



# Race to the Top - District

## Technical Review Form

Application #0022NC-1 for Gaston County Schools

### A. Vision (40 total points)

	Available	Score
<b>(A)(1) Articulating a comprehensive and coherent reform vision (10 points)</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>

**(A)(1) Reviewer Comments:**

The Gaston County Schools (GCS) articulated a comprehensive and coherent reform vision shared through the description of achievement modeled by the current magnet school of technology over the past four years that implemented blended learning options resulting in the achievement of a graduation rate averaging over 95%.

GCS reform vision extends and builds on the following four core educational assurance areas.

- Common Core Standards for Mathematics and English/Language Arts – outlining standards and assessments preparing students for college- and career- readiness
- HomeBase data system – used for instructional improvement, record, track and monitor student progress
- North Carolina Educator Evaluation System for teachers and principals – used to evaluate and support the recruitment, development, growth, rewarding, and retention of highly effective teachers and principals
- Frameworks For Action, turnaround process for low achieving schools, - model will be used to identify areas of need and implement alternative programs and opportunities

The Gaston County Schools have boldly set district-wide goals for improving student outcomes:

- increase graduation rates;
- offer alternative options for learning and successfully earning a diploma;
- opportunity to apply for early graduation;
- access to online learning platform;
- address specific individual needs for achievement and in-depth learning opportunities.

These goals of accelerating student achievement, deepening student learning, increasing equity will be addressed by offering a choice of learning venues and approach:

- learning program [100% online vs. blended learning];
- location [central program facility vs. remote personal location];
- experience [elective interest vs. traditional secondary progression].

The Gaston Online Academic Learning (G.O.A.L.) reform vision is to develop blended learning options for participating secondary schools grades 6-12 to address students' diverse learning styles, integrate technology with instruction, flexible learning periods, and self-paced individualized learning.

The G.O.A.L. program clearly describes the classroom experience for students and teachers as they participate in personalized learning environments. The individual learning options and possible scenarios of choices a student will have is based on the individual educational needs as well as taking in consideration a student's physical and well being.

All students will be supported by a team of educators and will have access to a technology device and wireless Internet services.

Overall, Gaston County Schools has articulated a comprehensive and coherent reform vision building on and expanding the current magnet model through the offering of the Online Academic Learning and Choices for Success in order to ensure all middle and high school students are prepared, experience success and graduate college- and career- ready.

The GCS reform vision clearly extends and builds on the Common Core Standards and assessments; the use of a current data system measuring student growth, success, informing how to improve instruction; State educator evaluation systems to evaluate, support recruitment, development, growth, rewarding, retention of highly effective teachers and principals; and a model used to implement the turnaround process for low achieving schools.

Therefore, Gaston County Schools scored in the highest of the high range.

**(A)(2) Applicant's approach to implementation (10 points)**

**10**

**8**

**(A)(2) Reviewer Comments:**

The Gaston County Schools proposed plans to implement bold reforms district wide at the secondary level and will be aligned with the NC Career and College Ready initiative, Common Core and Essential Standards. The Gaston Online Academic Learning (G.O.A.L.) reform will be implemented at the middle and high school levels to ensure students are college- and career- ready.

GCS provided a detailed description of the process used to select schools to participate and a copy of the 2012-13 At-Risk Spreadsheet to demonstrate the evidence of the process.

The At-Risk Spreadsheet was designed to identify and rank the district schools according to the greatest needs based on specific, acknowledged, and prescribed risk factors. The identified risk factors for each school included: economically disadvantaged, minority, mobility, performance composite, average growth, percentage and number of goals met on AMO, attendance rate, students living with one parent/guardian.

GCS determined, according to the ranking of the At-Risk Spreadsheet, that 20 schools would participate in the G.O.A.L. program model, which is designed to positively impact student achievement and increase the percentage of students who graduate prepared for college and careers.

GCS identified and listed the 11 middle schools and 9 high schools by name that will participate in the proposed grant activities.

The GCS proposal provided detail statics for the 20 participating GCS middle and high schools:

- 16,217 enrolled students;
- 57.59% are from low-income families;
- 51.42% are high needs and at-risk not being academically prepared;
- 1,465 educators.

The GCS proposal provide an explanation of those schools yet to be selected include the remaining 3 high schools of which serve specialized populations and were not considered for participation due to their unique implementation models.

Overall, the GCS approach to implementing the proposed G.O.A.L. reform model is a well-executed and quality plan building on a precisely calculated formula for the selection process of participating student population.

The GCS created and utilized the At-Risk Spreadsheet for the process of identifying student needs and ranking schools for the selection of participation in the project. However, all of the middle schools and nine of the eleven high schools are identified in the proposal to participate.

The At-Risk Spreadsheet used the data of nine risk factors then ranked the schools assigning each a ranking from 1 to 10.

It is unclear how GCS justifies the criteria utilized to determine the high-need schools if all of the middle schools and nine of the high schools are selected to participate in the project rather than utilizing the At-Risk Spreadsheet process to determine the selection of participating schools based on the greatest needs according to specific, acknowledge, and prescribed risk factors.

Therefore, Gaston County Schools scored in the low of the high range.

**(A)(3) LEA-wide reform & change (10 points)**

**10**

**5**

**(A)(3) Reviewer Comments:**

Gaston County Schools G.O.A.L. program model boldly proposes a reform for the secondary level by using a currently implemented state and district model to execute reform and change within 20 of the 23 middle and high schools in the district.

The vision is to provide learning options for all students to ensure success. The establishment of G.O.A.L. provides the opportunities of full time online learning and extended blended learning to assist students in being college- and career-ready in the learning environment that fits the individual's learning style, schedule and personal needs.

Overall, the Gaston County Schools (GCS) proposal provides evidence describing how the proposal will be a meaningful reform supporting changes for all middle and high school students.

GCS has defined eight goals for improved student outcomes that support Project 1: GCS Online Learning Academy and Project 2: Choices for Success/Blended Learning; alignment to the eight quantifiable outcomes; supporting the ten integrated strategies that expand successful practices from middle school to high school; and a implementation phase chart.

GCS provided the data and goals for the current graduation rate of 81.2%, the 5-year goal of increasing to 90.6%, and a detailed explanation of the roles and responsibilities of personnel/stakeholders.

However, it is unclear from the information as to how and if GCS plans to scale up the proposed program to include the remaining excluded high schools students in order to demonstrate a meaningful reform as required and defined in the notice to support a district-wide change beyond the 20 participating schools.

Therefore, Gaston County Schools scored in the middle of the medium range.

**(A)(4) LEA-wide goals for improved student outcomes (10 points)**

**10**

**6**

**(A)(4) Reviewer Comments:**

Gaston County Schools provided charts of performance on summative assessments both Proficiency and Growth and Decreasing Achievement Gaps including NC End of Grade Reading Comprehension Test; NC End of Grade Mathematics Comprehension Test; NC End of Course Test, Algebra I; NC End of Course Test, English; NC End of Course Test, Biology; Graduation Rates; and College Enrollment. The baseline data and goals are presented for middle school students [grades 6-8]; high school students [grades 9-12]; and postsecondary including the subgroups of students – Overall; Black; Hispanic; Two or More; White; ED; LEP; SWD; Female; and Male.

Overall, the Gaston County Schools (GCS) proposed an increase of student learning targets based on the Baseline SY 2011-12 student data. The proposal presents bold and aggressive goals for growth with the student subgroups of ED, LEP and SWD.

However, it is unclear from the presented student data if the proposed goals are equal to or exceed the State ESEA targets for Gaston County Schools. Without the State ESEA targets supporting documentation as required and defined in the notice, it is too obscure to determine if the presented goals for improved student outcomes are achievable and/or

ambitious.

Therefore, Gaston County Schools scored in the middle of the medium range.

**B. Prior Record of Success and Conditions for Reform (45 total points)**

	Available	Score
<b>(B)(1) Demonstrating a clear track record of success (15 points)</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>11</b>

**(B)(1) Reviewer Comments:**

Gaston County Schools (GCS) provided an explanation and charts to demonstrate the evidence of track records for student and teacher success throughout the district including graduation rates, turnaround school, safety, non-traditional high school, alternative school, Robotics Competition Programs, scholarship money, and teacher recognition.

GCS provided the following student data:

- Charts and description of summary for the district and each high school four-year cohort graduation including the numbers, percentages, and subgroups [All Students; Male; Female; American Indian; Asian; Black; Hispanic; Two or More Races; White; ED; LEP; SWD; and Academically Gifted].
- Charts and description of elementary school success of turnaround school focused on providing professional learning for teachers and implementing a model focused on the development of the whole child.
- Charts and description of evidence of success in School Crime, Violence, Dropout Rate Report by placing emphasis on early intervention, home visits to students identified as at-risk of dropping out, collaboration with parents, individual attention for students
- Charts and description of partnership of non-traditional high school and community college – in 5-year period students can earn a high school diploma and an associate degree; targeting students at risk of dropping out and students in an accelerated program of study
- Charts and description of alternative HS- high-risk students graduate with a differentiated diploma and opportunities to advance to post-secondary education
- Description of increased participation and expansion of Robotics Competition Program – S.T.E.M learning experiences in a teamwork setting [8 students] and hands-on learning experiences; increase from 2 to 44 school teams in CyberDroid Robotics, Lego Robotics, FTC Robotics
- Description of excelling students and committed educators resulting in the Class of 2013 earning 1,377 scholarships from 168 colleges and awarded \$49 million in scholarship funds
- Description of past 3 years a GCS teacher earned Regional Teacher of the Year as top teacher overall throughout nine school districts

Overall, the Gaston County Schools (GCS) proposal provided the supporting data and description to demonstrate evidence of increased student learning and achievements by the success of a turnaround school; increase HS success and graduation in alternative and non-tradition settings; increase interest and participation in STEM; earned scholarship awards; and excellent teacher recognition.

Even though the alternative school enrollment is only 31 [6<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup>]; the non-traditional school enrollment is only 23 [9<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup>]; and the turnaround school was elementary level the Gaston County Schools (GCS) proposed plan is to emulate these models throughout the MS and HS setting in order to support the plan of ensuring every student experiences success.

However, it is unclear from the provided data in charts as to the evidence demonstrating a clear record of success in the past four years as required and defined in the notice. GCS lacked the required data for the 4-year cohort graduation rates,

incidents of crime, suspensions and expulsions.

Therefore, Gaston County Schools scored in the high of the medium range.

**(B)(2) Increasing transparency in LEA processes, practices, and investments (5 points)**

**5**

**5**

**(B)(2) Reviewer Comments:**

Gaston County Schools G.O.A.L. program describes the availability upon a public information request and the use of a local websites to share current school information with the public including all personnel salary information, non-personnel expenditure, financial data, annual reports, and monthly report of budget and expenditures.

Screen shots were provided of the following items: administration salaries obtainable from the local media website and the financial reports obtainable from the GCS website.

Overall, the Gaston County Schools (GCS) demonstrated a high level of transparency in LEA processes, practices, and investments by the availability on local websites and upon a public information request.

Therefore, Gaston County Schools scored in the highest of the high range.

**(B)(3) State context for implementation (10 points)**

**10**

**10**

**(B)(3) Reviewer Comments:**

Gaston County Schools G.O.A.L. program provides a description of the various endeavors to implement personalized learning environments.

GCS has implemented the state adopted Common Core and Essential Standards to align teaching and learning with career and college readiness. Through the use of NC Race to the Top funds over the past three years the district team leaders have deployed professional development for all educators on the standards and instructional practices to fit the needs of students as well as Career and Technology Programs for secondary levels.

The provided description and charts demonstrates evidence of successful implemented initiatives and plans to support the proposed G.O.A.L. program to implement personalized learning environments.

- District training on the understanding and use of online learning tools and technology
- All MS and HS campuses are wireless learning environments
- Assessment data systems to enhance instructional and program decisions for students
- Evaluation tools to provide educators access to evaluation, growth and development plans
- On-going professional development: K-8 balanced literacy and 6-12 integration of STEM – rigorous science and math courses

Overall, the Gaston County Schools (GCS) proposal provides evidence of the plans and the implementation of quality personalized learning environments through the use of LEA and grant funds – state RTTD and School Improvement. GCS demonstrates having sufficient autonomy under State legal, statutory, and regulatory requirements to implement personalized learning environments.

Therefore, Gaston County Schools scored in the highest of the high range.

<b>(B)(4) Stakeholder engagement and support (15 points)</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>(B)(4) Reviewer Comments:</b>		
<p>Gaston County Schools G.O.A.L. program provided a description of the stakeholder engagement during the development process, feedback to the proposed elements and letters of support.</p> <p>GCS engaged the leaders of district level office department to assess needs and develop the plan. School principals reviewed and refined the plan prior to the solicitation of feedback from the community stakeholders – students, teachers, parents, board of education, community leaders and community partners.</p> <p>Evidence of the actual letters of support were received from the following stakeholders – local educators association, local college, chief of police, United Way, and Boys and Girls Club.</p> <p>Overall, the Gaston County Schools (GCS) proposal provides evidence of stakeholder engagement in the development of the proposed plan and stakeholder support.</p>		
<p>However, it is unclear from the presented descriptions and lack of evidence as to the actual level of support and engagement beyond single opportunities to provide feedback that the students, teachers, parents, board of education, community mayors have for the G.O.A.L. program plans.</p> <p>It is unclear if the G.O.A.L. program leaders received feedback and if so how it was utilized to develop the plan.</p> <p>It is unclear beyond a letter of support from the president of the local teacher union and a single work session as to the level of input, engagement, support the teachers of GCS have for the proposed G.O.A.L. program.</p> <p>A large portion of the possible success for the proposed G.O.A.L. program lies within the support, belief, desire, determination of stakeholders particularly the students, parents, teachers, community leaders. The Gaston County Schools (GCS) proposal lacks the demonstrated evidence of meaningful engagement and support from key stakeholders as required and defined in the notice.</p>		
<p>Therefore, Gaston County Schools scored in the low of the medium range.</p>		

**C. Preparing Students for College and Careers (40 total points)**

	Available	Score
<b>(C)(1) Learning (20 points)</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>(C)(1) Reviewer Comments:</b>		
<p>Gaston County Schools provided an explanation of the proposed G.O.A.L. plan aimed at providing middle and high school students the opportunity to accomplish their learning goals by having access to self-paced online learning modules, on-demand digital learning, blended learning and/or traditional classroom environment. Plans for the implementation of G.O.A.L. were outlined in tables describing the three phases of activities, timeline and responsible personnel.</p> <p>Overall, the G.O.A.L. proposal described the intentional design of a plan for improving learning and teaching by personalizing the learning environment utilizing non-cognitive and cognitive theories that will empower middle and high students to assume ownership of their learning path to education.</p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· High expectations – education teams will provide individual students with intentionally designed interventions and support while the students master the content knowledge.</li> <li>· Self-determination/student voice – creation of student-centered learning environments according to their interests, learning process, perceived needs in preparation for real-world experience and post-graduation college and career choices.</li> </ul>		

- Self-regulation - equip students with confidence and skill sets to persevere through adversities and address identified needs through scaffolding interventions.

The GCS presented the G.O.A.L. plan demonstrating an intentional designed plan aimed to prepare middle and high school students for the successful path in a college- and career- ready graduation process yet there are areas in the overall plan that are ambiguous in providing the necessary supportive evidence to demonstrate the components of a high-quality plan as required and defined in the notice.

The plan explains that each middle and high school site will conduct a needs assessment to determine which learning environment is best for the school and for the needs of students. Yet, it is unclear of the plans intent for each school site as to whether there will be one type of learning environment offered or multiple options of learning environments for students to select.

It is unclear in the proposed plan actually how the parents will be informed, involved and engaged as well as the expected role of support the parents will provide in their student's choice of educational learning environment.

It is unclear how the plan will ensure the delivery of high quality content and resources to each and every student within each of the proposed learning environments options.

It is unclear how the GCS online learning plan will ensure students have access and exposure to diverse cultures, contexts, and perspectives that motive and deepen learning.

It is unclear of a comprehensive plan for the utilization of formative assessments to track student growth and guide the classroom instruction.

Therefore, Gaston County Schools scored in the middle of the medium range.

**(C)(2) Teaching and Leading (20 points)**

**20**

**9**

**(C)(2) Reviewer Comments:**

Gaston County Schools has outlined a vigorous plan to provide training, professional communities and support mechanisms for teachers and school leaders as the G.O.A.L. program expands opportunities in the schools for the implementation of personalized learning environments engaging and supporting students' journey to be college- and career- ready upon graduation.

GCS presented the following components to support all participating middle and high school students:

- SmartBoard technology and wireless access infrastructure;
- digital learning platform - manage and track student learning in real-time;
- teachers transitioning to the role of "facilitator of learning" – trained to monitor "student progress and communication";
- students training - initial procedures for online learning;
- support community – secondary curriculum facilitators, online curriculum facilitators, blended learning coaches, online teachers, program counselors;
- professional learning communities and professional development for teachers.

Overall, the G.O.A.L. proposal described a preliminary plan for the improving learning and teaching by personalizing the learning environment supporting all middle and high school students to graduate college- and career- ready.

The proposed plan will expand opportunities for student access to online learning courses and web-based learning environments. The proposed plan will expand opportunities for teacher training for online learning and instructional platforms, monitoring student success, and student engagement. The proposed plan will expand and upgrade current facilities and infrastructure as well as manage teacher and student online learning programs.

The GCS presented a plan of team community support systems to empower the teachers, provide training through support

mechanisms, use of the state teacher evaluation tool based on six standards, monitoring student progress through various data tools, and the alignment of content state standards with digital learning media, web-based learning environments and blended instructional methods.

However, there are areas in the overall plan for the improving learning and teaching by personalizing the learning environment that are ambiguous in providing the necessary supportive evidence to demonstrate the components of a high-quality plan as required and defined in the notice.

The GCS plan is composed of proposed plans to expand and improve the online learning platforms modeled in the current district middle and high schools. Yet the proposal is stated in general terms outlining the plans of action and lacking the specifics details of the activities to be undertaken along with the rationale for the activities in order to provide the supportive evidence of the actual expansion and improvement on the outcomes of the current models in place.

The GCS proposal lacks the supportive evidence to demonstrate a reasonable and coherent plan for the use the current PLC to deliver new professional development on high-quality digital learning resources for the proposed personalized learning environments.

It is unclear how GCS will ensure that educators understand the process and the use of data to measure and accelerate student progress.

It is unclear of the specific structured plan to train and support teachers in the use of the technology, high-quality digital learning resources and the multiple digital learning platforms.

It is unclear of the specific structured plan to train and support students as they participate in the personalized learning environments striving to increase performance and achieve academic goals.

It is unclear from the provided information as to how the GCS proposal demonstrates with the supportive evidence of specifics on how the proposed high-quality digital learning resources are aligned with college- and career-ready standards and the proposed coursework in the multiple digital learning platforms.

It is not clear from the presented GCS plan as to data demonstrating supportive evidence that students are being instructed and supported by highly effective teachers and principals.

It is unclear of the GCS plan to recruit, reward, and retain highly effective teachers and principals.

Therefore, Gaston County Schools scored in the middle of the medium range.

#### D. LEA Policy and Infrastructure (25 total points)

	Available	Score
<b>(D)(1) LEA practices, policies, and rules (15 points)</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>9</b>

**(D)(1) Reviewer Comments:**

Gaston County Schools provided a detailed description of district practices, policies and rules related to the proposed establishment of the G.O.A.L. (Gaston Online Academy Learning).

The proposed plan is for the Gaston County Schools Board of Education (BOE) policies regarding online learning to be developed in accordance and equivalent with the State BOE policies. These will include policies to govern enrollment and management of e-learning environments to ensure student success.

The GCS plan will provide the school leadership team with sufficient flexibility and autonomy to allow students to participate in the online learning environment based on the individual's needs. Each student will have a customized schedule, flexible calendar and instructional support to ensure student success in the G.O.A.L. personalized learning model.

Both the state and district BOE policies now provides students the opportunity to progress by allowing the flexibility of attaining course credit through online learning, requires rigorous instruction, valid and reliable assessments, and demonstrating mastery of standards through authentic assessment methods.

The G.O.A.L. model will provide students with adaptable resources and instructional practices for students to attain high school credit in a non-traditional setting.

Overall, the G.O.A.L. proposal described a plan to develop policies, practices, and rules that will facilitate personal learning opportunities supporting student success by demonstrating progress through mastery and the provision of learning tools, resources, and instruction.

However, the GCS proposal states that the implementation of the G.O.A.L. personalized learning model will provide learning opportunities for students "...in the ten existing traditional high schools..." It is unclear if the G.O.A.L. proposal to obtain course credit through online learning opportunities is only for GCS high school students or will include GCS middle school students as stated in other sections of the proposed plan.

It is unclear if the G.O.A.L. proposed plan would provide learning resources and instructional practices that are adoptable and fully accessible to those identified as students with disabilities and those identified as English learners.

Therefore, Gaston County Schools scored in the middle of the medium range.

**(D)(2) LEA and school infrastructure (10 points)**

**10**

**5**

**(D)(2) Reviewer Comments:**

Gaston County Schools provided an explanation of the proposed G.O.A.L. plan ensuring the district infrastructure would support personalized learning through the 1:1 blended learning environment.

Plans are to update existing infrastructure and devices with Windows 7; implement a fully accessible guest network; install additional wireless access points at each MS and HS building; purchase of a CIPA compliant WiFi solution to accommodate for those outside the district; purchase additional cloud access and database interoperability with the state system; a robust Learning Management System (LMS); and purchase a personal learning device for each participating student and teacher.

The improvement plan for the district infrastructure involves additional human resources including student technicians; professional support staff; web portal providing help desk support, self guided tutorials, blended course shells; and an LMS administrator.

Overall, the Gaston County Schools have developed a strong infrastructure supporting personalized learning and plans to incorporate additional infrastructure improvements according to the identified needs.

However, the GCS proposed plan of developing and making additional infrastructure improvements is unclear how the G.O.A.L. program will implement the use of interoperable data systems ensuring the security and integrity of human resources data, student information data, budget data, and instructional improvement system data.

It is unclear how the GCS plan will allow parents and students to export information in an open data format in order to use in other learning systems.

The GCS plan states that the BYOD – Bring Your Own Device is an essential tool throughout the initiative. It is unclear how the plan assure all participating students regardless of income, has access to the necessary tools and learning resources both in and out of school in order to support the personalized learning.

Therefore, Gaston County Schools scored in the middle of the medium range.

**E. Continuous Improvement (30 total points)**

	<b>Available</b>	<b>Score</b>
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<b>(E)(1) Continuous improvement process (15 points)</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>15</b>
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**(E)(1) Reviewer Comments:**

Gaston County Schools has provided a high-quality plan for implementing a rigorous continuous improvement process that provides timely and regular feedback on the progress toward meeting the project goals and opportunities for ongoing corrections and improvements during the four years of the grant and after the term of the grant.

The Project Director will take the lead role in working directly with the Design Team meeting on a regular base to assess, create plans, monitor for effectiveness, and evaluate projects to address and improve outcomes then will communicate directly to the deputy superintendent of instruction.

The Logic Model, as presented in (A)(3), is a strategic outlay of:

- inputs (investments of personnel, professional development, data system, infrastructure, materials)
- outputs (activities, who we reach)
- short term (during grant timeline)
- long term (scaling up across district)

The GCS plan has methodically presented a Goal Based Strategy Plan identifying 9 goals supported by strategies, person(s) responsible for implementation and reporting data, benchmark dates, required resources, and monitoring methods.

Overall, the G.O.A.L. program has developed a well thought out plan supported by comprehensive strategies to ensure continuous improvement with sufficient strategies to assess, plan, monitor, evaluate and improve the outcomes. The Design Team at the district and school level will lead the G.O.A.L. team in the implementation of the rigorous continuous improvement process.

Therefore, Gaston County Schools scored in the high of the highest range.

<b>(E)(2) Ongoing communication and engagement (5 points)</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>
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**(E)(2) Reviewer Comments:**

Gaston County Schools provided a strong plan for ongoing communication and engagement with internal and external stakeholders of the G.O.A.L. plan to provide personalized learning options.

The implementation phase of G.O.A.L. will utilize a variety of resources to communicate with the external stakeholders (formal website, local newspaper, news channels, district website, Connect Ed, school-site community meetings, and kick-off celebration).

Internal stakeholders will participate in consistent communication and engagement through one-on-one conversations, PLC (professional learning communities), department/online meetings, formal website, and email. Formal and informal feedback will be solicited through focus groups, design team meetings, online surveys, formal website, and social media groups.

Overall, the internal and external stakeholder groups are addressed in the plan and the use of a variety of methods will provide means for ongoing communication and engagement.

However, it is not clear as to which of the stakeholders will be targeted to solicit formal and informal feedback through the focus groups, complete the online surveys, on the website, and across social media groups.

Therefore, Gaston County Schools scored in the low of the high range.

<b>(E)(3) Performance measures (5 points)</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>
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**(E)(3) Reviewer Comments:**

Gaston County Schools presented ambitious yet achievable performance measures for the middle and high school students, with the annual targets for required and applicant-proposed performance measures.

The GCS performance measures are in the SMART format to maximize validity and reliability. Goals were calculated on the actual 2012-13 baseline performance data, and computation of a trajectory seeking a 25-50% incremental improvement over the course of the program.

Overall the G.O.A.L. proposed performance measures are based on meeting the personalized learning standards of the targeted middle and high school students. The proposed measures are clearly identified; the rationale is stated for the selection of the measure; justification of how it is rigorous, timely and formative for the proposed plan and theory of action for the implementation success or concerns; and explanations how it will be reviewed and improved over time.

The GCS performance measures are ambitious in that they represent significant expected increases and/or decreases over the grant and post-grant periods. They appear to be achievable, based on the baseline performance data.

However, the GCS identified eight performance measures where as the requirement and defined in the notice indicates should have a total of approximately 12 to 14 performance measures.

It is unclear of the plan to review and improve the performance measures if it is found to be insufficient to gauge implementation progress.

Therefore, Gaston County Schools scored in the low of the medium range.

**(E)(4) Evaluating effectiveness of investments (5 points)**

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**3**

**(E)(4) Reviewer Comments:**

Gaston County Schools provided a rigorous plan to evaluate the effectiveness of investments. GCS proposes to ensure the most effective financial evaluation measures by aligning project goals and performance measures to specific student performance.

The GCS evaluation plan includes:

- ensure all students are college- and career- ready and increase graduation rate to 90.6%
- increase equity – decrease achievement gaps across subgroups
- improve reading and math proficiency and growth
- increase technology – blended learning opportunities
- increase teacher effectiveness and promote teacher empowerment
- utilize enhanced data system to promote data based decisions to improve teacher effectiveness

Overall, GCS proposed evaluation plan is data driven focusing on the effectiveness of investments. A check and balance system ensures the effective use of RTTD funds. In addition, GCS will contract with an external evaluation organization to provide objective evaluation for the G.O.A.L. project outcomes.

However, the GCS evaluation plan is ambiguous in that the details demonstrating a high quality plan have been omitted such as the responsible party and timeline for each of the project outcomes.

Therefore, Gaston County Schools scored in the high of the medium range.

## F. Budget and Sustainability (20 total points)

	Available	Score
<b>(F)(1) Budget for the project (10 points)</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>8</b>
<p><b>(F)(1) Reviewer Comments:</b></p> <p>Gaston County Schools G.O.A.L. budget has well defined components:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Budget includes other funding sources – NCDPI, State, LEA, State RTT, RTT-D</li> <li>· Budget appears to be reasonable and sufficiently detailed for the use of staff positions, travel, curriculum development, external evaluation services, computing devices, technology supplies and services</li> <li>· Thoughtful rationale for investments and priorities including description of all funding sources and use</li> <li>· Explanation of expenditures identifying those to be continued, phased out, funded by different sources</li> </ul> <p>GCS plans to utilize the collected evaluation data for the two G.O.A.L. projects to inform future investments for the program ensuring the sustainability of the personalized learning environments.</p> <p>Overall, the G.O.A.L. budget plan is comprehensive, reasonable and sufficient to support the development and implementation of the G.O.A.L. projects of personalized learning environments. The investments for improvements, educators, technology, and personal devices align with the proposed RTTD approach to G.O.A.L. providing secondary students the opportunity to accomplish their learning goals by having access to self-paced online learning modules, on-demand digital learning, blended learning and/or traditional classroom environment.</p> <p>However, as requested and defined in the notice, the total revenue for the other identified funding sources is unclear. The Project 1 &amp; 2 Ongoing Costs chart only identifies combined funding sources - local, state, federal, other – per line item.</p> <p>Therefore, Gaston County Schools scored in the low of the high range.</p>		
<b>(F)(2) Sustainability of project goals (10 points)</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>3</b>
<p><b>(F)(2) Reviewer Comments:</b></p> <p>Gaston County Schools provided a description of a sustainability plan. The utilization of the collected evaluation data for the two G.O.A.L. projects will be used to inform future investments for the program ensuring the long-term sustainability of the personalized learning environments.</p> <p>GCS identified personnel positions that will be sustained, combined, temporary, responsibilities transferred to other positions, reduced, or continued.</p> <p>The plan outlined the technology, instructional support, infrastructure, technology services, computing devices and identified the items, funding source and percentage of support.</p> <p>The plan outlined the ongoing costs, description and assumption, cost per year, and whether funding source is local, state, federal or other.</p> <p>Overall, the G.O.A.L. proposal presented a plan to sustain the proposed project based on the collected data, guidance, and direction provided by the external evaluators in the determination of the effectiveness of the courses and determination of the budget and personnel for future courses.</p> <p>However, the GCS proposed plan to ensure sustainability of the initiative reform goals after the grant term of the grant is ambiguous according to that which is required and defined in the notice.</p> <p>It is unclear from the information presented as to the level of support GCS has from State and local government leaders to sustain the proposed reform initiative.</p>		

It is unclear of the plan GCS will implement and on which criteria will be used in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the past investments and utilize the data to inform the CCS future investments.

It is unclear from the presented description and chart of evidence demonstrating an estimated budget for any timeframe after the term of the grant in order to support the sustainability of the proposed project goals of the personalized learning environment.

Therefore, Gaston County Schools scored in the lower of the medium range.

### Competitive Preference Priority (10 total points)

	Available	Score
<b>Competitive Preference Priority (10 total points)</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>5</b>

#### Competitive Preference Priority Reviewer Comments:

Gaston County Schools presented a description of the middle and high school students' needs.

GCS identified a plan to orchestrate the services of the community partners to support student learning and to ensure behavioral, social and emotional needs of the students are met in order to provide optimal learning experiences for students especially the at-risk student population.

GCS has established the Office of Business and Education Partnerships to promote continued collaboration with business, civic, community and faith-based organizations to impact student success. The GCS Partnership Office matches community resources to the identified student and school needs while serving as the liaison between the business and education.

GCS identified ten community partners and the current services provided to students and families:

- mental health services;
- day treatment;
- gang prevention – on campus or service facility;
- after school and summer support for life skills;
- backpacks of healthy balanced food - reduce hunger;
- career/college promise program – ensure access to advance level courses and 2-year degrees;
- online courses HS level;
- professional development and training support;
- Rachel's Challenge – anti-bullying program;
- funding for counselor assisting MS and HS students transition out of alternative school;
- after school tutoring and summer programming;
- mentoring.

GCS identified six community partnerships serving targeted student population groups that align and support the proposed RTTD desired results.

- Increase social, emotional and behavioral support services – family and community support;
- Reduce bullying incidents as reflected in discipline incidents – family and community support;
- Reduce discipline incidents – educational;
- Reduce hunger by providing nutritious meals on weekends – family and community support;

- Increase attendance rates – educational;
- Increase reading and math proficiency – educational.

GCS proposes to utilize a variety of informational sources including the new student instruction information system, HomeBase, developed with the use of State RTT funds. HomeBase will store, track and produce reports in real time on various types of student data including grades, discipline data and attendance data.

Other sources used to track data are the results for End of Course and End of Grade exams and surveys – students, parents, community, teacher, superintendent. Data from these sources are reviewed and matched to resources, which in turn ensure layers of support to meet the students’ needs.

GCS has identified the need to reduce the percentage of discipline referrals and improve the attendance rate for middle and high school students. Student academic needs will be identified through progress monitoring, quarterly grades, and EOG/EOC summative data.

A support team encompassed of the blended learning coaches, counselors, and CTE coordinators will work with the students to coach and guide their personalized learning experience and experience access to options and positive choices.

Overall, the GCS has presented a proposal to use the newly established Office of Business and Education Partnerships to promote continued collaboration with business, civic, community and faith-based organizations to impact student success resulting from the partners impact on social, emotional and behavioral outcomes.

However, the GCS proposal was well intended to identify and provide necessary services to the identified students with high needs, yet lacked the clarity to define a coherent and integrated partnership plan resulting in the resource alignment and integrated services to provide additional student and family supports addressing the social, emotional, or behavioral needs of the identified students.

Although goals were presented, it is unclear of the evidence to support the needs of services in order to reach the goals of college- and career- readiness.

It is unclear of the partnership’s coordinated process and procedure to analyze data, request services, track the selected indicators to measure each result, use of the data targeting resources to improve results, and the effect and outcome of the identified targets of attendance, behavior, grades, and graduation.

It is unclear of the strategy to scale the model to serve additional students and needs of students.

It is unclear how the partnership will build the capacity of the staff providing the necessary tools and support to engage the parents and families for decision-making about solutions to improve results and address the needs of the student, family, and school.

Therefore, Gaston County Schools scored in the middle of the medium range.

### Absolute Priority 1: Personalized Learning Environments

	Available	Score
<b>Absolute Priority 1</b>		<b>Met</b>

#### Absolute Priority 1 Reviewer Comments:

The Gaston County Schools has articulated a comprehensive and coherent reform vision, G.O.A.L., building on and expanding the current magnet model through the offering of an online learning platform, the Online Academic Learning and Choices for Success, in order to ensure middle and high school students have the opportunity to accomplish their learning goals by having access to self-paced online learning modules, on-demand digital learning, blended learning and/or

traditional classroom environment.

The G.O.A.L. proposal described a preliminary plan for improving learning and teaching by personalizing the learning environment, providing the necessary tools and support systems for middle and high school students to graduate college- and career- ready.

The GCS proposal provided supporting data and a description to demonstrate evidence of a successful track record to increase student learning and achievements by increased graduation rates; turnaround a school; increased HS success and graduation in alternative and non-tradition settings; increased interest and participation in STEM; earned scholarship awards; and excellent teacher recognition.

The G.O.A.L. proposal presented evidence of a quality plan to strategically utilize the RTTD funds and evaluation data to inform future investments for the program ensuring the long-term sustainable budget to support the project goals beyond the RTTD funding.

<b>Total</b>	<b>210</b>	<b>133</b>
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## Race to the Top - District

### Technical Review Form

Application #0022NC-2 for Gaston County Schools

#### A. Vision (40 total points)

	Available	Score
<b>(A)(1) Articulating a comprehensive and coherent reform vision (10 points)</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>

**(A)(1) Reviewer Comments:**

Gaston County Schools (GCS) present a clear vision for continuing and enhancing at the local level the educational reforms that began in North Carolina as a result of the state's successful RTT-State grant. Their GOAL, Gaston Online Academic Learning, projects seek to build upon infrastructure that has been developed as a result of prior RTT funding and upon past successes shown at schools within the district. The description of a statewide Home Base data system, the state's adoption of Common Core standards, extensive training afforded to educators as a result of the initial RTT funding and existing framework of professional standards and evaluation all set the stage for the proposed projects. The applicant meticulously outlines how it will expand the benefits derived from the initial RTT grant to address targeted middle and high schools in GCS serving grades 6-12. The vision detailed in A1 adeptly describes how the applicant intends to use teacher professional development, a combination of technology acquisition for staff and students to ensure equity and technology infusion to provide personalized learning experiences for students. The applicant is thorough in the identification of the target schools, students, and teachers as well as in their description of how a funded project will combine traditional schooling and blended learning options to address learner needs and preferences. An instructional framework that will build on the prior successes of the district's magnet school of technology and its credit recovery program frame the focus of GOAL which seeks to provide flexible scheduling, flexible course choices, online learning only or blended learning (which will be a combination of the traditional school setting and online learning on-site or in a remote location) making their description both clear and credible.

<b>(A)(2) Applicant's approach to implementation (10 points)</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>
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**(A)(2) Reviewer Comments:**

GCS provides a succinct description of the school selection process used to select participating schools, students, and staff and included tables that graphically displayed the information used for selection. GCS' selection process involved the use

of an at-risk spreadsheet designed to identify and rank schools in greatest need. It appears that using this standardized process eliminated the possibility of personal bias and partiality entering into the selection process and ensured that participating schools met eligibility requirements. Based upon the ranked listing, 20 of 56 schools were chosen to be involved in the GOAL project. All middle schools in the county and 9 of 11 high schools were ultimately selected. No school outside of the rank ordered list was included which supports that the district adhered to its established criteria for project participation. As required, a listing of each school's name is provided. Sufficient detail is included to verify that participating students meet the threshold percentage for low income and high need. The reported totals included in the application include 16,217 participating students with 57.9% of that total meeting low income criteria, 51.42% who are from high need families and 1,465 educators specified as being selected to involved the GOAL project.

**(A)(3) LEA-wide reform & change (10 points)**

**10**

**5**

**(A)(3) Reviewer Comments:**

The applicant presents an ambitious plan for achieving LEA reform rooted in 8 identified goals and 8 reportedly quantifiable outcomes which they intend to achieve through 10 integrated strategies. Expected rates of goal attainment are limited to the specification of an attainment rate for only one of the goals. No other numerics or clearly measurable outcomes are provided to easily quantify results. While goals and activities are specified, the response lacks a specific timetable for implementation or accomplishment other than Figure B of the Implementation Phase where the applicant presents monthly segments of 3-4 months in Phases 1 within 3 years is specified. The applicant uses the key terms logic model and theory of change but without the necessary specificity to aid in providing a convincing plan of action with specific milestones detailed during the grant cycle. There is no reference to how the plan will be scaled up over time except in the expectation that student outcomes by subgroup will result in closing the achievement gaps that currently exist. The applicant does provide an expansive list of personnel who will be involved in the projects.

**(A)(4) LEA-wide goals for improved student outcomes (10 points)**

**10**

**7**

**(A)(4) Reviewer Comments:**

A very generalized statement regarding the applicant's vision is included in this section. In essence, the applicant's vision is that through flexibility in course offerings and options for student learning, increases in the percent of students who graduate from high school ready for college and careers will occur. The applicant uses a variety of charts to delineate past growth and LEA growth targets over the grant cycle. Achievement-wise the district sets very ambitious goals to increase student performance to levels equivalent to or exceeding the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction ESEA AMOs. Baseline data is provided dating back to school year 2011-2012 by goal area and subgroup. Goals for each school year all the way through school year 2017-2018 (the post-grant year) are provided to show expected student outcomes. The applicant notes in the charts that data for school year 2012-2013 will not become available until November 2013. Therefore throughout the charts, no performance data is reported for 2012-2013. The methodology reflects an intent to utilize a value-added method for determining growth. No information is provided to address increased equity which is needed as part of section's response criteria. While the tables are filled with numeric information about lofty goals for growth over time, the response is limited in the substance needed to clearly articulate how broadened options and flexibility alone will yield the desired results.

**B. Prior Record of Success and Conditions for Reform (45 total points)**

	Available	Score
<b>(B)(1) Demonstrating a clear track record of success (15 points)</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>11</b>

**(B)(1) Reviewer Comments:**

Gaston County Schools' presents information regarding four consecutive years of graduation rate (GR) increases. Since graduation means students have met learning requirements, this is support for the applicant showing success. They also reported decreases in incidents of crime for three consecutive years. This statistic cannot be conclusively linked to advancing student learning as (B)(1) requires.

A GR of 81.2% is reported in the applicant's response which is significantly up from the 72% reported in 2010 and 13.1 percentage points about the rate reported in 2006. The applicant further reports a 4 year graduation rate exceeding 90% at five of the district's nine high schools. Charts and graphs including raw data are included reflecting cohort graduation rates in graphic form and dropout rate reductions for six consecutive years .

The applicant selected schools in greatest need using its at-risk spreadsheet and targeted achievement gains, reduction in

crime incidents, increases in attendance and graduation rate as components of the ambitious reforms it seeks.

Successes seen at Highland School of Technology where the graduation rate is nearly 100% are planned to be replicated at participating schools by making available such online learning templates as Learn NC, Moodles, and Cisco. The successes reaped from a previous school improvement grant at Woodhill Elementary, a turnaround school, will be brought to GOAL participating schools. Woodhill's two focuses: (1) providing professional development and (2) implementing a new model to focus on the whole child, are also intended to be brought to this project if the grant is awarded.

Undocumented in this section is how the applicant will make student performance data available to students, educators, and parents in ways to inform and improve the range of services, the delivery of instruction, and participation. The applicant presents data, statistical or otherwise, to show how the software mentioned is clearly correlated to the prior successes at the schools it mentions.

**(B)(2) Increasing transparency in LEA processes, practices, and investments (5 points)**

**5**

**3**

**(B)(2) Reviewer Comments:**

GCS' response to (B) (2) indicates that there is a way for parties to gain access to actual salary information at the school level for instructional staff only, teachers only, and for all school level instructional personnel. They also state that non-personnel expenditures at the school level are accessible. The submission of a public information request is listed as an method to gain each type of information.. GCS further states that the GCS budget resolution is posted on the district's website under the "community" link. Personnel salaries are also indicated as being accessible through an on-line search at [www.charlotteobserver.com/education/](http://www.charlotteobserver.com/education/). Appendix 4 is listed as another means of accessing the information. While the the applicant addresses that each item is accessible, it is of concern that gaining that access comes only after a request is made drawing into question whether that is truly a high level of transparency linked to ease of access. Also though Appendix 4 does contain information regarding the finances and financial status of the district, the specific pages that would show that items a-d are easily accessible within that document are not provided for review which makes determining true transparency difficult to assess.

**(B)(3) State context for implementation (10 points)**

**10**

**10**

**(B)(3) Reviewer Comments:**

GCS presents compelling evidence that the state has positioned school districts to be ready to provide personalized learning options. NC was among the first states to receive RTT with GCS receiving \$5,197,000 of the state's funding. As a result, the local school district began implementing Common Core Standards since 2010. They have career pathways that allow students to exit high school with a regular diploma, with a diploma and an associates college degree and a differentiated diploma that supports struggling students and personalizes learning. There is strong evidence that conditions exist in the state that place the state and district at an advantage. NC has provided the legal, statutory, and regulatory autonomy needed for districts to focus on individual student needs without unnecessary state mandated limitations. Local districts have flexibility to make decisions. State statutes that would have hampered local autonomy have been revised or removed to allow local decision making to occur. Past RTTD funding has helped to establish the infrastructure for the personalized learning platforms that will be a part of this applicant's efforts. The entire state has implemented a Home Base data system, a statewide Educator Evaluation System, and a turnaround process called the Framework for Action. Each is an example that NC and GSC have an advantage over districts and states that are just moving in this direction. Their RTTD plan builds on this autonomy with the online learning that will be a central part of their project.

**(B)(4) Stakeholder engagement and support (15 points)**

**15**

**9**

**(B)(4) Reviewer Comments:**

Stakeholder engagement in the preparation of the proposal appears to be inadequate based upon the given response. While the application lists multiple opportunities for the Board of Education to review and approve the proposal as well as opportunities for administrators to meet, give input/ feedback during the planning stages of proposal preparation, the multiple opportunities do not appear to have been extended or afforded to parents or the community---groups who are central to the success of the project. The application indicates that only one opportunity each was provided for parents and community stakeholders to meet. While it appears that parents and the community were afforded the opportunity to give input in writing, there is no indication in the response of whether either group took advantage of this opportunity nor is there any indication that parents and community groups had any opportunities to meet to discuss revisions/adjustments being made to the application based upon input and feedback provided. Omitted from the application is any reference to whether the LEA is one with or without collective bargaining representation (and as a result no indication of whether 70% of teachers from participating schools support the proposal). There are multiple examples of written contacts (primarily electronic) with the mayors of surrounding municipalities and other stakeholder groups of the intent to apply

and to seek the input of the stakeholders. Stakeholder support letters are included in the applicant's submission from Gaston Community College, Gaston College, Gaston County Police, United Way of Gaston, the Boys and Girls Club of Greater Gaston, the North Carolina Association of Educators, though none from parents/parent organizations civil rights organization, student organizations, or advocacy groups are included.

### C. Preparing Students for College and Careers (40 total points)

	Available	Score
<b>(C)(1) Learning (20 points)</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>(C)(1) Reviewer Comments:</b>		
<p>To evidence a high quality plan, an applicant must address each of the following components: key goals, activities to be undertaken along with a rationale for the activities, the timeline, the deliverables, and the parties responsible. Multiple goals are flowered throughout the section yet no succinct, exhaustive list of "key" goals is provided. What this reader knows from reviewing the response is that the applicant intends for the students to improve academically and to achieve at higher levels than in the past through the use of a variety of personalized online learning experiences (blended learning, online or in combination with traditional schooling, etc.) and the appropriate combination face-to-face interactions with teachers. Digital learning that can be self paced is a central component of the intended approach.</p> <p>(a) The applicant's response begins with the words, "with the support of parents and educators" yet no supporting detail is provided to show the extent and type of support that parents provided to this effort or what measures/mechanisms the district used to ensure parent support, involvement, and engagement. The curriculum changes (adoption of higher standards) and access to a variety of learning platforms aided by technology are evidence that learning can be deepened.</p> <p>(b) The respondent presents convincing evidence that personalized learning to meet the unique needs of students will result from the implementation of Gaston's project. The student data is reported to be able to be updated in real time meaning as it is input it is updated to reveal the level of content mastery.</p> <p>GCS provides a 3 phase timeline for project implementation. Project goals are listed in other sections of the application. Much of the responsibility for implementation, according to the project application, will fall to a GOAL Design Team with no information included relative to administrative oversight from the central office. The initial implementation of the program, according to the response, is January 2014 when a needs assessment will be conducted and a schedule to accommodate online learning labs will be developed. This is to be followed by a March 2014 development of school missions and function. Tables 11-13 provide the logistics for implementation with key components of the application identified under the headings activities, timeline, and responsibility meeting those aspects of a high quality plan. Higher standards required by the state and the LEA are outlined in the respondent's information and include the adoption of Common Core Standards and Essential Standards for NC. Self selection of modules and self pacing of learning support and demonstrate opportunities for deepened student learning.</p> <p>(iv) (A) The common assessments and district benchmark assessments will be used to continuously analyze and monitor progress and/or the need for intervention.</p> <p>(iv) (B) Multidisciplinary teams are specified as the group who will review and make personalized recommendations based on what students know and need to know to be college and career ready while making sustained progress.</p> <p>v. Individualization and interventions (including scaffolding and differentiation strategies) are explicitly included as approaches to address cognitive and non-cognitive needs to ensure academic success.</p> <p>c. The plan specifies that training will occur monthly during the 2014-2015 school year in all core academic areas. No specific information is offered to address how students will be supported to ensure they understand how to use the tools and resources provided to track and manage their own learning.</p>		
<b>(C)(2) Teaching and Leading (20 points)</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>(C)(2) Reviewer Comments:</b>		
<p>(C) (2) requires a high quality plan which necessitates the inclusion of key goals, activities to be undertaken and the rationale for the activities, the timeline, the deliverables, and the parties responsible for implementing the activities within the response. The focus of the applicant's project is online learning. The applicant intends to make the learning experience more personalized to the needs of learners. The applicant's approach takes into account the broadened options and</p>		

access that web-based learning environments and digital learning platforms bring to the education arena.

The project intends to continue to make available typical face-to-face instruction in the traditional school setting and then to expand learning to afford students whatever combination of educational services and instructional delivery methods they need to meet their learning needs and interests. GCS' plan and approach are quite ambitious. They appear to be well-positioned to embark on these expanded learning options because of their state's history of educational reform . Making school available 24 hours a day for 7 days a week in middle school and high school is an innovative approach and appears feasible. They intend to accomplish this access through online, computer-assisted learning. The state and district appear to be well ahead of others in this area based upon data included in the response.

The success of their technology high school where the graduation rate is close to 100% points to an accomplishment that they hope to replicate at other sites. The online, computer-assisted options appear to be very real possibilities for other schools to mirror. The time and money already invested in professional development for teachers and school leaders appears to position the district well. The opportunities for additional professional development through this project, and the use of the state's evaluation system supports that both plans and mechanisms are in place to ensure that students will receive instruction from highly effective teachers who are supervised by highly effective leaders.

Convincing information regarding the twice a year state mandated common exams at the high school level and the once a year exams at the middle school level that are aligned to Common Core Standards in math and language arts and the North Carolina Essential Standards in science and social studies supports that there are measures to assess student progress, continuously improve performance, and close gaps. Additional high quality learning resources and processes and tools are specified in Table 15.

Hampering the possibility of awarding the maximum points for this section are a number of omissions. This section fails to address timelines and parties responsible for ensuring the overall plan is well orchestrated and logistically implemented. Only a glimpse is provided of the responsible parties in Table 14 of this section. Also omitted from this section is information regarding a plan for increasing the number of effective and highly effective teachers and principals at hard to staff schools, subjects and in specialty areas such as special education. The applicant does not sufficiently explain how the project will ensure the students' exposure to highly effective teachers and leaders. The methods for adapting content is not sufficiently addressed in the response. Finally there is insufficient detail presented about how course alignment will occur.

#### D. LEA Policy and Infrastructure (25 total points)

	Available	Score
<b>(D)(1) LEA practices, policies, and rules (15 points)</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>(D)(1) Reviewer Comments:</b>		
<p>The applicant candidly reports that project implementation will require some "modest policy shifts" in Gaston Board of Education Policies. The application further notes that some adjustment must be made to NC Board of Education policy especially in the areas of the use of paraprofessionals, seat time requirements, and student attendance requirements. The applicant recognizes that policy must also be written and approved to address e-learning environments.</p> <p>This portion of the applicant's response evidences that school leaders will be given the autonomy and flexibility needed to adjust schedules and, the school calendar as well as autonomy to offer needed instructional support. No mention is made regarding autonomy and flexibility regarding personnel decisions, staffing models, roles/responsibilities of educators and non-educators or school level budgets which results in a lack of clarity regarding whether there is autonomy/flexibility in these areas .</p> <p>Recent changes in North Carolina State Board of Education policy allowing for more flexible requirements for course credit attainment are reported in GCS's response though no specific statute number or name of a law revision is given.</p> <p>The use of authentic assessments including student portfolios, presentations, research projects, etc. are all listed as opportunities that will be available to validate skill/content mastery.</p> <p>As defined by the notice, a high quality plan necessitates the inclusion of key goals, activities to be undertaken and the rationale for the activities, the timeline, the deliverables, and the parties responsible for implementing the activities. The application is unclear in the delineation of a rationale for the included activities involving changes. No timeline is specified in this section of the application, no specific deliverables are spelled out other than what is summarized above each table. Clarity and sufficient detail are lacking with regard to addressing learning resources and instructional practices that will be adaptable and accessible to such students as those with disabilities and English language learners.</p>		

<b>(D)(2) LEA and school infrastructure (10 points)</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>6</b>
<p><b>(D)(2) Reviewer Comments:</b></p> <p>GCS's project includes the acquisition of all necessary technology equipment, linked services, and supplies for each student/family regardless of the income level to ensure appropriate access. There is no mention of comprehensive policy(ies) within the response.</p> <p>Planning for the project reflects the identification of inadequate existing infrastructure that must be remedied to ensure they have a fully accessible guest network and a system that is interoperable with data systems in use at the state and district levels. Among the necessary changes the district has identified as being necessary are updates to an Active Directory with Windows 7 or later operating systems, access to a filtered, CIPA-compliant Wi-Fi solution, added human resources to support system operation, and additional wireless access points to name a few. The district recognizes that the guest network will require a phased in approach but overtime the ability to bring your own device (BYOD) will be an available option. The plan also calls for the purchase of a robust Learning Management System that takes into account consideration of necessary servers, SaaS (software as a service), licenses, training, and LMS administrator position.</p> <p>While all of the above-mentioned areas are touched upon as well as the district's vision, goals, and deliverables (i.e. items to be acquired), the respondent stops short of providing any timeline information or responsible parties in this section. The response is limited in its attention to addressing exporting data using interoperable data systems. There is also a lack of clarity regarding how low income student who lack equipment and/or prior training and access will be addressed to ensure equity particularly with those who have never had any equipment or any associated training.</p>		

**E. Continuous Improvement (30 total points)**

	Available	Score
<b>(E)(1) Continuous improvement process (15 points)</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>9</b>
<p><b>(E)(1) Reviewer Comments:</b></p> <p>The applicant's response to (E)(1) includes a plan to utilize regularly scheduled monthly meetings of principals, department heads, the project director and Design Team to ensure a successful implementation of the GOAL project. Through its logic model, GCS intends to frame the structure and road map for project success. Obscure details are provided regarding how the applicant will measure and publicly share information on the quality of its investments funded by RTT-District. GCS references fidelity checks but provides no examples of the the type(s) of fidelity checks intended for use.</p> <p>In Table 16 GCS identifies 8 <b>goals</b> for the project. The data is presented with each goal specifically stated followed by the table detailing the strategy, person responsible for implementation, person responsible for reporting data, benchmark dates, required resources, and monitoring methods.</p> <p>A high quality plan includes timeline, among other necessary components. GCS' <b>timelines</b> included in the Benchmark Dates section (beginning with the creation of the online academy between January and Summer of 2014) appear to omit attention to getting the many staff needed to operate the program employed and in place to implement the project but are otherwise stretched throughout the life of the grant cycle. The project appears to be a massive undertaking. It will capitalize on infrastructure in place as a result of earlier RTT funding, innovative thinking related to state and district initiatives that have yielded positive results in many of the areas this project with address. The LEA's prior successes are planned to be replicated at participating sites to ensure similar improvements occur through the grant . There is no inclusion of how the District will publicly share information on the quality of the RTT-D investments.</p> <p><b>Deliverables</b> are not explicitly stated in the response. There is no mention of what is intended to occur after the grant for ensuring continuous improvement is not clearly evident in the response. There is no mention of what is to occur to ensure continuous improvement after the grant cycle ends.</p>		
<b>(E)(2) Ongoing communication and engagement (5 points)</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>
<p><b>(E)(2) Reviewer Comments:</b></p> <p>The components required for a high quality plan are listed below. Where there are noted omissions of the components, the applicant has had point deductions. Outlined below are the components and what the applicant did or did not include:</p>		

**Key Goals** - GCS reports a vague plan to ensure ongoing communication and engagement. They Included their intent to involve internal and external stakeholders but said nothing specific about goals in the response. As such, this aspect of a high quality plan is deemed as insufficient.

**Activities/Rationale** - Included among the activities to be involved are the development of a formal website, use of the local newspaper and news channels, use of the Connect Ed, holding school site based community meetings and a community kick-off celebration, using focus groups, online surveys, social media groups. It is surmised from the response that the rationale for the activities is to obtain formal and informal feedback about the program.

**Timeline** - No time line is provided as part of the response. The respondent's statement regarding "regular design team meetings" is inadequate to be accepted as a definitive timeframe. Therefore this component of the plan is insufficient.

**Deliverables** - Deliverables are not specifically identified within the response. One can assume that at the very least the formal website will be one deliverable, yet the applicant did not expressly state it to be such. The response is vague and unclear in this area.

**Parties Responsible** - The response states that the chief communication officer will lead formal communications. Other parties listed as responsible include the project director, coordinator of online learning, online curriculum facilitators, instructional technology facilitators, online teachers, and blended learning coaches who are overseen by the Design Team which is led by the deputy superintendent of instruction. Though the individuals to be involved are listed. there is no delineated evidence of the specific roles each individual will play other than what the chief communications officer is designated to do.

<b>(E)(3) Performance measures (5 points)</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>2</b>
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**(E)(3) Reviewer Comments:**

Per the criteria, an applicant is to specify approximately 12 - 14 performance measures. GSC provides 7-8 measures in Table 17 which is not an adequate number, though the measures selected are rigorous. No information is included to justify why the fewer measures still meet the performance measure requirement. The target population of the project is 6th grade (middle school) through 12th grade according to previous responses in the application. Assessment of the measures is planned for quarterly or monthly reporting. The project will focus on attendance improvement, improvement of social-emotional health, attainment of proficiency on both standardized tests, and the number of students in 10th grade by subgroup who score 15 or higher on the composite score of the ACT PLAN. Identifying the rationale for selection of each performance measure was challenging to say the least. Omitted from the response is any information regarding how the measure will be reviewed and improved over time if it is determined to be insufficient to gauge implementation progress. The (E)(3) Performance Measure Table lacked baseline data for 2012-2013 and included no other performance data expectations for future years. Therefore, this is insufficient to support the evidence of performance measures.

<b>(E)(4) Evaluating effectiveness of investments (5 points)</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>1</b>
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**(E)(4) Reviewer Comments:**

GCS provides very scant details regarding evaluating the effectiveness of investments. They present a plan to contract with an external evaluator who will conduct an objective evaluation of the project. There is no specificity regarding the minimum levels of expertise necessary for the evaluator. GSC's goals are outlined in Table 18. However the deliverables included are a bit ambiguous in that they are listed in the same section with the project outcomes and are not clearly delineated as being separate from an outcome.

This section does not spell out a timeline as is required in a high quality plan. A methodology for evaluating the effectiveness of funded activities was not documented. As a result it, will be difficult to assess and evaluate how professional development and activities employing technology are progressing and impacting project success.

**F. Budget and Sustainability (20 total points)**

	Available	Score
<b>(F)(1) Budget for the project (10 points)</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>6</b>

**(F)(1) Reviewer Comments:**

GCS reports that funding sources supporting the GOAL project will include funds from the RTT-District grant in the amount of \$24,998,284.3, funds from the NC Department of Public Instruction (that provides the Home Base Data system) and

state allotments for all the classroom teachers who will be a part of the blended learning opportunities, plus local education agency funds which provides existing resources at school locations for personnel and infrastructure. The total of revenue from the combined funding sources is omitted from this section which makes the total revenue for the project undeterminable.

Additional items omitted from the grant include the delineation of any one-time investments and the inclusion of necessary rationale. Recurring operational costs to the grant and a rationale for those costs are included. Strategies that will ensure the long term sustainability of the personalized learning environments are non-existent in this section though they are required. For a district with as many involved staff and students and a project of this magnitude, the requested amount seems reasonable. It is noted that the project contains a sizable amount of personnel for whom there is no inclusion the response of a plan/process to sustain the positions following the ending of the grant cycle. The greatest expense specified in the grant will be the supplies which includes the acquisition of over \$10 million dollars (of the requested \$24+ million) which for a district this size appears reasonable for the indicated number of participants.

<b>(F)(2) Sustainability of project goals (10 points)</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>3</b>
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**(F)(2) Reviewer Comments:**

A high quality (HQ) plan necessitates the inclusion of the five areas outlined below:

- key goals - GCS' key goals are presented in prior sections of the application. Therefore this component of a HQ plan is evident.
- activities to be undertaken and the rationale for the activities - Specific activities related to ensuring sustainability are not provided. Therefore this critical component of a HQ plan is not present impacting the rating.
- the timeline - The only reference to a timeline that could be located was the reference to the intent to complete an annual report. Here there needed to be evidence of the timeline for all activities related to sustainability of project goals.
- the deliverables - Deliverables were taken to mean, but were not clearly spelled out as such in the response, the annual report and creation of the online academy. The applicant needed clearly include a listing of all of the deliverables for sustainability of the project.

and,

- the parties responsible for implementing the activities - There is a lack of clarity regarding the responsible parties even after a review of the (F)(2) response and the referenced Tables 19 and 20.

No documented evidence of a complete response for (F)(2) could be located within the application. As such an overall credible plan for sustainability is lacking

A letter of support from the NC Department of Education is included evidencing that there is state support for the applicant's project and its focus.

**Competitive Preference Priority (10 total points)**

	Available	Score
<b>Competitive Preference Priority (10 total points)</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>7</b>

**Competitive Preference Priority Reviewer Comments:**

The applicant describes historical relationships that have existed between the district and area partners and further indicates an intent to seek other partnerships while expanding existing partnerships. The Office of Business Partnerships is identified as the vehicle to accomplish those tasks. GSC is able to document its efforts to inform and generate support for its project though little information, if any, is mentioned about the extent and duration of partnerships formed between entities such as the Gaston Police Department, Boys and Girls Club, etc. or of how the resources of the agencies will augment each other .

It is apparent that the district went to great lengths to document that it provided public awareness about the grant effort and the district's desire to seek stakeholder input. Yet, the application lacks the needed references to address parent and family participation in decision-making about solutions to improve results. The failure to address select, implement, and evaluate supports for the needs of student participants is also a concern. Table 21 provides the population, type of results and

desired results within six categories. The intent to use and review survey results from Home Base, parent, student, and teacher Surveys. The application is vague in addressing infrastructure, plans for assessment of progress over time, and the process for the resolution of problems encountered as the project progresses. Letters of support are included reflecting support of the district's effort however the letters stop short of indicating the extent of sustained partnerships between the entities.

Tracking of results is addressed in the following ways within the applicant's response. The applicant reports that data will be drawn from the new student information system developed by the state. Results from the annual superintendents' annual survey will be a part of the tracking process as will be the tracking of student discipline and attendance data and academic results. This data can be captured at the district, school and student level.

The annual, ambitious performance measures proposed for the projects included in this application are specific in the table supporting section E-3 (Table 17) and in the Competitive Preference tables in this section .

### Absolute Priority 1: Personalized Learning Environments

	Available	Score
<b>Absolute Priority 1</b>		<b>Met</b>

**Absolute Priority 1 Reviewer Comments:**

GCS does an exemplary job of discussing the academic achievement increases that have resulted from local efforts and the district's prior participation in RTTT-State funding efforts. They build a convincing case indicating GCS's readiness to expand its personalized learning efforts through the use of personalized online learning, either independently or in tandem with traditional learning options. The fact that GCS already has a high graduation rate that has increased each year for the past four years is an indication that they are doing some good things to meet learner needs---the differentiated diploma which is backed by the state of North Carolina being one of them. NC has already invested in a Home Data Base system which supports that the necessary infrastructure already exists for enhanced personalized learner. This applicant is therefore in a excellent position to expand personalized learning through the use of technology. Common Core Standards are already adopted which speaks to state's (and the district's) focus on increased rigor, college and career readiness. The state's Education Evaluation System which is already in place is a definite plus. It is noteworthy that GCS recognizes that the traditional length school day does not fit for every student or meet their needs. This recognition indicates an understanding that just attending school for a defined number of hours/days and sitting in a desk is not a necessity. Investments already made in extensive professional development positions the applicant to take the next natural step toward the types of personalized and distance learning opportunities that are already appearing in higher education nationally and internationally. GCS' innovative approach to creating learning environments that will allow everything from standard diploma to a differentiated diploma, remediation to early graduation through the use of a central facility or a remote personal location is a bold approach.

<b>Total</b>	<b>210</b>	<b>143</b>
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## Race to the Top - District

### Technical Review Form

Application #0022NC-3 for Gaston County Schools

#### A. Vision (40 total points)

	Available	Score
<b>(A)(1) Articulating a comprehensive and coherent reform vision (10 points)</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>7</b>

**(A)(1) Reviewer Comments:**

Gaston County Schools presents a reform vision of a strategy designed to meet the personalized needs of students. The strategy is called Gaston Online Academic Learning (G.O.A.L.), and it addresses the four assurance areas (adopt college and career ready standards; data systems that reassure student growth and success; recruiting, developing, reward, and retaining effective teachers and principals; turning around the lowest achieving schools).

The reform vision clearly describes the learning experiences for teachers and students participating in G.O.A.L. As described in this application, it will provide several different venues for students to access instruction (face-to-face, online, blended). The application describes how grant activities will include two projects: (1) Will establish a online learning environment that enables students to have access to personalized learning options. It may include a central site, remote learning opportunities blended learning opportunities, online learning courses, and the implementation of personalized technology devices. (2) Will offer additional online learning courses and credit recovery courses for grades 6-12. It will be considered a combination of traditional and alternative learning options, where student's needs will be assessed individually and a plan of action determined that might include working within the traditional school environment but on an alternative schedule.

The Gaston County Schools application describes the North Carolina Framework for Action; however, it is unclear how Gaston County Schools will use the Framework to turn around low achieving schools in the district.

It is unclear how the vision described in this application will decrease achievement gaps across student subgroups (i.e., racial/ethnic minorities, English learners, special education , economically disadvantaged). For example, the application describes how flexible scheduling will allow students to combine flexible learning hours with self-paced, individualized learning, but it does not adequately describe how this is likely to result in decreased achievement gaps.

Overall, this places Gaston County Schools at the high end of the mid-range. While the overall vision has some limitations, the vision presented in this application has some strong elements that have the potential to improve learning and achievement.

**(A)(2) Applicant's approach to implementation (10 points)**

**10**

**6**

**(A)(2) Reviewer Comments:**

Gaston County Schools describes the process used to select participant schools. A list of schools that will participate in grant activities is included in the application—as well the total number of participating students, including the number from economically disadvantaged families, and other high needs subgroups.

An “at risk” spreadsheet is included in the appendices which indicates how many at-risk factors each of the middle and high schools has; however, no information is provided about the cut-points that were used to categorize each of the criteria as “at risk” or “not at risk”. All middle schools and high schools, except for several specialty high schools, were included in the proposed reform.

The number of risk factors of the selected schools varied widely (i.e.. from 9 to 1)—and the Applicant inadequately described how the information in the spreadsheet was used to select schools since both schools with great need and schools with little need were included in the reform effort.

Overall, this places Gaston County Schools towards the middle of the mid-range.

**(A)(3) LEA-wide reform & change (10 points)**

**10**

**5**

**(A)(3) Reviewer Comments:**

Gaston County Schools presents a plan that includes some, but not all elements, of a high-quality plan. Strengths of the application are that It provides information about quantifiable outcomes that will be measured and integrated strategies that will be used to implement G.O.A.L. The application also includes detailed tables that adequately present LEA-wide goals, quantifiable outcomes, and integrated strategies.

The Applicant indicates that the theory of change is a “proven” theory of change, but provides no information about who has previously used this theory and whether there is any research that would support the argument that it is proven. Since all middle and high schools (except for several specialty schools) are included in the original group of schools, there is no need for scale-up except to those specialty schools.

It is unclear how all of the pieces will be put together to create a viable theory of change that will lead to improved student outcomes and close the achievement gap. The logic model contains a table that includes an appropriate vision statement, and the table that lays out the model with a focus on how the work of staff in various roles (project director, data analysts,

principal, online facilitators, etc.) will produce various outputs which will lead to various outcomes-impacts. The outcomes-impacts are implementation outcomes (for example, all staff, students, and parents are utilizing dashboard data regularly to make improvements and decisions). The logic model does not indicate how G.O.A.L. will lead to improved student outcomes. The Implementation Phases figure is focused on planning and developing G.O.A.L. Little information is provided regarding how it will actually be implemented within the grant period.

Overall, this places Gaston County Schools in the middle portion of the mid-range. The plan presented has elements that have the potential to improve student learning outcomes; however it fails to describe a theory of change that will improve learning outcomes for all students.

**(A)(4) LEA-wide goals for improved student outcomes (10 points)**

**10**

**7**

**(A)(4) Reviewer Comments:**

Gaston County Schools presents a vision that has ambitious goals; however it is unclear whether the goals are reasonable and achievable. Gaston County Schools presented tables with data which indicated that achievement is projected to increase and that the achievement gaps should decrease. The tables also showed increased graduation rates, and college enrollment. The applicant indicated that value added methodology was used to determine growth—however, no details were provided about this methodology. Given that the logic model does not indicate how project activities will lead to improved student learning and outcomes, and increased equity, it is ambiguous whether the goals are achievable. Overall, Gaston County Schools scored towards the upper end of the mid range.

**B. Prior Record of Success and Conditions for Reform (45 total points)**

	Available	Score
<b>(B)(1) Demonstrating a clear track record of success (15 points)</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>8</b>

**(B)(1) Reviewer Comments:**

Gaston County Schools has a track record of increasing graduation rates over time for all students from 2010 to 2013. Inadequate information was provided to tell if the graduation rate increased for all subgroups across this time period. Inadequate information was also provided to evaluate the track record for student learning outcomes, closing the achievement gap, and college enrollment.

Insufficient information is provided to determine if Gaston County Schools has a clear record of success at its lowest performing/achieving middle and high schools. The Applicant describes how one elementary school (Woodhill Elementary School) was turned around through the implementation of a School Improvement Grant, but does not provide similar information for any middle or high schools. The applicant has not focused G.O.A.L. on the lowest achieving or performing schools, but rather on all middle and high schools, except for a couple specialty schools—and inadequate information is provided about the track record at low performing middle and high schools to evaluate. It is unclear whether there were any priority or focus middle or high schools in the district.

The Applicant does not describe how it will make student performance data available to students, educators, and parents in ways that will inform and improve participation, instruction, and services.

Overall, this places Gaston County Schools in the middle of the mid-range. The Applicant has provided some evidence that it has a strong track record, but the evidence provided is inadequate for the neediest schools, and insufficient data were provided for some relevant variables (student learning outcomes, closing achievement gap, college enrollment).

**(B)(2) Increasing transparency in LEA processes, practices, and investments (5 points)**

**5**

**3**

**(B)(2) Reviewer Comments:**

Gaston County Schools included a statement which described the extent to which the applicant already makes available school level expenditures for each of the four categories. Personnel salaries are not publicly available on district websites. However the information is available upon a public information request, and can also be obtained from the site of a local newspaper (*The Charlotte Observer*). Since the district does not operate or maintain the publicly available data base, there is inadequate evidence provided that the information provided in the newspaper data base is current and accurate. It is also unclear whether actual personnel salaries are presented on the newspaper website at the school level.

Gaston County Schools publicly posts audited financial statements for each fiscal year. However, the applicant indicates that a public information request is required to access monthly expenditure reports. It is unclear whether the information in

the audited financial reports or the monthly expenditure reports are at the school level.

Overall, this places Gaston County Schools at the high end of the middle range since there are transparency limitations—but the applicant did include a description of what is made available.

<b>(B)(3) State context for implementation (10 points)</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>7</b>
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**(B)(3) Reviewer Comments:**

The Gaston County Schools application adequately indicates that the Applicant has some of the conditions needed to implement personalized learning environments. Several examples are provided which demonstrate the relationship between the North Carolina Race to the Top Initiative and the Gaston County Schools Race to the Top Initiatives. For example, Gaston County Schools describes how the district used Race-to-the-Top (State) funding to align teaching and learning with the Common Core and Essential Elements. Information is also provided about several innovative schools (Highland School of Technology, Gaston Early College High School, Woodhill Elementary) and programs (differentiated diplomas). The Applicant also describes how professional development helps ensure that teachers understand the Common Core and Essential Elements, the educator evaluation process, and other related Race-to-the-Top (State) initiatives.

The application included a signed letter from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction which indicates that the district's goals and planned activities align strongly with state work; however insufficient information is provided regarding whether the district has sufficient autonomy under State legal, statutory, and regulatory requirements to implement the G.O.A.L. personalized learning environments. Overall, this places Gaston County Schools at the upper end of the mid range.

<b>(B)(4) Stakeholder engagement and support (15 points)</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>13</b>
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**(B)(4) Reviewer Comments:**

Gaston County Schools adequately describes how principals, teachers, students, parents, and the board of education were engaged in the process. For example, the G.O.A.L. framework was present to parents at a Superintendent's Parent Advisory Meeting. At the meeting parents were provided with an opportunity discuss it, and to provide feedback and direction.

A strong letter of support written by the president of the district's teacher association was included in the application. Teachers were given the opportunity to provide meaningful input and feedback on G.O.A.L. by attending a work session. During this session the concept of G.O.A.L. was reviewed and the teachers provided input.

Less information was provided about the input and feedback provided by many of the community stakeholder groups. Letters were included in the appendices which demonstrate that Gaston County Schools reached out to these stakeholders—but many of the included letters of support were perfunctory and indicated little beyond the receipt of the information by the stakeholder.

Overall, this places Gaston County Schools toward the lower end of the high range.

**C. Preparing Students for College and Careers (40 total points)**

	Available	Score
<b>(C)(1) Learning (20 points)</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>15</b>

**(C)(1) Reviewer Comments:**

The Gaston County Schools application describes several important elements of a high-quality plan (timeline, activities, parties responsible for implementing activities)—however, it is unclear that these individual components fit into a coherent plan that will lead to the implementation of a high-quality online learning environment during the life of the grant. For example, a rationale is not included for the activities.

A strength of G.O.A.L. is that it will allow students to work at their own pace, and provide scaffolding and individualized supports. Gaston County Schools provides convincing evidence that the district seeks to empower all learners, including high-needs students in G.O.A.L. For example, the proposal presents information about how G.O.A.L. can be used by non-traditional students to complete a public school curriculum.

Little detail is provided regarding how G.O.A.L. will provide deep learning experiences in areas of academic interest, or provide access and exposure to diverse cultures, contexts, and perspectives. For example, the applicant states that “online

learning opens many doors to places, cultures, perspectives and opportunities", but provides no information about how this will occur with G.O.A.L. Similarly the applicant provides insufficient information about how G.O.A.L. will help students develop skills and traits such as goal-setting, teamwork, perseverance, critical thinking, communication, creativity, and problem solving.

Gaston County Schools adequately describes how students will have access to a personalized sequence of instructional content. For example, the application indicates that each student will have an individualized plan of instruction designed by online teachers and blended learning coaches using data from students' assessment and online course content.

The Applicant adequately describes accommodations and high-quality strategies for high-need students, and indicates that all students will have access to scaffolding interventions and individualized supports to address identified cognitive/non-cognitive needs.

Gaston County Schools uses several assessments, including district benchmark assessments, to monitor and assess student progress towards mastery of content standards. This data are analyzed to determine any necessary interventions, and to identify opportunities for enrichment.

Gaston County Schools provides a vague description of the mechanisms that will be put in place to provide training and support for students that will ensure that they understand how to use the tools and resources provided to them to track their learning. The Applicant indicates that multiple opportunities will be created to get the training needed, that there will be technology facilitators, and that there will be onsite training--but the details are sparse about the content of the training and what it will entail.

Overall, this places Gaston County Schools at the high end of the mid-range.

**(C)(2) Teaching and Leading (20 points)**

**20**

**16**

**(C)(2) Reviewer Comments:**

Gaston County Schools provides many elements of a high quality plan that will support an approach to improved teaching and leading . The described plan has components needed to help educators improve instruction and increase their capacity to support student progress. Gaston County Schools adequately describes how educators will engage in training and professional learning communities (PLCs) to support their practice and support effective implementation of personalized learning environments and strategies that meet each students academic needs and will help ensure all students can graduate on time and be college- and career-ready. For example, PLCs will be established and each participating school will initially have a blended-learning coach. The training will help ensure that teachers are prepared to effectively implement G.O.A.L. These activities will support the effective implementation of personalized learning environments and strategies that meet students needs. The training will also help teachers develop the skills needed to adapt content and instruction and provide opportunities to engage in common and individual tasks.

The Applicant adequately describes how it will utilize actionable data. Gaston County Schools indicates that data analysts from the Accountability Dept. along with online teachers, online curriculum facilitators, and blended learning coaches will study the data from various student assessments to revise and make informed decisions regarding curriculum and instruction. It is ambiguous how frequently student progress will be measured, though the application indicates that data accumulated from various student assessments will be used to revise and make informed decisions regarding curriculum and instruction.

Adequate evidence is provided that teacher practice will be improved though the use of feedback. The NC Teacher Evaluation tool, along with the student academic growth model, will provide the framework for educator improvement and potential professional development. The Applicant does not provide sufficient detail about how school leaders and leadership teams will have the training, policies, tools, data, and resources that will enable them to structure effective learning environments.

Insufficient information was provided in the application about the plan for increasing the number of students who receive instruction from effective and highly effective teachers and principals. The applicant indicated that the district is making an effort to recruit more personnel with math, science, or specialty areas, but it is not clear what this effort entails.

Overall, this places Gaston County Schools at the low end of the high-range.

**D. LEA Policy and Infrastructure (25 total points)**

	Available	Score

<b>(D)(1) LEA practices, policies, and rules (15 points)</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>5</b>
<p><b>(D)(1) Reviewer Comments:</b></p> <p>Gaston County Schools does not currently have all of the policies in place that will be needed to implement G.O.A.L. For example, according to the application, "establishing the G.O.A.L. model for high school credit attainment will require modest shifts in the Gaston County Board of Education Policies. For example, HR policies will need to be reviewed to ensure that they accommodate the use of paraprofessionals and classified staff." Gaston County Schools also states that "Gaston County BOE [Board of Education] policies must be developed to govern enrollment and management of e-learning environments in a manner that will ensure student success." The Applicant does not indicate that the board has agreed to change these policies to allow the full implementation of G.O.A.L. (and the membership of the board may change over time), so it may be unrealistic to expect that the Applicant will be able to get some of these policies changed.</p> <p>The Applicant states that school leaders will be provided with the flexibility and autonomy to move away from the traditional 4 X 4 block schedule, however sufficient detail not provided about how school schedules and calendars and instructional support from school staff members will be used to facilitate personalized learning.</p> <p>The Applicant indicated that "policies and practices regarding authentic assessment opportunities will be developed that allow students to demonstrate standards mastery at non-traditional intervals and in non-traditional ways," but no information is provided about what developing these policies entails. (For example, does it require the approval of the Board of Education?)</p> <p>The Applicant states that "the entire premise of the GOAL. model for high school credit attainment derives from providing adaptable learning resources and instructional practices to students in need of a non-traditional setting for high school course attainment," but it does not indicate whether the learning resources and instructional practices that will be utilized will be adaptable and fully accessible to students with disabilities and English learners.</p> <p>Overall, this places Gaston County Schools towards the lower end of the mid-range.</p>		

<b>(D)(2) LEA and school infrastructure (10 points)</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>3</b>
<p><b>(D)(2) Reviewer Comments:</b></p> <p>Gaston County Schools currently does not have the infrastructure in place to support the blended learning environment described in this application. For example, the district will need to purchase a robust, filtered, CIPA-compliant WiFi solution so that participants will be able to access materials off-site. The applicant adequately described a process for bidding, obtaining, installing and upgrading the technology infrastructure; but information is lacking regarding how the described upgrades will ensure that all participating students, parents, educator, and other stakeholders, regardless of income will have access to necessary content, tools, and other learning resources.</p> <p>No information was provided regarding whether the information technology systems described in this application will allow parents and student to export their information in an open data format or use the data in other electronic learning systems; or whether the applicant planned to use interoperable data systems that include human resources data, student information data, budget data, and instructional improvement system data.</p> <p>Overall, this places Gaston County Schools at the low end of the middle range.</p>		

**E. Continuous Improvement (30 total points)**

	<b>Available</b>	<b>Score</b>
<b>(E)(1) Continuous improvement process (15 points)</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>15</b>
<p><b>(E)(1) Reviewer Comments:</b></p> <p>Gaston County Schools has a high-quality plan for implementing a rigorous continuous improvement process that will provide timely and regular feedback on progress toward project goals and opportunities for ongoing corrections and improvements. Gaston County Schools provides a strong description of how its logic model will be used to guide continuous improvement. For example, the application indicates that "The Logic Model will provide the structure and road map." The application included a figure which showed an appropriate continuous improvement process with feedback loops (create, monitor, evaluate, assess), and also provided a detailed goal-based strategy plan.</p> <p>The application adequately describes how the Applicant will monitor and measure progress toward project goals. For example, the project director will seek input through regularly scheduled monthly principal meetings to obtain input at the</p>		

school level, and will meet with department heads on a quarterly basis.

Overall, the places Gaston County Schools at the high end of the high range.

<b>(E)(2) Ongoing communication and engagement (5 points)</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>
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**(E)(2) Reviewer Comments:**

Gaston County Schools has a high-quality plan for ongoing communications and engagement that represent the best thinking at the point the time, while recognizing that it may require adjustments and revisions during implementation. Gaston County Schools presented a reasonable plan for ongoing communication and engagement with internal and external stakeholders. For example, communication about G.O.A.L. will take place during professional learning communities (PLC) meetings, department/online meetings, on a website, and through email. Gaston County Schools will also hold focus groups, have online surveys, and maintain social media groups to support an ongoing conversation.

Overall, the places Gaston County Schools at the high end of the high range.

<b>(E)(3) Performance measures (5 points)</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>
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**(E)(3) Reviewer Comments:**

Gaston County Schools identified an appropriate number of performance measures. The targets were set using a predictive model, and were calculated utilizing past performance data. They were based on the computation of a trajectory that seeks a 25-50% incremental improvement over the course of the program. The Applicant includes appropriate rationales for the selection of the measures, and the measures are appropriate because they fit the needs of the students in the district. A strength is that the measures include both performance and participation measures disaggregated by subgroup. The described measures will provide rigorous, timely, and formative leading information tailored to Gaston County Schools' proposed plan and Logic Model. Insufficient Information was provided about how the Applicant planned to review and improve the measures over time. Overall this places the applicant at the low end of the high range.

<b>(E)(4) Evaluating effectiveness of investments (5 points)</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>3</b>
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**(E)(4) Reviewer Comments:**

Gaston County Schools provides a plan with some elements of a high quality plan. Gaston County Schools indicates that a data-driven process will be used to evaluate the effectiveness of Race to the Top – District funded activities. A table is included in the application that describes data that will be collected as part of the data-driven process. According to the application, performance data will be "analyzed and trends documented to allow a shift in processes if necessary." However, insufficient detail is provided about how the data collected will be utilized to determine whether the approach will lead the district to continuously improve its plans. For example, the application focuses on the data (grade records, attendance records, etc.) and data sources (surveys, online vendor data, etc.), rather than on how it will be used to evaluate the effectiveness of investments. Overall, this places Gaston County Schools at the high end of the mid range.

**F. Budget and Sustainability (20 total points)**

	Available	Score
<b>(F)(1) Budget for the project (10 points)</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>

**(F)(1) Reviewer Comments:**

The budget provided by Gaston County Schools is appropriate, the budget items are reasonable and sufficient to support development and implementation of the proposal, and the Applicant includes a thoughtful rationale. It identifies all funds that will support the project and includes a narrative and assumptions/description (rationale) for costs. For example, costs are broken down by personnel, fringe benefits, travel, equipment, etc.; and there are detailed cost descriptions and assumptions for each category. The budget identifies funds that will be used for one-time investments versus those that will be used for ongoing operational costs. The detailed information and narrative places Gaston County Schools at the high end of the high range.

<b>(F)(2) Sustainability of project goals (10 points)</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>5</b>
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**(F)(2) Reviewer Comments:**

The Gaston County Schools plan for sustainability of project goals does not include sufficient detail for some of the elements of a high-quality plan. Gaston County Schools provided very little specific information about how the project will be sustained after the end of the project, but did indicate that the coordinator of online learning would lead the effort to develop a long-term sustainability plan.

The Applicant included a general description of how "online course options will be funded by teacher allotments from the state as more students transition to online learning." The Applicant indicated that Federal sources would provide funding for several positions (coordinator of online learning, data analysts, blended learning coaches, etc.) in the Sustainability Budget for G.O.A.L., but did not describe what Federal funding sources would be tapped after the grant ended. The application includes brief descriptions of budget items--but there is insufficient detail to support the assumptions. For example, the "cost description and assumptions" for data analysts states "\$70, 000, 1 FT-Permanent divided across two projects", which is an inadequate explanation for the budget assumptions for this sustainability budget item

Overall, this places Gaston County Schools in the middle of the mid-range.

### Competitive Preference Priority (10 total points)

	Available	Score
<b>Competitive Preference Priority (10 total points)</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>4</b>

#### Competitive Preference Priority Reviewer Comments:

Gaston County Schools proposes to integrate public and private resources in a partnership designed to augment the schools' resources by providing additional student and family supports to schools that address the social, emotional, or behavioral needs of the participating students. To facilitate the effort to collaborate with business, civic, community and faith-based organizations the district created an Office of Business and Education Partnerships that matches community resources with district needs. There is insufficient evidence that the described partnerships will give the highest priority to students in participating schools with high-need students since the Application included all secondary schools (except for several specialty schools) in the overall application, and does not indicate which schools will get highest priority in the competitive priority. There is also insufficient information in the application to determine if the needs and assets of the school and community are aligned with the goals of the competitive priority. It is unclear how parents and families of participating students will be engaged in the decision-making process.

The identified partners (e.g., Alexander Youth Network, Genesis House, etc.) have the potential to add to what the Gaston County Schools is proposing to do. Many of these partners have previously partnered with the district. It is not clear how committed some of the partners are to G.O.A.L. since letters of support were not included for all of the partners identified in the application.

The Applicant identifies 5 population-level desired results (bullying incidents are reduced, discipline incidents are reduced, students are provided nutritious meals to reduce hunger on week-ends, increased attendance rates, increased reading and math proficiency rates) that align with, and support, the applicant's broader Race to the Top – District proposal. They appropriately include both education outcomes and community/family supports.

The applicant describes how it proposes to work with its partners in tandem with district efforts to implement a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) which will integrate the protocols and practices of both positive behavior support and intervention (PBIS) and response to intervention (RtI). Adequate information is provided about how this model has a national research base, and how it might be utilized in Gaston County Schools.

It is unclear how the other services would be integrated with the education services for students who are accessing instruction online. Gaston County Schools proposed to use blended learning coaches (BLC) to work directly with students and coach and guide them as they have more personalized learning experiences. The Applicant describes how it anticipates eventually transferring most of the responsibilities of the BLC to counselors, but does not describe how the other partners will work with students who are not physically on a school campus.

A limitation of the application is the small number of performance measures which will provide more limited data than if a broader range of performance measures had been selected. Three reasonable annual performance measures were identified for the proposed population-level. The measures are ambitious yet achievable, and clearly describe the desired results for students. Three measures is substantially below the 10 allowed.

Overall, this places Gaston County Schools towards the lower end of the mid-range.

## Absolute Priority 1: Personalized Learning Environments

	Available	Score
<b>Absolute Priority 1</b>		<b>Met</b>
<p><b>Absolute Priority 1 Reviewer Comments:</b></p> <p>Gaston County Schools addressed how it will build on the core educational assurance areas to create learning environments that are designed to improve learning and teaching. The Applicant met Absolute Priority 1. Each of the core educational assurance areas are addressed at some point in the application.</p> <p>The Applicant articulated a vision which guided the development of a comprehensive and coherent plan. The proposed plan has some limitations as described in this review, but overall it is a high-quality plan.</p>		

<b>Total</b>	<b>210</b>	<b>141</b>
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