpose (i.e. website, newsletters, annual report, student handbook)</li> <li>•Minutes from meetings related to development of the district's purpose and direction</li> <li>•Documentation or description of the process for creating the district's purpose including the role of stakeholders</li> <li>•Stakeholders' interviews</li> </ul>	4
1.2	The system ensures that each school engages in a systematic, inclusive, and comprehensive process to review, revise, and communicate a school purpose for student success.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Examples of school purpose statements if different from the district purpose statement</li> <li>•Survey results</li> <li>•Agendas and/or minutes that reference a commitment to the components of the schools' purpose statements</li> <li>•Written District Quality Assurance Review procedures and documents that monitor schools' adherence to the district purpose and direction and that of the school</li> <li>•Stakeholders' Interviews</li> </ul>	3
1.3	The school leadership and staff at all levels of the system commit to a culture that is based on shared values and beliefs about teaching and learning and supports challenging, equitable educational programs and learning experiences for all students that include achievement of learning, thinking, and life skills.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Examples of schools' continuous improvement plans</li> <li>•The district strategic plan</li> <li>•Survey results</li> <li>•Statements of shared values and beliefs about teaching and learning</li> <li>•Communication plan and artifacts that show two-way communication to staff and stakeholders about educational programs and equitable learning experiences</li> <li>•Interviews with administrators</li> </ul>	3

1.4	Leadership at all levels of the system implement a continuous improvement process that provides clear direction for improving conditions that support student learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•The district strategic plan</li> <li>•Survey results</li> <li>•The district data profile</li> <li>•Communication plan and artifacts that show two-way communication to staff and stakeholders</li> <li>•Agenda, minutes from continuous improvement planning meetings</li> <li>•Examples of schools continuous improvement plans</li> <li>•Stakeholders' interviews</li> </ul>	3
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**Powerful Practices**

**Indicator**

1. The district leadership team engaged stakeholders in the review, revision, and communication of the district's purpose and direction.

1.1

The district shaped and defined the vision and purpose through its core values and beliefs. The vision and stated expectations are pervasive throughout the district and its schools. During interviews, the superintendent and stakeholders clearly articulated a consistent meaning and understanding of the district's vision and how it came into being and is communicated. The leadership in each school indicated they were held accountable for changing the culture and meeting the stated expectations in accordance to the purpose and direction.

When a school community can unify and commit to a common vision and purpose for the school district, it provides a consistent framework for stakeholders to understand and contribute to achieving the expectations set forth in the vision and purpose. A well-articulated, shared vision/purpose can shape and support the decision-making process to ensure alignment and coherency throughout the district.

**Standard 2: Governance and Leadership**

Governance and leadership are key factors in raising institutional quality. Leaders, both local administrators and governing boards/authorities, are responsible for ensuring all learners achieve while also managing many other facets of an institution. Institutions that function effectively do so without tension between the governing board/authority, administrators, and educators and have established relationships of mutual respect and a shared vision (Feuerstein & Opfer, 1998). In a meta-analysis of school leadership research, Leithwood & Sun (2012) found that leaders (school and governing boards/authority) can significantly "influence school conditions through their achievement of a shared vision and agreed-on goals for the organization, their high expectations and support of organizational members, and practices that strengthen school culture and foster collaboration within the organization." With the increasing demands of accountability placed on institutional leaders, leaders who empower others need considerable autonomy and involve their school communities to attain school improvement goals. Leaders who engage in such practices experience a greater level of success (Fink & Brayman, 2006). Similarly, governing boards/authorities that focus on policy-making are more likely to allow school leaders the autonomy to make decisions that impact teachers and students and are less responsive to

politicization than boards/authorities that respond to vocal citizens (Greene, 1992).

AdvancED has found through its own evaluation of best practices in 30,000 institutions around the world that a successful institution has leaders who are advocates for the institution's vision and improvement efforts. The leaders provide direction and allocate resources to implement curricular and co-curricular programs that enable students to achieve expectations for their learning. Leaders encourage collaboration and shared responsibility for school improvement among stakeholders. The institution's policies, procedures, and organizational conditions ensure equity of learning opportunities and support for innovation.

Standard			Standard Performance Level
The system operates under governance and leadership that promote and support student performance and system effectiveness.			3.17
Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
2.1	The governing body establishes policies and supports practices that ensure effective administration of the system and its schools.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•School handbooks</li> <li>•Communications to stakeholder about policy revisions</li> <li>•Professional development plans</li> <li>•Student handbooks</li> <li>•Staff interviews</li> </ul>	3
2.2	The governing body operates responsibly and functions effectively.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Governing authority minutes relating to training</li> <li>•Proof of legal counsel</li> <li>•Governing code of ethics</li> <li>•Governing authority training plan</li> <li>•Governing authority policies on roles and responsibilities, conflict of interest</li> <li>•Findings of internal and external reviews of compliance with laws, regulations, and policies</li> <li>•Interviews with board members, administration, and other stakeholders</li> </ul>	4



## External Review

Florence City Schools

2.3	The governing body ensures that the leadership at all levels has the autonomy to meet goals for achievement and instruction and to manage day-to-day operations effectively.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•District strategic plan</li><li>•Stakeholder input and feedback</li><li>•Social media</li><li>•Roles and responsibilities of school leadership</li><li>•Roles and responsibilities of district leadership</li><li>•Examples of school improvement plans</li><li>•Maintenance of consistent academic oversight, planning, and resource allocation</li><li>•Agendas and minutes of meetings</li><li>•Communications regarding governing authority actions</li></ul>	4
2.4	Leadership and staff at all levels of the system foster a culture consistent with the system's purpose and direction.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Examples of decisions in support of the schools' continuous improvement plans</li><li>•Examples of decisions aligned with the district's purpose and direction</li><li>•Examples of collaboration and shared leadership</li><li>•Examples of decisions aligned with the district's strategic plan</li><li>•Examples of decisions aligned with the school's purpose statement</li><li>•Examples of improvement efforts and innovations in the educational programs</li></ul>	3
2.5	Leadership engages stakeholders effectively in support of the system's purpose and direction.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Copies of surveys or screen shots from online surveys</li><li>•Involvement of stakeholders in a school improvement plan</li><li>•Examples of stakeholder input or feedback resulting in district action</li><li>•Involvement of stakeholders in district strategic plan</li></ul>	2

2.6	Leadership and staff supervision and evaluation processes result in improved professional practice in all areas of the system and improved student success.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Supervision and evaluation documents with criteria for improving professional practice throughout the system and student success noted</li> <li>•Governing body policy on supervision and evaluation</li> <li>•Representative supervision and evaluation reports</li> <li>•Lead Alabama as administrator formative evaluation process; EDUCATE Alabama as teacher evaluation process</li> </ul>	3
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**Powerful Practices**

**Indicator**

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| <p>1. The district's elected Board of Education knows its duties and responsibilities and allows the superintendent to manage, without interference, the day-to-day operations of the schools.<br/>This was cited over and over by all stakeholders that were interviewed. Clearly defined roles and responsibilities are included in the district's policies and procedure manual.</p>                               | 2.2 |
| <p>2. The district employs an exemplary and diverse team of leaders whose primary focus is student learning.<br/>The staff and administration's primary goal is for the Florence City School district to be number one in the state. The diversity of leadership provides opportunities for commitment from the total community. It is very important to have the right people on the bus and in the right seats.</p> | 2.3 |
| <p>3. Phenomenal teamwork and versatility of the leadership staff exists.<br/>Becausue of the lack of funds to employ more staff, the leadership steps right in and wears multiple hats. Their philosophy is "what ever it takes." This was verified continuously throughout the district. The majority of the leaders in the district are performing multiple tasks.</p>   | 2.4 |

**Opportunities for Improvement**

**Indicator**

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| <p>1. Implement a comprehensive communication process with all stakeholders.<br/>Communication is an integral instinct of all living things. In order to create effective communication, all stakeholders must be a part of the two-way communication act.</p> | 2.5 |
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**Standard 3: Teaching and Assessing for Learning**

A high-quality and effective system has services, practices, and curriculum that ensure teacher effectiveness. Research has shown that an effective teacher is a key factor for learners to achieve to their highest potential and be prepared for a successful future. The positive influence an effective educator has on learning is a combination of "student motivation, parental involvement" and the "quality of leadership" (Ding & Sherman, 2006). Research also suggests that quality educators must have a variety of quantifiable and intangible characteristics, which include strong communication skills, knowledge of content, and knowledge of how to teach the content. The school's curriculum and instructional program should develop learners' skills that lead them to think about the world in complex ways (Conley, 2007)

and prepare them to have knowledge that extends beyond the academic areas. In order to achieve these goals, teachers must have pedagogical skills as well as content knowledge (Baumert et al, 2010). The acquisition and refinement of teachers' pedagogical skills occur most effectively through collaboration and professional development. These are a "necessary approach to improving teacher quality" (Colbert et al, 2008). According to Marks, Louis, & Printy (2002), school staff that engage in "active organizational learning also have higher achieving students in contrast to those that do not." Likewise, a study conducted by Horng, Klasik, & Loeb (2010), concluded that leadership in effective schools, "supports teachers by creating collaborative work environments." Institutional leaders have a responsibility to provide experiences, resources, and time for educators to engage in meaningful professional learning that promotes student learning and educator quality.

AdvancED has found through its own evaluation of best practices in 30,000 institutions around the world that a successful institution implements a curriculum based on clear and measurable expectations for student learning that provides opportunities for all students to acquire requisite knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Teachers use proven instructional practices that actively engage students in the learning process. Teachers provide opportunities for students to apply their knowledge and skills to real world situations. Teachers give students feedback to improve their performance.

Standard		Standard Performance Level	
The system's curriculum, instructional design, and assessment practices guide and ensure teacher effectiveness and student learning across all grades and courses.		2.67	
Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
3.1	The system's curriculum provides equitable and challenging learning experiences that ensure all students have sufficient opportunities to develop learning, thinking, and life skills that lead to success at the next level.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Course or program descriptions</li> <li>•Learning expectations for different courses and programs</li> <li>•Enrollment patterns for various courses and programs</li> <li>•Posted learning objectives</li> <li>•Course, program, or school schedules</li> </ul>	3
3.2	Curriculum, instruction, and assessment throughout the system are monitored and adjusted systematically in response to data from multiple assessments of student learning and an examination of professional practice.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Profile of educational model or delivery system</li> <li>•Surveys results</li> <li>•Program descriptions</li> <li>•Curriculum guides</li> <li>•Curriculum writing process</li> </ul>	2

## External Review

Florence City Schools

3.3	Teachers throughout the district engage students in their learning through instructional strategies that ensure achievement of learning expectations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Examples of teacher use of technology as an instructional resource</li><li>•Surveys results</li><li>•Student work demonstrating the application of knowledge</li><li>•Authentic assessments</li><li>•Findings from supervisor formal and informal observations</li><li>•Examples of student use of technology as a learning tool</li></ul>	3
3.4	System and school leaders monitor and support the improvement of instructional practices of teachers to ensure student success.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Supervision and evaluation procedures</li><li>•Surveys results</li><li>•Peer or mentoring opportunities and interactions</li><li>•Documentation of collection of lesson plans, grade books, or other data record systems</li><li>•Examples of improvements to instructional practices resulting from the evaluation process</li></ul>	3
3.5	The system operates as a collaborative learning organization through structures that support improved instruction and student learning at all levels.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Calendar/schedule of learning community meetings</li><li>•Survey results</li><li>•Agendas and minutes of collaborative learning committees</li><li>•Evidence of informal conversations that reflect collaboration about student learning</li></ul>	3
3.6	Teachers implement the system's instructional process in support of student learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Survey results</li><li>•Examples of learning expectations and standards of performance</li><li>•Examples of assessments that prompted modification in instruction</li><li>•Classroom observations, interviews</li></ul>	3
3.7	Mentoring, coaching, and induction programs support instructional improvement consistent with the system's values and beliefs about teaching and learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Records of meetings and informal feedback sessions</li><li>•Survey results</li><li>•New Teacher Orientation</li></ul>	2

## External Review

Florence City Schools

3.8	The system and all of its schools engage families in meaningful ways in their children's education and keep them informed of their children's learning progress.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•List of varied activities and communications modes with families, e.g., info portal, online, newsletters, parent centers, academic nights, open house, early release days</li><li>•Parental/family/caregiver involvement plan including activities, timeframes, and evaluation process</li><li>•Survey results</li><li>•Volunteer program with variety of options for participation</li></ul>	2
3.9	The system designs and evaluates structures in all schools whereby each student is well known by at least one adult advocate in the student's school who supports that student's educational experience.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Master schedule with time for formalized structure</li><li>•Description of formalized structures for adults to advocate on behalf of students</li><li>•List of students matched to adults who advocate on their behalf</li></ul>	3
3.10	Grading and reporting are based on clearly defined criteria that represent the attainment of content knowledge and skills and are consistent across grade levels and courses.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Sample report cards for each program or grade level and for all courses and programs</li><li>•Survey results</li><li>•Evaluation process for grading and reporting practices</li></ul>	2
3.11	All staff members participate in a continuous program of professional learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Survey results</li><li>•Brief explanation of alignment between professional learning and identified needs</li></ul>	3
3.12	The system and its schools provide and coordinate learning support services to meet the unique learning needs of students.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•List of learning support services and student population served by such services</li><li>•Schedules, lesson plans, or example student learning plans showing the implementation of learning support services</li></ul>	3

### ***Opportunities for Improvement***

### ***Indicator***

1. Investigate methods to provide instructional coaches at the secondary level. The primary function of the instructional coach is to observe classroom practices and gather data to assess strengths and opportunities for improvement to tailor support for teachers. This ultimately affects student learning.

3.7

2. Formalize a mentoring program for new teachers and staff. 3.7  
 Support to new teachers and staff is very crucial to retainment. Continuity of staff plays a vital part in student achievement.

**Standard 4: Resources and Support Systems**

Institutions, regardless of their size, need access to sufficient resources and systems of support to be able to engage in sustained and meaningful efforts that result in a continuous improvement cycle. Indeed, a study conducted by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (Pan, 2003) "demonstrated a strong relationship between resources and student success...both the level of resources and their explicit allocation seem to affect educational outcomes."

AdvancED has found through its own evaluation of best practices in 30,000 institutions around the world that a successful institution has sufficient human, material, and fiscal resources to implement a curriculum that enables students to achieve expectations for student learning, to meet special needs, and to comply with applicable regulations. The institution employs and allocates staffs who are well qualified for their assignments. The institution provides a safe learning environment for students and staff. The institution provides ongoing learning opportunities for all staff to improve their effectiveness. The institution ensures compliance with applicable governmental regulations.

Standard			Standard Performance Level
The system has resources and provides services in all schools that support its purpose and direction to ensure success for all students.			3.25
Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
4.1	The system engages in a systematic process to recruit, employ, and retain a sufficient number of qualified professional and support staff to fulfill their roles and responsibilities and support the purpose and direction of the system, individual schools, and educational programs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Assessments of staffing needs</li> <li>•District quality assurance procedures for monitoring qualified staff across all schools</li> <li>•Policies, processes, procedures and other documentation related to the hiring, placement and retention of professional and support staff for the district and schools</li> <li>•Documentation of highly qualified staff</li> <li>•District budgets or financial plans for the last three years</li> <li>•Stakeholder and staff interviews</li> </ul>	4

## External Review

Florence City Schools

4.2	Instructional time, material resources, and fiscal resources are sufficient to support the purpose and direction of the system, individual schools, educational programs, and system operations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Examples of school schedules</li> <li>•Alignment of district budget with district purpose and direction</li> <li>•Examples of school calendars</li> <li>•Alignment of school budgets with school purpose and direction</li> <li>•Instructional roadmap</li> </ul>	3
4.3	The system maintains facilities, services, and equipment to provide a safe, clean, and healthy environment for all students and staff.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•School safety committee responsibilities, meeting schedules, and minutes</li> <li>•District quality control procedures showing the monitoring of compliance with district expectations for school facilities and learning environments</li> <li>•Survey results</li> <li>•Documentation of compliance with local and state inspections requirements</li> <li>•Example systems for school maintenance requests</li> <li>•Example maintenance schedules for schools</li> <li>•Stakeholders and staff interviews</li> </ul>	3
4.4	The system demonstrates strategic resource management that includes long-range planning in support of the purpose and direction of the system.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•District quality control procedures showing the monitoring of compliance with district expectations for school facilities, learning environments</li> <li>•District strategic plan showing the areas of budget, facilities, quality control, and other strategic systems</li> <li>•Survey results</li> <li>•Policies, handbooks on district and school facilities and learning environments</li> <li>•Stakeholder and staff interviews</li> </ul>	4
4.5	The system provides, coordinates, and evaluates the effectiveness of information resources and related personnel to support educational programs throughout the system.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Evaluation procedures and results of education resources</li> <li>•Data on media and information resources available to students and staff</li> <li>•Survey results</li> </ul>	3

**External Review**

Florence City Schools

<p>4.6</p>	<p>The system provides a technology infrastructure and equipment to support the system's teaching, learning, and operational needs.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Assessments to inform development of district and school technology plans</li> <li>•Survey results</li> <li>•Brief description of learning management systems or data management systems that support the effective use of student assessment results, school effectiveness, and district effectiveness</li> <li>•District technology plan and budget to improve technology services and infrastructure for the district-level and school-level</li> <li>•Examples of school-level technology plans and budgets to improve technology services and infrastructure to students and staff</li> </ul>	<p>3</p>
<p>4.7</p>	<p>The system provides, coordinates, and evaluates the effectiveness of support systems to meet the physical, social, and emotional needs of the student population being served.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Examples of improvements made to education program and delivery models based on results of program effectiveness evaluations</li> <li>•Schedule of family services, e.g., parent classes, survival skills</li> <li>•Social classes and services, e.g., bullying, character education</li> <li>•Survey results</li> <li>•Agreements with school community agencies for student-family support</li> <li>•List of support services available to students</li> <li>•Observations</li> </ul>	<p>3</p>
<p>4.8</p>	<p>The system provides, coordinates, and evaluates the effectiveness of services that support the counseling, assessment, referral, educational, and career planning needs of all students.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Description of referral process</li> <li>•List of services available related to counseling, assessment, referral, educational, and career planning</li> <li>•Survey results</li> <li>•District quality assurance procedures that monitor program effectiveness of student support services</li> <li>•Description of IEP process</li> <li>•Stakeholder interviews</li> </ul>	<p>3</p>



**Powerful Practices**

**Indicator**

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|---|------------|
| <p>1. The district demonstrates success in recruiting, employing, and maintaining sufficient numbers of highly qualified professional and support staff to support the purpose and direction of the district. Interviews and review of artifacts verified the district employs a sufficient number of highly qualified staff to support its purpose and direction. Staff retention plays a vital part in student success.</p>                   | <p>4.1</p> |
| <p>2. The district demonstrates strategic resource management through the review of individual improvement plans throughout the district to include: the schools, central office, and departments. The district explores ways to prioritize fiscal needs, monitors implementation of actions, and evaluates their effectiveness. As a result, the district has been able to save money and redirect funds to support classroom instruction.</p> | <p>4.4</p> |

**Opportunities for Improvement**

**Indicator**

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| <p>1. Expand initiatives to improve student and staff attendance. Research reports that students who attend school regularly learn more and are more successful in school than those who do not. Students who miss school miss out on carefully planned sequences of instruction, active learning experiences, and class participation. They miss out on the opportunity to ask questions and are more likely to drop out of school.</p> | <p>4.8</p> |
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**Standard 5: Using Results for Continuous Improvement**

Systems with strong improvement processes are moving beyond anxiety about the current reality and focusing on priorities and initiatives for the future. Using results, that is, data and other information, to guide continuous improvement is key to an institution's success. A study conducted by Datnow, Park, & Wohlstetter (2007) from the Center on Educational Governance at the University of Southern California indicated that data can shed light on existing areas of strength and weakness and also guide improvement strategies in a systematic and strategic manner (Dembosky et al., 2005). The study also identified six key strategies that performance-driven systems use: (1) building a foundation for data-driven decision making; (2) establishing a culture of data use and continuous improvement; (3) investing in an information management system; (4) selecting the right data; (5) building school capacity for data-driven decision making; and (6) analyzing and acting on data to improve performance. Other research studies, though largely without comparison groups, suggested that data-driven decision making has the potential to increase student performance (Alwin, 2002; Doyle, 2003; Lafee, 2002; McIntire, 2002).

AdvancED has found through its own evaluation of best practices in 30,000 institutions around the world that a successful institution uses a comprehensive assessment system based on clearly defined performance measures. The system is used to assess student performance on expectations for student learning, evaluate the effectiveness of curriculum and instruction, and determine strategies to improve student performance. The institution implements a collaborative and ongoing process for improvement that aligns the functions of the school with the expectations for student learning. Improvement efforts are sustained, and the institution demonstrates progress in improving student performance and institution effectiveness.

## External Review

Florence City Schools

Standard			Standard Performance Level
The system implements a comprehensive assessment system that generates a range of data about student learning and system effectiveness and uses the results to guide continuous improvement.			2.6
Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
5.1	The system establishes and maintains a clearly defined and comprehensive student assessment system.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Brief description of technology or web-based platforms that support the education delivery model</li> <li>•Brief description of student assessment system including range of data produced from standardized and local or school assessments on student learning and school performance</li> <li>•Survey results</li> <li>•Documentation or description of evaluation tools/protocols</li> </ul>	3
5.2	Professional and support staff continuously collect, analyze and apply learning from a range of data sources, including comparison and trend data about student learning, instruction, program evaluation, and organizational conditions that support learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Survey results</li> <li>•District quality control procedures that monitor schools in effectively using data to improve instruction and student learning</li> <li>•Examples of changes to the district strategic plan based on data results</li> <li>•List of data sources related to student learning, instruction, program effectiveness, and conditions that support learning</li> <li>•Written protocols and procedures for data collection and analysis</li> </ul>	2
5.3	Throughout the system professional and support staff are trained in the interpretation and use of data.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Policies and written procedures specific to data training</li> <li>•Professional learning schedule specific to the use of data</li> <li>•Documentation of attendance and training related to data use</li> </ul>	2

## External Review

Florence City Schools

5.4	The school system engages in a continuous process to determine verifiable improvement in student learning, including readiness for and success at the next level.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Agendas, minutes of meetings related to analysis of data</li><li>•Student surveys</li><li>•Evidence of student readiness for the next level</li><li>•Evidence of student success at the next level</li><li>•Evidence of student growth</li><li>•Description of process for analyzing data to determine verifiable improvement in student learning</li></ul>	3
5.5	System and school leaders monitor and communicate comprehensive information about student learning, school performance, and the achievement of system and school improvement goals to stakeholders.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•District quality control procedures for monitoring district effectiveness</li><li>•Minutes of meetings regarding achievement of student learning goals</li><li>•Survey results</li><li>•Sample communications to stakeholders regarding student learning, conditions that support learning, and achievement of school improvement goals</li><li>•Examples of district marketing tools and websites that cite student achievement results or that make promises regarding student achievement</li></ul>	3

### ***Opportunities for Improvement***

### ***Indicator***

1. Expand transitions between grades and schools.  
Research reveals that students tend to perform better academically when there is a smooth transition between grades and schools. A defined plan would ensure a smooth transition when students move from one level to the next or from one school to another within the district.

5.4

## Part II: Conclusion

### Summary of the External Review

In off-site and on-site review sessions, the AdvancED External Review Team examined artifacts and evidence provided by the institution. During the on-site portion of the review, the team reviewed additional artifacts, collected and analyzed data from interviews, and conducted observations.

The Florence City Schools' External Review was held October 21-24, 2012. In preparation for the external review, it was evidenced by the review of artifacts, interviews with stakeholders, and observations that the district spent an enormous amount of time preparing for the external review and was well-prepared. The district was open and honest in its self-appraisal as powerful practices, challenges, and opportunities for improvement were duly noted. Moreover, interviews with various stakeholders and presentations by various staff members solidified the self-appraisal. The External Review Team engaged in several activities before and during the on-site visit. Throughout the visit, the staff and stakeholders responded to the team's questions and requests pertaining to data and other artifacts.

The External Review Team was pleased in having the opportunity to interview 314 stakeholders to gain further insight and perceptions regarding the district's adherence to the AdvancED Standards and effectiveness of the district in meeting its continuous improvement goals. Of the 314 stakeholders, five (5) Board members, twenty-nine (29) administrators, sixty-eight (68) teachers, ninety-seven (97) parents, community and business partners, and one hundred fifteen (115) students were interviewed. As a result, the External Review Team synthesized the data collected and engaged in deliberations to frame the external review report and to provide meaningful feedback to help the district with its continuous improvement process.

Using the evidence collected, the team engaged in dialogue and deliberations concerning the degree to which the institution met the AdvancED Accreditation Standards and Indicators.

The vision and purpose of the Florence City Schools, to "Empower students to explore, create, challenge, innovate, and lead," was evidenced throughout the district. The district is highly motivated to ingrain into every student the desire and skills to accomplish this vision and purpose. As the External Review Team reviewed artifacts and engaged in conversations and interviews with various groups of stakeholders, several overarching themes emerged to include: a strong sense of pride, community, collegiality, a shared vision, a caring staff, collaboration and team work, and a family-like atmosphere. However, across the district exists a need for mentoring, coaching, and induction programs that are consistent with the district's values and beliefs about teaching, learning, and the conditions that support learning.

The district enjoys an open, respectful relationship among the governing Board of Education, the central office, and school leadership. The Board members understand their roles and responsibilities to make policy and provide direction while allowing the district and school leaders the autonomy to conduct the day-to-day operations of the schools and district. Policies and practices should continue to increase focus on professional growth for all staff, using supervision and evaluation processes to target individual

growth needs as well as to support school-wide and district goals of ensuring student success.

An exemplary partnership exists between the Board and the leadership that keeps student learning as everyone's top priority. They work to function as a cohesive unit for the good of all students. Continued and expanded efforts to communicate with all stakeholders will enable all parents, staff, and community members be fully engaged in decision-making and to fully support the district's continued efforts to increase rigor, relevance, relationships, and readiness for students to succeed in the 21st century.

The district's course offerings and class selections provide all students with a variety of options, which are both challenging and equitable, to meet individual needs and prepare for college or career options. Interviews revealed that additional vertical and horizontal collaboration has occurred more frequently as the common core standards have been implemented.

District and local school personnel use data to identify student needs and provide interventions, support, or enrichment opportunities. Students are provided with enrichment opportunities at all grade levels with the Renaissance program in elementary school, accelerated classes in middle school, and Advanced Placement classes in high school. Some learning experiences are individualized based on assessment data, student interests, and student performance as evidenced in interviews and classroom observations.

Teachers throughout the district use a variety of instructional strategies to meet the needs of students. Observations revealed objectives posted on the board, and some classrooms posted essential questions related to the lesson. However, there were limited exemplars provided to students to help guide and inform the students. Classroom observations revealed whole group instruction, small group instruction, and peer teaching. Some technology was utilized as an instructional tool to gather and use information. Some teachers collaborate and align grading procedures, but there is no common grading practice throughout the district. Grade levels use a variety of methods to record student grades.

The district and school leaders monitor the instruction of teachers to ensure that it aligns with the system's beliefs to ensure students are prepared to be successful after high school, as well as engage them in the learning process. District and local school personnel provided evidence of various forms of informal mentoring for new faculty and staff members. However, there is no systematic process to provide a formal mentoring and induction program throughout the district. The district did provide a new teacher orientation this past year but lacks systematic procedures in each school to support new staff members.

The district and local schools utilize a variety of methods to engage families in meaningful ways in their children's educational experience. Interviews revealed a gap in the availability to provide parents who may not have access to a computer or internet, who don't have transportation to the school, or who don't support the educational process with the same access to their children's educational experiences. A student management system, INOW, is utilized to report student grades and progress, as well as emails, personal phone calls, conferences, and completed assignments.

All of the schools have integrated a process to provide each child with an advisor or mentor. District personnel and local school teachers participate in professional learning activities based on individual and

school needs. Interviews revealed autonomy to participate in learning activities that were relevant to their job responsibilities, but no specific evaluation of program effectiveness was noted.

The district is committed to continuous improvement and setting high expectations. Utilizing recommendations from their previous accreditation visit, the district has reformed its mission statement from a focus on life-long learning to include actionable words such as Challenge, Create, Innovate and Lead. By doing so, the district has established a new pledge to excellence.

Currently, districts goals are being implemented to improve data collection and the communication of this information to staff members. Regular monthly data meetings are being used as an avenue to distribute data to staff. The district's continuous efforts in this area are aimed at increasing communication, improving the use of technology for data collection and offering professional development that mirrors data analysis conclusions.

During the on-site review, members of the External Review Team evaluated the learning environment by observing classrooms and general operations of the institution. Using data from these observations, the team evaluated the quality of instruction and learning that took place classified around seven constructs or environments: equity, high expectations, support, engagement, progress monitoring and feedback, management, and use of technology.

The External Review Team visited four of the district's eight schools and the 12 For Life Career Center. During the schools' visits, twenty-six (26) classroom observations were made, which provided for instructional practices and learning environments to be observed. The instrument used for these observations is a school improvement resource to conduct observations for the purpose of creating the most optimal environments in which students can learn. The reason for the shift from a focus on teachers to a focus on learners is to ensure that learners are engaging, acting, reacting, and benefiting from various contexts or environments that should be evident in all effective learning settings. Learning environment means the context in which student learning occurs with a particular thematic overlay. As the External Review Team observed learning environments, "evidence" that students are engaging in or experiencing an environment that is conducive to learning that focuses on a number of important themes including equity, high expectations, support of learning, active learning, progress monitoring and the provision of feedback, well-managed, and digital was collected.

All of the constructs within the overall learning environment were rated above average except digital learning (the use of technology). The External Review Team reports that the schools feature a wealth of current hardware and a sufficient infrastructure but lacked a high level of quality use to enhance or engage student learning. Additionally, the team noted that teachers were not consistently and effectively using technology to empower students to explore, create, challenge, innovate, or lead. The team observed some low level teacher-centered activities such as answering questions, drill and practice, and academic games. Minimal use of technology as a teaching tool or use by students as a learning tool was observed.

The Florence City School district is a progressive school district and is constantly seeking ways to

address the needs of its students. The External Review Team extends sincere appreciation to the staff and stakeholders for its hospitality, support, and professionalism demonstrated before and during the visit. The team acknowledges and applauds the district for the efforts they have employed to improve the quality of educational programs and offers congratulations for the progress made towards maintaining district accreditation as a quality system. Therefore, the External Review Team recommends the Florence City School district for a new five-year term of accreditation by the Advanc-ED Accreditation Commission.

## **Required Actions**

1. Identify professional development needs and prioritize funds as they become available.

Primary Indicator or Assurance: 5.3

The primary purpose for professional development is to increase the effectiveness of all who are engaged in the teaching-learning process. Each member of the staff must develop his/her skills to the maximum and the educational environment must provide a positive environment which encourages and establishes the necessary development machinery for each staff member to participate.

2. Implement a systematic plan to train teachers in analyzing and using data to inform decisions related to differentiated instruction, formative assessments, and individual student needs.

Primary Indicator or Assurance: 3.2

Data are the key to continuous improvement. Data patterns reveal strengths and opportunities for improvement. Therefore, effective use and analyzing of data are essential.

3. Create consistent grading practices across grade bands and schools.

Primary Indicator or Assurance: 3.10

Grading principles and practices will form the basis of the district's grading policy. In order to maintain equity in grading, the entire district needs to be on the same page in terms of how student assessments and work are evaluated and assigned a grade.

4. Develop a plan to increase the engagement of families in their children's education.

Primary Indicator or Assurance: 3.8

Parents and families have the most direct and lasting impact on children's learning and development of social competence. When families are involved, students achieve more, exhibit more positive attitudes and behaviors, and feel more comfortable in new settings.

## Part III: Addenda

### *Next Steps*

The institution should:

1. Review and discuss the findings from this report with all stakeholders.
2. Ensure that plans are in place to embed and sustain the strengths noted in the Powerful Practices section to maximize their impact on the institution.
3. Develop action plans to address the Required Actions made by the team. Include methods for monitoring progress toward the Required Actions.
4. Use the report to guide and strengthen the institution's efforts to improve student performance and system effectiveness.
5. Following the External Review, submit the Accreditation Progress Report detailing progress made toward addressing the Required Actions. Institutions are required to respond to all Required Actions. The Required Actions should be completed before the Accreditation Progress Report is submitted. The report will be reviewed at the state and national level to monitor and ensure that the system has implemented the necessary actions to complete the Required Actions. The accreditation status will be reviewed and acted upon based on the completion of the Required Actions and the resulting improvement.
6. Continue to meet the AdvancED accreditation standards, submit required reports, engage in continuous improvement, and document results.

### *Celebrating Accreditation*

Following the External Review, the Team submits the final report to AdvancED for review and for action by the AdvancED Accreditation Commission, which confers accreditation and upon the institution. Upon receiving its accreditation, the institution should share its achievement with internal and external communities.

### *About AdvancED*

In 2006, the North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement (NCA CASI), the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Council on Accreditation and School Improvement (SACS CASI), both founded in 1895, along with the National Study of School Evaluation (NSSE) came together to form AdvancED: one strong, unified organization dedicated to education quality. In 2011, the Northwest Accreditation Commission (founded 1917) joined NCA CASI and SACS CASI as part of AdvancED. AdvancED is the world's largest education community, representing 30,000 public and private schools and systems across the United States and in 75 countries worldwide and educating 16 million students. The Northwest Accreditation Commission joined the AdvancED network in 2011.



Today, NCA CASI, NWAC, and SACS CASI serve as accreditation divisions of AdvancED. Through AdvancED, NCA CASI, NWAC, and SACS CASI share research-based accreditation standards that cross state, regional, and national boundaries. Accompanying these standards is a unified accreditation process designed to help educational institutions continuously improve.