

March 3, 2022

Mr. Chris Ragsdale, Superintendent  
Cobb County School District  
514 Glover Street  
Marietta, GA 30060

Dear Mr. Ragsdale,

This letter serves as an official communication regarding the accreditation status of the Cobb County Schools and the results of the Special Review, conducted August 15-18, 2021. As such, the report and its findings are no longer valid and are replaced by the observations and direction provided in this letter.

First, and foremost, Cobb County Schools are fully accredited including meeting all required standards for accreditation. Cobb County School District is a good school system with a successful record of student achievement and continuous improvement. At no time during the recent process did the teaching, learning, or professional leadership within the system place its accreditation at risk. The focus of recent engagements with the system has and continues to be on helping the school district improve, and specifically within the area of board governance.

Cobb County Schools have been accredited by the Southern Association of Schools and Colleges (SACS) since 1952. During this long tenure the system has experienced significant growth in population and diversity. A historical strength of the system is its ability to manage growth without sacrificing the quality of education provided. The system benefits from strong community support including the fiscal resources to meet the needs of students and to address challenges that impact learning. The result of the Special Review clearly indicates that Cobb County Schools are performing at or above expected levels. The report clearly indicates the strong record of student performance while noting areas where greater improvement can be realized.

Cognia's special review teams are primarily constituted by volunteers and, while Cognia provides guidance and support, Cognia does not substantively revisit the factual findings of the teams unless adverse action is recommended against an institution's accreditation. However, the institution may provide evidence of factual errors, which can be impactful regardless of whether an accreditation recommendation is made. Additionally, if a factual error is tied to a finding in the report, the finding can be modified or rejected. That appears to have occurred in the system's review conducted on August 15-18, 2021.

Cognia greatly relies on the special review teams, and these teams are expected to review educational organization’s fidelity to Cognia’s performance standards. They are also expected to place a higher weight on physical evidence than assertions of opinion or allegations. They are also expected to carefully balance their application of Cognia’s standards against the School District’s responsibility and autonomy to make its own decisions if those decisions do not violate performance standards. Cognia’s mission is school improvement, not substituting its judgment within the legal decision-making authority of duly elected and appointed school officials. If teams are not careful, this line may be blurred, which may have occurred in this case.

In the evidence the School District provided in response to Cognia’s request and what you reiterated regarding findings in the Cobb County Special Review Team Report, it appears the Special Review Team did not adequately contextualize or incorporate factual evidence provided by the School District. In turn, this may have led to Team findings and recommendations in – for example – awarding the system an “Initiating” rating in “allocating human, material, and fiscal resources in alignment with the system’s identified needs and priorities to improve student performance and organizational effectiveness.” Given the Team did not identify a circumstance in which the School District did not follow its own policies and procedures, it is unclear why the Team recommended an “improvement priority” to “ensure adherence to clearly defined policies, procedures, and practices to promote consistency and transparency throughout the decision-making process, particularly in managing fiscal resources.” Based on the evidence the School District presented, it is clear the School District has comprehensive policies relating to procurement and has won external awards for its purchasing and procurement processes. Further, the Cobb County School District is subject to annual audits by the Georgia Department of Audits and Accounts and has not received audit findings regarding its practices.

Consequently, Cognia’s professional staff has reviewed the evidence provided by the school system and cross referenced it with the report findings. The findings in the report related to procurement policies and procedures, allocation and use of CARES funds, and the purchase of the UV system and hand sanitizers were not an accurate reflection of the evidence provided. There are no concerns regarding allocation and use of resources by the Cobb County Schools. In fact, the community has historically provided the necessary resources and the system has a track record of allocating these resources in the best interest of the educational system and its students.

Additionally, findings relating to policy proposal and implementation were inconsistent with the factual evidence provided. While the report contained assertions that board members did not have adequate time to consider policy and procedure changes requested by the School District’s administration, the record demonstrated board members were provided all board meeting agenda items in advance of board meetings and being asked to vote on those items. Additionally,

the evidence indicates that the superintendent authorizes and encourages board members to contact members of the executive cabinet directly if they have questions regarding policies, procedures, or operations within those administrators' areas of responsibility. It is not common practice for superintendents to provide board members this level of direct access and information. This level of access is to be commended. This practice is factually inconsistent with any suggestion that information is withheld from board members.

The area of improvement that the review noted, and remains valid, is in board governance. Without exception, members of the governing board and the review team agreed that governance of the school system can be improved. As such, there are two recommendations for improvement related to board governance.

Evidence provided in the report indicated that while the Board may be fractured, it is not broken. In observing several board meetings and other public communications from members of the Board, it is evident that the Board is divided and representatives on each side of this division are contributing to an atmosphere at board meetings and other gatherings that are not in the best interest of the school system and its purpose. As we have often seen, it does not appear all board members understand or fully appreciate the important role they occupy in School District governance, and the equal importance of acting within, not beyond, this role. It is incumbent upon every board member to set aside personal agendas and focus their efforts on governing together in the best interest of the school system.

The school system has and continues to provide guidance, training, and coaching of members of the Board. Such efforts should continue and perhaps be expanded but change in behavior is ultimately the responsibility of each individual board member. While Cognia fully appreciates that board members can and will have differing opinions, Cognia's governance standards expect board members to be truthful, professional, and collaborative in resolving or moving beyond those differences, focusing primarily on areas of common interest and responsibility in service to the school system and its students. If board members embrace Cognia's recommended practices, they are likely to find they enhance, not diminish, their ability to fulfill the significant responsibilities of their elected positions.

In review, these two recommendations will be the focus of our efforts to support the district. We are aware that the district is making progress in these areas, and we encourage those efforts to be continued.

### Areas for Improvement

Members of the governing board should:

1. Adhere to board policies to develop a culture of trust and cooperation among board members, employees, and the stakeholders within the district.
2. Review the Code of Ethics to develop, implement, and monitor a plan of accountability to ensure adherence of all board members in effectively and efficiently executing their established roles and responsibilities.

It is the responsibility of every member of the Board of Education to commit to improving the performance of the Board in governing the system. It is important that board members work cooperatively and collaboratively with each other, the leadership of the system and the community at large to ensure that the Cobb County Schools continue their proud history of student success and ongoing improvement.

The system should continue current efforts to address these improvement areas and prepare to share the results of such efforts during Cognia’s next regularly scheduled evaluation in 2024. This timeline should provide ample opportunity for additional board training in governance before the next scheduled visit. Cognia will continue to support the school system on their journey of continuous improvement. As a Cognia member institution, Cobb County Schools has full access to the expertise of Cognia’s professional staff and its significant library of support resources. We are willing to assist in any way we can, if requested.

I congratulate you and your team on leading the school system and look forward to the continued success of the system in preparing students for their future.

Respectfully,



Mark A. Elgart, Ed.D.  
President/CEO

cc. Dr. Annette Bohling, Chief Global Accreditation Officer  
Mr. David Chastain, Chair, Cobb County Board of Education