Executive Summary

Dawson County School System

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Introduction

Every school system has its own story to tell. The context in which teaching and learning takes place influences the processes and procedures by which the school system makes decisions around curriculum, instruction, and assessment. The context also impacts the way a school system stays faithful to its vision. Many factors contribute to the overall narrative such as an identification of stakeholders, a description of stakeholder engagement, the trends and issues affecting the school system, and the kinds of programs and services that a school system implements to support student learning.

The purpose of the Executive Summary (ES) is to provide a school system with an opportunity to describe in narrative form the strengths and challenges it encounters. By doing so, the public and members of the community will have a more complete picture of how the school system perceives itself and the process of self-reflection for continuous improvement. This summary is structured for the school system to reflect on how it provides teaching and learning on a day to day basis.
Description of the School System

Describe the school system's size, community/communities, location, and changes it has experienced in the last three years. Include demographic information about the students, staff, and community at large. What unique features and challenges are associated with the community/communities the school system serves?

Dawson County is easily identifiable on the state map. It is the “Scottie dog” sitting in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains forty-five miles due north of Atlanta. The county covers 213.9 square miles that was carved out of four surrounding counties in 1857.

Although Dawson County experienced a 34.3% increase in population during 2000-2007, making it the 11th fastest growing county in the state at that time, it has experienced very little growth over the past eight years. The county population of approximately 22,957 is comprised of 96.4% White, 0.9% Black, 4.0% Hispanic and 1.2% other ethnicities. There are approximately 269 Hispanic students within the student population. Dawson County's cultural diversity is clearly much less than surrounding Hall and Forsyth counties that have large Hispanic populations and also less than the state (Hispanic 9.3%, Black 31.5%). Dawson's diversity more closely resembles neighboring Pickens County. The 17.9% of residents 65 years and older indicates this migration included people moving to the county to retire, attracted by the slower moving lifestyle and resort/golf communities. Diversity is more accurately addressed through socio-economic rather than culture in Dawson County.

Seventy-seven percent of the county's land use area is forestland. Thousands of acres of unspoiled nature attract outdoor enthusiasts. Two scenic rivers, the Etowah and Amicalola, lend themselves to whitewater rafting, kayaking, tubing, fishing, and swimming. Amicalola Falls, the tallest waterfall in the Southeast, sits next to the Chattahoochee National Forest and 8 miles from the southern starting point of the Appalachian Hiking Trail. Amicalola State Park has spectacular scenery and hiking trails, which make it one of the state's most popular parks. A lodge is available for those that prefer hotel comforts, while cottages and a campground offer more rustic accommodations. Forty-seven miles of Lake Lanier shoreline attract boaters and fishing enthusiasts to the 38,000-acre lake. Our climate and rolling terrain have given birth to some unique attractions such as the Chestatee Wildlife Preserve and the 70-acre Burt's Pumpkin Farm that is visited by thousands of families every fall. Adding to the diversity of our tourism is Uncle Shuck's Corn Maze, a newly opened winery, a motor sports park, and the Premium Outlet Mall that boasts over 5 million shoppers a year with 85% coming from outside our county. A museum dedicated to the history of stock car racing highlights Dawson County's contribution to the birth of this sport. Tourism remains strong even during tough economic times due mainly to the wide diversity of attractions.

Georgia Highway 400, the major transportation route running from Atlanta through the southwest portion of the county, makes it easy for tourists to access our resources in addition to being referred to as the economic engine of Dawson County. Much of our industry lies close to this corridor. Currently, there is one hundred million dollars of new construction occurring in this area. This residential/commercial development will bring growth opportunities and challenges to the school system. Georgia Department of Labor shows our industry mix to be 75.7% service, 9.5% goods producing, and 14.5% government with 47% of residents working outside the county. Agriculture remains the number one industry in the county, with 90% being the poultry industry. Employment opportunities have not increased at the same rate as the population growth indicated by the 65.5% of the residents working outside the county.

Georgia Kids Count shows the current median household income estimated as $54,503, a model based on a 2012 estimate ranking us 16 out of the 159 counties in Georgia. However, KIDS COUNT also notes 12.9% of our residents living in poverty, compared to Georgia’s 19.2%. Child neglect averaged a rate of 6.3% per 1,000 from 2009-2012, but rose to 7.9% in 2013 compared to the Georgia rate of 5.0%. Agency interviews indicate the much of the time child neglect is tied to adult's alcohol or some other type of substance abuse. The child
abuse five-year average from 2009-2013 is a rate of 3.98% per 1,000 compared to the Georgia five year average of 2.9% per 1,000. In interviews, key leaders in the community all note that child safety is a critical issue.

Dawson County's percent of students receiving free or reduced lunches has fluctuated from 45-52% during the years of 2010-2015. Based on 2015 data, the district currently serves 46% of students as free or reduced.

The Dawson County Board of Education currently operates seven state-of-the-art, SACS (Southern Association of Colleges and School Accrediting Commission) accredited public schools. All four of the county’s elementary schools are school-wide Title I schools. The current school system enrollment is approximately 3,493 students with 14% of the population students with disabilities, 7% gifted and 2% ELL. The school system is the single largest employer in the county. The school system employs 291 certified staff members with 100% of classroom teachers being highly qualified and 225 classified staff members. Seventy-one percent of certified staff members have a master’s level or higher degree of education. Current enrollment numbers for each school are listed below.

Riverview Elementary - 363
Robinson Elementary - 590
Kilough Elementary - 377
Black's Mill Elementary - 339
New Dawson County Middle School - 400
Riverview Middle School - 364
Dawson County High School (including HighTower Academy) - 1,060

Recommendations from the previous AdvancED Accreditation Exit Report included improving attendance. The strong emphasis placed on graduation and attendance is evident as seen in the improvement in graduation rate and daily attendance rates over the past few years. Dawson County's on-time graduation rate for 2015 was 89.2%, which is a vast improvement from 67.6% in 2004. Dawson County's graduation rate is higher than the state's average of 77.8% in 2015. Likewise, the system's average daily attendance rate for students rose from 94.30% in 2005 to 95.17% in 2015.

Dawson County School System was granted Charter status for the first time in 2010-2011. The system is in its fifth year as a Charter System of Georgia and has applied to be renewed in July 2016. The system's goals are closely aligned to our charter system goals, and both are driven by the five-year strategic plan.
System's Purpose

Provide the school system's purpose statement and ancillary content such as mission, vision, values, and/or beliefs. Describe how the school system embodies its purpose through its program offerings and expectations for students.

The school system formed a Strategic Planning Committee during the fall of 2014. This committee was challenged with the task of conducting a comprehensive needs assessment to make determinations about areas of growth for the school system. This led to the development of a five-year strategic plan to guide the system in improvement. The process began with an open public meeting in October of 2014 where an overview of the state of the schools was presented to over 120 stakeholders. Stakeholders then divided into smaller groups where input was received. In November of 2014, the Strategic Planning Committee met to review the input received at the open public meeting. The Strategic Planning Committee was comprised of 30 members, who included system administrators, teachers, parents, students, business leaders, and system governance council members. Additionally, a Georgia Department of Education/Charter System Consultant served as a member of the Strategic Planning Committee. During this meeting, the system purpose, direction, and commitment statements were reviewed. A draft purpose, direction, and commitment statement was created and disseminated to schools for review and feedback by their respective stakeholder groups. In January of 2015, the system leadership representatives of the Strategic Planning Committee met for two days to review the input received thus far and to develop the goal areas that would be the framework for the system strategic plan. Throughout the remainder of the spring of 2015, several meetings were held to finalize the strategic plan. The plan was unanimously approved by the local board of education in May of 2015.

The purpose of the Dawson County Charter School System is to be an exemplary school system, with outstanding staff, that prepares students to compete globally. This purpose is accomplished through the direction of providing quality instruction and student support in a nurturing environment that results in success for all. Students in the Dawson County Charter School System are provided high-quality instructional opportunities through the district's commitment to provide:

1. Graduation for all
2. A secure and nurturing/supportive learning environment
3. Relationships with students, families, schools and community
4. Treatment of dignity and respect for everyone
5. A challenging curriculum through research-based, data driven, differentiated instruction
6. Extra-curricular activities and other opportunities, which develop positive personal growth
7. Integration of current and emerging technologies to compete in the 21st Century.

Dawson County School System systematically reviews all system and school goals to ensure that the purpose and direction of Dawson County Schools is embedded in every decision impacting students and system operations.

The Dawson County Board of Education establishes the goals and objectives that drive the educational decisions across the curriculum, funding, and professional learning. The board of education works with the superintendent, system and school level leadership team, and governance councils to implement an accountability process that maintains a strong focus on our strategic plan goals. All school improvement plans are aligned to the system's strategic plan and progress is reviewed every forty-five days.
Notable Achievements and Areas of Improvement

Describe the school system's notable achievements and areas of improvement in the last three years. Additionally, describe areas for improvement that the school system is striving to achieve in the next three years.

AREAS OF NOTABLE ACHIEVEMENT

Elementary School Academic Successes Highlights

The system elementary school CRCT math scores increased from 7 grade levels across the district scoring below the state level in 2013 to 1 grade level scoring below the state level in 2014. Riverview Elementary had 5/15 content areas measured on the CRCT as 100% M/E on the first administration of the test. Significant percentage increases in other content areas included the following from FY13 to FY14:

- 29% increase in math from 3rd grade 2013 to 4th grade 2014
- 23.2% increase in 5th grade Social Studies from 2013 to 2014
- 27.5% increase in 5th grade Science from 2013 to 2014

Kilough Elementary School had 100% pass rate on 5th grade Reading CRCT in 2014. Riverview Elementary School had 100% pass rate on 4th grade Reading and Math and 5th grade reading, math and language arts CRCTs in 2014.

Middle School Academic Successes Highlights

The system middle school CRCT math scores increased from 2 grades across the district scoring below the state level in 2013 to all grades scoring at or above the state level in 2014.

The combined middle school scores in the area of Social Studies were ranked as follows in state scoring:

- 6th grade ranked 7th in the state
- 7th grade ranked 7th in the state
- 8th grade ranked 8th in the state

Both schools' academic content scores for each grade level were just a few percentage points apart. This is a result of continuous horizontal planning, common assessment, and data review.

The combined middle school CRCT scores ranked first in the RESA as follows:

- 7th grade MA (meets & exceeds: 95.7%)
- 8th grade ELA (exceeds: 61.3%)
- 6th grade SS (exceeds: 70.5%)

Dawson County Middle School had a 100% pass rate on 8th grade reading CRCT in 2014. The middle schools were ranked #1 in our RESA District for percentage of students meeting/exceeding CRCT in 8th grade language arts, 7th grade math, and 6th grade social studies in 2014.
High School Academic Successes Highlights

Dawson County High School ranked 6th in the state spring End of Course Test (EOCT) scores in the area of Biology. It ranked 7th in the state with spring EOCT scores in the area of Coordinate Algebra.

Dawson County High School ranked #1 in our RESA District in the percentage of students exceeding the Analytic Geometry EOCT.

Recently, the system received the results of Georgia's new state assessment, which is called Georgia Milestones Assessment. The assessment is designed to measure the proficiency of students mastery of state core content curricular standards in language arts, math, science and social studies. Dawson County's scores were better than the state average in all tested content areas and grades when looking at performance levels 2, 3, and 4. Overall, the system's areas of greatest concern are math at all levels and science at all levels and social studies at the elementary and high school levels. The system and its schools are busy analyzing this new baseline data and updating school improvement plans to focus on areas in need of improvement. Highlights from the assessments are as follows:

1st Place Ranking in system's RESA district (Performance Levels 2, 3, and 4)
- 6th grade social studies
- High School Analytic Geometry

2nd Place Ranking in system's RESA district
- 5th grade math
- 8th grade language arts
- 8th grade social studies

3rd Place Ranking in system's RESA district
- 5th grade language arts
- 8th grade math
- High School Biology

4th Place Ranking in system's RESA district
- 3rd grade social studies
- 7th grade social studies

Other System Academic Successes

The partnership between the University of North Georgia College of Education and the Dawson County School System has been a successful, mutually beneficial relationship for students, teachers, and the student interns from the university. With an average of ten interns per elementary, the partnership has brought together the research capabilities, expertise, and resources of the university, with the opportunities to interact with students, teachers, and administrators in a real school setting to enhance learning opportunities for our students, teachers, and future teachers. The partnership brings university professors into the school setting to instruct interns, establish learning labs (Science/Literacy and Reading/Classroom management), conduct professional development for system teachers, and share research findings with the system (inquiry learning, teacher coaching, integrated learning). Interns have university courses and labs in the school setting 2 days/week and they intern in various school settings 3 days/week during their junior year and fall semester of their senior year. Spring semester of the senior year, interns are full-time student teachers.
HighTower Academy (non-traditional) had 13 students graduate a full academic year early.

Twelve percent of the graduating class of 2014 were HighTower Academy students.

Professional learning in MAX Strategies (literacy strategies) initiated at the middle and high schools.

RvES & BMES utilized the services of a literacy coach to assist teachers with instructional strategies and providing feedback to students.

Cognitive Guided Instruction professional learning and implementation has been instrumental in increasing elementary math achievement scores.

An attendance initiative, such as Zoo-Zingo at RES has contributed to improved student attendance.

Literacy By Design and Math By Design initiatives have been initiated at the middle and high schools to prepare students for increased text complexity and transition to the new Georgia Milestones Assessment.

The Student Coaching program at KES empowers students to assume leadership roles. The school presently has over 50 trained student coaches. Training is provided through a summer academy.

Several classrooms in grades 3 - 12 are in experimental stages with using the Flipped Classroom, which is a form of blended learning where students learn content online or via videotaped lesson at home.

State Middle School Optimist Oratorical Speech Winner

5th Annual AP Honor Roll

138 students eligible for Hope Scholarship/13 Qualified for Zell Miller Scholarship

Awarded $175,000 in local scholarships to 95 students

AREAS IN NEED OF IMPROVEMENT

There were several challenges that became clear in the final stages of development of the strategic plan. The system student achievement data indicated that students at all grade levels perform well in the areas of reading and language arts. However, the data indicated that students at all grade levels were not performing at an equivalent level in the areas of math, science, and social studies. In addition, the system's most recent 2015 state assessment scores reveal the areas of greatest concern are math at all levels and science and social studies at the elementary level. Increasing student performance in these areas was recognized as an identified area of need for the entire school system. Finally, as part of the system and school self-assessments, indicator 3.7 (mentoring, coaching, and induction programs support instructional improvement consistent with the system's values and beliefs about teaching and learning) is also an area in need of improvement.

As an economically disadvantaged and rural school system, access to extended learning opportunities is often a limitation for students. The inadequate offering of extended learning opportunities quickly surfaced as a second challenge. The economic diversity within the school system should not place limitations on the support opportunities that are available to students.
The school system has been able to provide many varied professional learning activities to instructional personnel throughout all seven schools. It was discovered that although much of the professional learning was determined to be high quality, there is a lack of consistency in measuring the effectiveness of those activities. There is also an inconsistency with a common language and standards covered in the activities. The emphasis on fully evaluating the quality of professional learning activities and their impact on student achievement and/or professional growth was found to be ranging from not important to important across the school system. The Strategic Planning Committee determined this inconsistency to be a challenge for the school system.

The Dawson County Charter School System would be better able to serve the needs of all stakeholders when these areas in need of improvement are addressed. Doing so would indicate that students are performing at high levels in all academic content areas and students have access to the support or enrichment opportunities they may need. In addition, personnel will have access to differentiated, high-quality and effective professional learning opportunities across all schools in the system.
Additional Information

Provide any additional information you would like to share with the public and community that were not prompted in the previous sections.

Recently, the board of education approved the realignment of grades sixth through twelfth. Over the next two years, the system will transition from a traditional middle and high school model to a middle school that serves grades 6th-7th, a junior high school that serves 8th-9th grades, and a high school that serves 10th-12th grades. The realignment will allow the system to provide more academic opportunities to its students and balance available space in order to accommodate growth in within the county. Currently, the majority of available seats are located at the elementary and middle schools. With the realignment, available space will be balanced between elementary, middle, and high. The planning process for the realignment was an eighteen month long decision-making process, which involved all district stakeholders.