Report of the External Review

for

Educational Service Unit #9

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US

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Introduction to the External Review

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

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

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

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

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

Part I: Findings

The Findings section presents the External Review Team's evaluation of the AdvancED Accreditation Standards and Indicators. It includes Powerful Practices and Opportunities for Improvement identified by the External Review Team.

Accreditation Standards and Indicators

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

This section contains an evaluation of each of AdvancEDs Accreditation Standards and Indicators, identification of Powerful Practices and Opportunities for Improvement related to each of the standards (if appropriate), and a description of the evidence examined by the External Review Team.

The AdvancED Standards and Indicators are the first of three primary areas of evaluation for AdvancEDs Performance Accreditation model. Using indicator-specific performance levels, the External Review Team evaluates the degree to which the institution meets each indicator on a scale of 1 to 4. The scores assigned to the indicators are averaged to arrive at a single score. This score, along with scores from evaluations of student performance and stakeholder feedback, will be used to determine the accreditation status of the institution.

Average Indicator Score for this Institution	2.08

Standard 1: The agency maintains and communicates at all levels of the organization a purpose and direction for continuous improvement that commits to providing programs and services, active learning, and high expectations for professional practice as well as shared values and beliefs.

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

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

Standard 1			
The agency maintains and communicates at all levels of the organization a purpose and direction for continuous improvement that commits to providing programs and services, active learning, and high expectations for professional practice as well as shared values and beliefs.			
Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
1.1	The agency engages in a systematic, inclusive, and comprehensive process to review, revise, and communicate an agency purpose.	• Observations • Documentation, minutes, or description of the process for creating the agency's purpose including the role of stakeholders • Accreditation Report • Survey results • Interviews • Purpose statements – past and present	2.0
1.2	The agency leadership and staff at all levels commit to a culture that is based on shared values and beliefs that include provision of relevant and targeted educational programs and services, equitable support, active engagement in learning, application of knowledge and skills, and high expectations for professional practice.	• Accreditation Report • Agendas, minutes of meetings, newsletters, or communications that reference a commitment to the agency's shared values and beliefs about teaching and learning, equity, active engagement in learning, and application of knowledge/skills • Interviews	2.0

Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
1.3	Leadership of the agency implements a continuous improvement process that provides clear direction for improving conditions that support learning.	• Agency profile • Interviews • Documentation that process resulted in improved conditions • Agenda, minutes from continuous improvement planning meetings • The agency continuous improvement plan with goals that have measurable targets	1.0

Opportunities for Improvement   *Indicator*

1. Engage KEY stakeholders at the district, building, and community level in more meaningful ways in the continuous improvement process to further clarify the agency's role/identity and respond to the dynamic needs of all stakeholders.   1.1

    It was noted that ESU #9's leadership and staff are having difficulty realizing any successful improvement efforts that are fully embraced by local districts. There is evidence that this is stemming, in part, from administrator changes over recent years. This leadership change has led to a different approach to improvement strategies and plans that have been implemented with limited, but emerging, success. This change in approach has not been completely understood by ESU #9 staff or some local districts, and coupled with traditional expectations on the limits of ESU #9 services, local districts expressed an uncertainty on how much to expect or rely on the ESU for support. The review team, after considerable probing questions to staff and local district administration, believes that this is not a reflection on a distrust of the capabilities of ESU #9 staff as much as it is uncertainty of ESU #9 having a clear and systematic process for meeting the true needs of local districts. It was stressed that such a system must be understood by all and used with diligence to include input, understanding, and clarity of success for partners and stakeholders. Simply put, it is agency practices that need to be evaluated and refined. During interviews and presentations, local districts, and leadership personnel expressed the need to define stakeholders and partners of the agency in order to adequately ensure two- way effective communication and collaboration. There is very little evidence demonstrating agency efforts to solicit feedback regarding achievement data and respond to stakeholders/partner input in a formalized, inclusive manner.

    What is missing in this process is the certainty that the leadership team will produce such a system that will be viable over time with some assurance in policy or written practice that allows for true participation, continuity and fidelity of improvement strategies. Without same, some partners, staff, and stakeholders are now provided license to not invest in ESU #9's.

    Determining who agency stakeholders and partners are, and then involving them in a predictable/sustainable inclusion process will likely have a significant impact on the participation and success of strategies that support the agency's purpose and direction.

Standard 2: The agency operates under governance and leadership that promote and support student performance and agency effectiveness.

Governance and leadership are key factors in raising institutional quality. Leaders, both local administrators and governing boards/authorities, are responsible for ensuring all learners achieve while also managing many other facets of an institution. Institutions that function effectively do so without tension between the governing board/authority, administrators, and educators and have established relationships of mutual respect and a shared vision (Feuerstein & Opfer, 1998). In a meta-analysis of educational institution leadership research, Leithwood and Sun (2012) found that leaders (school and governing boards/authority) can significantly "influence school conditions through their achievement of a shared vision and agreed-on goals for the organization, their high expectations and support of organizational members, and their practices that strengthen school culture and foster collaboration within the organization." With the increasing demands of accountability placed on institutional leaders, leaders who empower others need considerable autonomy and involve their communities to attain continuous improvement goals. Leaders who engage in such practices experience a greater level of success (Fink & Brayman, 2006). Similarly, governing boards/authorities that focus on policy-making are more likely to allow institutional leaders the autonomy to make decisions that impact teachers and students and are less responsive to politicization than boards/authorities that respond to vocal citizens (Greene, 1992).

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

Standard 2			
The agency operates under governance and leadership that promote and support student performance and agency effectiveness.			
Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
2.1	The governing body establishes policies and support practices that ensure effective administration of the agency.	• Interviews • Accreditation Report • Agency policies, procedures, and practices including any related to learning experiences, professional growth and fiscal management	3.0
2.2	The governing body operates responsibly and functions effectively.	• Interviews • Accreditation Report	2.0

Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
2.3	The governing body ensures that agency leadership has the autonomy to meet established goals and to manage day-to-day operations effectively.	• Accreditation Report • Interviews • Written descriptions of roles and responsibilities of board and of agency leadership • Examples of protection, support and respect of governing body for autonomy of agency leadership	3.0
2.4	Leadership and staff throughout the agency foster a culture consistent with the agency's purpose and direction.	• Accreditation Report • Examples of collective accountability for agency effectiveness • Interviews • Examples of decisions in support of the agency's continuous improvement plan	2.0
2.5	Leadership engages stakeholders effectively in support of the agency's purpose and direction.	• Communication plan with stakeholders • Survey results • Examples of opportunities for stakeholders to shape decisions, have meaningful leadership roles, work collaboratively on improvement efforts • Representative communications with stakeholders • Interviews	2.0
2.6	The agency's supervision and evaluation processes result in improved professional practice.	• Examples of professional development offerings and plans tied specifically to the results from supervision and evaluation • Brief description of supervision and evaluation process • Policies on supervision and evaluation • Interviews	2.0

Opportunities for Improvement   *Indicator*

1. Develop a formalized, system-wide plan to promote clear and effective communication and collaboration for planning and decision making related to achieving the mission, purpose, and goals of ESU #9 supported by the continuous improvement process.   2.4

   During interviews and presentations, leadership, employees, and member school district representatives expressed the need to enhance communication and collaboration. A number of individuals indicated that communication has progressed and continues to improve, but remains a developing need across the organization. Examples were provided where information was shared with some in the organization, but not all. Other examples were provided where decisions had been communicated without an explanation as to how and why the decision was made. Written decision making processes and transparency of the processes would improve communication and understanding inside the organization and with member schools.

   The departments at ESU #9 were described as "silos", "compartmentalized", and "divided" by various groups inside the organization as well as representatives of member school districts. Recent collaborative efforts between the technology and professional development departments indicate a willingness and desire to collaborate towards transparent and shared goals. There was a strong voice by many staff members that these efforts should be the norm and not the exception.

   Self-reflective processes that give clarity to the agency's mission, purpose, and goals also provide opportunities to collaborate across departments. When implemented, the culture of ESU #9 will be consistent with the stated mission, purpose, and goals of the organization. In addition, everyone will understand the rationale and benefits of decisions that have been made.

   Developing and implementing a plan to promote clear and effective communication and collaboration within the organization and with stakeholders will likely have a significant impact on the district's mission, purpose, and goals and move the organization forward. The continuous improvement process supports processes that are enhanced by clear and effective communication and collaboration.

Standard 3: The agency's services and programs support the educational needs of its constituent schools/systems through meaningful professional learning experiences.

A high-quality and effective educational system has services, practices, and curriculum that ensure teacher effectiveness. Research has shown that an effective teacher is a key factor for learners to achieve to their highest potential and be prepared for a successful future. The positive influence an effective educator has on learning is a combination of "student motivation, parental involvement" and the "quality of leadership" (Ding & Sherman, 2006). Research also suggests that quality educators must have a variety of quantifiable and intangible characteristics that include strong communication skills, knowledge of content, and knowledge of how to teach the content. The institution's curriculum and instructional program should develop learners' skills that lead them to think about the world in complex ways (Conley, 2007) and prepare them to have knowledge that extends beyond the academic areas. In order to achieve these goals, teachers must have pedagogical skills as well as content knowledge (Baumert, J., Kunter, M., Blum, W., Brunner, M., Voxx, T., Jordan, A., Klusmann, U., Krauss, S., Nuebrand, M., & Tsai, Y., 2010). The acquisition and refinement of teachers' pedagogical skills occur most effectively through collaboration and professional development. These are a "necessary approach to improving teacher quality" (Colbert, J., Brown, R., Choi, S., & Thomas, S., 2008). According to Marks, Louis, and Printy (2002), staff members who engage in "active organizational learning also have higher achieving students in contrast to those that do not." Likewise, a study conducted by Horng, Klasik, and Loeb (2010), concluded that leadership in effective institutions "supports teachers by creating collaborative work environments." Institutional leaders have a responsibility to provide experiences, resources, and time for educators to engage in meaningful professional learning that promotes student learning and educator quality.

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

Standard 3			
The agency's services and programs support the educational needs of its constituent schools/systems through meaningful professional learning experiences.			
Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
3.1	The agency provides equitable, relevant and targeted support programs and/or services for all schools/systems.	• Evidence that learning experiences have prepared learners for success • Accreditation Report • Interviews	2.0
3.2	The agency monitors its programs and services to measure effectiveness and to guide ongoing adjustments in delivery.	• Accreditation Report • Description of agency monitoring system for programs and services including those involved • Interviews	2.0

Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
3.3	Agency staff provide professional learning opportunities that engage practitioners in their learning.	• Accreditation Report • Examples of instructional strategies used to engage practitioners in learning • Interviews	3.0
3.4	The agency uses collaboration as an essential operating principle in the development and delivery of its services and programs.	• Observations • Accreditation Report • Schedules/examples of collaboration with constituent schools/systems • Interviews	2.0
3.5	All agency staff members participate in a continuous program of professional learning.	• Accreditation Report • Recent evaluations of professional learning activities • Interviews	2.0
3.6	The agency's support services meet the unique learning needs of its constituent schools/systems.	• Data used to identify learning needs of constituent schools/systems • Accreditation Report • Interviews	3.0

Opportunities for Improvement   *Indicator*

1. Expand the formal focus on collaboration through professional learning communities   3.4
   (PLC) across departments on a regular schedule to enhance results of inquiry practices
   regarding program and service effectiveness.

   The team noted multiple examples of evidence during interviews, presentations, and
   exhibits provided that ESU #9 values and supports continuous learning within ESU #9 and
   with local districts. There has been some effort to meet often as PLCs within departments
   to increase communication.

   ESU #9 staff is described by external stakeholders (local districts) as, respected
   individuals, with everyone doing their job, and each person trying their best, but not as a
   cohesive team. Many districts indicate that some professional development opportunities,
   special education and technology services would be difficult to do without, and in some
   cases it would be considered indispensable. Schools and districts indicated appreciation
   for the partial input into services and programs provided, and would see benefit in a
   system that includes them more often.

   Internal staff and district representatives often described ESU #9's communication and
   work as compartmentalized, fragmented, and in silos. Examples of this include
   professional development planning that was planned for specific staff that could benefit
   others within the organization if there was a system to include and encourage
   participation. While some efforts to work across departments has begun, there was no
   evidence to show that there is a systematic manner of determining common goals, how to
   collectively determine if goals are attained, what should be done when they are not
   accomplished, and what should be done when they are accomplished.

   It was reported that there is an administrative team studying systems thinking/systems
   action and there is a desire for professional development for all, as opposed to
   segregated between departments. The external review team heard comments that
   indicated this would only become part of the culture if the total leadership team and staff
   was dedicated and disciplined in the pursuit of a structured excellence. As stated during
   the review, "this can not be dependent only on quality professionals or just a good
   decision-making system, it be must have a combination of both quality practices of
   collaboration and professionals who adhere to those practices."

   Some local school districts currently collect data on impact of ESU #9's professional
   development provided to their teachers (instructional strategies implemented and student
   achievement). It was noted that the ESU staff could potentially use this data to monitor
   program effectiveness if there was a specific protocol and culture that allowed dialogue
   and consultation by all appropriate staff.

   When collaborative examination of results regarding programs and services become
   routine, ESU #9's personnel can clearly link local district improvement results to program
   and service delivery. This data would enable ESU personnel to engage in a data-driven,
   continuous improvement process.

Standard 4: The agency provides resources, programs and services that support its purpose and direction for all constituent schools/systems.

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

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

Standard 4			
The agency provides resources, programs and services that support its purpose and direction for all constituent schools/systems.			
Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
4.1	The agency engages in a systematic process to recruit, employ, and retain a sufficient number of qualified professional and support staff to fulfill their roles and responsibilities and support the purpose and direction of the agency.	• Policies, processes, and procedures and other documentation related to the hiring, placement, and retention of staff • Interviews • Accreditation Report • Needs assessments related to hiring needs	2.0
4.2	Material and fiscal resources are sufficient to support the purpose and direction of the agency.	• Interviews • Accreditation Report • Examples of efforts to improve agency effectiveness • Demonstrations of equitable allocation of resources to constituents	2.0
4.3	The agency maintains facilities, services, and equipment to provide a safe, clean, and healthy environment for all.	• Interviews • Accreditation Report • Observations	3.0

Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
4.4	The agency demonstrates strategic resource management that includes long-range planning in support of the purpose and direction of the agency.	• Interviews • Agency strategic plan • Accreditation Report • Planning process for managing budgets, facilities, and other agency components	2.0
4.5	The agency provides, coordinates, and evaluates the effectiveness of programs and services delivered to constituent schools and systems.	• Observations • Accreditation Report • Interviews • Agency system for evaluating effectiveness of recruiting, hiring, and retention processes	2.0
4.6	The agency provides technology infrastructure and equipment to support the teaching, informational, and operational needs of the agency and the schools/systems it serves.	• Technology budget • Policies and procedures related to technology use and technology needs • Interviews with ESU staff and local district staff	2.0

Opportunities for Improvement   *Indicator*

1. Allocate resources strategically based on long range planning that reflects the identified purpose and direction of the agency.   4.4

    The visiting team reviewed the Strategic Plan that has been developed by the Educational Service Unit (ESU) within the last two years. Although a plan has been drafted, it is in the initial phases of implementation, and some sections of the plan were "plans to plan". The Review Team found little evidence that the purpose and direction of the Educational Service Unit has been clearly and concisely determined; nor have all external stakeholder groups been identified or invited to participate in the Unit's work to develop a mission statement. Strategic resource management and comprehensive long range planning must include the voices of all stakeholders if appropriate decisions are to be made. There was no evidence of a process to periodically review the effectiveness of the strategic plan as it is implemented. Agency leaders and the governing board are ultimately responsible for collection and analysis of data to measure the impact of the activities included in the strategic plan.

    More clearly and concisely determining the ESU's purpose and direction will provide criteria to guide the ESU as resources are allocated and the strategic plan is implemented. Knowing the purpose and direction of the organization will not only help to focus the efforts of all staff, but is critical when resources are limited. Before the purpose and direction can be determined, the Unit must identify all internal and external stakeholder groups. The voices of these groups must be heard in the identification of purpose and direction.   Collection and analysis of data allows the organization to make needed changes to increase the effectiveness of the work of the Unit as implementation occurs.

2. Develop and implement a comprehensive process for data collection and analysis to determine the effectiveness of programs and services.   4.5

    Through document review, observations, and interviews the Review Team found little evidence of a systematic or systemic process used to evaluate the effectiveness of programs and services delivered to its member schools. Although surveys are used occasionally to measure customer satisfaction, no data is collected or analyzed to determine the impact of programs provided by the ESU. Member schools are surveyed each year to determine staffing to support schools' programs. Although fiscal resources have been shrinking in recent years, the ESU works to maintain critical services to schools in each of its programs and services. The Review Team found no evidence of an organized and systematic process to identify the needs of districts, collaboration throughout the Service Unit to determine coordinated delivery of such needed service, or evaluation the process.

    Developing and implementing a process of data collection and analysis of the impact of programs and services helps provide a more effective and efficient organization. Knowing the needs of member schools and collaboration across ESU #9 programs could allow for greater efficiency and greater positive impact for schools. Such data analysis will not only provide information but can provide leverage when the ESU works to entice member schools to utilize the programs and services provided by the Unit.

3. Enhance and revise the technology plan to align the developing technology infrastructure to fully meet the operational needs of all schools.   4.6

The External Review Team found through documented evidence and interviews that ESU #9 is dedicated to a full integration of technology throughout the system and its service area. The External Review Team found that the administration and the technology staff are aware of the lack of up-to-date technology systems, and are focused on the need to update services and infrastructure. The staff have dedicated the past two years working to update the ESU #9 system to meet many needs of the participating districts within the financial limits of the service unit.   As a result, twenty-six network firewalls have been installed; web-filtering hardware has been updated and put in more adaptable rooms for protection of all data. Network circuits have been upgrade in a more economically feasible manner. Additionally, there is now a secure camera system in the service unit facilities. The plans for the future are to move all server-based services to a virtual environment, thus moving the entire system "beyond the digital environment."

The Review Team agreed with comments from staff and local district input that the technology staff must be commended on the progress, but now must work to elicit more specific and relevant input from all schools regarding specific technology needs in order to continue on the road to improvement.   During interviews it was suggested that it would benefit the process if communication between all factors have more transparency in the total financial budget requirements per school. The service unit has a technology plan, but the partnering districts expressed a need to revise plans to include rationale reflecting policies and procedures with ways to indicate and ensure benefits for each local district.

Including and analyzing specific local district factors in a systematic process that includes input from stakeholders would give a view of the support relationship, and set the stage for further technology support and progress. Developing a more inclusive and transparent decision and planning process would allow community stakeholders to open channels for input, participation in services, and overall image management of ESU #9 services.

Standard 5: The agency implements a comprehensive evaluation system that generates a range of data about the effectiveness of the agency and uses the results to guide continuous improvement.

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

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

Standard 5			
The agency implements a comprehensive evaluation system that generates a range of data about the effectiveness of the agency and uses the results to guide continuous improvement.			
Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
5.1	The agency establishes and maintains a clearly defined and comprehensive evaluation system.	• Action Plans, including assessments used to measure progress • Interviews • Documentation or description of evaluation protocols • Agency Profile document	1.0
5.2	Professional and support staff throughout the agency continuously collect, analyze and use a range of data sources, including comparison and trend data related to program evaluation and organizational conditions.	• Accreditation Report • Interviews • Evaluation data on impact of programs • Goals and action plans for individual agency departments and programs	1.0

Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
5.3	The agency's leadership monitors and communicates comprehensive information about learning and the achievement of agency improvement goals to stakeholders.	• Accreditation Report • Interviews • Agency website • Documentation of continuous improvement plans, goals and action plans	2.0

Opportunities for Improvement   *Indicator*

1. Ensure that in the implementation of the suggested collaborative process of identifying improvement goals for both the agency and programs includes strategies that utilize multiple delivery methods to share the results of the process and their impact to all stakeholders.

   5.3

   As described in the 3.4 Indicator opportunity for improvement narrative, for the process to be of greatest efficiency, it must include the utilization of a variety of collaboration and communication strategies to share the goals, actions, evaluation, and impact statements with all stakeholders. ESU #9. As noted in the agency self-assessment there is a need for this enhanced sharing process. During many of the interviews conducted with stakeholders, the need for greater transparency in this area of the ESU #9 systems is greatly in need of improvement.

   The current relationship between individual staff and local districts is very positive although there is a general reticence in trusting the "system" of collaboration and communication. This lack of trust appears to be due to the lack of specific and effective strategies to ensure full communication and collaboration.

   Taking action on this opportunity will empower both the agency and the member districts to leverage their excellence to address their individual needs.

Part II: Conclusion

Summary of the External Review

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

The AdvancED External Review Team was comprised of professionals from Nebraska and out-of-state with background experience at the Educational Service Unit level, district level, building administration, classroom teaching, and participants in numerous prior External Reviews. The team had on-line and on-site training in the External Review process and protocols. Prior to the on-site work, the External Review Team dedicated time to review materials provided off-site to support the review. This review, coupled with the extensive examination on-site, supported an overall belief that a core school leadership team, with insight from departmental staff, had performed a direct appraisal of their agency strengths while noting challenges facing the organization. This is a system in search of accreditation for the first time. ESU #9 volunteered for this process and is self-identified as an organization revitalizing a commitment to a system-wide approach for the refinement and further implementation of an active strategic improvement plan that was developed in 2011. The External Review Team observed examples of agency-wide purposes and vision statements designed to guide in improving the capacity to serve local districts more effectively. The ESU is currently researching ways to increase the scope of effectiveness, through identified action strategy implementation to ensure improvement of services within financial limitations. The agency is working to implement this improvement framework while "wrestling" with challenges that occurred during key staffing changes three years ago. While many of the issues that were evident during that initial transition period have been resolved, there are still lingering issues revolving around certainty of the direction of the ESU #9 services that linger with some agency staff and local district administrators. The agency completed the required self-assessment, executive summary, and gathered supplementary artifacts needed for the External Review.

The self-assessment, executive summary, and extremely honest discussion found during the interviews and review of artifacts allowed the review team to provide a clear appraisal of how ESU #9 meets AdvancED Standards. Agency leaders, staff, and board of education members have expressed the intention to use this self-assessment and the report from the External Review to provide further insight on the direction ESU #9 will pursue in the next few years. The district provided numerous artifacts and documents for review as well, and agency staff was very supportive in directing review team members to further information for clarity as needed. The attention to detail and connection to AdvancED Standards in artifacts provided were meaningful and insightful.

The ESU #9 leadership team and staff were very well prepared for their External Review. The collaboration, cooperation, and attention to detail provided was thorough and provided great clarity to the work of the review team. During the review, the team was able to meet and interview 77 staff, administrators, outside managers, students, and stakeholders. The sincere desire to provide information that would demonstrate the status of ESU #9 in relation to AdvancEd standards was impressive, and the insight provided during interviews with staff, board of education members, and stakeholders interviewed was extremely helpful.

The External Review for ESU #J lasted three and one half days. The team began work on Sunday May 4, with its

first work session and dinner with agency staff that evening. The actual review occurred May 5-7, 2014 within the ESU. Monday's activities began at the ESU #9 office where presentations and interviews occurred. For the majority of the 2nd day, the External Review Team visited local schools to take part in discussions with local administrators, ESU #9 staff, and observe services within the local schools.

The last day of the review, the External Review Team spent time on clarifying questions, wrapping up deliberations, and finalizing report elements to deliver in the exit report presented to the leadership team, board members, and agency staff members at the end of the school day.

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

The district's self-assessment, interviews with staff, conversations with local administrators, and observations during the External Review all showed a strong aspiration to become a vibrant organization, respected for being responsive to local needs, and a viable organization that is relevant in the future. At the time of the review it was noted that this vision of relevance and indispensability has not yet been fully identified. It was also clear that the agency had yet to identify all pertinent information that could be gathered and analyzed to assist in clearly identifying the proper niche of the organization. However, there is a strong desire to develop significant formalized protocols, procedures, and practices to support system-wide improvement. There were a number of themes that became evident during the review that include:

1) The need for ESU #9 to provide a description or measure of activities relating to collecting, sharing, and assessing information about the values, beliefs, and philosophy held by the ESU, its staff, and the local districts.

2) The development of structured implementation procedures and practices used to collect data related to any of the designed activities/strategies within ESU #9 or local school districts.

3) Describe activities related to providing specialized information, instruction, or skill development in an organized way to practitioners and other key staff in programs and local districts.

4) Define the activities relating to changes in funding sources or modifying funding requirements and access to support programs.

5) Determine any manner of changing external or internal policies or practices to secure a better or longer term fit between funding sources and program resource needs.

6) Finally, clarify actual changes in policy, management, or operating structures or methods in response to experiences gained with the operation of a service or support program.

These themes are more fully explained in the individual standard and indicator Opportunities for Improvement and Required Actions sections of this review.

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

management, and use of technology.

The External Review Team applauds the administrator, the entire leadership team, the board of education members, and local school district administrators for providing the information and insight needed prior to and during the External Review. This insight was instrumental in supporting the work of the External Review Team. The emphasis on collaboration and a thorough, and direct self-review could prove to be a benefit in the work of the dedicated professionals at ESU #9. It was evident that leadership and staff desire to provide services that are valued and impactful in local school districts. The External Review Team confirmed many of the self-described achievements and identified challenges facing ESU #9. The External Review Team has left the system with required actions designed to build upon the groundwork started by the existing strategic plan, and the agency self-assessment of AdvancED standards.

In the past, accreditation reviews resulted in an accreditation recommendation on status. Labels such as advised, warned, probation, or all clear were used to describe the status of a school relative to the criteria. Beginning with school year, 2013-14, AdvancED is introducing a new framework to describe the result of an accreditation review. Consistent with the modern focus of accreditation on continuous improvement with an emphasis on student success, AdvancED introduces an innovative and state-of-the-art framework for diagnosing and revealing institutional performance called the Index of Education Quality (IEQ). The IEQ is comprised of three domains of performance: 1) the impact of teaching and learning on student performance; 2) the leadership capacity to govern; and 3) use of resources to support and optimize learning. Therefore, your institution will no longer receive an accreditation status. Instead, your institution will be accredited with an IEQ score. In the case where an institution is failing to meet established criteria, the accreditation will be under review thereby requiring frequent monitoring.

The three domains of performance are derived from the AdvancED Standards and Indicators; the Analysis of Student Performance; and the Engagement and Involvement of Stakeholders. Within each domain institutions will be able to connect to the individual performance levels that are applied in support of the AdvancED Standards and evaluative criteria. Within the performance levels are detailed descriptors that can be a valuable source of guidance for continuous improvement. Upon review of the findings in this report, institutional leaders should work with their staff to review and understand the evidence and rationale for each Required Action as well as the corresponding pathway to improvement described in the performance levels of the selected Indicator.

The IEQ provides a new framework that recognizes and supports the journey of continuous improvement. Your institution's IEQ is the starting point for continuous improvement. Your actions for improvement that have a positive impact will be reflected in your IEQ score.

IEQ Institutional Score: 219

Teaching and Learning Impact: 200 (Standards 3 and 5)

Leadership Capacity: 236 (Standards 1 and 2; Stakeholder Engagement Criteria)

Resource Utilization: 217 (Standard 4)

The External Review team recommends that ESU #9 be accredited by the AdvancED Accreditation Commission for a five-year term of accreditation. A key to the continued improvement of this ESU rests in the ability of system, in

collaboration with other partners, to develop sustainable improvement momentum characterized by actual changes in policy, management, or operating structures/methods in response to experiences gained with the operations of programs within the ESU.

If the required actions are implemented, ESU #9 will further bolster the influence all staff have on organizational improvement and local school district success. It is clear that ESU #9 has the foundation for quality support systems to fulfill the desire to make this just one step in continuous improvement.

Required Action

1. Design and implement a formalized continuous improvement process grounded on a comprehensive profile of agency and constituent district needs, combined with a summary of effectiveness of all ESU programs/services in order to clearly identify growth goals that support purpose and direction.

   Related Indicator or Assurance: 1.3

   Description:
   A review of the agency strategic plan did demonstrate a serious effort to articulate the direction, vision, and purpose of the organization. The review team did not see evidence that the ESU #9 purpose and vision goals were clear in how the staff would know if and when they are successfully implemented. It was noted that many staff did not articulate or demonstrate the ability to identify "success" of a strategy. A recurring theme in the interviews was a desire to develop a process for continuous improvement, with input from all staff and representative stakeholders that aligns with the purpose and direction of the school. There was also comments that the agency did not always identify sources of important data i.e., local district profiles, student achievement information, students of single parents or grand parents, drop out data, data on student success at the next level, and, most importantly, clear evidence that a program was successful. A review of artifacts, presentations, and interviews at the time of the review indicate that this "profile" is clearly not in place system-wide at the time of the review. Evidence does not suggest that a systemic process has yet been fully implemented to review/revise services based on student or program data. Interviews with the professional staff and the leadership team indicated that the data driven review process is somewhat evident at the departmental levels. These processes has not yet been documented or implemented with fidelity to yield improved program achievement based on district goals, strategies, or activities. Some staff expressed interest in developing a data-driven improvement process, but the Review Team did not see this expressed system-wide. The stated hope during interviews was that all stakeholders should be included in this process.

   Developing a process that results in a single continuous improvement plan based upon a robust profile will allow the service agency to work more efficiently and effectively to meet clearly stated purpose and goals and to ensure the best outcomes for all stakeholders.

2. Develop and implement a comprehensive system that includes reliable measures to evaluate the effectiveness of all programs and services delivered to constituent schools and systems.

   Related Indicator or Assurance: 5.1

   Description:
   The district self-assessment, interviews with instructional staff, and observations revealed a very strong commitment to the improvement process. Beyond the consistency of administering surveys and holding formal

feedback discussions with local superintendents, the external team was unable to ascertain evidence that the system uses multiple reliable measures to determine the effectiveness of programs. The team did note numerous other "data points" that were available to inform progress, but saw little evidence that this was being used to inform decisions on a systematic basis. Thus, it was unclear what the accepted criteria for success for a program or service from one system program to another across the entire service area were.

Consistent data points, clear metrics, and uniform expectations hold educators and systems accountable to the same bar of rigor, better preparing them for success. This will lead to reliable information about a program for the purpose of making educational decisions and informing students, parents, and other staff about student success.

3. Develop and implement formal procedures and protocols that outline the incremental steps and processes for collecting and analyzing data, including trend data, to coordinate and evaluate the effectiveness of all programs and services to inform agency continuous improvement plans.

Related Indicator or Assurance: 5.2

Description:
The External Review Team found, through a review of evidence, interviews, and observations, there is limited systemic and systematic use of data to guide programs, professional development, and assessment of program success. Evidence showed, and interviews confirmed, that a process is irregularly implemented to ensure alignment between what is delivered and what is reviewed/revised using real data on fidelity or metrics of success within/across departments, or at the local school level. There was limited evidence that the strategic planning process ensures alignment by using current program or student data. Staff interviews revealed emerging knowledge about collecting and analyzing program, student, and fidelity data in modifying services for success. The team also heard a desire to implement a comprehensive professional learning plan addressing how to gather and monitor current research on using data to improve instruction.

By implementing such formal protocols and practices the agency can better informed and develop comprehensive plans that include a wide range of data focused on continuous improvement.

Part III: Addenda

The External Review Team

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Next Steps

The institution should:

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

Celebrating Accreditation

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

About AdvancED

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

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

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