



COBB COUNTY
SCHOOL DISTRICT

One Team, One Goal: Student Success

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March 26, 2021

Dr. Andre' Harrison
Cognia Accreditation Services
7665 S. Research Drive
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Dear Dr. Harrison:

I am writing to you today in response to the February 16, 2021, letter I received from Cognia's Chief Global Accreditation Officer, Dr. Annette Bohling. While I am both surprised and disappointed to have received a letter regarding complaints about the Cobb County School District, I appreciate the opportunity to address those concerns with you.

Our number one priority at the Cobb County School District has been, and will always be, the safety of our staff and students. While we have remained steadfastly focused on our number one priority, we have continued to provide superior educational opportunities that make ours a highly sought-after school district of excellence where all students have the tools to succeed. Local boards of education often struggle during the best of times, and our Board is no different. Understandably, those struggles may be heightened under the extreme worldwide pandemic circumstances we currently find ourselves.

As I address each of the Standards mentioned as possible non-adherence, you will see our Board of Education has accepted the responsibility of meeting mandated training requirements to serve in their roles. I will also share background information regarding the school district's approach to the education of our students, and you will notice that the Cobb County School District has gone to great lengths to provide families a choice in their student's learning environment during these challenging times. We have listened to the majority of our stakeholders and simultaneously have not disenfranchised the minority.

Standard 1.4: The governing authority establishes and ensures adherence to policies that are designed to support system effectiveness.

The State Board of Education adopted a training program for members of local boards of education July 2011.

Cobb County School District Policy BBBC: Board Member Development Opportunities clearly defines training requirements. All Cobb County School Board members adhere to

BOARD OF EDUCATION

Randy Scamihorn, *Chair* • David Banks, *Vice Chair*
Jaha Howard • Leroy Tre' Hutchins • David Chastain • Charisse Davis • Brad Wheeler

SUPERINTENDENT

Chris Ragsdale

these training requirements. Listed below you will find each board member's training for the 2019-2020 school year.

Board Member	Date of Training	Event
Randy Scamihorn	12/04/2019	GSBA Workshop (Educational Equity)
	*9/24/2020	Whole Board Governance Training
	06/12/2020	GSBA Crisis Planning w/COVID – 19
Brad Wheeler	12/04/2019	GSBA Workshop (Legal Issues)
	*9/24/2020	Whole Board Governance Training
David Chastain	12/04/2019	GSBA Workshop (Educational Equity)
	*9/26/2020	Whole Board Governance Training
David Banks	12/04/2019	GSBA Workshop (Finance)
	*9/24/2020	Whole Board Governance Training
Charisse Davis	12/04/2019	GSBA Workshop (Educational Equity)
	*9/24/2020	Whole Board Governance Training
Jaha Howard	12/04/2019	GSBA Workshop (Educational Equity)
	*9/24/2020	Whole Board Governance Training
Leroy Hutchins	11/10/2020	GSBA New Board Member Orientation
	11/11/2020	GSBA New Board Member Orientation
* Training Deadline extended due to COVID-19 Crisis		

The Cobb County School Board adhered to Policy BBBC by gaining six hours of individual training at the Georgia School Boards Association (GSBA) Pre-Conference Workshop in the area of their choice. The remaining three hours of Whole Board Governance Training was presented by the school board attorney firm of Gregory, Doyle, Calhoun & Rogers in the areas of policy, rule changes, regulations and upcoming challenges.

The Board has accepted the requirements of training and understands the importance of continued learning. While training does not necessarily guarantee board adherence to all policies and rules, the mandated training requirement is clearly being met.

Standard 1.5: The governing authority adheres to a code of ethics and functions with the defined roles and responsibilities.

The State Board of Education adopted a model code of ethics for members of local boards of education October 1, 2010. Within three months, all school districts were required by the Georgia Code to adopt such a model.

Cobb County School District Policy BH: Board Code of Ethics was approved on January 27, 2011, within three months after being adopted by the State Board of Education. This policy has consistently been reviewed, re-coded, and revised as needed. Board ethics were

included during Whole Board Governance Team Training in June 2019. The Cobb County School Board's continued training is listed below for the 2018-19 school year.

Board Member	Date of Training	Event
Randy Scamihorn	12/06/2018	GSBA Workshop (Legal)
	06/11/2019	Whole Board Governance Team Training
Brad Wheeler	12/06/2019	GSBA Workshop (Legal)
	06/11/2019	Whole Board Governance Team Training
David Chastain	12/06/2018	GSBA Workshop (Finance)
	06/11/2019	Whole Board Governance Team Training
David Banks	12/06/2018	GSBA Workshop (Legal)
	06/11/2019	Whole Board Governance Team Training
David Morgan	06/11/2019	Whole Board Governance Team Training
	06/30/2019	School Board U: Board Ethics
	06/30/2019	School Board U: Parliamentary Procedures
	06/30/2019	School Board U: Strategic Improvement
*Charisse Davis	11/20/2018	Local Board Orientation
	04/29/2019	Fundamentals of Financial Governance
	05/01/2019	GSBA New Board Member Orientation
	06/11/2019	Whole Board Governance Team Training
*Jaha Howard	11/14/2018	Fundamentals of Finance Governance
	11/15/2018	GSBA New Board Member Orientation
	11/20/2018	Local Board Orientation
	06/11/2019	Whole Board Governance Team Training

* New Board Member

The Cobb County School Board strives to adhere to the goals of Policy BH. Annually, during the first board meeting of the new year, all Board members receive a copy of Policy BH and sign an acknowledgement agreeing to comply with the policy. Additionally, new Board members were required to receive additional training hours that included Local Orientation, Fundamentals of Financial Governance, and New Board Member Orientation. Veteran board members received six hours of training at the GSBA Pre-Conference Workshop in the area of their choice, and all board members received the remaining three hours of Whole Board Governance Training presented by GSBA trainer Zenda Bowie. Ms. Bowie is a former member of a Georgia school board and a long-standing trainer for GSBA. She is regarded across Georgia as the board member trainer of choice, especially in the areas of ethics and board behavior.

The Marietta Daily Journal (MDJ) Newspaper best describes the June 11, 2019, board training as follows: (this article written by Thomas Hartwell, beat writer for the MDJ.)

Cobb school board members were advised to leave adult issues and personal agendas out of meetings and to focus on the county's children during a training session Tuesday. The issues that most plague boards around the state tend not to deal with children at all, according to Zenda Bowie, of the Georgia School Boards Association, who gave a three-hour presentation to the board as part of its required governance training. She said avoiding politics and accepting difference of opinion, while still supporting the final decisions of the board, are the keys to public trust and the board's success. "Once the board has voted, it is the responsibility of the members of the board to be supportive of that action," Bowie said, adding that board members should still express their opinion during board discussions. "What we're basically saying is don't sabotage the school board's decision." She also said it is of dire importance that the board be open-minded when hearing the opinions of other members and of the public, but that they "stay in their lane." Decisions on staff hiring, budgeting, facilities and student instruction should be left to the superintendent and his staff and board members opinions should never turn into decisions on behalf of the district, she said. David Chastain, the board's chairman, said he believes the Cobb school board has done well to avoid bringing personal matters to work. Chastain said while there have been a handful of heated debates at meetings, the board is still fairly new as a group and communication will likely improve as time goes on. It's a challenge trying to keep all seven people on track when you're having a discussion," he said. "I want to say that hopefully we can see some improvements... We're still getting to know each other." Vice Chairman Brad Wheeler agreed. Wheeler added that each member needs to focus on not taking another's opinion personally. He said difference of opinions on the board represent a difference of opinion in the community, but "you have to be careful that you don't make things personal, because then things break down." Board member Charisse Davis said, especially with her and Jaha Howard's recent election to the school board, the board is having to consider new opinions in a way that has not yet been considered. Davis said new board members bring new experiences and she hopes to see more open-minded discussion of new ideas in the future. "As long as everybody feels like they have a voice and a way of communicating and their opinion is valued, then OK," she said. "we're not always going to agree and that's OK too." Bowie also challenged board members not to speak for the board and reminded them to keep lines of communication with both the public and each other open and flowing. She said board members should share their opinions with each other prior to meetings so board members are not surprised by each other's' votes or comments. Bowie further encouraged every board member to share their opinion during meeting discussions, as an elected representative's silence does a disservice to the community, she said.

Standard 2.1: Learners have equitable opportunities to develop skills and achieve the content and learning priorities established by the system.

The Cobb County School District enjoys a long history of academic excellence and student success, as evidenced by the achievements of the District, our schools, and our students. The District has demonstrated an unwavering commitment to this rich tradition of excellence and innovation amid, arguably, one of the most challenging and unprecedented times in educational history.

Over the course of the last 13 months, the Cobb County School District has continued to prioritize the needs of our students and community by aligning our time, energy, and

resources to overcoming the challenges to learning the pandemic has created for every school district across the country.

Despite tremendous obstacles, the Cobb County School District has successfully maintained continuity of learning and support for students through a variety of strategically planned, designed, and implemented initiatives. These efforts have allowed students access to the resources, learning, and supports needed to remain engaged and supported in the learning process--despite barriers created by the current national health crisis. These dedicated efforts include a variety of opportunities and resources to support the diverse and evolving needs of the students and communities it serves.

These efforts include, but are not limited to:

- **PreK-8 Resource Collections** – Upon closure of the District in March, as required by Executive Order of the Governor, weekly Resource Collections were developed for each grade level and available for pick-up 7 days a week at all food distribution locations and at prioritized high-density dwelling communities. These resources provided access to and support for prioritized learning standards for families with limited technology or internet access. Accommodations for special education and English learners were included with each grade level, as well as parent tips and social-emotional activities for students and families. These resources were also available to all families via the District website.
- **Academic and Social Emotional Learning Parent Resource Website** – Development and expansion of developmentally appropriated resources to assist families in best supporting their child's individual needs during distance learning.
- **Cobb County School District YouTube Channel** – District YouTube channel provided access to weekly pre-recorded lessons aligned to identified 4th Quarter standards, in the areas of English/Language Arts, Math, Science, and Social Studies. Additionally, these lessons were accessible to students/families via Cobb TV Channel 24.
- **Tutoring** – Families had access to personalized homework help and expert tutors in more than 50 subjects with bilingual offerings from March through May. On-demand access to tutors was available Monday-Friday 9a.m. – 11p.m.

At the conclusion of the 2019-2020 school year, the Cobb County School District prioritized additional supplemental learning experiences to accelerate learning, provide enrichment, and/or to mitigate the effects of summer learning loss compounded by school closures in March. The District redesigned programs and opportunities that would have traditionally been face-to-face and added or expanded other opportunities to provide on-going support for identified student populations in a virtual environment turning the summer months. These opportunities included, but were not limited to:

- **Summer Literacy Camp** – A literacy program that combined research-based reading and writing practices with an engaging summer camp approach. This initiative targeted identified 4th, 5th, and 6th grade students and provided students with both print and digital resources delivered to their homes at no cost to parents. Teachers provided continuous and targeted instruction and support in a virtual environment.

- **Summer Enrichment Academy** – Enrichment program for elementary-aged students qualifying for gifted services. This opportunity was offered at no cost to families and the experience was provided to students in a virtual environment.
- **Extended School Year Program** – Program for students with disabilities who qualify for the service. Students were provided with small-group and one-to-one instruction, specifically aligned to their IEP goals and objectives, in a virtual environment.
- **High School Summer School** – A credit recovery opportunity for current high school students. Students were provided an opportunity to receive instruction through a blended delivery model of online learning and direct virtual instruction.
- **Course Audit Opportunities** – All high school students were provided the opportunity to audit a course, taken during Spring 2020, to enhance and support their knowledge and understanding of prioritized content.
- **Summer Backpacks** – Customized, high-interest fiction and non-fiction books and learning resources to support identified English Learners in grades 3-8 across the district. Each backpack included a Parent Guide to assist parents in supporting their student's summer learning. The guides were provided in Spanish and English, based on the home language of the family. Additionally, all English Learners in grades K-5 were provided access to Imagine Learning, an online, adaptive resource targeting language and literacy development.
- **Summer Intervention Resources (K-8)** – A collection of recommended resources provided to local schools for students in need of intervention throughout the summer. Resources include online instructional materials for Math intervention (K-8) and a combination of online materials for ELA intervention through a variety of research-based, district-resources, including, DreamBox, Headsprout, Freckle, Read180, and System 44.
- **Summer Link** – Expansion of summer learning resources available in targeted content areas for students in grades pre-kindergarten through high school. Students in grades PreK-8 were provided access to online, adaptive resources in ELA, Math, Science, and Social Studies throughout the summer. These resources were responsive to individual student needs and could be accessed from a multitude of devices to support greater accessibility for all students.

In August 2020, the Cobb County School District resumed school in a virtual environment due to the extremely high number of COVID-19 cases in Cobb County and surrounding areas. In preparation for this possibility, the District had prioritized and accelerated work associated with the District's learning management system to ensure continuity of learning would be maintained should this situation arise. The integration of the student portal within the Cobb Teaching and Learning System (CTLs) allowed students, teachers, and staff to maintain daily schedules and provide daily instruction and support to students via teleconferencing capabilities.

Approximately 40,000 devices were provided to students to ensure all students had daily access to instruction. Additionally, the District worked to support those families with limited or no internet access through distribution of personal connectivity devices, and strategically placed school buses in targeted high-density dwelling communities equipped with broad range Wi-Fi access to support connectivity efforts.

In preparation for students to return to school, the Cobb County School District partnered with Hanover Research to support all certified staff members and provide targeted social emotional learning professional learning to better equip staff at addressing and supporting the diverse social and emotional needs of all our students, especially related to their experiences since school closures in March. Additionally, all newly certified employees completed required culturally responsive teaching professional learning while attending the District's required New Teacher Academy. The District also hosted a Social Emotional Learning Conference in January, whereby more than 400 district leaders participated in trauma-informed leadership training to support continued efforts in creating positive and inclusive learning environment for all students.

The Cobb County School District made a commitment to continue to provide all families the option of face-to-face or remote learning opportunities, even as the time to reopen schools approached in September. Families were given an opportunity to remain remote or return face-to-face, while maintaining continuity of learning, through a shared synchronous approach to instruction. This model permitted teachers to share instruction via teleconferencing from their designated classrooms with the student who chose to remain in the remote environment.

This model prioritized the diverse and evolving needs of students and families and included:

- The opportunity for face-to-face students to have increased interaction and socialization;
- The opportunity for remote students to have continued uninterrupted access to high-quality instruction;
- The opportunity for all students to learn together as a class and remain engaged with their peers;
- The flexibility to allow for each student to seamlessly transition between face-to-face and remote based on the needs of the student and/or family; and
- Continued, uninterrupted access to support services and/or personnel for all students regardless of learning environment selected

The District will continue to make this option available to students and families for the duration of the 2020-2021 school year to accommodate the changing needs of students and families and maintain continuity of learning for all students.

It is extremely important to note that, although District decisions are never agreed upon by all stakeholders, receiving feedback from the diverse Cobb community has been a priority and a strength during the 2020-2021 school year. Knowing COVID-19 has impacted each family differently, all Cobb parents have been given three opportunities to provide their input on the instructional model used by Cobb Schools.

The first opportunity, which guided instructional decisions during the fall of 2020, saw more than 97,000 parents respond, including over 42,000 parents of elementary students, over 23,000 parents of middle school students, and more than 30,000 parents of high school students. Approximately 62% of Cobb parents asked for a face-to-face classroom model, while 38% of Cobb parents asked for a remote classroom model. In response to the

significant input we received from parents, staff, and the community, Cobb Schools continued to provide both classroom models to meet the needs of all students.

The second opportunity, which guided instructional decisions during the winter of 2021, saw more than 106,000 parents respond, including over 45,000 parents of elementary school students, over 25,000 parents of middle school students, and more than 34,000 parents of high school students. Similar to the fall of 2020, 66% of Cobb parents asked for a face-to-face classroom model, while 34% of Cobb parents asked for a remote classroom model. In response to the significant input we received from parents, staff, and the community, Cobb Schools continued to provide both classroom models to meet the needs of all students.

The third opportunity, which will guide instructional decisions during the spring of 2021, was offered to parents beginning February 15, 2021, and continued to receive responses through February 28th. As of the writing of this letter, percentages are similar to the first two opportunities for parents to provide input.

In addition, the District's communication content, which can be found through social media, the District website, weekly newsletters, email, podcasts, and videos, reaches over 2,000,000 readers, viewers, and listeners per month.

As a school district, we believe it is our responsibility to teach students, regardless of the challenges in doing so. During a pandemic as complex as COVID-19, with as many opposing viewpoints as it has engendered, we continue to meet that responsibility in a way that honors our diverse communities and is consistent with our legal, moral, and ethical duties to all of our stakeholders.

Standard 3.8: The system allocates human, material, and fiscal resources in alignment with the system's identified needs and priorities to improve student performance and organizational effectiveness.

The Cobb County School District continues to prioritize financial, material, and human capital resources to provide opportunities that ensure all students have access to high levels of learning, coupled with the support necessary for continued academic progress and success. Targeted interventions and supports, such the District's Early Literacy Initiative and Transformational School Model approach, have continued this year. The Early Literacy Initiative was expanded to an additional 7 schools for the 2020-2021 school year. Funding and personnel have been leveraged to allocate differentiated resources to schools based on the unique needs of a school and the students served.

This year, to expand pre-kindergarten access to families, the District opened the South Cobb Early Learning Center as a component of the District's comprehensive literacy plan, as well as opening the Cobb Innovation and Technology Academy. We targeted partnerships with organizations such as Junior Achievement /3DE, Discovery Education, as well as individual schools throughout this year, despite the challenges the pandemic created to traditional formats for this support. The District conducted a District-wide needs assessment in the areas of fine arts, career, technical, and agricultural education and health and physical education. This needs assessment resulted in the acquisition of \$2.7 M worth of PreK-12 content

resources to support the Georgia Performance Standards and access to highly effective instruction.

The Cobb County School District Financial Services Division has established the highest credit rating from Moody's and Standard & Poor; the highest in long-term (Aaa) and short-term (MIG1) credit ratings for FY2021. The District is one of only 23 school districts in the country to hold both highest credit ratings in the industry concurrently. The District is in the position to financially meet the identified needs and priorities to improve student performance and organizational effectiveness.

General Fund Expenditures Per Pupil by Comparison of the Big 4 Metro Districts.

Per Student Cost Categories	Cobb	DeKalb	Fulton	Gwinnett
Instructional	\$6,758	\$7,150	\$6,892	\$5,899
Media	\$145	\$139	\$163	\$125
Instructional Support	\$371	\$387	\$814	\$507
Pupil Services	\$244	\$676	\$691	\$296
General Administration	\$177	\$253	\$261	\$207
School Administration	\$624	\$694	\$640	\$773
Transportation	\$485	\$656	\$599	\$612
Maintenance/Operations	\$628	\$1,121	\$969	\$664
TOTAL	\$9,452	\$11,076	\$11,029	\$9,083

Note 1: Low Cobb County School District Administrative and Support Costs

Note 2: High Percentage focused on Instruction (Classroom Teachers and Students)

Student Achievement is and will continue to be a priority for the Cobb County School District before, during, and after the pandemic.

Since 2014, Cobb students have improved their academic performance in virtually every accountability measure available. As measured by the most recent calculation of Georgia's accountability measure (CCRPI), students in Cobb have demonstrated higher proficiency, faster progress, and demonstrated higher college readiness than their peers across the state of Georgia. Cobb schools scored 86.1 out of a possible 100 points on the CCRPI which is 10.2 points higher than the 75.9 posted by the average Georgia district. Cobb schools also outpaced all metropolitan Atlanta districts with higher CCRPI schools than Fulton, Gwinnett, Marietta City, DeKalb, and Atlanta Public Schools.

Cobb students have graduated at an increasingly higher rate as Cobb's graduation rate has improved by 7.5 percentage points to an all-time high of 88.6% in 2020. Cobb student scores on the Georgia Milestones have ranked as the highest or second highest of all metropolitan Atlanta school districts for the last five years in a row.

Cobb students have surpassed their peers across the state and nation for five consecutive years on both the SAT and the ACT. Cobb Schools boasts 29 National Blue Ribbon Schools, 56 Georgia Schools of Excellence, 36 STEM certified schools, 2 STEAM certified schools, and

13 Cognia STEM certified schools. In just the past two years alone, Cobb students have collected more than \$200 million in scholarship dollars to apply to college tuition.

In closing, while the COVID-19 pandemic has presented everyone with extreme challenges, the Cobb County School District administration and Board have continued serving children at an extremely high level. One final example of our effective and efficient work is found in the accomplishments made during our Board meetings. From January 2020 through January 2021 (months inclusive), CCSD administration presented 64 Board agenda items during official public Board meetings, with 62 of those items receiving approval by unanimous vote. The remaining items, both regarding the board meeting calendar and/or change in that calendar, carried 5-1 and 5-2, respectively.

While the Cobb County School District's record speaks for itself, we know there is room for growth and improvement in all areas, including effective Board governance. To that end, we have recently appointed a new interim general counsel with deep experience in accreditation and school board governance matters. In addition, we continue to explore high-quality training and team-building opportunities for our Board and myself, so that we may improve our functioning and effective communication. We are committed to continuous improvement in meeting our respective obligations under Cognia, state law, and Board policy.

Thank you for the opportunity to address the Standards concerns mentioned in your letter. Please do not hesitate to contact me should you need further information or clarification.

Best regards,



Chris Ragsdale
Superintendent
Cobb County School District

Cc: Annette Bohling, J.D.