



## **AdvancED – Executive Summary**

**DESCRIPTION OF THE SCHOOL: Describe the school’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 serves? (6000 character limit)**

The Cherokee County School District, as Georgia’s ninth-largest school system, builds upon a foundation of blue-ribbon excellence by focusing on the mission of “Educating the Emerging Generation.”

Home to more than 236,000 residents and ranking seventh in population among Georgia counties, Cherokee attracts homeowners with its family friendly reputation and “Where Metro Meets the Mountains” location.

While the high quality of CCSD schools, proximity to Atlanta and north Georgia mountains and strong public safety top the list of attractive features, unique selling points include historical sites, natural beauty and opportunity for sports and recreation.

Founded in 1831, Cherokee retains many of its original communities and celebrates its rich history, including its Cherokee Indian heritage, role in the cotton, marble, poultry and railroad industries and birthplace of leaders such as U.S. Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Gov. Joseph E. Brown.

The Etowah River runs through Cherokee, which is home to Allatoona Lake... one of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers’ most popular properties, as well as two local reservoirs set in recreation areas, and expanding holdings of parks land, athletic facilities and greenspace.

A popular saying in Cherokee is “no matter your zip code, you’ll find outstanding public schools – just choose the lifestyle you want”: cosmopolitan downtown Woodstock, Towne Lake’s golf neighborhoods, Allatoona lakeside homes, equestrian communities to the east, Canton’s historic district, mountainside homes to the north... and many choices in between.

The county’s school system, ranging from grammar schools to rural one-room schoolhouses, was established in 1886, growing in 1956 with the merger of the Canton city system and in 1967 with

the addition of the African-American community's high school. Today, CCSD includes 41 schools and centers, as well as award-winning alternative high school and Cherokee Academies school choice programs.

During the 1990s-2000s housing boom, Cherokee consistently ranked among the fastest-growing counties in the Nation... and CCSD's student enrollment increased just as rapidly. While the Recession provided a respite, pre-existing "pipe farms" now are quickly transforming into new neighborhoods, and enrollment's rising along with it. The School District's enrollment has grown from 16,000 students in 1990 to 41,169 in 2016 – 157%, with a rate of 5% over the last three years (2,088 students).

The community's changing demographics are reflected in CCSD's enrollment, with 69% Caucasian, 18% Hispanic, 7% Black, 2% Asian/Pacific Islander and 4% two or more races. Cherokee County since 1990 has seen an influx of immigrants from Mexico and Central America to work in construction, poultry processing and agriculture, also reflected in CCSD's 6% of students from households where English is a second language (54 different languages are spoken in students' homes).

The percentage of students qualifying to receive free or reduced-price lunch, which hit a high of 1 in 3 during the Recession, has dipped to 30%; while the local economy is improving, many still struggle. Seven CCSD schools operate as Title I programs.

The School District is the community's largest employer, with 4,500 full-time employees and another 1,000 part-time and at-will employees. More than 75% of CCSD's certified employees hold advanced degrees; the average CCSD teacher has 14 years of experience and a master's degree.

Attracting and retaining high-quality teachers is a National challenge, but CCSD has positioned itself well through the development of a stellar reputation, competitive packages (fifth-highest average teacher salary in the State), Districtwide mindset of supporting and encouraging employees and consistent recruitment. The School District's annual teacher attrition rate is 7%, as compared to the State's 11%.

Despite significant State "austerity budget cuts" and declining Local property tax revenue already hindered by a residential-heavy tax base, CCSD has maintained financial stability and its focus on teaching and learning... 67.5% of the budget is dedicated to classroom instruction. While at the height of the Recession, CCSD used furlough days and increased class size to weather the storm, the School Board since has eliminated furloughs and steadily returned class size to nearly pre-Recession levels. The School Board recently reduced the millage rate to 19.45, and maintains reserves at 12-15% levels. The \$451.9 Million budget receives 52% of its funding from Local, 46% from State and 2% from Federal revenue.

In order to construct new and replacement schools to house skyrocketing enrollment and develop a Districtwide technology program, a blue ribbon committee of local leaders in 2000

recommended a system of Education SPLOST (Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax) and bonds to fund more than \$500 Million in capital costs in 15 years. The community agreed and has since renewed this plan three times, most recently in November with 73% approval... 78,796 voters said “yes,” more than the three previous renewals combined.

The past year has brought significant change and excitement to CCSD, with the appointment of the first new Superintendent of Schools in 18 years! Dr. Brian V. Hightower, who now has served CCSD for 30 years, took office on Feb. 1. Since taking office, he has led the update of more than 50 School Board policies, the implementation of the Strategic Waiver School System plan, the development of the Instructional Framework for teaching and assessment expectations, the redesign of numerous important facets of operations such as the Strategic Plan, School Improvement Plans, website, branding and mission statement and other significant initiatives.

Dr. Hightower’s vision for CCSD is continuous improvement, building on a foundation of success and blue-ribbon reputation and encouraging leadership districtwide to accomplish the mission of “Educating the Emerging Generation.”

**SCHOOL’S PURPOSE: Provide the school’s purpose statement and ancillary content such as mission, vision, values and/or beliefs. Describe how the school embodies its purpose through its program offerings and expectations for students. (6000 character limit)**

The Cherokee County School District’s full Mission Statement, which is annually reviewed by the School Board along with its Belief Statements and Major System Priorities, was revised this summer to state:

“We, the School Board of the Cherokee County School District, are committed to educating the emerging generation through learning environments designed to increase the performance of all students.”

The abbreviated mission mantra of “Educating the Emerging Generation,” since adoption this summer, has been embedded throughout the District... from the top of the website to the top of the minds of teachers, administrators and leaders in all that they do.

The Mission Statement is based on a set of Belief Statements, which are reviewed by the School Board during its annual leadership retreat and serve as standards for CCSD leadership planning:

1. All students deserve the opportunity to learn, achieve success and become productive citizens.
2. Education/learning is a shared responsibility and should take place in the home, at school and in the community.
3. All students can learn; but they learn in different ways, at different rates and with different preferential learning styles.
4. Learning is achieved through the use of a variety of effective teaching techniques.

5. A safe and secure environment is essential for teaching and learning.
6. All students should be taught by teachers and parents how to learn and how to become lifelong learners. All students deserve equal access to a quality education.
7. Quality education requires quality staff, programs, facilities, equipment and technology.
8. Parent and community participation, support and responsibility are essential to the positive social, emotional, cultural and academic development of every student.
9. Student achievement is enhanced through partnerships with parents, businesses, community-based organizations and agencies, local institutions of higher learning and other public entities.
10. All policy, administrative, instructional and educational support decisions should be based on student needs and what is best for students.
11. Diversity should be promoted so that isolation of racial, ethnic and socioeconomic groups is avoided and education is enhanced in a diverse, inclusive setting.
12. All schools should be accountable for improving student achievement.
13. All schools should reflect school-based, participatory management.
14. All students must be prepared to function effectively in a knowledge-based, technologically-rich and culturally-diverse 21st century.
15. All staff should have access to results-driven professional development and training which is aligned with the School Board's Major System Priorities and School Improvement Plans. Such professional development and training must be standards-based, job-imbedded, collaborative and build an organizational culture that insures continuous improvement.

The Belief Statements inform the Major System Priorities, which are reviewed by the School Board during its annual leadership retreat and guide the annual update of CCSD's Five-Year Strategic Plan:

1. Establishing internationally competitive standards for student performance and an accountability system and policy framework designed to insure that all students are challenged individually and collectively to meet more rigorous standards.
2. In collaboration with technical colleges, other institutions of higher learning and the local business community, insuring that vocational/technical education programs prepare students for a diverse and technologically rich society.
3. Insuring that all students and staff have a safe and secure environment for teaching and learning.
4. Attracting, retaining, and training the best teachers, principals, and support staff.
5. Utilizing technology both to improve student achievement and to increase the school district's productivity and efficiency as a major business enterprise.
6. Increasing parental and community involvement through public engagement policies and practices that treat parents, businesses, community-based organizations and agencies, local institutions of higher learning and other public entities as true partners in the educational process.

7. Addressing exploding student population growth, recognizing that there is a large gap between the school district's facilities and technology needs and available capital outlay revenue.

These statements – Mission Statement, Belief Statements and Major System Priorities – are showcased in CCSD's websites, publications and communications, and the messages are consistently delivered to leaders, administrators, teachers, students, parents, volunteers, partners and the community at large.

These statements guide all aspects of School District operations, decision-making processes and strategic planning, with expectations in that regard communicated in united messages by the School Board and the Superintendent, not only through publications, written communications and meeting addresses, but also through the annual CCSD Leadership Symposium retreat and workshop.

Adherence to these statements is evidenced in the Annual Report of District Progress, which assesses performance based on the Strategic Plan and Major System Priorities, and School Improvement Plans, which additionally are informed by "gap analyses" of and site visits to demographically like schools in CCSD and surrounding communities and School Council input; student academic performance on State and National assessments; teacher and leader performance on TKES and LKES assessments; parent survey responses and communication; and volunteer and partner engagement and involvement.

**NOTABLE ACHIEVEMENTS AND AREAS OF IMPROVEMENT: Describe the school's notable achievements and areas of improvement in the last three years. Additionally, describe areas for improvement that the school is striving to achieve in the next three years. (6000 character limit)**

The Cherokee County School District is recognized nationally for its leadership in developing model standards and academic school choice initiatives, effective use of instructional and business technology, successful community engagement and collaborative strategic planning. These elements all contribute to students' exceptional performance on National exams, schools' presence on National ranking lists and District, school, student and staff achievement of top honors.

While each school's two 3-year School Improvement Plan goals must be measurable, align with CCSD's Strategic Plan and be adopted by the School Board, the process is community driven... goals vary by school, such as one school's focus on increasing early childhood literacy versus another's targeted graduation rate goal. At the District level, top goals for the next three years include fully implementing Instructional Framework standards for teaching and assessment, maximizing Strategic Waiver School System flexibility for optimizing resources, furthering business technology use to improve operations, and attracting and retaining the best workforce.

A leader in developing standards, CCSD created local standards for student knowledge mastery, which served as a blueprint for the State and continue to inform instruction; and developed a career education program, including a capstone Senior Project, which influenced the State's Career Pathways initiative. For its innovations in academic school choice, CCSD has twice won National recognition from the American School Board Journal's MAGNA Award Program recognizing outstanding programs that advance learning... most recently in 2015 for its Cherokee Academies.

The Cherokee Academies initiative, launched in 2012-13, creates school-wide specialized programs at 6 elementary schools – four STEM Academies and two integrated Fine Arts Academies -- with open districtwide enrollment and transportation. Academies not only provide additional resources to these Title I schools, but also incubate new instructional methods, resources and equipment for subsequent sharing as “best practices” districtwide.

Canton Elementary School STEM Academy in November 2016 was named the State's top elementary school for STEM education by the Technology Association of Georgia (TAG)... a significant achievement for a traditional elementary school – even more so for a Title I school. Additionally, Clark Creek Elementary School STEM Academy – one of only a dozen State-certified STEM elementary schools -- was named a State finalist for a TAG top honor. The School District also now is in the midst of a U.S. Department of Education-funded \$1.9 Million competitive grant project to study integrated arts model outcomes.

The School District in March for the 11th time was named one of the top 10 large school systems nationwide by the Center for Digital Education and the National School Boards Association for its effective use of technology in education. This recognizes CCSD's successful use of technology including integration of mobile devices and technology into curriculum such as Bring Your Learning Device, iPad labs and 3D technology; the Open CCSD online public information warehouse; Microsoft Innovation Educator certification of teachers, classrooms and schools and Apple Vanguard certification; and operational efficiency and communications technology such substitute teacher scheduling, application and payroll management systems and an emergency notification system for parents.

Efficiency in all arenas is an area of continuous improvement for CCSD, as evidenced by being one of only 14 districts in the Nation to win the 2015 U.S. Department of Education Green Ribbon School District Sustainability Award for exemplary efforts to reduce environmental impact and utility costs, promote better health, and ensure effective environmental education.

The School District consistently achieves success in parent and community engagement initiatives, and one measure is 100% school participation in PTA and the election of numerous CCSD parents to State and National roles including the current Georgia PTA President. The School District also is home to the 2015-17 National PTA School of Excellence: Hickory Flat Elementary School.

The result of this effort to work efficiently and collaboratively shows in the academic success of students and teachers throughout the District:

CCSD's Class of 2016 average SAT Score increased to 1577, No. 1 in metro Atlanta and 3rd in Georgia, exceeding the National average by 93 points;

CCSD's Class of 2016 average ACT score increased to 23.1, ranking in Georgia's top 5 and exceeding the National average of 20.8. Seven CCSD seniors are 2017 National Merit Scholarship semi-finalists;

CCSD for the 5th consecutive year exceeded the State's average under the College and Career Ready Performance Index system... and increased its average score by more than 3 points;

CCSD is one of only 6 Georgia school systems on The College Board's 2015 Sixth Annual AP District Honor Roll... CCSD's 3rd consecutive year earning the distinction;

CCSD's Class of 2015 exceeded National and State averages on rigorous Advanced Placement (AP) exams and earned Georgia's 3rd-highest passage rate;

CCSD's high schools all made The Washington Post's "America's Most Challenging High Schools" list, 2 were named to U.S. News and World Report's "Best High Schools in America" list and all are Georgia AP STEM or AP STEM Achievement Schools;

Twenty-seven CCSD schools (up from 24) made the Governor's 2016 SHAPE (Student Health and Physical Education) Honor Roll, reflecting their commitment to fitness and nutrition... CCSD claimed 12% of Georgia's honorees; and,

CCSD's leaders include Georgia's 2016 Distinguished Principal, Middle School Principal of the Year, National Distinguished Assistant Principal and School Bell Award Principal; two 2016 Character.org Promising Practices Award-winning Principals; and Georgia's 2014 High School Principal of the Year!

**ADDITIONAL INFORMATION: Provide any additional information you would like to share with the public and community that was not prompted in the previous sections. (6000 Character Limit)**

The 2011 AdvancED Quality Assurance Review Team recommended CCSD for District Re-Accreditation as a Quality School System, with two required actions:

- As part of the District annual review and update of the Five Year Strategic Plan: Clearly define timelines; Identify means for monitoring progress; and Identify metrics for evaluating effectiveness.

- As part of the annual review and update of the Five Year Strategic Plan, include a professional development plan in 5-year strategic plan that aligns with: System priorities; Strategic planning; and School Improvement planning.

The Team also issued Standards Ratings of Highly Functional for Vision and Purpose; Governance and Leadership; Teaching and Learning and Commitment to Continuous Improvement; and Operational for Documenting and Using Results; Resources and Support Systems; and Stakeholder Communication and Relationships.

Following this review, CCSD implemented strategies to specifically address the required actions and areas not rated Highly Functional.

In regard to CCSD's Five-Year Strategic Plan, an annual review process began involving District-level leaders, but also employees from all levels, community leaders and parents. This review culminated in an updated plan presented for public review prior to School Board adoption.

A major overhaul of the Strategic Plan was initiated this summer, with a goal of aligning CCSD goals with AdvancED's Standards for Quality School Systems. This process began with close examination by District-level leaders of every domain, action step and metric in the existing plan. Every element was reviewed to determine relevance, and all retained content was reorganized by AdvancED standards.

All of this work led to a more useful document for all levels of CCSD leadership and one that can be easily understood by the community at large. An important part of the process was conducting presentations at School Council Meetings throughout CCSD, and taking that feedback from staff, parents and partners into account during the revision process.

A similar process was undertaken at the school level through the Strategic Plan-aligned revision of School Improvement Plan, with an end goal of focusing on two, 3-year measurable goals supported by staff, parents and partners.

Three significant actions in the past year addressed improving documentation and using results: shifting Assessment staff to the Division of Educational Programs, a logical move joining instruction and assessment; conducting a "gap analysis" comparing CCSD schools to demographically like schools within CCSD and neighboring counties to identify "best practices" for adoption; and approving the Instructional Framework: expectations guiding how teachers design instruction and assess student learning. This strong focus on documentation and use of results also is clearly evident in CCSD's recently established Strategic Waiver School System plan, which outlines specific achievement benchmarks and timelines.

The value of professional development has been heightened in response to the Team's review, with a greater focus on ensuring training aligns with CCSD's Strategic Plan and School Improvement Plans and the mindset that opportunities for continuous self-improvement should be afforded to all employees.

The newly appointed Superintendent made “growing leaders” an important theme for his first year, and carried out this belief through actions.

These actions included development of a Superintendent’s Leadership Symposium featuring a National leadership speaker and District leadership presentations; quarterly leadership meetings offering District staff the opportunity to present to peers and colleagues; and monthly Cardinal Directions newsletters sharing his recent leadership readings.

The Superintendent also directed improvements to existing programs, such as the Superintendent’s Leadership Academy administrator development workshops, Camp Cherokee new teacher orientation and a major expansion of instructional technology professional development. The District achieved a National reputation for its successful Microsoft Innovative Educators (MIE) and Experts and certified classrooms and schools training... claiming the world’s first certified elementary and middle schools, as well as its development of a CCSD Apple Vanguard elite program. This support has extended to the Superintendent personally, who completed MIE training along with his senior staff and support staff.

Stakeholder communications and relationships have dramatically improved in last five years, and Dr. Hightower views this as one of his most important roles as CEO.

The District has significantly enhanced use of electronic communications – through a new website designed in-house focused on parents’ needs, 15,000+ Facebook followers, 11,000+ Twitter followers and increased internal and external e-newsletters; and the adoption of a Districtwide emergency parent notification system (text, email and phone).

The District’s extensive communications publications now consistently win top honors from the Georgia School Public Relations Association, with CCSD claiming four “best in the state” titles in the past four years.

The District strongly supports community engagement through PTA, with 100% school participation and Superintendent support including meeting attendance and State conference presentations on collaboration; School Councils, with new opportunities for input, leadership and CCSD committee service; and recently established annual Partner of the Year and Volunteer of the Year Awards, recognizing outstanding partners and volunteers at the school and district level.

As woven throughout this document -- and CCSD’s operations -- the Superintendent and School Board believe continuous improvement only is achieved through openness to self- and external assessment and willingness to change in response to best serve students... and fulfill CCSD’s mission of “Educating the Emerging Generation.”