

Performance Standards

for State Education Agencies



Introduction: What makes a quality state education agency?

A high-performing state education agency succeeds when it supports every learner every day, offering opportunities for every school and district to reach further.

One hallmark of a high-performing state education agency is that it continually strives for improvement. Like the member institutions we serve, Cognia® works to innovate and improve.

In fall 2022, we completed a research and development cycle to create Cognia Performance Standards specific to state education agencies to acknowledge changes and set expectations for quality performance and support to schools and districts in a new era. Based on current research in education and input from practitioners with experience in state education agencies, the development process assures that the standards at the foundation of our improvement and accreditation strategies are viable, feasible, and relevant to agencies in today's world.

Significant concepts

The standards also include several significant concepts to guide state education agencies forward, including:

LEARNER-CENTERED: The standards describe the elements of effective agency practices that ultimately impact all learners.

COLLABORATIVE PRACTICES: The standards emphasize the expectation of collaboration and positive relationships across interactions within the agency and with external partners.

SUPPORTIVE AND ACCOUNTABLE: The standards focus on all aspects of agency functioning to ensure supportive communications to all stakeholders, and expectations for accountability at all levels.

Quality characteristics

Six key characteristics are evident when state education agencies effectively adopt the Cognia Performance Standards and engage in Cognia's third-party review process for accreditation and continuous improvement.

HEALTHY CULTURE: A high-performing state education agency nurtures and sustains a healthy culture where personnel feel connected to the purpose and work of the organization and behave in alignment with the values and norms. The agency reflects its mission, beliefs, and expectations by improving outcomes and supporting education institutions under its jurisdiction. The agency models behaviors that build and maintain positive relationships among agency personnel and with client districts and schools.

LEADERSHIP: A high-performing state education agency promotes and supports leadership at all levels within the agency. Leaders model expected behavior and support others to engage in effective leadership practices. Leaders communicate expectations for all personnel with consistency and purpose, and model positive interactions with personnel, client districts and schools, and other organizations.

POLICY MANAGEMENT: A high-performing state education agency develops, implements, maintains, and evaluates processes for ensuring state and federal policies are implemented with fidelity within the agency and in client districts, schools, and with partner organizations. State-level regulations, policies, and procedures are developed collaboratively with legislators and leaders from client districts and schools, other state agencies, and partner organizations. Agency personnel engage with other states, national organizations, and federal leaders and agencies to inform and shape federal legislation and regulations.

COMMUNICATION AND SUPPORT: In a high-performing state education agency, all agency offices anticipate and respond to client needs by developing and delivering information, seeking and responding appropriately to feedback, and maintaining trustworthy processes. The agency allocates resources to client districts and schools fairly and equitably with reasonable requirements for

accountability. The agency effectively builds capacity by empowering clients to confidently solve problems and make decisions that result in improvement.

PARTNERSHIPS: A high-performing state education agency builds and maintains effective partnerships with other agencies and organizations that impact the improvement of education. The agency ensures that partnerships are collaborative, inclusive, and work toward mutually beneficial outcomes.

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT: A high-performing state education agency continually identifies and pursues areas for improvement, and consistently measures progress at all levels within the agency. Personnel in the agency embrace a growth mindset that includes evidence-based reflection on past results and a willingness to adapt and change, where and when needed. The agency defines expected outcomes for accountability of personnel, improvement in processes and results, client satisfaction, and efficiency of operations.

These characteristics serve as our model for identifying and discussing agency quality.

Framework for improvement

Our standards and the key characteristics are the foundation for Cognia's approach to continuous improvement—not just to accreditation. These are the elements that should guide every state education agency to ensure high-quality implementation and overall organizational effectiveness.

Rating the standards

During an agency's self-assessment and Accreditation Engagement Review, each standard will be rated according to a unique four-point scoring rubric. The point-value definitions appear below.

LEVEL 4	Demonstrating noteworthy practices producing clear results that positively impact learners
LEVEL 3	Engaging in practices that provide evidence of expected effectiveness that is reflected in the standard
LEVEL 2	Developing or improving practices that provide evidence that effort approaches desired level of effectiveness
LEVEL 1	Reflecting areas with insufficient evidence and/or limited activity leading toward improvement

Key Characteristic 1: Healthy Culture

A high-performing state education agency nurtures and sustains a healthy culture where personnel feel connected to the purpose and work of the organization and behave in alignment with the values and norms. The agency reflects its mission, beliefs, and expectations by improving outcomes and supporting education institutions under its jurisdiction. The agency models behaviors that build and maintain positive relationships among agency personnel and with client districts and schools.

Keys to a healthy culture

A healthy culture is evident when agency personnel:

- Are actively engaged in, committed to, and supportive of the agency's vision and mission
- Actively offer ideas and collaborate with leaders and peers in a safe environment
- Improve through change and build trust with client institutions with a focus on the best interest of learners

STANDARD 1

Agency personnel cultivate and sustain a culture of respect, trust, fairness, equity, and inclusion and is free from bias.

STANDARD 2

Agency personnel are committed to and engaged in supporting the purpose and mission of the agency.

STANDARD 3

Agency personnel behaviors and actions embrace change that benefits education outcomes.

STANDARD 4

Agency personnel foster a healthy environment of well-being and positive relationships.

STANDARD 5

Agency personnel embrace collegiality and collaboration in support of clients and their learners.

Key Characteristic 2: Leadership

A high-performing state education agency promotes and supports leadership at all levels within the agency. Leaders model expected behavior and support others to engage in effective leadership practices. Leaders communicate expectations for all personnel with consistency and purpose, and model positive interactions with personnel, client districts and schools, and other organizations.

Keys to quality leadership

Effective leadership is evident when agency leaders:

- Model effective leadership practices and expectations while supporting others to do so
- Communicate clear expectations for agency work and service to clients
- Institute embedded professional learning and self-improvement for all staff
- Make decisions based on facts and data from a variety of valid sources

STANDARD 6

Leaders hold themselves and others to expectations of integrity, honesty, professionalism, collaboration, accountability, and positive interaction within the agency and with client and other organizations.

STANDARD 7

Leaders model and cultivate effective individual and collective leadership skills among agency personnel.

STANDARD 8

Leaders use data and input from a variety of sources to make decisions and model personal accountability.

STANDARD 9

Leaders institute a robust program of embedded professional learning and mentorship for agency personnel.

Key Characteristic 3: Policy Management

A high-performing state education agency develops, implements, maintains, and evaluates processes for ensuring state and federal policies are implemented with fidelity within the agency and in client districts and schools, and with partner organizations. State-level regulations, policies, and procedures are developed collaboratively with legislators and leaders from client districts and schools, other state agencies, and partner organizations. Agency personnel engage with other states, national organizations, and federal leaders and agencies to inform and shape federal legislation and regulations.

Keys to effective policy management

Effective policy management is evident when the agency:

- Holds internal agency offices as well as client schools and partner agencies and organizations accountable for the implementation of state and federal policies and regulations
- Identifies metrics and evaluation processes that align with policy and outcome expectations
- Reports the impact of state and federal policies

STANDARD 10

The agency collaborates with stakeholders to develop, inform, and evaluate state and federal policy.

STANDARD 11

The agency documents and communicates the impact of its processes and outcomes regarding state and federal policy.

STANDARD 12

The agency ensures accountability of schools, districts, and the agency regarding the implementation of state and federal policy.

Key Characteristic 4: Communication and Support

In a high-performing state education agency, all agency offices anticipate and respond to client needs by developing and delivering information, seeking and responding appropriately to feedback, and maintaining trustworthy processes. The agency allocates resources to client districts and schools fairly and equitably with reasonable requirements for accountability. The agency effectively builds capacity by empowering clients to confidently solve problems and make decisions that result in improvement.

Keys to quality communication and support

Effective communication and support are evident when the agency:

- Provides timely and thorough service to agency personnel and clients
- Allocates resources equitably to meet the needs of districts, schools, and their learners
- Uses feedback to and from clients for improvement

STANDARD 13

The agency establishes fair and reliable policies, regulations, and improvement processes that build mutual trust to increase the effectiveness of client support.

STANDARD 14

The agency anticipates and responds to client needs by developing and delivering information in a way that empowers schools and districts to make decisions and solve problems that result in improvement.

STANDARD 15

The agency establishes processes for determining eligibility and use of funds to allocate resources fairly and equitably.

STANDARD 16

The agency collects, evaluates, and responds appropriately to feedback and data for continuous improvement.

Key Characteristic 5: Partnerships

A high-performing state education agency builds and maintains effective partnerships with other agencies and organizations that impact the improvement of education. The agency ensures that partnerships are collaborative, inclusive, and work toward mutually beneficial outcomes.

Keys to effective partnerships

Effective partnerships are evident when:

- Improved learning for students and the effectiveness of districts and schools are the focus
- Quality, service, and shared vision are key factors when selecting partners
- Partners plan, collaborate, and work together to collectively solve problems fairly and equitably

STANDARD 17

The agency partners with organizations that build the agency’s capacity to impact educational improvement.

STANDARD 18

The agency and partners build on each other’s strengths to help improve learning for students through increased effectiveness of schools and districts.

STANDARD 19

The agency and partners employ fair and equitable practices to ensure quality service and collectively solve problems.

STANDARD 20

The agency and partners work together to jointly achieve inclusive and mutually beneficial outcomes.

Key Characteristic 6: Continuous Improvement

A high-performing state education agency continually identifies and pursues areas for improvement, and consistently measures progress at all levels within the agency. Personnel in the agency embrace a growth mindset that includes evidence-based reflection on past results and a willingness to adapt and change, where and when needed. The agency defines expected outcomes for accountability of personnel, improvement in processes and results, client satisfaction, and efficiency of operations.

Keys to continuous improvement

Effective improvement is evident when:

- Measures of success are clearly defined throughout all levels of the agency and success against those measures is celebrated
- All agency personnel implement improvement/action plans with fidelity
- Personnel reflect on valid prior results, plan accordingly, and are held accountable for action items related to improvement priorities

STANDARD 21

Team members create agency, department, and individual growth goal(s) with defined measures aligned to the agency's and department's mission and vision.

STANDARD 22

Personnel regularly reflect on prior results, create action steps related to improvement goals, and hold themselves and others accountable for those actions.

STANDARD 23

Leaders at all levels of the agency regularly monitor the implementation and effectiveness of improvement efforts including celebrating successes in achieving expected results.

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