



# Cobb County School District

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**Marietta, Georgia**

**August 15-18, 2021**

**Special Review Report  
# 215096**

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# Special Review Report

## Introduction

This report presents the findings of the Cognia™ Special Review conducted on August 15-18, 2021. The Special Review was conducted for Cobb County School District in Marietta, Georgia, in response to complaints and allegations against the district.

The Cobb County School District (CCSD) is currently the second largest public school district in Georgia with 111 schools and approximately 107,000 students. This district serves as the largest employer in Cobb County with over 17,000 employees, of which 65 percent of teachers have advanced degrees. The district reports the student demographics as 34.9 percent Caucasian, 30.6 percent Black, 23.9 percent Hispanic, 6 percent Asian, and 4.7 percent as other.

Complaints were received by various stakeholders from the community and staff alleging the Cobb County Board of Education was not upholding its roles and responsibilities. The following statements are summarized examples of the concerns expressed by the complainants. Board members:

- Exhibit a lack of understanding regarding their roles and responsibilities.
- Do not demonstrate collegiality with respect to their differences or work cohesively to promote student achievement and the success of the district.
- Do not adhere to a Code of Ethics regarding board conduct during board of education meetings.
- Do not adhere to ethical practices for fiscal oversight.
- Make decisions that seem unethical, discriminatory, or inhumane.
- Are not communicating transparently to staff and community stakeholders on issues of current importance and related decisions. For example, the Board has not been responsive to requests for discussions about items related to teacher and staff support and safety improvements during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.
- Have not been responsive to requests for discussions related to the study and expansion of targeted literacy interventions based on data about student performance.

The nature of the complaints received by Cognia suggested that the district may not be adhering to selected *Cognia Performance Standards for School Systems* listed within this report. This report is organized around those cited standards.

## Activities of the Special Review Team

In preparation for the Special Review, the team reviewed the district's written responses submitted to Cognia about the alleged complaints, current website information, video recordings of board meetings and work sessions, and documents provided by the district via eProve Workspace. During the review, the team engaged remotely via Zoom in the following activities:

The team conducted 179 remote interviews that included the following:

- The Special Review Team conducted interviews with the seven board members and the superintendent. Four review team members participated in the superintendent interview while two team members paired up to interview each board member.
- Executive and district-level leaders (i.e., representing the areas of curriculum, data, accountability and assessment, finance, special education, communication/public affairs, facilities and safety, and policy and planning) were interviewed in pairs by two team members. The district selected all executive and district leaders except for the policy and planning representative, who the review team specifically requested to provide clarification on policy matters.



- Stakeholders who demographically represent the district, schools, and board member posts within the county were selected for individual or focus group interviews.
- Community stakeholders who demographically represent schools and board member posts within the county were selected for focus group interviews.
- A review of evidence included the CCSD board meetings and work sessions dated from August 22, 2019, to August 19, 2021.
- A review of the district website, local news articles about the district found via a Google search and provided by the district, and evidence the district uploaded into the eProve Workspace.

## Findings

The Special Review Team's findings are organized by each cited standard. For each standard, the Special Review Team provides a rating followed by a Summary of Findings. Priorities for Improvement and Directives are provided for any standard rated as *Insufficient* or *Initiating*. Recommendations are provided for any standard rated as *Improving* or *Impacting*. The findings of the Special Review Team are reported within four ranges identified by the colors below:

Color	Rating	Description
Red	Insufficient	Identifies key areas that need more focused improvement efforts
Yellow	Initiating	Represents areas to enhance and extend current improvement efforts
Green	Improving	Pinpoints quality practices that meet the standards
Blue	Impacting	Demonstrates noteworthy practices producing clear results that exceed expectations

Leadership Capacity Standard		Rating
1.4	<b>The governing authority establishes and ensures adherence to policies that are designed to support system effectiveness.</b>	Initiating

### Improvement Priority

- **Adhere to board policies to develop a culture of trust and cooperation among board members, employees, and the stakeholders within the district.**

### Findings

An examination of the Cobb County School System Policy Manual and artifacts, interview data, and observations of recorded board meetings and work sessions provided evidence for the Special Review Team about the Board's adherence to its prescribed roles and responsibilities. The team found that the Board proactively participates in multiple trainings to improve its effectiveness. In the system's initial response to the complaints communicated by Cognia, the superintendent shared that board members had engaged in training to enhance their awareness and understanding of their roles and responsibilities. The correspondence dated March 26, 2021, outlined a listing of professional learning opportunities in which each board member had participated during the 2019-2020 school year. According to the listing, each member attended sessions at the Georgia School Board Association (GSBA) Pre-Conference Workshop on topics of individual's chosen interest. Topics selected by board members included legal issues, educational equity, and finance. An additional Whole Board Governance Training was conducted on September 24, 2020, and

attended by all board members. The training, facilitated by Gregory, Doyle, Calhoun, and Rogers law firm, the school board's legal counsel at that time, focused on policies, rule changes, regulations, and future challenges.

During the 2018-2019 school year, board members also participated in GSBA training sessions of their choice. Topics chosen included legal issues and finance. During that same school year, all board members participated in an additional three-hour whole board training. A description of the training published in the *Marietta Daily Journal*, and included in the correspondence from the superintendent, revealed the topics focused on ethical behaviors for board members as they fulfilled their roles and responsibilities. In a document provided to the team, the superintendent also listed New Board Member Orientation training for newly elected members, which focused on understanding the duties and responsibilities of the various central office departments.

The Board has established policies that provide direction for policy revisions and adoptions. Policy BA - Goals and Objectives, for example, defines the Board's role and responsibility as policymakers by outlining, "The Board will direct, control, and inspire the organization through the careful establishment of Board written policies reflecting the Board's values and perspectives about ends to be achieved and means to be avoided." The policy, last reviewed on May 17, 2012, further stipulates that the Board will serve as the policymaker and focus on the "intended long-term effect outside the organization and not the administrative or programmatic means of attaining those effects." The Official Code of Georgia Annotated O.C.G.A. 20-2.0049 (Standards for the local board of education members) provides more clarity on the roles and responsibilities of board members and discusses topics such as "vision setting, policymaking, approving multimillion-dollar budgets, and hiring a qualified superintendent," all geared toward improving "schools and the academic achievement of all students."

Additionally, Policy BD-Policy Development, last reviewed on February 15, 2018, describes the process for proposing or revising policies and states, "On a regular basis, each administrative division will review policies affecting that division." In addition, the district has assigned a district staff member to oversee the process for revising, adopting, and developing board policies. The team conducted a comprehensive review of the existing Policy Manual. While Policy BD did not stipulate a definitive timeline for reviewing existing guidance, the team found that most policies had been reviewed within the past five years. However, several policies contained data indicating that they had not been reviewed, revised, or revisited recently. Examples of these policies include the following:

- Policy IA-Student Performance Standards and Expectations (last reviewed on 5/14/08)
- Policy DA-Fiscal Management Goals and Objectives (last reviewed on 6/28/12)
- Policy CEI-Superintendent Evaluation (last reviewed on 7/19/12)
- Policy EGAA-R-Workers' Compensation (last reviewed on 7/19/12)
- Policy EBGA-R-Improvement/Modifications to the District Internet (last reviewed on 8/23/12)
- Policy CEB-Superintendent Duties (last reviewed on 10/25/12)
- Policy CEJ-Superintendent Separation (last reviewed on 10/25/12)
- Policy KA-Treatment of Consumers (last reviewed on 10/25/12)
- Policy IKB-R-Controversial Issues (last reviewed on 5/22/15)

While the team noticed that Policy BD describes the process for policy actions, it does not address the need for internal and external stakeholders to have the topics in advance of discussing or making decisions about revising existing or adding new policies. In addition, team members viewed board meeting recordings where policy changes were recommended, discussed, and voted on during the same meeting. When asked about this process during interviews with district-level staff, the response was that even though a 30-day "lie on the table" process is typically recommended by the GSBA, that requirement is currently not a part of the system's existing policy. During the October 24, 2019, board work session, one member made a motion that the Board change its meeting schedule to have two meetings a month - one as a work session and another on a different day as the voting meeting. The rationale for the recommendation was to increase transparency so that the public would have time to provide input on items being discussed and voted on by the Board.



After discussion and debate, the vote on the motion to change the meeting structure failed to pass by a vote of 2 to 5.

Team members viewed recordings of board meetings where recent policy changes occurred with limited time for board members to process the impact of the change. One specific example is the Board's actions on Policy BC - Board Meetings, which changed the number of board members (i.e., from three to four) required to add an item to the agenda. Interviews with district officials revealed the former means of adding agenda items included several options, such as business the superintendent would bring to the Board, items the chairperson chose to add, or the approval of three board members. During the board work session on November 19, 2020, however, the Board voted to change Policy BC to reflect new requirements for the approval of items placed on the agenda for work sessions and board meetings. Under the new guidance, "A proposed agenda for the meeting will be prepared by the Superintendent with input and approval of the Board Chair and delivered via email four days prior to the agenda work session." The revised policy stipulates, "Items may be placed on the work session agenda by the Superintendent, the Board Chair, or through a request by any four board members." During interviews, when asked the rationale for making the change from three to four board members, the board chairperson responded, "Only to have board items included on the agenda and not subjects not pertinent to our children."

The recent change in policy from three to four board members required to add an item to a meeting agenda concerned the Special Review Team. Board members lacked prior knowledge of the proposed policy change to place items on the board agenda and the rationale for the change. In addition, action was taken to invoke the change with limited input from stakeholders. In the meeting, a board member made several comments indicating his displeasure with the policy change and called it censorship for some board members. The board member stated, "Anyone paying attention to our board meetings will understand the division of this Board, with generally four members on one side and three on the other" (Timestamp 02:48:58). The motion to change the policy passed on the same night the policy revision was initially submitted. This change in the number of board members needed to approve the addition of an item to the agenda was especially concerning considering the current dynamics of the Board with a visible 4 to 3 vote split on numerous agenda items. The new policy also grants the board chairperson a great deal of authority in determining the items that may be discussed and voted on by the Board and lessens the ability of board members to represent their stakeholders.

An example of the impact from the change in Policy BC occurred during the August 19, 2021, board work session. One board member requested the topic of "COVID Protocols" be added to the board agenda as a discussion item. His reasoning was the Board, out of community concern, needed to be more aware of the procedures, practices, and resources available to support the health and safety of students and staff during the pandemic. The board chairperson immediately admonished the board member and stated that procedures exist for adding items to the board agenda. He went on to say that because those procedures were not followed and because COVID-19 was not an emergency topic, as the chairperson, he was denying the right to add the item to the board agenda (Timestamp 01:46:00). This resulted in an argument among the chairperson and several other board members and also involved the legal counsel on several occasions. The chairperson did not allow the Board to vote to determine whether four members approved adding "COVID Protocols" to the meeting agenda for discussion. He emphasized that he was using his authority as the chairperson to not add the item to the agenda.

The Special Review Team also reviewed Policy CMA-R - Administrative Rules (last revised on 2/11/19), which elevates the Board's role in developing and approving administrative rules to guide the day-to-day operations of the district and schools. The policy states, "These Rules embody the philosophical foundations, beliefs, and core values of the District and the Cobb County Board of Education (Board). As such, they establish parameters within which employees, particularly school and District administrators, exercise their decision-making authority."

In essence, these policies about administrative rules place the Board in the position of developing policies and informing the district how to enforce or operationalize the policies. The team reviewed recordings from board meetings where Administrative Rules were consistently included on the consent agenda or for



discussion. The team noted a shift in the Board’s focus from policy development to administrative rule approval. For instance, a review of the Policy Manual revealed that in 2018, the Board acted on 14 administrative rules while working on five policies. In 2019, the Board did not review, update, or adopt any policies, yet it acted on 18 administrative rules. In 2020, the Board updated 12 administrative rules, but only two policies. In 2021, at the time of the Special Review, the Board had updated 14 administrative rules while focusing on one policy. The concentrated focus on approving administrative rules may be having an impact on structuring the system’s day-to-day operations.

**Directives:**

- Update the Policy Manual to ensure all policies are current and adhere to state and federal laws, when applicable.
- Develop and maintain a calendar that ensures a systematic review and revision of all district policies within a reasonable timeframe.
- Include opportunities for stakeholders to review and understand policy revisions, changes, and adoptions before the final vote.
- Include specific policies that most directly align with board meeting agenda items and items the Board will consider in work sessions.
- Participate in professional development on “Robert’s Rules of Order” to gain clarity about the role of the chairperson and fellow board members when conducting meetings and ensure that Robert’s Rules of Order are consistently used during all board meetings.
- Monitor adherence to established board roles and responsibilities to support student achievement while also developing a culture of trust, cooperation, and mutual respect among board members and stakeholders throughout the district.
- Align policies and practices to promote a culture of trust, collaboration, and mutual respect among board members and other stakeholders throughout the system.

Leadership Capacity Standard		Rating
1.5	<b>The governing authority adheres to a code of ethics and functions within defined roles and responsibilities.</b>	Initiating

**Improvement Priority**

- **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.**

**Findings**

The Special Review Team studied Cobb County School District Policy BH - Board Code of Ethics that guides board members to operate ethically and conscientiously. The policy states that board members should “Work with other board members in a spirit of harmony and cooperation despite differences of opinion that may arise during the discussion and resolution of issues at board meetings.” The Special Review Team observed board meeting videos (<https://www.cobbk12.org/page/8993/watch-meetings-online>) and found that, at the January 21, 2021, board work session, each member signed a Code of Ethics form (Timestamp 01:20:17).

According to interviews and observations of board meetings, the Board has functioned primarily as a cohesive entity and adhered to the Code of Ethics. At a board work session on November 14, 2019, for example, a board member bragged on the superintendent and the financial services department for being transparent, indicating this was a valued attribute. However, a shift in the type and tenor of board member



discourse has emerged, which is visible in how each member collectively and individually demonstrates the ethical responsibility required of board members.

An example of the decline in the harmonious working relationship among board members occurred at the next board work session on September 19, 2019. At this meeting, the board chairperson recommended the Board remove the Board Member Comments agenda item because board members veered off into different directions during this time. While one board member seconded the motion to remove the Board Member Comments standing agenda item, others accused the chairperson of surprising some board members with this suggestion. For example, one board member referred to a significant point from their training, “Don’t surprise your fellow board members at the board meeting.” The member then asked the chairperson for examples of board member comments that made this issue urgent (Timestamp 02:20:31). The board chairperson said that political comments had been made during this section of the meeting. Another board member reacted and said that all they had before the meeting was the board meeting agenda that said Board Member Comments for Potential Action. The board member said that when words such as equity are mentioned that censoring occurs and added that this recommendation was suspicious and done to reign in board member comments (Timestamp 02:26:46). One board member commented that some board members did not know that Board Member Comments was on the agenda to be removed. The board member stated, “Four people are not surprised by this; three people may be.” The member implied the Board has a double standard and runs from difficult discussions (Timestamp 02:37:37). Ultimately, the Board voted on the original motion to remove the Board Members Comments from the agenda, and it passed 4-3 (Timestamp 03:53:13).

The debate related to the removal of Board Member Comments highlights the Board’s recent lack of transparency and trust and the change in Board dynamics. The discussion also shows that some board members may not be able to fully represent their constituents due to their lack of knowledge of what will be discussed and voted on before the board meeting and in time to study the issues fully.

Another example of the change in board member interactions occurred at the August 22, 2019, board meeting. During the Board Member Comments section of the meetings, a personal political view was discussed by one board member who said it was hypocritical that the Board tells kids about leadership and respect while at the same time praising leaders who are not role models (Timestamp 00:50:23).

The Board’s School District Organization Plan (Policy AC) provides an overarching expectation for the district. Section C of the policy speaks to core values (e.g., integrity, demonstrating honesty, consistency, taking responsibility for action, and being worthy of trust) that should guide board members and district personnel. In interviews, few stakeholders reported satisfaction with board members. Stakeholder interviews, for instance, yielded information about the Board’s lack of efficacy for acting in the best interest of students and as a harmonious governing authority. When asked whether they knew why Cognia was conducting this review, stakeholders overwhelmingly pointed to the Board. They also made comments such as board members are negatively impacting students, divided down party lines, driven by social media and politics, and split 4 to 3.

The Special Review Team determined that the removal of Board Member Comments from the meeting agenda was a pivotal point in creating conflict among board members. For example, at the September 24, 2019, board meeting, one board member used the Public Participation time to speak. This board member physically moved from his seat and addressed the Board as a member of the public. The board member talked about leadership and vision (Timestamp 00:42:38). In addition, at the April 22, 2021, board work session, another board member asked the board chairperson to discuss a topic and said, “I know we are not able to make board member comments, but I would like to hear your comments, Mr. Chair, ... Mr. Chair, can you expound on that for our behalf please” (Timestamp 01:37:45).

Moreover, the Special Review Team examined documents (e.g., Executive Brief: Evidence for Special Review of CCSD, Executive Summary: Board Interactions through Social Media) provided by the district. The team also reviewed examples of board members’ social media feeds that represent the district and interactions with the public. The team found multiple instances of board members who may not have



adhered to Policy BBBA that outlines the persons responsible for communicating on behalf of the Board and district. The policy states, “The Board Chair is the official spokesperson for the Board of Education” and “The official spokesperson for the District is the Superintendent or his/her designee.” However, in evidence provided to the team, the district reported being aware that four board members have social media accounts that represent the district, including three with posts that potentially violate policy (i.e., one board member with 51 posts, a second board member with one post, and a third board member with three posts) and one board member sends a monthly newsletter. The board chairperson publishes a weekly video series that represents the Board.

Additionally, some inappropriate comments by board members on social media present a potential violation of Board Policy BBBA that states, “Communication by Board members to the news media should be helpful to the District and not harmful.” The district provided some examples of social media posts made by board members:

- A call to “Be on notice and take as many screenshots as you feel necessary; we won’t be silenced, nor intimidated.”
- A reference to the board chairperson’s comment about not knowing what Critical Race Theory means as being “embarrassing.”
- A statement about the presentation from 30escientific, the makers of Iggy™ hand washing stations in support of the board member’s vote against the purchase.
- A post on “Grapevine” revealing the results of a high school poll telling what institutions that students planned to attend after graduation. These results were published prior to the district sharing information with students.

After reviewing numerous other print and social media items, the team found other instances of board member actions or postings that are inappropriate and ethically questionable. On August 16, 2021, the Cobb County Courier printed an article (<https://cobbcountycourier.com/2021/08/classes-virtual-cob/>) that referenced a board member who disseminated false information about the coronavirus (COVID-19) via email as part of an invitation to join a private Facebook group to support the Cognia review and specific board members.

Although district policy appoints the chairperson as the designated speaker for the Board, the team found examples of inappropriate information provided by the chairperson during his weekly video briefings (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCxUYlueRXEbuGTwamWkUn5g>). On February 24, 2021, for instance, the chairperson states that a few board members are in violation of board policy and accuses them of sending mixed messages (Timestamp 00:01:20). He also says, “We will not allow a select few to tear down what you, our community, has built” (Timestamp 00:02:13; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v0pRxJieFIk&list=PLJ3LDNHg8nlmdMBZ7t4IzIL7RPARrslua&index=22>). In addition, on March 3, 2021, he states that “Despite what three of our board members tell you, Cobb County Schools rank among the best schools in the country.” He later adds that political agendas imported from national headlines are not allowed at board meetings (Timestamp 00:00:50; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0GA6vnoyDos&list=PLJ3LDNHg8nlmdMBZ7t4IzIL7RPARrslua&index=21>).

During interviews, stakeholders also expressed concern that the Board no longer functions as an effective body. For example, interviews revealed that stakeholders are embarrassed by social media postings. Stakeholders often called the Board dysfunctional. One teacher shared, “I learn about things through the Grapevine social media post. The district may be nervous about how things are sent out, for it can be used on social media against the district. I have been very concerned about information sent out by my board member - politicizing.” Another teacher commented, “My board member, over the Post in which I work in and where my kids go to school, has gone downhill and made it personal.” A district-level stakeholder added, “I am very, very careful about what I say, for it can go viral. We have to avoid being pawns. A lot of information we give could be leveraged by the Board, particularly in their own social media boards.” Finally, principals shared that they were embarrassed by the Board’s actions and Facebook page. They talked about how these actions portray a negative public image. Some principals said they tried to tune out the noise from the Board.





Another recent example of the lack of collegiality and respect among board members surfaced at the June 10, 2021, board work session. When the board chairperson recommended a resolution against Critical Race Theory (CRT) and the 1619 Project, a discussion ensued among board members and the chairperson. One board member asked for a definition of Critical Race Theory and explained that without a definition that other programs (e.g., restorative practices) could be eliminated through accidental association with CRT. (Timestamp 02:40:00). A second board member commented that in order to discuss politics at board meetings a member had to agree with the views of some others (Timestamp 02:32:35) and that this was the second time that the Board was considering a resolution full of untruths and added, "When I first got on the Board, I tried to propose a resolution and was told that we don't do that" (Timestamp 02:34:52). A third board member spoke in favor of the resolution pointing to the need to keep this as an adult issue. The board chairperson said the first board member was "conflating programs" and had "besmirched" teachers. This resulted in the chairperson and the board member engaging in a debate and talking over one another. The chairperson told the board member to "Finish your remarks on the resolution and quit saying half-truths" (Timestamp 02:48:05). The first board member noted that this interaction had been disrespectful (Timestamp 02:48:14). A fourth board member asked what made this resolution so urgent that it had to be passed so quickly and commented that this was a political stance and white ideology and that he hoped the board would take the opportunity to "correct course" (Timestamp 02:52:34).

The resolution against Critical Race Theory passed with four members voting yes and three members abstaining, and according to interview data, board members voted along political party lines. When the Board changed its policy on November 1, 2020, to eliminate the Board Member Comments standing agenda item, the board chairperson said that it was to avoid having members bring national politics to board meetings.

The recent shift in the tone of board member interactions and relationships and the appearance of disregard for the board policies (e.g., BH - collegiality, BBA - communication, and AC - district's mission and board actions) negatively impacts the district at various levels. Also, board members not adhering to the Code of Ethics and communication plan and not functioning collegially makes the following Directives a priority for the district.

### **Directives**

- Seek an external expert to facilitate a board self-assessment of its performance based on national or state standards about best practices in school governance and develop a plan to use findings from the self-assessment to improve the Board's effectiveness, collegiality, and trust among board members.
- Identify and implement strategies, actions, and evaluation measures based on the results of the self-assessment to address institutional needs.
- Collaboratively (i.e., all board members) select training and trainers that align with the results of the self-assessment.
- Monitor, reassess, and take corrective actions to continuously improve the implementation of strategies, actions, and measures identified in the self-assessment.
- Monitor adherence to the behavioral norms outlined in the Code of Ethics and annually affirmed by each member of the Board.



Learning Capacity Standard		Rating
2.1	Learners have equitable opportunities to develop skills and achieve the content and learning priorities established by the institution.	Improving

**Findings**

Evidence provided for the team’s review demonstrated the school district’s high academic performance. A document entitled “Executive Summary: District Overview and Student Outcomes” stated, “The CCSD Class of 2020 posted an average score of 1107 on the SAT [formerly the Scholastic Assessment Test] which is 64 points higher than the state average (1043), 77 points higher than the national average (1030) and is the highest of the large districts in the state of Georgia.” The district provided additional data in Cognia eProve on student performance on the ACT (formerly American College Testing) and shared the following statement: “For the 15<sup>th</sup> straight year, Cobb County School District students achieved record-high scores on the ACT college entrance exam. The Class of 2020’s average score of 23.2 is 2.6 points higher than the national average (20.6), is 1.5 points higher than the state average (21.7) and is the highest of the large districts in the state of Georgia.” The district’s graduation rate of 88.6 percent, according to documents provided for the team’s review, is higher than the state rate of 83 percent.

District performance as reported by the Georgia Department of Education (GDOE) and cited on the 2019 College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) for Cobb County reveals a district CCRPI score of 86.1 ([http://ccrpi.gadoe.org/Reports/Views/Shared/\\_Layout.html](http://ccrpi.gadoe.org/Reports/Views/Shared/_Layout.html)). This rating was 10.2 points higher than the overall rating for all schools across the state. Evidence presented by the school district also included a video shared by district staff at a board meeting. The recording stated, “Cobb’s high school students outperformed their peers throughout metro Atlanta. Cobb’s third- through eighth-grade students scored higher in 75 of the 84 subject area exams and placed second in the remaining exams.”

The Special Review Team found evidence of multiple programs designed to challenge and accelerate student learning. The district, for example, has seven high school magnet programs (i.e., Math, Science and Technology; International Studies; Engineering and Biotechnology; International Baccalaureate; Performing Arts; and Medical Sciences and Research) for advanced students. In addition, the district boasts 36 Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) certified schools, two Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics (STEAM) certified schools, six Georgia STEM certified schools, two Georgia STEAM certified schools, 13 Cognia STEM certified schools, 22 National Blue Ribbon Schools, and 56 Georgia Schools of Excellence.

Even though evidence of student success was continuously displayed in an aggregate format, little evidence was presented that supported the disaggregation of student data in comparing performance by schools and by subgroups. CCRPI scores are reported in five achievement levels with Proficient Learner and Distinguished Learner being the highest two levels. A comparison of subgroup performance at these two levels revealed gaps in student achievement.

The following tables show the gaps in student achievement among various subgroups on the 2019 Georgia Milestones Assessment System (GMAS).

All Students	American Indian/ Alaskan Native	Asian/Pacific Islander	Black	Hispanic	Multi-Racial	White
53.36%	54.9%	80.24%	39.29%	35.48%	60.97%	71.48%

Economically Disadvantaged	English Language Learners	Students with Disabilities
32.50%	33.33%	27.45

A careful analysis of student results revealed similar gaps in achievement at other grade levels and in other content areas that were tested on the GMAS. Additionally, the team noted that performance gaps were also evident when comparing schools within the same grade band across the district, particularly Title I and non-Title I schools. CCRPI scores for the most current testing cycle (i.e., the school year 2020-2021) were scheduled to be released by the GDOE on the first day of the Special Review and hence were not available for the team's examination.

During interviews, district office staff, teachers, and principals discussed the achievement gaps and their work to eliminate those disparities. Interview data indicated that the Cobb Collaborative Communities' (CCC) work and 10-day data calls with academic coaches and principals discussing student performance had begun, but one stakeholder reported that even though the work was started, "2020 happened and 2020 knocked us backwards," referring to the impact of the pandemic. Another stakeholder talked of initial improvements, "All subgroups did have green flags on the 2019 CCRPI," indicating performance progress had been made. A district staff member noted that current work focuses on implementing the Early Literacy Framework, "We are investing in people and not programs." An extensive report of the literacy efforts was presented at the October 24, 2019, board work session and highlighted the work developed through the Balanced Instructional Model.

When asked whether subgroup performance data are shared with the Board or with the public, especially in discussions regarding decision-making for resources and support systems to increase student performance, one internal stakeholder responded, "We are afraid to, because it would immediately show up in the media." Another stakeholder discussed a "Culture of only talking about what we are doing best" and not discussing the areas of need.

Interviews with stakeholders revealed concerns about the equitable means used to support all learners across the district, especially those students needing additional assistance. One stakeholder described students who enter ninth-grade reading at a fourth- or fifth-grade level, "Something systematically is happening in the school system. There is a segment of students who are consistently coming in that are widely not prepared for the rigor of high school." Talking about the need to look at subgroup performance, the stakeholder continued, "Just because you are a very good school district, you can still become a better school system." During interviews, another stakeholder said, "Privilege is given to a few—and that's a hard pill to swallow."

Public participation at board meetings and work sessions also revealed circumstances of stakeholders speaking about equity in the schools. During the August 22, 2019, board meeting, one stakeholder talked about school climate and safety, "It is time for us to have a conversation so that we can truly be One Team, One Goal, Student Success." The speaker then referenced that 40 percent of students in the district are eligible for free and reduced lunch, and sometimes find "a challenge in being able to succeed." He added that the school district should do a better job at supporting these students (Timestamp 00:25:07). During the public participation section of the May 20, 2021, work session (Watch Meetings Online - cobbk12.org), one stakeholder provided the results of a recent survey administered to teachers in the district by an external group. One of the survey questions asked, "Have you witnessed or experienced inequity due to race or ethnicity as a Cobb County teacher?" The stakeholder cited responses such as "Schools of high minority populations receive less attention to campus upkeep unless it is a thing that gets in the media. I have seen Black and Brown students treated differently than White students due to bias and possible outright racism" (Timestamp 00:25:25). At the May 20, 2021, work session, a stakeholder said, "Yes, I see teachers come down harder on minority students. I also see schools with larger minority populations have to struggle for resources and access to technology" (Timestamp 00:25:32).

Board members also try to initiate conversations about equity concerns during board work sessions and formal meetings. In one exchange during the April 22, 2021 (Watch Meetings Online - cobbk12.org) board work session, one board member raised the issue about student performance differences and having time for the Board to gain more insight into academic performance. The board member asked how they reconcile the differences in student performance (Timestamp 01:19:47). The board member also inquired



about whether this item could be put on the agenda. The chairperson said that he would take it under advisement because he thought the Board talked about academics at most meetings already (Timestamp 01:21:47). A board member responded, “So if four board members want to talk about academics in detail at each meeting, we can do that? Because this is our business, right?” The chairperson responded by stating, “Overall, our business is the focus of the entire district, but our business is to oversee the superintendent and the staff and not to get into their business. Their lane is to make sure we are doing what we are supposed to be doing” (Timestamp 01:22:34).

The proposed 2020-2025 Cobb County Strategic Plan describes the school district as “A district of excellence where all students succeed.” According to artifacts submitted by the district, the strategic plan was “built based on twelve months of work and feedback from 9,000 Cobb citizens and staff members.” At the time of the Special Review, the plan had not been presented to the Board for formal approval. However, the superintendent explained that it would be presented “as public health conditions allow.” Even though the 2020-2025 Strategic Plan specifically outlines two goals directly correlated to personalized learning and differentiated support, the plan does not include information about how these goals will be attained or measures that will be used to assess goal progress. Goal 1 of the plan states, “Vary learning experiences to increase college and career pathway” while goal 2 stipulates, “Differentiate resources for students based on needs.” The plan includes statements about beliefs and values and lists the knowledge, skills, and key attributes that critical players need in the continuous improvement process, including leaders, scholars, and citizens. However, beyond this information, no specific initiatives, timelines, measurements, or allocated resources are outlined in the plan to ensure that identified goals are attained and equitable learning experiences are available for all students in the system.

Designing equitable learning activities includes collecting, analyzing, communicating, and using disaggregated performance data. These actions are critical when making decisions about resources, supports, and opportunities for students in all subgroups to develop skills, learn content, and attain learning priorities. While implementing initiatives focused on continuous improvement and strategic planning, solutions for addressing achievement gaps should be clearly delineated and communicated so all stakeholders can clearly understand projected plans to ensure access to personalized and equitable learning opportunities.

## **Recommendations**

- Ensure the 2020-2025 Strategic Plan contains initiatives, measures, and resources to support and monitor progress toward meeting the needs of all students.
- Develop, implement, and monitor a systemic and formalized process for collecting, analyzing, and using disaggregated student performance data to identify subgroup performance priorities to examine during deliberations on strategic planning.
- Monitor the progress of strategic plan goals and initiatives that focus on closing the achievement gaps among subgroups at all schools throughout the district.
- Allocate human, fiscal, and material resources equitably to improve performance for all groups of students represented in the district.
- Require district staff to report to the Board, on a routine basis, results of all subgroups' aggregated and disaggregated performance as measured by formative and summative assessments and use those findings for decision-making within the purview of the Board.



Resource Capacity Standard		Rating
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.	Initiating

**Improvement Priority**

- **Ensure adherence to clearly defined policies, procedures, and practices to promote consistency and transparency throughout the decision-making process, particularly in managing fiscal resources.**

**Findings**

The Cobb County School District’s Comprehensive Annual Financial Report (CAFR) (Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 2020) showcases that the district’s comprehensive annual financial report has earned the Certificate of Achievement for Excellence in Financial Reporting from the Government Finance Officers Association of the United States and Canada (GFOA) since 1980. The Special Review Team also noted that the district’s comprehensive annual financial report had received the Association of School Business Officials (ASBO) Certificate of Excellence in Financial Reporting every year since 1984. These awards are made to government units that publish a comprehensive annual financial report that conforms to program standards and meets generally accepted accounting principles and applicable legal requirements. Each award is valid for one year.

In addition to these achievements, within the district’s comprehensive annual report, the Special Review Team also found that since 1990, the district has earned the Distinguish Budget Presentation Award from GFOA. According to the CAFR, for a district to receive this award, it must publish a budget that meets the criteria outlined by GFOA; this award is valid for one year also. The district has earned the Meritorious Budget Award from ASBO each year since 2005.

The team also was able to access several documents that focus on legal and procedural guidance used by the system to address financial matters. While the district has been recognized for its notable achievements for its management of fiscal resources for numerous years, a review of board meeting work sessions and board meeting videos may demonstrate a lack of clarity about the collection and analysis of data used to assess the impact of resources on meeting identified goals and priorities. At the December 17, 2020, board work session, for example, the superintendent showed a video of an ultra-violet (UV) light disinfecting and hand sanitizing system (i.e., UV room sanitizers and aqueous ozone hand sanitizers) used as a prototype at an elementary school in the district. He outlined potential actions for funding the project and scaling the project to all district elementary schools (Timestamp 00:57:20). During the presentation, board members asked questions, and one board member made a motion “To accept the superintendent’s proposal to allocate up to \$12,000,000 for sanitary supplies and equipment from the unassigned fund balance. Any federal, state, or local funds available will replenish the proposed expenditure from the unassigned fund balance.” Another board member seconded the motion (Timestamp 01:17:00). By approving the expenditure, the Board used money from the unassigned fund balance to cover funds that they had not received yet from the federal government.

Though the district has had strong community support regarding the successful continuation of the Education Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (Ed-SPLOST V), which is an indication of trust among stakeholders regarding the district’s decision-making in the management of fiscal matter, the Board’s decision to purchase UV lighting equipment caused stakeholders to scrutinize the Board’s decision. For example, during the Public Comments portion of the February 11, 2021, board meeting, stakeholders expressed concerns regarding the following:

- The purchase of UV room sanitizers and ozone hand sanitizers for classrooms and lack of a scientific basis supporting the claim that these sanitation systems add appreciable improvement in



safety over cleaning normally, handwashing, or using alcohol hand-based sanitizer (Timestamp 00:19:35).

- The company that was awarded the UV contract (Timestamp 00:28: 35).
- The fiscal responsibility of the Board and superintendent regarding the December 17, 2020, board meeting where the Board approved \$12,000,000 to purchase UV disinfecting systems and aqueous ozone handwashing stations. One stakeholder stated that she expects the Board and superintendent to be more responsible with taxpayers' money (Timestamp 00:30:56).
- Matters about how and why district purchases are made and reference to board policies, procurements, and purchases. A stakeholder voiced appreciation for the decision to halt the contract with the UV light company and said it was a great first step, but there was much more to do (Timestamp 00:14:55).

During interviews, some stakeholders expressed concerns with the Board's purchase of the UV lights and hand sanitizing stations. When external stakeholders were asked about the district's decisions to buy these items, their responses were similar. Stakeholders said that the Board did not put its money in the right place, reported the purchase was upsetting, and wondered how the purchase was made without board approval. Parents indicated the Board lacked oversight, the purchase was disconcerting, and principals needed to focus on things that really matter.

A different spending decision related to Cognia Performance Standard 3.8 was discussed during the June 25, 2020, virtual board meeting. In that meeting, a board member requested more information on the Cobb Teaching and Learning System (CTLS) due to the Board's future request to the Cobb County Board of Commissioners regarding the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES) funds to enhance the CTLS (Timestamp 02:03:42). As the leader of the district, the superintendent took the necessary steps to outline a plan to spend \$8,100,000 on the CTLS. The district markets CTLS as a fully integrated "one-stop-shop" for Cobb County Schools. It provides online portal access to students, teachers, parents, and administrators. Also, online learning resources are available through the dashboard, including textbooks. As part of the discussion, board members inquired about the use of CARES funds requested from the Cobb County Commissioners. The superintendent informed the Board that CARES funds would help accelerate the CTLS to be a true learning management platform for students who choose remote learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Timestamp 02:04:34).

On July 14, 2020, the Cobb County Board of Commissioners voted in support of the superintendent's request and approved the \$8,100,000 in CARES funds. The presentation to the Board of Commissioners by CCSD staff outlined that the cost would cover professional learning, translation, support, maintenance, and curriculum content development in every core subject. The presentation also indicated that funds would allow schools that spend their discretionary funds on curriculum to now spend those funds on other resources and that consolidating content into all four parts of the CTLS platform saves teachers' time. Finally, it was suggested during the presentation that CTLS provides high-quality, standards-aligned content to students and parents through an equitable educational experience in all kindergarten through twelfth-grade subject areas.

The team reviewed the draft 2020-2025 CCSD Strategic Plan and found that the district had identified critical areas for improvement, descriptions of values, and attributes that key stakeholders in the improvement process should possess. However, the plan did not describe initiatives and timelines to reach specified goals or identify proposed budgetary costs and funding sources to ensure the availability of human, fiscal, and material resources needed to attain the desired outcomes. Also, based on interviews with internal stakeholders, the team could not discern whether all staff members and students have access to the technology needed to use the CTLS program. Teachers, for example, described their struggle with accessing and using technology. They reported not having enough technology devices for students to use to connect to the program. In addition, several teachers mentioned an English/language arts resource that does not make reading materials accessible to low achieving students at their reading levels. However, the district recently spent \$8,100,000 to update the program in response to teachers' concerns.





Finally, the team noted another example that illustrated the importance of the board ensuring consistency when making decisions related to fiscal matters. During the August 19, 2021, work session, the chairperson recommended contracting with a specific law firm for the reapportionment. Then, the chairperson made a recommendation to get the process started and said that he was going to ask the Board for a vote. After the discussion, the Board tabled the agenda item until the evening board meeting. Later at the board meeting on the same evening, the chairperson (Timestamp 01:11:20) made a motion to select a law firm for reapportionment, which was seconded. During the discussion, a board member stated (Timestamp 01:21:30) that for financial and fiscal responsibility the Board always gets three bids at a minimum. He said, "If we are going to do this one team as a Board, then we all need to be at the table in this decision-making process." In discussing the recommendation, he said the Board did not need to decide so abruptly as it had time to research and collect more information. The chairperson said that he just wanted to bring it forward. The chairperson called for the vote following the discussion, and the vote passed 4 to 3.

Above all, like many school systems across the nation and beyond, Cobb County School District leaders are faced with many challenges and must make difficult decisions about highly charged issues while representing the best interest of students due the current situation(s) related to public education. However, it is important for leaders to operate in a cohesive manner, demonstrating respect, trust, and transparency and clearly communicating during decision-making related to fiscal resources. Plus, it is important that they adhere to clearly defined policies, procedures, and practices that promote consistency and transparency throughout the decision-making process.

### Directives

- Collect and analyze data before making decisions on fiscal matters and communicate outcomes to stakeholders.
- Review and revise (if necessary) board policies regarding financial decision-making to ensure consistency, clarity, and transparency.
- Develop, implement, and monitor board actions regarding fiduciary matters to ensure adherence to adopted policies
- Ensure the Board participates in all planning activities to develop the district's vision and goals that guide prudent and accountable resource usage in schools and across the district.
- When appropriate, ensure stakeholders have opportunities to provide input in identifying necessary resources that align with the district's goals and key priorities in the strategic plan.
- Strengthen the processes to ensure the quality, fidelity, and equity of human, material, and fiscal resources are aligned to identified needs and key priorities in the district's strategic plan.

## Insights from the Special Review

The Special Review Team for the Cobb County School District in Marietta, Georgia conducted a remote review to investigate the possible violations of the Accreditation Standards. As a result of the Special Review, the following insights were gained by the review team:

- The Code of Ethics, as adopted by the Board, is not adhered to with fidelity by most board members. The Code of Ethics should be a strong focus of training, including accountability measures to hold each board member individually and corporately responsible for improving public perception of board leadership and district leadership.
- The lack of a consistent and formal process for making resource allocation decisions raised questions about how the Board handles its fiduciary responsibility, especially due to the Board's decisions about CTLS, UV lights, the hand sanitizing system, and the appointment of a law firm for reapportionment.
- Revising the strategic plan to include measurable goals, initiatives, and budgetary allocations would better ensure the presence of a comprehensive plan to guide the system during its continuous improvement process. Once these components are clearly defined, the system can then complete the necessary steps to formally adopt the strategic plan for the 2020-2025 cycle.



- Results from standardized assessments reveal progress is being made in subgroup performance even though there is still a need for a continuous focus on closing the achievement gaps.
- The division within the Board and the lack of trust among board members projects a negative light on the district and hinders the Board's ability to lead the district toward its mission of "One Team, One Goal: Student Success."

## Accreditation Recommendation

For a consistent period of time, Cobb County School District has earned notable achievements related to its fiscal accountability measures, and the public has continuously supported the district through a vote of the reapproval of the Education Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (Ed-SPLOST V), which is an indication of trust among stakeholders regarding the district's decision-making in the management of fiscal matters. However, in recent years, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, the district has made decisions regarding fiscal resources that have caused stakeholders to question the Board's ability to make sound decisions in a collective manner for the betterment of the district. In addition, while board members have participated in numerous professional learning sessions to enhance their knowledge and skills, it is important that the Board identify specific trainings that can help members work collectively as a team and fully understand their roles and responsibilities for improving and sustaining the trust in their ability to lead. Finally, while the results from standardized assessments have revealed that aggregate results indicate high performance across the district and progress is being made in subgroup performance, it will be important for the district to continuously focus on closing the achievement gaps among subgroups of students throughout the district and its schools.

Based on the findings of the Special Review Team, Cognia concludes that the district will retain its current **Accredited status** while it addresses the Recommendations, Directives, and Improvement Priorities outlined in this Special Review Report. A Progress Monitoring Review will be scheduled in the next 12 months to examine the progress made by the district.

## Next Steps

The results of the Special Review provide the next steps to guide the Cobb County School District's improvement journey to increase the quality of educational opportunities for all learners. A copy of this report will be sent to the CCSD superintendent. CCSD shall use the report to guide its response to the findings and its improvement efforts.

CCSD is accountable for addressing the Improvement Priorities identified in this report. Upon receiving the Special Review Report, CCSD must implement the following steps:

- Review and share the findings with stakeholders;
- Develop plans and take action to address the Improvement Priorities identified by the Special Review Team;
- Use the findings and data from the report to guide and strengthen the institution's continuous improvement efforts;
- Schedule and host a Monitoring Review by **December 2022**. The purpose of the Monitoring Review will be to assess the progress made in complying with the Special Review Team's Improvement Priorities; and
- Submit an Institution Progress Report, no less than two weeks prior to the scheduled Monitoring Review. The report should detail the steps taken, including supporting evidence, to address the Improvement Priorities. A report template will be provided to the institution.

