



External Review

South Central Nebraska Unified School District #5

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction to the External Review Process.....	1
Part I: Findings.....	2
Accreditation Standards and Indicators.....	2
Learning Environment.....	21
Part II: Conclusion.....	22
Summary of the External Review.....	22
Required Actions.....	23
Part III: Addenda.....	26
Next Steps.....	26
Celebrating Accreditation.....	26
About AdvancED.....	26

Introduction to the External Review Process

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 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 also includes Powerful Practices and Opportunities for Improvement identified by the External Review Team, observations of the Learning Environment, as well as Required Actions.

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. AdvancED's 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. 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 AdvancED's Accreditation Standards and Indicators, conclusions concerning Powerful Practices and Opportunities for Improvement related to each of the standards, and a description of the evidence examined by the External Review Team. Indicators are evaluated and rated individually by the External Review Team using a four-level performance rubric. The Standard Performance Level is the average of indicator scores for the standard.

Standard 1: Purpose and Direction

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 own 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 aligned with the institutions' vision that is supported by internal and external stakeholders. These expectations serve as the focus for assessing student performance and overall institution effectiveness.

Standard	Standard Performance Level
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External Review

South Central Nebraska Unified School District #5

The system maintains and communicates at all levels of the organization a purpose and direction for continuous improvement that commit to high expectations for learning as well as shared values and beliefs about teaching and learning.		3.0	
Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
1.1	The system engages in a systematic, inclusive, and comprehensive process to review, revise, and communicate a system-wide purpose for student success.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•District purpose statements - past and present•Examples of communications to stakeholders about the district's purpose (i.e. website, newsletters, annual report, student handbook)•Minutes from meetings related to development of the district's purpose and direction•Copy of strategic plan referencing the district purpose and direction and its effectiveness•Standards overview presentation	3
1.2	The system ensures that each school engages in a systematic, inclusive, and comprehensive process to review, revise, and communicate a school purpose for student success.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Examples of written stakeholder communications or marketing materials that portray the school purpose and direction•Agendas and/or minutes that reference a commitment to the components of the schools' purpose statements•District data profile, professional learning communities	3
1.3	The school leadership and staff at all levels of the system commit to a culture that is based on shared values and beliefs about teaching and learning and supports challenging, equitable educational programs and learning experiences for all students that include achievement of learning, thinking, and life skills.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Examples of schools' continuous improvement plans•The district strategic plan•Statements of shared values and beliefs about teaching and learning•Professional development plans and implementation timelines on topics related to equity, organizational effectiveness, and improved instruction and programs•Statements or documents about ethical and professional practices•Principal, teacher, parent, and student interviews, classroom observations	3

External Review

South Central Nebraska Unified School District #5

1.4	Leadership at all levels of the system implement a continuous improvement process that provides clear direction for improving conditions that support student learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •The district strategic plan •The district data profile •Professional development plans and implementation timelines on topics related to equity, organizational effectiveness, and improved instruction and programs •Agenda, minutes from continuous improvement planning meetings •Examples of schools continuous improvement plans •Standards overview presentation, Superintendent, school board, student, teacher, and parent interviews, newsletters, website, district and school letterheads 	3
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Powerful Practices

Indicator

1. Commitment to the continuous improvement process is evident across the system. South Central Nebraska Unified #5 is committed to the continuous improvement process. The process is district-wide and includes the involvement of all stakeholders.
The continuous improvement process team engages in the analysis of multiple sources of data to establish district-wide, measurable school improvement goals. The plan incorporates the use of research-based strategies and activities to support improvement of student achievement as outlined by the goals. In addition, the team meets on a regular basis to ensure that the process is ongoing.

1.4

An effective continuous improvement process includes well-defined steps and procedures with a focus on providing quality learning to improve achievement for all students.

Standard 2: Governance and Leadership

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 school leadership research, Leithwood & 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 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 school communities to attain school 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 school 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 has found through its own evaluation of best practices in 30,000 institutions around the world 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			Standard Performance Level
The system operates under governance and leadership that promote and support student performance and system effectiveness.			2.5
Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
2.1	The governing body establishes policies and supports practices that ensure effective administration of the system and its schools.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •School handbooks •District operations manuals •Communications to stakeholder about policy revisions •Staff handbooks •Professional development plans •Student handbooks 	3
2.2	The governing body operates responsibly and functions effectively.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Proof of legal counsel •Governing code of ethics •Governing authority policies on roles and responsibilities, conflict of interest •Findings of internal and external reviews of compliance with laws, regulations, and policies •Strategic plan 	2

External Review

South Central Nebraska Unified School District #5

2.3	The governing body ensures that the leadership at all levels has the autonomy to meet goals for achievement and instruction and to manage day-to-day operations effectively.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •District strategic plan •Social media •Roles and responsibilities of district leadership •Examples of school improvement plans •Agendas and minutes of meetings •Middle school implementation; board interviews 	3
2.4	Leadership and staff at all levels of the system foster a culture consistent with the system's purpose and direction.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Examples of decisions in support of the schools' continuous improvement plans •Examples of decisions aligned with the district's purpose and direction •Examples of collaboration and shared leadership •Examples of decisions aligned with the district's strategic plan •Examples of decisions aligned with the school's purpose statement •Professional development offerings and plans •administrative meeting agendas; professional learning communities; established committees 	3
2.5	Leadership engages stakeholders effectively in support of the system's purpose and direction.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Involvement of stakeholders in a school improvement plan •Superintendent newsletter; website 	2
2.6	Leadership and staff supervision and evaluation processes result in improved professional practice in all areas of the system and improved student success.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Governing body policy on supervision and evaluation •Representative supervision and evaluation reports •principal and teacher interviews; copy of evaluation instrument 	2

Powerful Practices

Indicator

1. Strong leadership at the district and in the schools is in place to move the district forward in meeting its unique challenges. 2.4
- Through interviews with board members the External Review (ER) team learned that the superintendent has their confidence in his ability to develop and implement a strategic plan which will guide the district in its quest for excellence. The superintendent's presentation provided the team with vision and purpose that form the basis for the plan. He has established a leadership team that implements that plan at the building and classroom levels. Principals, teachers, and support staff interviews reinforced the team's assessment that leadership is in place that can direct initiatives necessary to achieve the vision and purpose. Students indicated that they are confident that the programs and services they have available are sufficient to allow them to reach their potentials. Parents shared that they trust that the district is providing their children with an excellent education.

In order for an organization to achieve excellence, quality leadership is critical. Leadership must be in place at all levels if that excellence is to be systemic. The ER team has determined that these qualities are in place in the district.

Opportunities for Improvement

Indicator

1. Develop strategies that will enable greater collaboration among the school board, administration, teachers, and community stakeholders as the district plan is implemented. 2.2

During the visit, the ER team noted that several stakeholders were unsure of the district strategic plan, how that plan will be carried out, and how it will benefit students and other stakeholders.

It is obvious that a strategic plan is necessary. However, for the plan to be successful, stakeholders need to understand it and how it will affect the district in moving forward. With all parties knowing the purpose and contents of the plan, students will ultimately benefit from a cohesive working relationship between the board of education, administration, and community members.

Standard 3: Teaching and Assessing for Learning

A high-quality and effective 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, which include strong communication skills, knowledge of content, and knowledge of how to teach the content. The school'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 et al, 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 et al, 2008). According to Marks, Louis, & Printy (2002), school staff that engage in "active organizational learning also have higher achieving students in contrast to those that do not." Likewise, a study conducted by Horng, Klasik, & Loeb (2010), concluded that leadership in effective schools, "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 through its own evaluation of best practices in 30,000 institutions around the world that a successful institution implements a curriculum based on clear and measurable expectations for student learning that 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		Standard Performance Level	
The system's curriculum, instructional design, and assessment practices guide and ensure teacher effectiveness and student learning across all grades and courses.		2.42	
Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
3.1	The system's curriculum provides equitable and challenging learning experiences that ensure all students have sufficient opportunities to develop learning, thinking, and life skills that lead to success at the next level.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Course or program descriptions •Graduate follow-up surveys •Learning expectations for different courses and programs •Posted learning objectives •Course, program, or school schedules •Rtl decision rules; standards team report; board and parent interviews; standards team interview; classroom observations 	2
3.2	Curriculum, instruction, and assessment throughout the system are monitored and adjusted systematically in response to data from multiple assessments of student learning and an examination of professional practice.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Common assessments •Program descriptions •Standards team report; board and principal interviews; standards team interviews 	2

External Review

South Central Nebraska Unified School District #5

3.3	Teachers throughout the district engage students in their learning through instructional strategies that ensure achievement of learning expectations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Examples of teacher use of technology as an instructional resource•Student work demonstrating the application of knowledge•Teacher evaluation criteria relating to prescribed instructional designs and proprietary practices•Examples of professional development offerings and plans tied specifically to the approved or prescribed instructional strategies and programs•Examples of professional development offerings and plans tied specifically to the results from supervision and evaluation•Examples of student use of technology as a learning tool•Rtl decision rules; standards team report; board, administrator, and teacher interviews; standards team interview	2
3.4	System and school leaders monitor and support the improvement of instructional practices of teachers to ensure student success.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Supervision and evaluation procedures•Recognition of teachers with regard to these practices•Documentation of collection of lesson plans, grade books, or other data record systems•Examples of improvements to instructional practices resulting from the evaluation process•Professional development offerings and plans tied to the prescribed education program, instructional strategies, developmentally appropriate practices, and student success•Principal and teacher interviews	3

External Review

South Central Nebraska Unified School District #5

3.5	The system operates as a collaborative learning organization through structures that support improved instruction and student learning at all levels.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Calendar/schedule of learning community meetings •Common language, protocols and reporting tools •Professional development funding to promote professional learning communities •Agendas and minutes of collaborative learning committees •Evidence of informal conversations that reflect collaboration about student learning •Administrative and teacher interviews; superintendent report; standards review presentation; standards team interview 	3
3.6	Teachers implement the system's instructional process in support of student learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Examples of learning expectations and standards of performance •Samples of exemplars used to guide and inform student learning •Posted objectives and targets; high school syllabi; evaluation instrument 	3
3.7	Mentoring, coaching, and induction programs support instructional improvement consistent with the system's values and beliefs about teaching and learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Professional learning calendar with activities for instructional support of new staff •ESU 9 professional development director; principal and standards team interviews 	2
3.8	The system and all of its schools engage families in meaningful ways in their children's education and keep them informed of their children's learning progress.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •List of varied activities and communications modes with families, e.g., info portal, online, newsletters, parent centers, academic nights, open house, early release days •Survey results •Calendar outlining when and how families are provided information on child's progress •Samples of exemplars used to guide and inform student learning •Board, administrators, teacher, and parent interviews; standards team interview 	3
3.9	The system designs and evaluates structures in all schools whereby each student is well known by at least one adult advocate in the student's school who supports that student's educational experience.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •TeamMates; Administrator, Teacher, Parent, Student Interviews; Standards Review Team Interview 	2

External Review

South Central Nebraska Unified School District #5

3.10	Grading and reporting are based on clearly defined criteria that represent the attainment of content knowledge and skills and are consistent across grade levels and courses.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Policies, processes, and procedures on grading and reporting•Sample communications to stakeholders about grading and reporting•Board, Administrator, Teacher, Parent, Student Interviews	2
3.11	All staff members participate in a continuous program of professional learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•District professional development plan involving the district and all schools•Brief explanation of alignment between professional learning and identified needs•Administrator walk-throughs; Administrator, Teacher Interviews, Fidelity Checklist for RTI	3
3.12	The system and its schools provide and coordinate learning support services to meet the unique learning needs of students.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Data used to identify unique learning needs of students•Training and professional learning related to research on unique characteristics of learning•List of learning support services and student population served by such services•Schedules, lesson plans, or example student learning plans showing the implementation of learning support services•Administrator, Teacher Interviews	2

Powerful Practices

Indicator

1. The implementation of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) encourages and supports collaboration across the system. All teachers and administrators participate in district-wide PLCs throughout the school year. The PLCs in grades preschool through sixth grade meet weekly, while the secondary ones (grades 7-12) meet every other week.

3.5

During the PLC time teachers work collaboratively across the district to analyze multiple sources of data, set SMART goals, and plan for implementation of instructional strategies that will lead to improvement of student achievement. The district effectively utilizes the incorporation of technology such as Distance Learning and Google Docs to enhance collaboration and communication among the PLC teams.

Highly functioning PLCs have formalized structures that engage teachers in frequent, collaborative work in analysis of data, identification of essential learning goals, and reflection of instructional practices.

2. The district has introduced common reading and math programs in the elementary grades of each school system. 3.6
- During interviews, administrators and teachers informed the ER team that the district has adopted common reading and math textbooks for each of the elementary buildings. The team observed teachers delivering instruction from some of these materials during classroom observations. Ashlock templates are also used to guide the use of the reading textbooks.

The adoption of common reading and math textbooks district-wide helps ensure that each student is receiving the same instruction on the same concepts. These common materials also support the ability of teachers to collaborate and further develop a sense of unity within the widespread district. The district-wide adoption allows the district to leverage greater numbers toward the purchase of materials and professional development, sometimes resulting in discounted prices.

3. The professional development plan is aligned to the district's purpose: Educate, Support, and Prepare. 3.11
- The professional development plan developed and implemented by the district is aligned to the continuous improvement goals and supports the district purpose. The plan was developed based on current, multiple sources of data and contains clear measurable objectives. Furthermore, the plan focuses on research-based strategies and activities, and includes the involvement of all educators in the system.

A professional development plan that supports the district's continuous improvement process increases educator effectiveness and results in improved learning for all students.

Opportunities for Improvement

Indicator

1. Use a variety of instructional strategies that allow for student collaboration, self-reflection, and development of critical thinking skills. 3.3
- The district's PLC calendar indicates teachers have received and will continue to receive professional development in instructional strategies and interventions for reading and math. The calendar also indicates professional development on using technology. During classroom observations, the team observed a technology class that allowed for collaboration and development of critical thinking skills. However, the team did not observe many of these types of activities in other classrooms. Reading instruction seemed to mostly consist of round robin reading as well as direct instruction in phonics. Round robin reading was also observed at the high school level.

Opportunities for student collaboration and self-reflection help keep students engaged in learning and deepen their understanding of concepts. It helps them to make sense out of their existing knowledge and new information. They must struggle with and resolve disparities. Reflection helps students learn by meta-cognition and synthesis. It also enhances student's motivation and ownership in their own learning.

2. Develop and implement an induction and mentoring program for new teachers. 3.7
An induction program is held for new staff prior to the start of the school year. Some new staff members are paired with Educational Service Unit (ESU) staff for support. ESU 9 provides some mentoring for new teachers. District teachers do not serve as mentors.
- An induction program with mentoring provides new teachers with support and direction that helps them have a successful teaching experience. New teacher success translates into better retention rates for new hires and better learning experiences for students.
3. Design a structure that provides each student with an adult advocate. 3.9
The district uses the Teammates program to pair students with adults. However, not all students participate in this program.
- Adult advocates who have built long-term relationships with students, built on trust and openness, can help guide them as they set goals, help them determine a clear path for accomplishing their goals, and hold them accountable for accomplishing the goals.
4. Evaluate grading practices for criteria representing each student's attainment of content knowledge and skills. 3.10
The district has a policy which describes a grading scale and addresses grading issues related to incomplete work, discipline, bias, and failing grades. The policy states that grading should be based on academic performance. It has been communicated to parents.
- Although a grading policy is in place, it is advisable to regularly evaluate this policy in light of a standards-based learning environment. Regular dialogue about how accurately grades reflect students' mastery of content knowledge and skills will help refine grading practices. Students and parents will then have a clearer idea of where the student is in relationship to the learning targets.
5. Provide opportunities for teachers to learn more about addressing unique learning needs. 3.12
- Benchmark assessments are given in the elementary reading program. The information from these programs is used to determine interventions for students. The elementary schools use a Response to Intervention (RtI) process for reading. Other courses and grade levels do not have a similar process. Some students have Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and receive special education services.
- One teaching strategy does not necessarily work for every student. Understanding the unique learning needs of students and then responding to those needs increases the possibility of success for each student. PLCs provide an opportunity for teachers to learn more about addressing individual student needs. PLCs can also be used to share action research related to unique needs of particular students.

Standard 4: Resources and Support 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, 2003) "demonstrated a strong relationship between resources and student success...both the level of resources and their explicit allocation seem to affect educational outcomes."

External Review

South Central Nebraska Unified School District #5

AdvancED has found through its own evaluation of best practices in 30,000 institutions around the world that a successful institution has sufficient human, material, and fiscal resources to implement a curriculum that enables students to achieve expectations for student learning, to meet special needs, and to comply with applicable regulations. The institution employs and allocates staffs 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 to improve their effectiveness. The institution ensures compliance with applicable governmental regulations.

Standard		Standard Performance Level	
The system has resources and provides services in all schools that support its purpose and direction to ensure success for all students.		2.63	
Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
4.1	The system 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 system, individual schools, and educational programs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Assessments of staffing needs •Policies, processes, procedures and other documentation related to the hiring, placement and retention of professional and support staff for the district and schools •Documentation of highly qualified staff •District budgets or financial plans for the last three years •Administrator Interviews 	3
4.2	Instructional time, material resources, and fiscal resources are sufficient to support the purpose and direction of the system, individual schools, educational programs, and system operations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Examples of school schedules •District strategic plan showing resources support for district •Alignment of district budget with district purpose and direction •Examples of efforts of school leaders to secure necessary material and fiscal resources •District quality assurance procedures showing district oversight of schools pertaining to school resources •Alignment of school budgets with school purpose and direction •Administrator Interviews 	3

External Review

South Central Nebraska Unified School District #5

4.3	The system maintains facilities, services, and equipment to provide a safe, clean, and healthy environment for all students and staff.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•School safety committee responsibilities, meeting schedules, and minutes•Policies, handbooks on district and school facilities and learning environments•Documentation of compliance with local and state inspections requirements•Example systems for school maintenance requests•Administrator, Teacher, Student Interviews	3
4.4	The system demonstrates strategic resource management that includes long-range planning in support of the purpose and direction of the system.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•District strategic plan showing the areas of budget, facilities, quality control, and other strategic systems•Policies, handbooks on district and school facilities and learning environments•Superintendent's Presentation and Interview; Principals Interview; Board Interview	2
4.5	The system provides, coordinates, and evaluates the effectiveness of information resources and related personnel to support educational programs throughout the system.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Schedule of staff availability to assist students and school personnel related to finding and retrieving information•Data on media and information resources available to students and staff•Library and Classroom Observations; Teacher Interviews	2

External Review

South Central Nebraska Unified School District #5

4.6	The system provides a technology infrastructure and equipment to support the system's teaching, learning, and operational needs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •District quality control procedures that monitor the effectiveness of technology services at the district-level and school-level •Assessments to inform development of district and school technology plans •Survey results •Brief description of learning management systems or data management systems that support the effective use of student assessment results, school effectiveness, and district effectiveness •District technology plan and budget to improve technology services and infrastructure for the district-level and school-level •Policies relative to technology use at the district-level and school-level •Principal and Teacher Interviews 	3
4.7	The system provides, coordinates, and evaluates the effectiveness of support systems to meet the physical, social, and emotional needs of the student population being served.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Social classes and services, e.g., bullying, character education •Survey results •Agreements with school community agencies for student-family support •Rubrics on developmentally appropriate benchmarks; e.g. early childhood education •Parent and Student Interviews 	2
4.8	The system provides, coordinates, and evaluates the effectiveness of services that support the counseling, assessment, referral, educational, and career planning needs of all students.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Description of referral process •List of services available related to counseling, assessment, referral, educational, and career planning •Survey results •Budget for counseling, assessment, referral, educational and career planning •Description of IEP process •Counselor, Principal, Parent, Student Interviews 	3

Opportunities for Improvement

Indicator

1. Develop and implement a long-range plan for the management of strategic resources. 4.4
Through interviews with administrators the ER team was not able to identify formalized, long-range resource management strategies. Although it appears that facilities are in good condition, the need for maintenance and replacement policies is recognized, but not in place. Through the superintendent's presentation the team learned that the district is fiscally sound in its ability to establish and implement a policy to ensure that resource management compliments instructional continuous improvement.
2. Assess the capability of the district to assure that adequate informational resources are available to support instructional program, student, and staff needs. 4.5
The ER team observed that while information resources appear to be accessible to students and staff, there does not appear to be a systemic approach to their use district-wide. Information technology is prevalent in the buildings; however, the team did not observe general use by students and staff. As students must learn to thrive in the information age, they need to be introduced to all modes of information resources and be expected to utilize them in solving real problems and challenges.
3. Assess the support systems that are available to meet the physical, social, and emotional needs of students. 4.7
As our society places more stresses on youth, it is important that schools determine their ability to support students and families in meeting those challenges. While the district is fortunate to have talented and committed counselors, demands continue to grow. As the district has dedicated itself to the development and implementation of continuous improvement of instruction, it is important that it focus as well on maintaining the individual and organizational conditions that support learning.

Standard 5: Using Results for Continuous Improvement

Systems with strong improvement processes are moving beyond anxiety about the current reality and focusing on priorities and initiatives for the future. Using results, that is, data and other information, to guide continuous improvement is key to an institution's success. A study conducted by Datnow, Park, & 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 et al., 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 school 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).

AdvancED has found through its own evaluation of best practices in 30,000 institutions around the world 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

External Review

South Central Nebraska Unified School District #5

effectiveness.

Standard			Standard Performance Level
The system implements a comprehensive assessment system that generates a range of data about student learning and system effectiveness and uses the results to guide continuous improvement.			2.6
Indicator		Source of Evidence	Performance Level
5.1	The system establishes and maintains a clearly defined and comprehensive student assessment system.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Brief description of technology or web-based platforms that support the education delivery model •Brief description of student assessment system including range of data produced from standardized and local or school assessments on student learning and school performance •Evidence that assessments are reliable and bias free •Documentation or description of evaluation tools/protocols •assessment calendar; assessment policy; standards overview presentation; decisions rule protocol for Rti 	3
5.2	Professional and support staff continuously collect, analyze and apply learning from a range of data sources, including comparison and trend data about student learning, instruction, program evaluation, and organizational conditions that support learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Examples of use of data to design, implement, and evaluate continuous improvement plans and apply learning •Survey results •List of data sources related to district effectiveness •Examples of data used to measure the effectiveness of the district systems that support schools and learning •Examples of changes to the district strategic plan based on data results •List of data sources related to student learning, instruction, program effectiveness, and conditions that support learning •Superintendent's presentation; professional learning communities; SMART Goal Protocol; data triangulation; climate surveys 	3

External Review

South Central Nebraska Unified School District #5

5.3	Throughout the system professional and support staff are trained in the interpretation and use of data.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Professional learning schedule specific to the use of data•Documentation of attendance and training related to data use•Professional Learning Communities schedule; reading & math data inservice	2
5.4	The school system engages in a continuous process to determine verifiable improvement in student learning, including readiness for and success at the next level.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Examples of use of results to evaluate continuous improvement action plans•Agendas, minutes of meetings related to analysis of data•Evidence of student readiness for the next level•Evidence of student success at the next level•Evidence of student growth•Description of process for analyzing data to determine verifiable improvement in student learning•Rti decision rules for K-6; Professional Learning Communities	2
5.5	System and school leaders monitor and communicate comprehensive information about student learning, school performance, and the achievement of system and school improvement goals to stakeholders.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•Minutes of meetings regarding achievement of student learning goals•Executive summaries of student learning reports to stakeholder groups•Survey results•Sample communications to stakeholders regarding student learning, conditions that support learning, and achievement of school improvement goals•Examples of district marketing tools and websites that cite student achievement results or that make promises regarding student achievement•Newsletters; PowerSchool	3

Opportunities for Improvement

Indicator

1. Train all professional and support staff in the interpretation and use of data. 5.3
The staff is currently attending PLC meetings and needs training to interpret and use data to guide instruction across all content areas. The district needs to continue to provide support and guidance regarding the use of data in the implementation of its continuous improvement process. The team was impressed with the amount of data available to staff but did not observe consistent use of the data.

2. Implement a continuous improvement process to design instruction to meet individual student needs in areas other than K-6 reading. 5.4
The Rtl process is well established for K-6 reading. The team learned through interviews and observations that this process has been very helpful to PLCs in differentiating instruction. It would be advisable to take the principles that have been learned in reading and apply them to math as well. The team did not identify consistent use of data to differentiate instruction to meet individual needs beyond the elementary level. The same principles should be studied in the secondary PLCs.

Learning Environment

Every learner should have access to an effective learning environment in which she/he has multiple opportunities to be successful. The Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool (ELEOT) measures the extent to which learners are in an environment that is equitable, supportive, and well-managed. An environment where high expectations are the norm and active learning takes place. It measures whether learners' progress is monitored and feedback is provided and the extent to which technology is leveraged for learning.

Observations of classrooms or other learning venues are conducted for a minimum of 20 minutes per observation. External review team members conduct multiple observations during the review process and provide ratings on 30 items based on a 4 point scale with 4=very evident, 3=evident, 2=somewhat evident, and 1=not observed. The following provides the aggregate average score across multiple observations for each of the 7 learning environments included in ELEOT.

Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool (ELEOT)

<i>Environments</i>	<i>Level</i>
Enter the Equitable Learning Environment value from the Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool (ELEOT).	1.6
Enter the High Expectations Environment value from the Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool (ELEOT).	1.9
Enter the Supportive Learning Environment value from the Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool (ELEOT).	2.2
Enter the Active Learning Environment value from the Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool (ELEOT).	2.2
Enter the Progress Monitoring and Feedback Environment value from the Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool (ELEOT).	2.0
Enter the Well-Managed Learning Environment value from the Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool (ELEOT).	2.2
Enter the Digital Learning Environment value from the Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool (ELEOT).	1.4

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 ER team arrived on Sunday, December 2 and held its first meeting to share an initial assessment of the evidence that had been provided by the district. The team was composed of two out-of-state members and three from Nebraska. Following that meeting the team met with the district administration, board members, and others who had been instrumental in preparing for the visit. The following three days were spent interviewing a broad range of stakeholders, reviewing evidence, observing students in classrooms, and preparing an exit report. The exit report was presented at a called school board meeting on Wednesday, December 5.

The team is grateful for the fine quality of preparation by the district. Evidence was extremely well organized. All requests for additional information or for access to individuals were fulfilled promptly with the same degree of hospitality experienced throughout the visit.

The team interviewed four board members, seven administrators, forty-two teachers, two counselors, eighty students, twenty parents, and five support staff. All school buildings were visited, including pre-school programs. Observations of thirty-one classrooms took place in which team members spent a minimum of twenty minutes. The Effective Learning Environment Observation Tool (ELEOT) tool was used to capture evidence of student engagement and activity.

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 is in the midst of a tremendous amount of change as it is genuinely committed to a continuous improvement process. There is a sense among the predominance of stakeholders that, as difficult as change can be, there is a need for it in the District. It appears that district leadership and staff know where they need to get, how they can get there, but have not yet gotten the improvement process in full implementation mode.

Challenged with the mission of bringing school districts together who have often been rivals in the past and are protective of their identities, largely revolving around their community schools, the superintendent and his leadership team are committed to district unification. The stakeholders exhibit a great sense of pride in their schools. It is now important that they also continue to develop their district identity as well.

A common theme that the team heard and observed in its interviews and observations was that the bottom line for any considerations and initiatives is, "Is it good for kids?" The team heard it from

leadership and staff, and it was corroborated in interviews and observations with students and parents.

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.

In classroom observations the team noted levels of evidence of practices taking place. The ELEOT tool was used to record the team assessment in each of the seven environment areas.

Through their thirty-one classroom visits team members generally observed high levels of engagement between teachers and students. Students were often participating in classroom and small group discussions. The team did not note a great degree of differentiation. The district is committed to Response to Intervention (RtI) which is tied to the Professional Learning Community (PLC) development that is taking place. It appeared that the elementary schools are further along with interventions than secondary schools.

Throughout the classroom visits the team noted respectful, positive interactions among students and teachers, and with their peers. Feedback was positive and frequent.

The team frequently observed instruction being delivered by traditional means. Little of the available technology appears to be used by students or staff to the higher levels of its capability.

The team appreciates the warmth and receptivity received from all stakeholders it encountered in its visit to the district. It is obvious that the commitment to continuous improvement is strong and pervasive throughout the district, that leadership and dedicated staff are in place, and that the communities value their schools. With the continuing implementation of the district's plan, the students of South Central USD #5 will be well served.

Following its review of artifacts, interviews, and observations the team will submit a report of findings to AdvancED. Based upon those findings the team recommends that the district be accredited, pending further review and action by the AdvancED Accreditation Commission.

Required Actions

1. Communicate the strategic plan under consideration for adoption by the Board of Education to all stakeholders.

Primary Indicator or Assurance: 2.5

Little evidence was presented to show that the South Central Nebraska Unified School District #5 (SCNU) Strategic Plan (August 2012) has been communicated to all stakeholders in the system. Page 9 of the Strategic Plan lists as a goal: 6. Implement a District-wide Communication Plan; however, there are no action steps listed to strive for that goal. Also, during parent interviews it was stated that they were not aware of the Strategic Plan. It is evident that various stakeholders have been involved in developing parts of the plan, but as a whole it has not been disseminated to them. The system is currently experiencing many changes and is challenged to include all stakeholders in the decision-making process and communicating those decisions to all. The Strategic Plan is substantive, worthy of the system's focused attention, and should be communicated to all stakeholders who will be impacted by the plan.

2. Develop and implement a systematic supervision and evaluation process for all personnel.

Primary Indicator or Assurance: 2.6

The district supervision and evaluation process does not represent a systematic plan or tool to evaluate certified staff informally and formally. A specific tool to use when conducting walk-throughs of staff to collect evidence for the formal evaluation was not present. The formal evaluation process is included in the staff handbook, but the tool used to evaluate teachers is not comprehensive and does not include Nebraska state teacher performance standards such as: foundational knowledge, learning environment, assessment, and vision and collaboration. Examples for teachers on how to achieve each of the evaluation indicators are not included.

Creating a systematic supervision and evaluation process will allow teachers to understand clear expectations of them in the classroom, school building, and the district. The process should include a systematic approach to communicate informal observations with teachers, so that they are aware of the positives and negatives occurring in the classroom prior to the formal evaluation. Clear examples of how to attain a satisfactory rating on each of the indicators enables teachers to plan for attainment of effective teaching practices.

3. Develop a written district-wide curriculum aligned with Nebraska standards horizontally and vertically, and include a timeline for review and revision.

Primary Indicator or Assurance: 3.2

The district has purchased and implemented common district-wide textbooks for reading and math. Ashlock templates are used to help guide the use of the core reading series in the elementary grades. However, there is limited evidence of a district-developed curriculum in almost all subject areas and grade levels. A math curriculum for grades kindergarten through twelfth grade has not been aligned to current state standards. There is a district-developed curriculum for high school English courses that is aligned to current standards. There is little evidence that the curriculum is regularly reviewed and monitored. Teachers are currently recording standards, objectives, lessons, and support materials in the computer-based program Atlas Curriculum Mapping.

A clearly written curriculum that spells out non-negotiable outcomes for students provides a road map for teachers and also for equity across classrooms and grade levels. The Atlas Curriculum Mapping program can be used as a starting point to identify the taught curriculum. This record of what has been taught can then be analyzed for gaps, overlaps, redundancies, and alignment to local and state standards. Once the curriculum has been established, benchmark assessments can be developed to monitor the curriculum. Professional development needs should be assessed and delivered to support the implementation of the curriculum. Establishing a timeline for review and revision of the curriculum ensures that it continues to respond to students' needs, current research, changing demographics, and community values.

Part III: Addenda

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 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 state and national level 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, which confers accreditation and 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, along with 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 (founded 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. The Northwest Accreditation Commission joined the AdvancED network in 2011.

External Review

South Central Nebraska Unified School District #5

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