



Report of the Quality Assurance Review Team for Hillsdale County Intermediate School District

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AdvancED is the parent organization of the North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement (NCA CASI), Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Council on Accreditation and School Improvement (SACS CASI), and the National Study of School Evaluation (NSSE). NCA CASI and SACS CASI serve as accreditation divisions of AdvancED.

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About AdvancED and NCA CASI

Background

Founded in 1895, the North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement (NCA CASI) and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Council on Accreditation and Schools (SACS CASI) accredit public and private schools and districts in 30 states, the Navajo Nation, Latin America, and the Department of Defense Schools worldwide.

In 2006, NCA CASI, SACS CASI, and the research and development arm of the accrediting associations, the National Study of School Evaluation, unified to form AdvancED. Dedicated to advancing excellence in education, AdvancED provides accreditation, research, and professional services to 23,000 schools in 65 countries, serving 15 million students.

NCA CASI and SACS CASI serve as accreditation divisions of AdvancED. Through AdvancED, NCA CASI and SACS CASI have defined shared, research-based accreditation standards that cross state, regional, and national boundaries. Accompanying these standards is a unified accreditation process designed to help schools, school districts, and education service agencies continuously improve.

The Accreditation Process

To earn and maintain accreditation from NCA CASI or SACS CASI, education service agencies and the schools they operate must:

- 1) Meet the AdvancED Standards for Quality Education Service Agencies.** ESAs demonstrate adherence to the seven AdvancED standards which describe the quality practices and conditions that research and best practice indicate are necessary for ESAs to achieve quality student performance and organizational effectiveness.
- 2) Engage in continuous improvement.** ESAs and the schools they operate implement a continuous improvement process that articulates the vision and purpose that the agency is pursuing (vision); maintains a rich and current description of school districts served and their performance, agency effectiveness, and the community (profile); employs goals and interventions to improve learner performance and agency effectiveness (plan); and documents and uses the results to inform what happens next (results).
- 3) Demonstrate quality assurance through internal and external review.** ESAs and the schools they operate engage in a planned process of ongoing internal review and self-assessment. In addition, the agency hosts an external quality assurance review team once every five years. The team evaluates the agency's adherence to the AdvancED quality standards, assesses the efficacy of the agency's improvement process and methods for quality assurance, and provides commendations and recommendations to help the agency improve. The team provides an oral exit report to the agency and a written report detailing the team's recommendations. The agency acts on the team's recommendations and submits a progress report two years following the review.

NCA CASI and SACS CASI accreditation engages the entire ESA community in a continuous process of self-evaluation and improvement. The overall aim is to help the agency and its schools maximize learner success and improve organizational effectiveness.

Introduction to the Quality Assurance Review

Purpose

The purpose of the Quality Assurance Review is to:

1. Evaluate the agency's adherence to the AdvancED quality standards.
2. Assess the efficacy of the agency's improvement process and methods for quality assurance.
3. Identify commendations and recommendations to improve the agency and its schools.
4. Make an accreditation recommendation for review by the national AdvancED Accreditation Commission.

A key aim of the Quality Assurance Review is to verify that the agency is operating with institutional integrity – that it is fulfilling its vision and mission for its students and other stakeholders.

Agency Preparation

To prepare for the Quality Assurance Review, the agency and its constituents and other stakeholders complete the AdvancED Standards Assessment Report. The report engages the agency in an in-depth self assessment of each of the seven AdvancED standards. The agency identifies and describes the evidence that demonstrates that it is meeting each standard. Through this internal review, the agency examines how its systems and processes contribute to learner performance and agency effectiveness.

Summary of Team Activities

The Quality Assurance Review Team is led by an AdvancED certified team chair and comprised of professionals from outside the agency. The team reviews the findings of the agency's internal self-assessment, conducts interviews with representative groups of constituents and other stakeholders, reviews student performance data and other documentation provided by the agency, and observes practices and daily operations. The team engages in professional deliberations to reach consensus on the agency's adherence to the standards for accreditation. The team provides an oral exit report and prepares a written Quality Assurance Review Team Report designed to help the agency and the schools it operates improve.

Using the Report – Acting on the Recommendations

The agency uses the report to guide its improvement efforts. The agency is held accountable for addressing the recommendations identified in the report. The AdvancED NCA CASI State Office is available to assist the agency in addressing the recommendations. Two years following the Quality Assurance Review Team visit, the agency must submit a progress report detailing the actions and progress it has made on the team's recommendations. The report is reviewed at the state and national level to ensure the agency is addressing the recommendations.

Accreditation Recommendation

The Quality Assurance Review Team uses the findings from the onsite visit to make an accreditation recommendation that is reviewed by the national AdvancED Accreditation Commission. Accreditation is granted by the AdvancED Accreditation Commission and communicated to the agency following action from the commission.

Summary of Findings

A Quality Assurance Review Team representing the North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and Schools (NCA CASI), a division of AdvancED, visited Hillsdale County Intermediate School District on April 26-29, 2009.

During the visit, members of the Quality Assurance Review Team interviewed: 19 administrators, 25 teachers, 26 support staff, 15 parents and business partners, 38 students and 3 members of the Governing Board for a total of 126 stakeholders. In addition to meeting with agency personnel and stakeholders, the team visited 9 schools and 5 school districts served within the Hillsdale County Intermediate School District service area. During the school visits, team members interviewed school stakeholders, visited classrooms, and reviewed relevant school artifacts.

Throughout the visit, the team reviewed documents, student performance data, and other artifacts provided by the agency. Specifically, the team examined the agency's systems and processes in relation to the seven AdvancED standards:

- Vision and Purpose
- Governance and Leadership
- Teaching and Learning
- Documenting and Using Results
- Resource and Support Systems
- Stakeholder Communications and Relationships
- Commitment to Continuous Improvement

The Quality Assurance Review Team used the standards to guide its review of the agency, looking not only for adherence to individual standards, but also for how the agency and the schools it operates function as a whole and embody the practices and characteristics of a quality education service agency. Through its examination of the agency's adherence to the standards, the Quality Assurance Review Team prepared reports on each standard, highlighting strengths and suggestions for improvement specific to each standard. These reports can be found following this summary.

The Quality Assurance Review Team also examined the effectiveness of the agency's methods for quality assurance. The team reviewed the agency's practices and methods to monitor and document improvement, provide meaningful feedback and support across the agency, ensure that AdvancED standards are met and strengthened, and regularly collect, use, and communicate results. The team's findings in this area can be found following the standard reports.

The team used the standard reports and quality assurance findings to identify common themes, significant accomplishments, and pressing needs facing the agency. These became the basis for the overall commendations and recommendations that are provided below. The commendations and recommendations should serve as the focus for the agency as it acts on the team's findings. They represent the areas that the team believes will have the greatest impact in helping the agency further its improvement efforts. The standard reports and quality assurance findings can be used to help reinforce and enrich the agency's understanding of the commendations and recommendations.

Commendations

The Quality Assurance Review Team commends the Hillsdale County Intermediate School District for the following strengths and accomplishments. While additional strengths are noted in the detailed review of each standard that appears later in this report, the commendations listed below are the strengths that the team believes are most deserving of being highlighted.

- Hillsdale County Intermediate School District (HCISD) encourages and provides collaboration, partnerships, and county wide service to schools and students. The ISD also effectively aligns resources, human and financial, to support the work of the ISD and its partners. Interviews with school personnel, agency staff, and other constituents support the existence of a pervasive culture of collaboration and continuous improvement, and the efforts to move from “school improvement” to “continuous improvement” are commendable. The collaborative nature of agency service has been instrumental in improving services to citizens throughout Hillsdale County.
- There is a consistent commitment, passion, and investment to support the achievement of all students throughout Hillsdale County. Interviews and documents reviewed support the agency efforts to provide services to students with special needs and general education students. Interviewees provided many examples of programs and activities focused on all students. Part of the ISD’s mission is “to provide service and support for the benefit of students, families, and community.” It is evident that this is regularly occurring.
- Innovative approaches address student needs despite challenging economic constraints. Many constituents interviewed, review of budget documents and expenditures, and review of program documents verified the ISD’s efforts to consistently address students’ needs with limited funds. The agency is very creative in its efforts to collaboratively find solutions to problems related to the needs of students. This effort also supports the ISD’s mission “to provide innovation, leadership, service, and support...” to its constituents.
- HCISD is committed to development and support of professional learning based on alignment of goals to local districts’ and the ISD’s mission. Teachers, paraprofessionals, school administrators, and agency staff all verified the ISD’s efforts to develop and support their professional learning in a variety of ways. Student learning improves through the improved skill of teachers, administrators, and other professionals who work with them every day. The ISD consistently supports those efforts.

Recommendations

In addition to the commendations, the Quality Assurance Review Team identified the following recommendations for improvement. The team focused its recommendations on those areas that, if addressed, will have the greatest impact on improving learner performance and overall effectiveness of the agency. The Hillsdale County Intermediate School District will be held accountable for making progress on each of the recommendations noted in this section. Two years following this review, the agency will be asked to submit a progress report on these recommendations. The agency should refer to the detail provided in the standard reports for guidance and greater depth on the recommendations.

- Develop and implement a comprehensive system of organizational evaluation based on clearly defined performance measures through which it will effectively organize, analyze, and use data to inform decision making that positively impacts effective teaching and learning in local schools and the ISD. While the team found some evidence of performance measures being used to measure success, it was uneven and sporadic. The team did not find clear evidence of an agency wide, comprehensive system or organizational evaluation. An agency wide, comprehensive system based on clear performance measures will improve the agency's effectiveness in all areas.
- Build institutional capacity to sustain improvement efforts and services that are independent of individuals. Many stakeholders interviewed indicated that they valued the work of particular individuals in leadership roles within the ISD. They also expressed concern about the provision of those services if, and when, those individuals leave the agency. An on-going succession plan for replacement of key people within the organization will ensure continuation of valued service to constituents.
- Strategically strengthen communication methods to better inform constituents of the services available through the ISD. Celebrate successes and share data that reflects progress toward goal accomplishment. Interviewees were complimentary of the services they receive from the ISD, but many reported that they "didn't know the ISD could do that..." or only realized that a particular service was available when told about it by a friend or neighbor. Improved communication to constituents about available services will improve the use of those services.

Next Steps

The agency should:

1. Review and discuss the findings from this report with all constituents and other stakeholders.
2. Ensure that plans are in place to embed and sustain the strengths noted in the commendations section to maximize their impact on learner performance and the effectiveness of the agency.
3. Develop action plans to address the recommendations made by the team. Include methods for monitoring progress toward the recommendations.
4. Use the report to guide and strengthen the agency's efforts to improve learner performance and agency effectiveness.
5. Two years following the Quality Assurance Review, submit the Accreditation Progress Report detailing progress made toward addressing the team's recommendations. The report will be reviewed at the state and national level to ensure that significant progress is being made toward the recommendations. Lack of progress can result in a change in accreditation status.
6. Continue to meet the AdvancED accreditation standards, submit required reports, engage in continuous improvement, and document results.

Resources

AdvancED offers a range of resources to support your agency as it acts on the findings in this report. The AdvancED Research and Development division provides online resources, research, handbooks, and tools to assist schools, districts and ESAs with continuous improvement. In addition, your state office provides hands-on professional development and ongoing technical assistance. Contact your state office for assistance in accessing these resources.

Celebrating Accreditation

Following the visit, the Quality Assurance Review Team submits an accreditation recommendation to AdvancED for review and action at the national level by the AdvancED Accreditation Commission, which confers accreditation and communicates it to the agency. Upon receiving its accreditation, the agency should celebrate its achievement with the community. The NCA CASI accreditation seals are available at www.advanc-ed.org/communicationskit for accredited schools, districts and education service agencies to post on their website and to use in communications. Flags, door decals, diploma seals, and lapel pins are also available and can be ordered from the website to help you share your accomplishment with your community.

Summary

The accreditation process engages the ESA, the schools it operates, and its community in an ongoing journey of continuous improvement. The next steps in this journey are to build on the commendations and address the recommendations noted in this report. Doing so will enable the agency to advance in its quest for excellence and deepen the fulfillment of its mission for those it serves.

Standard Reports

The primary requirement for accreditation is that the education service agency demonstrates that it meets the seven standards for accreditation. The Quality Assurance Review Team divided into standard teams to review each standard and prepare a standards report summarizing the team's findings. These standard reports, along with the quality assurance findings that follow these reports, provided the basis for the team's identification of over-arching commendations and recommendations presented earlier in this report. The reports submitted by each team are provided on the following pages for the agency's review and use. Each report reflects its respective team's unique voice, perspective, and deliberations. The reports can be used to help enrich and deepen the agency's understanding of the overall commendations and recommendations.

Vision and Purpose

STANDARD: The agency establishes and communicates a shared purpose and direction for the continuous improvement of the performance of learners and the effectiveness of the services being provided by the agency.

Impact Statement: An agency is successful in meeting this standard when it commits to a shared purpose and direction. The leadership establishes expectations for continuous improvement of student learning aligned with the agency's vision that is supported by personnel and external constituents. These expectations serve as the focus for assessing learner performance and system effectiveness. The agency's vision guides allocations of time as well as human, material, and fiscal resources.

Description

Hillsdale County ISD has a clearly articulated mission statement that has been in place since the early 1990s. It guides the work of the Intermediate School District and states that "the mission of the Hillsdale County Intermediate School System is to provide innovation, leadership, service, and support in a collaborative manner, for the benefit of students, families, and community." This statement is published throughout the ISD on brochures, handbooks, flyers, other written documents, and throughout ISD-operated school facilities.

Stakeholders interviewed demonstrated a consistent understanding of the purpose and mission of the ISD. Collaboration and innovation are common themes and common topics of discussion among stakeholders.

Strategic planning and continuous improvement activities have been in place at the ISD for decades and have included general strategic planning, the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Criteria and, more recently, the NCA Accreditation process. Constituent groups have been involved throughout these improvement processes and continue to provide input to the ISD staff in support of efforts to accomplish the mission.

The ISD maintains an up-to-date profile of the agency, its constituents and learners, and its community. This profile is included in the ISD's Standards Assessment Report and other agency documents.

The Education Leadership Initiative (ELI) was established in 2006 to bring together a broad cross section of 13 community members to provide collaborative leadership to advance the missions of the ISD, local school districts, and communities. This initiative has been highly successful in maximizing and developing resources which assure exceptional opportunities that enrich the quality of life for all Hillsdale County citizens. This group continues to play an important role in strategic planning and collaborative actions. The group includes representatives from the law enforcement community, a judge, the county sheriff, human services personnel, and more.

All internal ISD groups review their own mission statements annually to ensure that they continue to appropriately indicate the direction for the work of each group and also to ensure that those individual mission statements are congruent with the ISD's mission statement.

Strengths

The team noted several successful practices deserving of recognition:

- The ISD's well publicized mission statement is commonly understood and constituents have a clear understanding of the purposes of the ISD. The mission statement serves as a consistent guide as agency personnel make decisions regarding services to be offered, programs to be provided, and initiatives to be started.
- Adherence to the mission statement ensures collaborative community efforts and support for programs that improve the lives of all citizens of Hillsdale County.
- The Education Leadership Initiative has been instrumental in continuous improvement of services for citizens in the county supporting the provision of needed academically and social services. This collaborative, county-wide group exemplifies a systemic approach to providing services and maximizing resources throughout the community.

Suggestions and Opportunities for Improvement

The team offers the following suggestions and opportunities for improvement in this standard area:

- Clearly measure results of programs offered to accomplish the mission of the agency including perceptual data and actual accomplishment of the stated purposes of all agency programs and offerings.
- Periodically assess constituents' understanding of the meaning of vision/mission to ensure that they both understand the purposes of the agency and also that planned programs are meeting those purposes.

Finding

Based on the evidence reviewed, the Quality Assurance Review Team has assigned the overall assessment level of operational, indicating that the Hillsdale County Intermediate School District has met the accreditation requirements for the Vision and Purpose standard.

Governance and Leadership

STANDARD: The agency provides governance and leadership that promote the continuous improvement of the performance of learners and agency effectiveness.

Impact Statement: An agency is successful in meeting this standard when its leaders advocate for the agency's vision and improvement efforts. The leaders provide direction and allocate resources to implement services and programs that enable staff and students to achieve expectations for their learning. Leaders function with clearly defined authority and responsibility and encourage collaboration and shared responsibility for improvement among constituents. The agency's policies, procedures, and organizational conditions ensure advocacy for quality of learning and support for innovation.

Description

The Hillsdale ISD board of education has effectively established policies and procedures that provide for the effective operation of the agency as evidenced by the extensive board policy manual and written documents which describe how policies are developed with assistance provided by NEOLA (a board policy services organization).

Members of the board are long-standing and have been instrumental in providing guidance and policy support as the ISD has changed, improved, and advanced in its mission of providing collaborative innovation, leadership, service, and support for the benefit of students, families, and community. The board has consistently remained in the appropriate role of policy development and supported the superintendent as the person responsible for implementation of those policies.

Constituents and ISD staff members interviewed noted how the board and administrative leaders have been instrumental in securing sufficient resources to ensure that the ISD accomplishes its mission. Examples include the ISD's role in establishing the county-wide fiber optics network, purchase of the Lochaven Center property for current and future use, purchase and remodeling of the current ISD offices in Hillsdale, funding to support professional development programs, significant support for unique local school district needs, and financial support for needed ISD personnel.

Many stakeholders interviewed indicated support for the role ISD leaders have played in creating collaborative networks across the county through which schools and school districts, the ISD, the court system, and the county department of human services work together to enrich the lives of the citizens of Hillsdale County. Also of significance is the establishment of the Education Leadership Initiative which promotes and advocates for county-wide support for needed instructional and support system services.

Strengths

The team noted several successful practices deserving of recognition:

- The ISD has established a well organized leadership team that represents all departments to discuss, brainstorm, and make recommendations of improvements that should be considered to improve the services provided by the ISD.
- Superintendents, principals, and teachers interviewed indicated that they regularly contact and communicate with various ISD leaders when they have needs that they cannot fulfill by themselves and ask for assistance from the ISD. They also reported that they are often asked by ISD leaders, “What do you need from us?” In both cases, significant efforts are made to provide needed services.
- The ISD board is, and has been, a constant, steady force advocating for provision of services in Hillsdale County to benefit the lives of students, families, and community members.

Suggestions and Opportunities for Improvement

The team offers the following suggestions and opportunities for improvement in this standard area:

- Develop methods to identify and support teacher leaders who have potential to become school administrators. Data indicate that high percentages of administrators change jobs each year and not enough quality applicants are available to fill all needed vacant positions. The ISD could be instrumental in assisting local school districts to identify and train teacher leaders who could become new school administrators.
- Develop a succession plan and begin to train people to succeed current successful leaders. Leaders of the ISD were clearly identified and tied to specific leadership responsibilities with many people interviewed being able to identify who is instrumental in accomplishing certain tasks and who provides leadership for which activities. When these leaders move on to other career opportunities or retire, well trained replacements should be ready to take their places.

Finding

Based on the evidence reviewed, the Quality Assurance Review Team has assigned the overall assessment level of operational, indicating that the Hillsdale County Intermediate School District has met the accreditation requirements for the Governance and Leadership standard.

Teaching and Learning

STANDARD: The agency promotes and supports research-based curriculum and instructional methods that enable constituents to facilitate achievement for all learners. *Impact Statement:* An agency is successful in meeting this standard when it promotes and supports curricula based on clearly defined, rigorous, and appropriately challenging expectations for student learning that provide opportunities for all learners to acquire essential knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The agency advocates for the use of proven instructional practices that actively engage students in the learning process; provide opportunities for students to apply their knowledge and skills to real world situations; and give learners feedback to improve their performance.

Description

The Hillsdale County Intermediate School District supports teaching and learning by ensuring the alignment of academic programs in general, special, and career and technical education that are based on clearly defined, rigorous, and relevant expectations for all students. The academic content standards provide opportunities for all learners to acquire the essential knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary for the future. The ISD general education programs are aligned to the standards-driven *Michigan Curriculum Framework*. In Special Education, programs are aligned to *Addressing Unique Education Needs of Students with Disabilities*. Implementation of an Individual Education Plan (IEP) ensures that clear goals, objectives and appropriate assessment methods are outlined within the content of the IEP to meet the identified needs of each student.

An Early Childhood Special Education Program is in place complete with a teacher curriculum manual for IEP goals and objectives with a detailed three-year plan. All Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs (i.e., Computer Aided Design & Manufacturing Technology, Multi-Media Marketing, Health Science Technologies, Homebuilding, Criminal Justice and Information Technology and Computer Certification) are certified by the State of Michigan and cross walked with the State of Michigan content area standards and benchmarks. All Career and Technical Education Programs have an active articulation agreement with local community colleges, such as Kellogg and Washtenaw. This is an example of how educational institutions working together can collaborate in partnerships focused on student learning.

As a result of districts developing a School Improvement Plan, the district leadership teams are provided a structure in which they collaboratively analyze student achievement data to identify and prioritize their critical needs. HCISD has been instrumental in convening elementary, middle and high school level meetings which provide administrators a forum to communicate their needs. Through the coordination of these sessions, the ISD collects and compiles the information in order to design professional development opportunities to address their needs.

One common need across all districts was identified in the area of writing. This data was gleaned from the Michigan Education Assessment Program (MEAP). During the 2008-2009 academic school year, HCISD planned and coordinated professional staff development featuring Lucy Calkins who is a Professor of Curriculum and Teaching and the Founding Director of the Teachers College

Reading and Writing Project. Clearly, this professional development supports instruction that is research-based and reflective of best practices and aligned with instructional goals. In addition, The Literacy Café and Summer Literacy sponsored by the ISD, attracts many educators within and outside the county. Due to the success of this initiative, the ISD will continue to offer this opportunity.

Also, the ISD recognizes the importance of providing assistance to new teachers entering the field of education. HCISD has developed and implemented a New Teacher Academy (NTA) that provides a comprehensive professional development series. Agenda topics include important content necessary to make their transition to teaching and the district smooth, efficient and successful. Some of the topics included the series are school improvement, student leadership and planning, homework and practice, nonlinguistic representations, CTE curriculum to name a few.

At the student level, the ISD sponsors a Pre-Teaching Program. The purpose of this program is for students to assume a degree of responsibility in a real classroom under the supervision of a highly qualified teacher. The student will apply knowledge of educational theory in terms of human growth and development as well as other classroom experiences faced by today's teachers.

Evidence gathered during interviews and artifacts indicates that a broad array of constituents can identify the important role ISD plays in the coordination of professional development opportunities county wide.

Strengths

The team noted the following practice deserving of recognition:

- Constituents perceive and value that the ISD listens to their needs and ideas, and works diligently to establish a cohesive county system for professional development focused on teaching and learning within the eight unique school districts and two charter schools.
- The ISD is perceived to be a valuable resource in coordinating and co-designing professional development in the areas the districts identify as needs.
- Career Technical Education programs afford students opportunities to apply their knowledge to real world situations.
- Distant Learning Opportunities offer students choices in unique course offerings, such as Japanese, French, Physics, Journalism and Zoology.
- The Early-On Special Education Program provides effective assessments that locate, identify and refer students in a timely manner.

Suggestions and Opportunities for Improvement:

The team offers the following suggestions for improvement and growth in this standard area:

- Focus additional data collection and analysis on student demographic data. As shifts in population emerge within a community, it is important to monitor achievement of student subgroups periodically as data becomes available. Subgroup populations to consider are economically disadvantaged, students with disabilities, gender, and ethnicity. The ISD can

begin this process by finding common ground as to the definition of equity and diversity. Artifacts relating to AdvancED Standard Indicator 3.5 were limited in focus.

- Collect, compile, and analyze feedback from participants attending professional development opportunities for future planning in teaching and learning.
- Collect, compile, and analyze the degree in the applications of the knowledge and skills learned in professional development opportunities to daily instructional practices.
- Provide follow-up sessions to augment the knowledge and skills gleaned.
- Broaden ISD professional development opportunities attending to current issues and trends facing general education and special education practitioners in the area of teaching and learning.

Finding

Based on the evidence reviewed, the Quality Assurance Review Team has assigned the overall assessment level of operational, indicating that the Hillsdale County Intermediate School District has met the accreditation requirements for the Teaching and Learning standard.

Documenting and Using Results

STANDARD: The agency enacts a comprehensive system of organizational evaluation that monitors and documents performance and uses these results to improve the agency's effectiveness.

Impact Statement: An agency is successful in meeting this standard when it uses a comprehensive system of organizational evaluation based on clearly defined performance measures. The evaluation system is used to assess the agency's performance based on its goals and expectations; to identify gaps in performance; to evaluate the effectiveness of its services; and to determine strategies for improvement. The evaluation system yields timely and accurate information that is meaningful and useful to agency leaders, staff, and constituents in understanding the agency's effectiveness in support of the continuous improvement of student learning.

Description

Hillsdale County ISD has established a strong expectation of setting goals and the importance of documenting and using results. This has resulted in the creation of a culture of improvement that is owned by all employees and programs or services that are created, adjusted, or eliminated based on a demonstrated and documented need. The belief in the importance of using data to document impact is beginning to infuse the entire organization as well as the districts it serves. HCISD strongly believes that decisions about programs should be made by those closest to the programs themselves.

A number of departments have collected data and are using it to determine improvement goals or service offerings; both Special Education and Career and Technical Education use student assessment data to select and monitor programs and allocate resources while the General Education

department uses data analysis by its districts to determine professional development offerings. Evaluations of professional development opportunities are used to adjust those events; notes from focus groups and other forms of perceptual data related to program and agency effectiveness are used to improve services. In addition, the business office has used a consultant to help analyze its programs and set goals. The results of the Plante Moran study as well as conversations with the Education Leadership Initiative have influenced the choice of the agency goals around innovation and collaboration.

While data has been collected by some individual departments, there is a lack of evidence that clearly defines performance measures across the entire agency or a systemic approach to organizational evaluation of the agency's goals and expectations for services. As a result, this has limited the agency's ability to use data to improve agency performance in a systematic way, or to demonstrate verifiable growth in effectiveness. It is admirable that each department has created its own mission statement that is aligned to that of the agency as a whole; however, there are not clear measures identified for each department that allows it to know whether it is fulfilling its mission and, consequently, the mission of the ISD. The ISD is well-positioned to bring together much of the data that is already being collected as well as new sources of data to create even more effective services than it is already providing; however, performance measures must be identified and clearly defined for all parts of the organization to maximize this potential.

The ISD has begun implementing a mapping project as a way to share data in a useful format for its constituent districts. Completing this project will provide useful information for both the ISD as well as the districts in setting improvement goals. Helping schools and districts crosswalk academic data with other forms of data also has the potential to identify strategies that are more aligned with learner needs, leading to increased student achievement.

Hillsdale ISD has been successful in identifying and collaborating with a variety of constituent groups, including members of the Education Leadership Initiative as well as superintendents, principals, and counselors. These stakeholders are strong in their beliefs that the ISD has accomplished many good things for the citizens of Hillsdale County. Stakeholders strongly urge the ISD to be even more strategic and effective in reporting these accomplishments to the external community. The strong relationship that the ISD has with the media can facilitate this recommendation.

While the ISD has made significant strides in this area, it also recognizes some deficits and has used the AdvancED Accreditation Process to advance this work.

Strengths

The team noted several successful practices deserving of recognition:

- HCISD has worked hard to establish an organization/community-wide culture of improvement and the importance of using data.
- There is an expectation that financial and human resources will be allocated based on data. Stakeholder input is a significant source of data.
- HCISD has begun a mapping project that will provide data in an accessible format for its districts, increasing the potential that results will be used to impact student learning.

- HCISD has provided inter-agency school improvement teams with two professional development days to plan and monitor improvement progress toward determining student success.
- HCISD has led its constituent districts in many data-related initiatives, including collaborative study at the county principal level to determine student needs.
- HCISD models data-driven decision-making practices within the organization and with constituents primarily through the use of perceptual data.
- Each department has developed a clear mission statement aligned to the agency mission that drives its work.

Suggestions and Opportunities for Improvement

The team offers the following suggestions and opportunities for improvement in this standard area:

- Identify and document clearly-defined performance measures for each ISD program/service.
- Identify, document, and implement a comprehensive system of evaluation based on the identified performance measures to evaluate program/service effectiveness.
- Compare HCISD performance to similar ISDs as an additional way to evaluate agency effectiveness.
- Identify and implement communication strategies to publicize ISD impact and effectiveness, including an updated annual report.
- Finalize and implement the data mapping project to support data analysis.

Finding

Based on the evidence reviewed, the Quality Assurance Review Team has assigned the overall assessment level of emerging, indicating that the Hillsdale County Intermediate School District has not met the accreditation requirements for the Documenting and Using Results standard.

Resource and Support Systems

STANDARD: The agency has the resources necessary to support its vision and purpose and to ensure the delivery of services and programs that support all learners.

Impact Statement: An agency is successful in meeting this standard when it deploys sufficient human, material, and fiscal resources to implement programs and services that support teaching and learning and constituent services. The agency employs and allocates staff that is well qualified for their assignments. The agency provides ongoing learning opportunities for all staff to improve their effectiveness. The agency ensures compliance with applicable local, state, and federal regulations.

Description

The Hillsdale County Intermediate School District coordinates appropriate human, material and fiscal resources to apply adequate programs and services to support services for teaching and learning. There is an innovative and collaborative approach to facilitating resources and support systems for student learning needs, staffing, and funding programs. The ISD has a strong budgetary plan and procedures to preserve and protect the fiscal integrity of the ISD during constrained economic times. This is evidenced in the balanced annual budgets and audits. The ISD has also implemented Request for Proposals (RFP) and innovative partnerships to provide resources and shared costs with businesses, other agencies (including MI Works!), colleges such as Jackson Community College and surrounding educational agencies and districts.

The ISD has developed strategies to provide on-going learning opportunities for staff, including the New Teacher Academy (NTA), Individual Development Plans, performance appraisals, and a Professional Development tracking system that requires staff to align professional development with ISD/school initiatives and goals. Although this effort has reached most areas, the implementation of a systematic process is needed to provide a framework that is designed to evaluate and improve professional learning and participation from all staff members.

The hiring process is systematic and includes a complete job description, request for appropriate certification, and proof of “highly qualified” requirements. New teachers participate in the NTA and a mentor program with veteran teachers. State and federal regulations are applied as required. A process is in place for the recruitment and retention of staff; in spite of this process, there is a 40% turnover in administrative staff. This turnover has been attributed to administrators moving on to other districts or ISD organizations.

Facilities are maintained and provide a safe, orderly, and healthy environment. The ISD Crisis Plan was developed in 2004 and is currently being updated in collaboration with the Sheriff’s Department of Hillsdale.

The ISD has been instrumental in establishing a fiber optics network to all schools in the county. The technology infrastructure has provided opportunities for a common student data system through Skyward and for shared communications systems and courses, including distance learning

via the I-TV language program which reaches across schools and districts. Most but not all districts are supported by technology efforts the ISD provides.

The ISD provides support services to meet the special learning needs of all students. Special Services are provided through the ISD schools, and district-based curriculums support appropriate placement and learning for all students. The ISD provides assessment programs such as Early-On, Great Start, Great Parents, Child Find, and additional referral processes. Special Education services are provided according to the identification of individual student needs.

Strengths

The team noted several successful practices deserving of recognition:

- The ISD has established and implemented collaborative efforts with business partners, community organizations, internal districts, and other similar agencies to support shared resources.
- Long term budget planning and procedures support resources and preparations for continuous improvement.
- The assessments, facilities, and programs for students with special learning needs are comprehensive and effective.
- Technology planning and initiatives are on-going and expand resources for schools in the districts.

Suggestions and Opportunities for Improvement

The team offers the following suggestions and opportunities for improvement in this standard area:

- Facilitate a county-wide technology infrastructure that includes all districts and schools.
- Update the Crisis Plan to reflect current buildings and planning.
- Implement a systematic process to design, implement, monitor, and evaluate professional development to improve learning for all staff, and ensure highly qualified status for all staff.

Finding

Based on the evidence reviewed, the Quality Assurance Review Team has assigned the overall assessment level of operational, indicating that the Hillsdale County Intermediate School District has met the accreditation requirements for the Resource and Support Systems standard.

Stakeholder Communications and Relationships

STANDARD: The agency fosters effective communications and relationships with and among its constituents and other stakeholders.

Impact Statement: An agency is successful in meeting this standard when it has the understanding, commitment, and support of its constituents and other stakeholders. Agency personnel seek opportunities for collaboration and shared leadership among its constituents and other stakeholders to help students learn and advance improvement efforts.

Description

Hillsdale County Intermediate School District has strong support for collaboration among stakeholder groups, as evidenced through interviews with partner groups, the Educational Leadership Initiative (ELI) members, and parents. The ELI team, comprised of partners from local school districts, services agencies, parents, and students has built upon previous strategic planning processes to further the mission of providing innovation, leadership, service, and support in a collaborative manner, for the benefit of students, families, and community. The collaborative efforts of the ELI team have resulted in direct services to local districts in the form of cooperative purchasing programs, technology software purchases, instructional services, and guidance and support in developing models for shared administrative and business services in local districts.

Interviews with local superintendents and building administrators and a review of agendas and minutes from meetings verified the ISD focus on providing information that is meaningful and useful to its stakeholders while facilitating open and direct two-way communication with diverse community groups.

Examples of partner groups exemplifying this collaborative culture include:

Special Education Parent Advisory Council

Hillsdale County Counselor's Association

HCISD teacher literacy group

Hillsdale College and Jackson Community College

Law Enforcement and Probate

Social Service Agencies

Other Intermediate School Districts

Local school districts

In each case, partner groups express an appreciation for the increase in intentional collaboration over the last three years resulting in ISD-wide improvement initiatives such as increased distance learning opportunities, effective literacy instruction strategies, services for students with disabilities, Articulation Agreements for Career Technical Education, and area-wide technology support. This collaboration is also evident in ISD staff participating in the Hillsdale Probate Drug Court

supporting students from local school districts in the court system and identifying services for those students.

Multiple forms of communication are utilized to inform stakeholders regarding ISD activities, programs, and resources. Agendas of all leadership and partner groups include opportunities for providing updates and listening to stakeholder needs. The ISD website is an important tool used to communicate information on resources, services, contact information, and important events. The ISD has developed a communication framework and general departmental communication plans designating approaches for sharing information about the ISD and to encourage listening for information from stakeholders. Methods identified included the use of local newspapers, radio spots, brochures, and reports at regular meetings of the ISD Board of Education, staff, and local administrators. This communication system provides periodic information relating to agency operation and services available to local schools and community members.

During interviews there was a perceived dilemma that, despite the overall collaborative nature at the ISD, there remains a lack of full understanding by the general public of the wide array of comprehensive services provided by the ISD that are available to all local districts. Partners, board members and staff stated that the tone of collaboration, combined with the financial conditions facing most local districts, might present a prime opportunity for the ISD to have success in reaching out to develop stronger understanding, commitment, participation, and support for programs and services provided by the ISD.

Strengths

The team noted several successful practices deserving of recognition:

- The ISD leadership has built upon a tradition of school improvement recognizing that improvement efforts are systemic. The strategic planning philosophy that grew over time to include the Baldrige initiative and resides in the present Education Leadership Initiative approach to continuous improvement has been driven by a systematic organization-wide look at improvement. The resiliency of the agency mission, after reflection by multiple stakeholders over time, has clearly established a strong purpose and support for the direction of the organization. This has led to improvement efforts that align functions in Special Education, Career Technical Education, and General Education.
- The model of collaboration set by the agency has provided the conditions for shared leadership by partners to advance improvement efforts and help students learn. This is evident in interactions across departments, with partners across the community, and with local school administrators and teachers. Overall the collaborative approach has positioned the ISD to be very adept at responding to the expressed needs of local districts while keeping in mind state/federal mandates and over-arching ISD goals. As part of this process, the ISD has organized collaborative groups of educators from local districts, provided subject area expert consultants, and facilitated meetings with the expressed purpose of identifying essential curricular content and providing training in effective instructional practices. This collaboration is assisting in developing quality programs, gaining commitment from all stakeholders, and defining the changing role of the ISD in student success.

Suggestions and Opportunities for Improvement

The team offers the following suggestions and opportunities for improvement in this standard area:

- Strengthen the communication plan with a focus on building a deeper understanding of the ISD services and opportunities by stakeholders. This should be a single comprehensive communication plan with specific strategies to include a balance of media with a universal audience in mind. The implementation of an enhanced communication plan to accurately reflect the changing identity and services of the ISD for all stakeholders will serve to strengthen connections with partners and increase stakeholder satisfaction, staff efficacy, and sustainability of improvement efforts.

Finding

Based on the evidence reviewed, the Quality Assurance Review Team has assigned the overall assessment level of highly functional, indicating that the Hillsdale County Intermediate School District has met the accreditation requirements for the Stakeholder Communications and Relationships standard.

Commitment to Continuous Improvement

STANDARD: The agency establishes, implements, and monitors a continuous process of improvement that positively impacts services and programs in support of learning.

Impact Statement: An agency is successful in meeting this standard when it implements a collaborative and ongoing process for improvement. New improvement efforts are informed by the results of earlier efforts through reflection and assessment of the improvement process.

Description

Hillsdale County Intermediate School District has demonstrated its commitment to continuous improvement for well over two decades. It began its continuous improvement journey in the 1990's when it created the Hillsdale Service Network and continued with Malcolm Baldrige Training for all employees. In 2000, the ISD received a grant for Lasting Impact, a 21st Century Community Learning Center Initiative which began the identification and description of collaboration within the county to improve student achievement and success. All employees are aware of the role that continuous improvement plays in student success. Professional development ensures that School Improvement Plans (SIP) are relevant, aligned to board and administrative goals and documented for allocation of resources. There is evidence of recognition by the Michigan Quality Council and the continuous improvement effort is funded by the Rural Education Assistance Program grant.

Advancements in the ISD's continuous improvement efforts are evidenced in several ways. The mission statement is visible throughout the county and is known by those with whom the team spoke. The ISD website has a very visible continuous improvement section that contains both documents of

its system and forms needed to review each subgroup's ongoing progress, apply for resources or professional development and document team meeting minutes, decisions and outcomes.

All departments, agency-run schools, and community partnerships have developed mission statements that align to the ISD Mission Statement. There is a well-developed and documented Education Leadership Initiative with representation from community agencies, parents, law enforcement, business and industry, workforce development, and local education agencies serviced by the Hillsdale ISD. This team meets a minimum of four times a year to review/revise goals, review improvement and align county resources to improve student success.

Strengths

The team noted several successful practices deserving of recognition:

- Continuous improvement efforts are becoming ingrained in the daily work of ISD staff.
- The Educational Leadership Initiative is active and crosses all functions of the agency and community.
- All resources and professional development must align to documented continuous improvement goals.
- Professional development and leadership extends to paraprofessionals and the development of their own conference.
- Dedicated planning coordinators are active for each SIP group.
- Agency-wide common SIP language has created understanding and value to the continuous improvement process.
- The ISD is an active participant in the Michigan School Improvement Facilitators Network.

Suggestions and Opportunities for Improvement

The team offers the following suggestions and opportunities for improvement in this standard area:

- Finalize the data mapping project to support continuous improvement data analysis.
- Finalize and implement the ISD communication plan to strategically disseminate information to community partners, constituents, and local education agencies related to the results of ongoing continuous improvement efforts.

Finding

Based on the evidence reviewed, the Quality Assurance Review Team has assigned the overall assessment level of operational, indicating that the Hillsdale County Intermediate School District has met the accreditation requirements for the Commitment to Continuous Improvement standard.

Quality Assurance Findings

The Quality Assurance Review Team examined the effectiveness of the agency's methods for quality assurance. The team reviewed the agency's practices and methods to monitor and document improvement, provide meaningful feedback and support across the agency, ensure that AdvancED standards are met and strengthened, and regularly collect, use, and communicate results. The team provides the following findings in this area.

Description

The Hillsdale County ISD has established a framework through which improvement efforts can be filtered. This framework includes school improvement teams and plans, focused leadership, a clear mission statement that is well understood, collaborative relationships with local schools, districts, and agencies, and a sincere desire to continuously improve. The ISD culture has evolved to understand the importance of using data (perception, financial, achievement, etc.) in a relevant, timely and transparent manner as the key fundamental in the improvement process.

The agency is at the point of identifying the questions they want data to answer in guiding activities as an agency and departments within the ISD. The agency also is beginning to have systems in place to answer those questions and move forward with providing improved service to all constituents. The implementation of improved programs and programming to meet identified needs will move the agency forward in its improvement efforts.

The agency has recognized the need to review progress yearly and to adjust strategies to needs identified annually.

The ISD Board of Education continues to be supportive of agency-wide improvement efforts and is moving forward in providing the resources needed to meet the identified needs across the county.

Strengths

The visitation team noted the following strengths:

- The agency is committed to quality in all its programs and has a long-standing tradition of identifying needs of its citizens and doing its very best to meet those needs with quality programs.
- The agency is poised to begin to effectively use the available data in the decision-making process to assure that quality is consistently present across the ISD in all departments, programs, and areas.
- Improvement plans and processes will be improved by identifying measurable goals and outcomes for all programs and collecting data through which to measure success.

Suggestions and Opportunities for Improvement

The team offers the following suggestions and opportunities for improvement in this area:

- Identify and document clearly-defined performance measures for each ISD program/service.
- Identify, document, and implement a comprehensive system of evaluation based on the identified performance measures to evaluate program/service effectiveness.
- Finalize and implement the data mapping project to support data analysis.
- Use these measures and system of evaluation based on them to regularly and consistently measure progress and quality.

Conclusion

The commendations and recommendations in this report are designed to focus the agency on those areas that will have the greatest impact on learner performance and agency effectiveness. While powerful in potential, the commendations and recommendations only have meaning when acted upon by the agency and the schools it operates. The strength of this report lies in the agency's commitment to using the findings to continuously improve. The key is action. The agency is encouraged to use the report as a call to action, a tool to sustain momentum in the ongoing process of continuous improvement.

The team identified several recommendations for improvement that the agency will need to address. Two years following this review, the agency will be required to submit a progress report summarizing its progress toward addressing the team's recommendations.

The Quality Assurance Review Team expresses appreciation to Superintendent Robert Henthorne; Executive Director, John Ciaravino; and General Education Supervisor, Pat Dillon, members of the professional staff, students, parents and other community representatives for hosting the review team. The team wishes the agency and its constituents much success in the quest for excellence through NCA CASI accreditation with AdvancED.

Appendix

Quality Assurance Review Team Members

Steve Fey, NCA Team Chair, is the NCA State Director for Iowa. He has 31 years of experience as a teacher, coach, and principal in public schools in Iowa and Colorado, 7 years as school improvement consultant at the Iowa Department of Education, and 3 years experience as Director of School Improvement Services for Heartland Area Education Agency in Central Iowa.

Michele M. Gaski is the Single Point of Contact for Cuyahoga County (Region 3) in Ohio. She has 33 years of experience as a coach, teacher, and principal in public schools in Ohio. In addition, Michele served as the Director of Curriculum and Instructional Technology for the Summit County Education Service Center in Summit County. Currently, Michele facilitates and coordinates Ohio School Improvement Initiatives for schools within Cuyahoga County.

Susan Rainey is a Quality Specialist for Oakland Schools. She has worked in education for 21 years in Oakland County, Michigan. Ten years were spent in the classroom and 7 years facilitating career development with students. Susan spent 7 years as a voluntary Lead Internal Auditor for the OS ISO 9001:2000 quality management system, advancing to manage the entire school continuous improvement initiative for its 4 technical campuses.

Ben Boerkoel is a School Improvement Consultant for the Kent Intermediate School District in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He previously served for 32 years as a teacher, principal, and Director of Instructional Services for a private school system in Grand Rapids. He currently works with schools in planning and facilitating school improvement initiatives and is also responsible for co-facilitating the strategic planning process as well as the NCA accreditation process at Kent ISD.

Fiona Hinds is the Associate State Director for Michigan - NCA CASI/AdvancED. She has served as an educator for 15 years as a principal, assistant principal, and teacher. Fiona was a founding teacher member of a charter school, and has been recognized for her innovative educational practices including Teaching Excellence and Mentoring for Success; developing a school culture that promotes student achievement; school business partnerships; career preparation; and administrative leadership.

Gus Bishop is the Director of Instruction for the Charlevoix-Emmet Intermediate School District. His professional career has included 12 years of classroom experience and over 20 years of administrative experience, including time as a building principal, curriculum director, assistant superintendent, and superintendent at the local school level. Experience with NCA has included serving on the Michigan State Council and serving as a team member and team chair on visiting teams at the building, district, and ESA level.

AdvancED Standards for Quality Education Service Agencies (ESAs)

The **AdvancED** Standards for Education Service Agencies are comprehensive statements of quality practices and conditions that research and best practice indicate are necessary for agencies to achieve quality learner performance and organizational effectiveness. As ESAs reach higher levels of implementation of the standards, they will have a greater capacity to support ever-increasing learner performance and organizational effectiveness. Each of the seven standards listed below has corresponding indicators and impact statements which can be accessed at www.advanc-ed.org.

Vision and Purpose

The agency establishes and communicates a shared purpose and direction for continuous improvement of the performance of learners and the effectiveness of the services being provided by the agency.

Governance and Leadership

The agency provides governance and leadership that promote the continuous improvement of the performance of learners and agency effectiveness.

Teaching and Learning

The agency promotes and supports research-based curriculum and instructional methods that enable constituents to facilitate achievement for all learners.

Documenting and Using Results

The agency enacts a comprehensive system of organizational evaluation that monitors and documents performance and uses these results to improve the agency's effectiveness.

Resource and Support Systems

The agency has the resources necessary to support its vision and purpose and to ensure the delivery of services and programs that support all learners.

Stakeholder Communications and Relationships

The agency fosters effective communications and relationships with and among its constituents and other stakeholders.

Commitment to Continuous Improvement

The agency establishes, implements, and monitors a continuous process of improvement that positively impacts services and programs in support of learning.