

WCS Recommended for Accreditation

November 2013

Accreditation is important to our community for many reasons, chiefly its close link to system improvement. The process asks school systems to critically examine and evaluate five standard areas: Governance and Leadership, Teaching and Assessing for Learning, Resources and Support Systems, and Using Results for Continuous Improvement.

Approximately 18 months ago, Whitfield County Schools began a self-evaluation of all elements of our system to prepare for our five-year accreditation visit. Accreditation is based on a set of rigorous research-based processes for evaluating the effectiveness of our school system. This review ensures we are working toward system improvement. The process of earning and maintaining accreditation provides clarity and lights a clear and compelling path to make changes that improve opportunities for students to excel.

Staff, parents, and community members served on committees that thoroughly evaluated our vision, strategies, priorities, leadership, programs, and resources, as well as all processes that support student learning. This information was compiled into a report and submitted to AdvancED, the primary accrediting agency for public schools. Our work culminated with a visit last week by a six-member review team from AdvancED. Team members traveled from four states: Florida, Michigan, Kentucky, and Georgia. The group, which included a college professor, teachers, and superintendents, spent three days in Whitfield County visiting our schools, looking at student data, and conducting interviews with hundreds of teachers, parents, students, administrators, and community members. During their exit report, they announced their recommendation for the school district to continue its long history of accreditation.

This process, and designation of being an accredited school district, assures our students and their families that their needs are being met through our quality educational program. According to the AdvancED website at advanc-ed.org, “accreditation is both a significant achievement pronouncing an institution’s quality of education, as well as a remarkably enriching process for the institutions recognizing the tremendous competitive and performance gains it affords.”

All of the Whitfield County Schools have held accreditation status since the 1960s and continue to build on their tradition of excellence. The process for accreditation has changed and we are only the second public school system in Georgia to benefit from a new kind of balanced accreditation report. The assessment is based on the analysis and evaluation of three areas: Impact of Teaching and Learning, Leadership Capacity, and Resource Utilization.

Accreditation is also important from an economic development standpoint by showing prospective business and industry professionals that quality schools are eager to serve their children. Accreditation establishes a standard to ensure it will be easy for students and their parents to transfer credits from one school to another. Graduating from an accredited school gives students greater access to federal loans, scholarships, post-secondary education opportunities, and military programs, many of which require students attend an accredited institution. Everyone in the community benefits from our system’s commitment to raise student performance and focus on accountability.

One powerful practice review team members pointed out to the Whitfield County Board of Education during their called meeting on Wednesday is our use of learning software, Measures of Academic Progress (MAP), to assess student academic growth. They believe our use of the academic data provided by MAP and the resulting focused support for students could serve as a model to other school districts. The clear and comprehensive student assessment is given three times annually to measure and monitor student achievement. Students monitor their individual growth by consistently setting learning goals from the data received from the assessment. This data is used to guide instruction for students and to individualize the learning. MAP also connects with a Compass Learning software that assigns instructional work focused on areas that need strengthening. Data from MAP assessments also allows us to compare the progress of Whitfield County students with students nationwide because the assessment is nationally normed.

Two items the committee said could use some improvement are reporting grades consistently in an easy-to-understand format and enhancing Response to Interventions (RTI) guidelines to ensure the system is appropriately serving the individual needs of all students. RTI is a method of academic intervention used to provide early, systematic assistance to children who are having difficulty learning.

Overall, review team leader Michael Bugenski said Whitfield County Schools is right where we need to be and seems to have plans for improvement firmly in place. Existing practices should continue to become more effective as we move forward and those plans we have already set in motion continue to mature.

The review team’s full report should arrive in four to six weeks, followed by a stamp of approval from AdvancEd in early 2014.