Cognia Performance Standards
Examining the Research

Cognia's Performance Standards™ have provided the foundation for our work across the globe for more than 125 years. These standards are reviewed and updated regularly to ensure the incorporation of growing educational research, advancements in educational practice, and the body of expertise that practitioners gathered. Implemented in 2022, Cognia's current Performance Standards serve as a guide for K–12 and postsecondary educational institutions in establishing and continually improving upon practices necessary to inspire and equip learners to succeed. The use of up-to-date research allows Cognia to stay current with the latest developments and innovations in education, ensuring relevance and effectiveness in improving all learner outcomes. By incorporating academic literature into its Performance Standards, Cognia is better equipped to support educational institutions in their efforts to improve teaching and learning and enable them to make informed decisions about instructional strategies and institution improvement initiatives. Cognia's Performance Standards are organized into key characteristics, focused on culture, leadership, engagement, and growth. Accompanying each key characteristic are descriptions of how schools may demonstrate evidence of the standards and their underlying constructs. These characteristics, descriptions, and standards are all individually and collectively supported by research.

Key Characteristic 1: Culture of Learning

Institutions with healthy cultures of learning produce environments in which learning is valued, promoted, and supported at all levels of the institution. This key characteristic emphasizes the importance of creating a culture that fosters continuous improvement and encourages learners, educators, and leaders to be active learners who are committed to their own growth and development. Educational institutions that have established a healthy culture of learning follow stated values and norms, connect stakeholders, and demonstrate evidence that reflects the institution's mission, beliefs, and expectations. A culture of learning also encourages collaboration and innovation, as individuals are empowered to take risks and try new approaches to accomplish their goals. By creating a culture of learning, institutions can ensure that learners are prepared to succeed in the 21st century, where adaptability, creativity, and critical thinking are essential skills.[1] Ultimately, institutions that prioritize a culture of learning are better equipped to achieve their mission and vision, while also supporting the growth and development of all stakeholders. A healthy culture is evident where:

Stakeholders are actively engaged and supportive of the institution's mission

Stakeholder engagement and support of an institution's mission are necessary for establishing a shared understanding of organizational direction and are

crucial to the success of the mission. As supported by a growing body of research, institutions with well-defined missions, visions, values, and goals are more likely to have a shared understanding of their organizational direction and are more effective in implementing their daily practices.[2] Additionally, scholars agree that well-defined organizational statements are important for creating a shared sense of purpose and direction, which can contribute to a positive school culture and improved learner outcomes in institutions.[3] Experts also say that when stakeholders, such as parents, community members, and staff, are actively engaged and supportive of the institution's mission, they can help to create a positive and collaborative learning environment.[4] Stakeholders can provide valuable input and feedback on the institution's goals and strategies, which can help to refine and improve them. Therefore, leaders should actively engage stakeholders to support the institution's priorities and guiding principles that promote learners' academic growth and well-being (Standard 3).

Research shows that institutions have a responsibility to integrate learner well-being into their guiding principles, such as mission, visions, and values.[5] Research also affirms that centering learner needs and well-being is an essential component of building equitable institutions, and efforts by institutional leadership to promote equity can benefit all learners.[6] In order to engage and support stakeholders, leaders should ensure that professional staff members receive the support they need to strengthen their professional practice (Standard 6). Studies indicate that professional support can help staff members feel valued and invested in their roles, which can lead to increased job satisfaction and retention rates.[7] Studies also show that providing educators with opportunities to collaborate and develop their skills is necessary for supporting them as stakeholders.[8] Other forms of support include educator participation in collaborative learning communities, job-embedded professional development, and coaching and mentoring, which are all positively associated with learner achievement growth in content areas such as math and reading.[9] Ultimately, investing in the professional support and development of staff members is an investment in the future success of the educational institution and its learners.

Learners' academic and non-academic needs and interests are the focal point

The academic and non-academic needs and interests of learners should be at the forefront of any educational institution's priorities. By prioritizing those needs, institutions can help ensure learners receive a well-rounded education that prepares them for success in all aspects of life. In order for institutions to understand and address the academic and non-academic needs of learners, leaders must establish a school culture that focuses on understanding individual learners' needs. Recent findings indicate that transformative leadership is necessary for establishing institutions that are dedicated to equity for all learners and addressing the academic and non-academic needs of learners.[10] Experts argue that leaders focused on creating inclusive and equitable institutions can significantly affect learner outcomes and achievement.[11] Cognia's Performance Standards emphasize that learners' well-being is at the heart of the institution's guiding principles (Standard 2). The establishment of a positive school climate has been shown to increase levels of learner well-being, resilience, and identity.[12] When learners feel safe, supported, and valued, they are better equipped to focus on their studies, develop healthy relationships, and reach their full potential. Evidence also suggests that prioritizing learner well-being also creates a positive and inclusive school culture that fosters a sense of belonging and encourages all learners to thrive.[13]

Additionally, in order to understand and address learner needs, institutions must ensure that learners benefit from a formal structure that fosters positive relationships with peers and adults (Standard 4). Social-emotional learning, an area of research that has grown extensively in recent years, has been shown to benefit learner behavior and academic performance by enhancing positive interactions and reducing negative behaviors.[14] When learners feel supported, respected, and valued by their peers and adults, they are more likely to feel comfortable and motivated in the learning environment.[15] Positive relationships can help learners build confidence, self-esteem, and resilience, which are all essential for academic and personal growth.[16] Empirical evidence shows positive educator-learner relationships are consistently associated with increased learner engagement over time, while negative relationships are associated with decreased engagement.[17] A formal structure that fosters positive relationships can take many forms, such as mentorship programs, advisory groups, or restorative justice practices. Evidence shows that these structures can provide opportunities for learners to connect with peers and adults in a meaningful way, build trust, and develop essential social-emotional skills.[18] Additionally, these structures can help learners feel supported through challenges and adversity, whether

those arise from academic struggles or personal issues. This formal structure, fostering positive relationships with peers and adults, can be a powerful tool for promoting learner well-being, academic success, and overall school culture.

Stakeholders are included and supported

Effective leaders build school cultures that include and support stakeholders. When stakeholders are involved in the decision-making process, they have a greater sense of ownership and investment in the educational institution's success. This involvement can lead to a shared vision, collaboration, and a stronger commitment to achieving common goals. In addition, stakeholders can provide a diverse range of perspectives and expertise, which can help to inform and improve the institution's practices. Supporting stakeholders is equally important as including them. By providing stakeholders with the necessary resources and tools, such as training and professional development opportunities, institutions can empower stakeholders to be contributors who are more effective and engaged.[19] Engaged stakeholders can help to build a sense of community and shared purpose, which can be a powerful motivator for learners and staff.

In order to engage stakeholders in the institution's mission, it is necessary that school leaders cultivate and sustain a culture that demonstrates respect, fairness, equity, and inclusion, and is free from bias (Standard 1). Prioritizing self-reflection and humility, building relationships with diverse stakeholders, and promoting culturally responsive practices are essential steps that researchers have identified in creating this school culture.[20] It is also necessary that professional staff members embrace effective collegiality and collaboration in support of learners (Standard 5). Experts say that successful leaders prioritize relationships, foster a culture of trust and collaboration, and create inclusive learning environments.[21] Evidence shows that when collegiality is encouraged, educators are more likely to trust each other and effectively participate in professional learning communities.[22] Scholars also state that leaders can support educators in building collegial and trusting relationships by fostering a culture of transparency and open communication, providing targeted professional development, and promoting shared leadership among educators.[23]

Key Characteristic 2: Leadership for Learning

Effective leaders provide a clear and compelling vision for the institution and create a positive school culture that promotes learning and growth. They are responsible for setting high expectations for learner achievement and creating a supportive environment that enables all learners to succeed. Leaders should be skilled at data analysis and use that data to inform decision-making and drive improvement. By providing strong leadership, school leaders can inspire educators and staff, engage families and communities, and ultimately improve learner outcomes. As such, school leaders are essential to the success of schools and the academic achievement of learners. Leaders of institutions who are dedicated to continuous improvement engage in their own learning and promote learning for educators and professional staff. Successful leaders communicate learning expectations to all learners within the institution, including learners and educators. Expectations for learning should be embedded within the institution's culture and reflected in the behaviors and attitudes of all stakeholders. Leadership for learning is demonstrated when school leaders:

Communicate expectations for learning

It is essential for school leaders to communicate clear expectations for learning to all stakeholders, including learners, parents, educators, and staff, to ensure that those involved in the educational process share collective goals and objectives. When expectations are clearly articulated, learners know what is expected of them, educators can better plan and deliver instruction, and families can provide support and reinforcement at home. As school leaders communicate expectations for learning, they guide professional staff members in the continuous improvement process focused on learners' experiences and needs (Standard 7). Experts contend that program evaluation and feedback from leaders are needed to ensure continuous improvement.[24] School leaders should focus on a small set of priorities and use evidence to inform practice as they increase alignment and promote sustainable improvement within their schools.[25] Continuous professional development must be a priority for school leaders in order to support the ongoing professional development needed by educators to improve learner outcomes.[26] Further, in order for school leaders to be supported in this process, the governing authority must demonstrate a commitment to learners

by collaborating with leaders to uphold the institution's priorities and to drive continuous improvement (Standard 8). Current research highlights the importance of creating supportive district cultures and developing leaders' self-efficacy and autonomy. Numerous studies also suggest that district-level leadership is crucial for creating a culture of continuous improvement and support for leaders and that successful implementation of these practices requires collaboration, communication, and ongoing commitment.[27]

In order to communicate expectations for learning, leaders should set expectations regarding curriculum. School leaders must help professional staff members implement curriculum and instruction that are aligned for relevancy, inclusion, and effectiveness (Standard 12). Research shows that a high-quality curriculum can have a positive impact on learner achievement, particularly in mathematics and literacy, promote critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and increase learner engagement and achievement.[28] School leaders must also ensure that curriculum and instruction are augmented by reliable information resources and materials that advance learning and support learners' personal interests (Standard 14). Experts argue that investing in a high-quality curriculum is a promising avenue for improving educational outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged learners who may lack access to high-quality educational resources outside of school.[29] Research also shows that alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment is necessary to promote learning, and educator professional development that is focused on integrating curriculum and instruction is essential to integrate the art and science of teaching in the classroom.[30] In total, effective communication of learning expectations helps to build a culture of collaboration and shared responsibility for learner achievement.

Influence and impact the culture in positive ways

Institutional leaders play a critical role in shaping culture, and research shows that their influence can profoundly affect the success and well-being of learners, educators, and staff.[31] Positive school culture is characterized by an environment of trust, respect, and collaboration, where all stakeholders feel valued, supported, and motivated to learn and grow.[32] By promoting and modeling positive behaviors, attitudes, and values, leaders can create a culture that fosters academic excellence, social-emotional development, and a sense of belonging for all members of the community.[33] In contrast, research

findings highlight that a negative or toxic school culture can lead to low morale, high turnover, and poor academic outcomes, and can even affect the mental and physical health of learners and staff.[34] Therefore, it is crucial for leaders to prioritize and invest in building a positive school culture through intentional, research-supported actions such as promoting inclusive practices, recognizing and celebrating diversity, and encouraging innovation and continuous improvement.[35] By doing so, they can create a thriving learning community that supports the success and well-being of all learners and staff. An essential function of how leaders can positively impact school culture is through the recruitment, supervision, and evaluation of professional staff members to optimize learning (Standard 10).

Additionally, leaders must ensure that learners' needs drive the equitable allocation and management of human, material, digital, and fiscal resources (Standard 15). The allocation of adequate funding is essential for institutions to support learning, such as qualified teachers, smaller class sizes, and instructional materials.[36] Effective school leadership is characterized by a focus on learning, a commitment to equity and inclusivity, and the ability to build and sustain a positive school culture.[37] Moreover, by supporting staff in their own learning and professional development, school leaders can empower them to improve their practice and increase their effectiveness in the classroom. Research indicates that effective leadership is essential for improving learner achievement, and schools must prioritize the development of leadership practices that are linked to positive outcomes.[38] Professional development, instructional coaching, and shared decision-making can build leadership capacity within the institution, and research has shown such capacity is essential for creating a positive and supportive school culture.[39]

Model and engage in learning while supporting others to do so

A leader's responsibility to model and engage in learning can in turn support other stakeholders in their own professional learning. Leaders should engage in their own professional development through research-supported practices, such as reflective conversations, co-constructing goals or action plans, and providing ongoing support and feedback to their supervisors in order to improve their practice and learner outcomes.[40] This should reinforce leaders' commitment to ensuring qualified personnel instruct and assist learners and each other in support of the institution's mission,

purpose, and beliefs (Standard 13). Research shows that educator quality is a more important factor than student demographics or class size in predicting students' academic achievement.[41] Therefore, it is essential that school leaders support educators in their instructional practices and ensure the instructional practices that educators use are aligned with the institution's goals.

Moreover, leaders should create and maintain institutional structures and processes that support learners and staff members in both stable and changing environments (Standard 11). Recent studies show that institutional working conditions, such as supportive leadership, opportunities for professional development, and collaborative school culture, are found to enhance educator job satisfaction.[42] Studies also show that leaders can create a more positive and effective school culture that supports learner success when they align their leadership practices with educators' expectations.[43] It is therefore important that leaders cultivate effective individual and collective leadership among stakeholders (Standard 9). Effective instructional leadership, characterized by a focus on improving teaching and learning, can foster a culture of collaboration and shared responsibility among educators, which in turn can enhance their belief in collective efficacy, a shared belief that collective action leads to improved learner outcomes.[44] When educators and staff have a strong sense of collective efficacy, they are more likely to share responsibilities and take on leadership roles collectively, working together to improve instructional practices, learner outcomes, and the overall environment.

Key Characteristic 3: Engagement of Learning

Engagement is a critical factor in promoting learning and success. When learners are actively engaged in their learning, they are more likely to retain information, develop critical thinking skills, and ultimately achieve their academic goals. Engaged learners are also more likely to enjoy the learning process, which can lead to increased motivation and a greater sense of ownership over their learning. In turn, this can help learners develop a lifelong love of learning and a willingness to take on new challenges. Effective engagement strategies can take many forms, from hands-on activities and project-based learning to collaborative learning and learner-led discussions. To foster engagement, educators and school leaders can also create a positive and supportive classroom environment that encourages risk-taking and celebrates learner success. By prioritizing engagement in the classroom, educators can help ensure that all learners are given the opportunity to reach their full potential, regardless of their background or abilities. Ultimately, the engagement of learners is critical to promoting academic achievement, developing important life skills, and preparing learners for success in the 21st century. Engagement is demonstrated when all learners:

Are included in the learning process

As the ultimate beneficiaries of the learning process, learners' active engagement and participation are critical to their success. By involving all learners in the learning process, educators can better understand their perspectives and needs and design learning experiences that are relevant, meaningful, and engaging. Institutions focused on including all in the learning process understand that learners should have equitable opportunities to realize their learning potential (Standard 17). Experts believe that institutions have a responsibility to provide fair learning opportunities for all learners, and educators should focus on creating classrooms that are respectful of learners' diverse backgrounds and experiences.[45] Leaders and educators must also ensure that learners experience curriculum and instruction that emphasize the value of diverse cultures, backgrounds, and abilities (Standard 16). Culturally responsive education—a research-based strategy to design and provide instruction relevant to learners—can enhance learner engagement, motivation, and achievement by incorporating learners' cultural experiences and perspectives into the curriculum and instructional practices.[46]

Leaders and educators should work together to ensure that instruction is monitored and adjusted to advance and deepen individual learners' knowledge and understanding of the curriculum (Standard 22). This includes differentiating instruction for all learners. Studies show that differentiating instruction, through planning lessons that meet the needs of diverse learners, using assessment data to guide instruction, and building a classroom culture that supports all learners, can lead to increased learner motivation, improved academic achievement, and greater engagement in the learning process.[47] To support educators in differentiating, monitoring, and adjusting instruction, school leaders should help them increase confidence and competency in data-driven instructional decisions, leading to improved learning outcomes.[48]

Participate with confidence

Successful learners are able to engage in experiences that promote and develop their self-confidence and love of learning (Standard 20). Evidence shows that when institutions implement social-emotional learning opportunities and interventions for learners, learners gain social-emotional skills, improve their behavior and attitude, and show an increase in academic performance.[49] When educators focus on establishing rapport with students and promoting students' growth mindsets, they can create an inclusive classroom culture that helps students develop confidence and motivation to learn.[50] Research has also shown that positive classroom and school culture are essential in helping students build academic tenacity, which is critical for improving academic outcomes and reducing achievement gaps.[51]

In classrooms where learners participate with confidence, educators provide instruction characterized by high expectations and learner-centered practices (Standard 21). Learner-centered education has been shown to increase motivation and engagement among learners. Studies find that it is essential for educators to shift their role from a traditional instructor to a facilitator who guides learners through the learning process.[52] Learner-centered practices include project-based learning, flipped classrooms, collaborative learning, problem-based learning, and gamification. Studies show that these practices can enhance learner motivation, engagement, and achievement, and can be supported by technology.[53] By fostering a culture of confident participation, educators can create a supportive and empowering learning environment that promotes learner achievement, well-being, and success.

Have agency over their learning

Within institutions, it is necessary that learners are immersed in an environment that promotes and respects student voice and responsibility for their learning (Standard 19). Experts state that student voice has a critical role in creating an ideal institutional environment for learner well-being.[54] Instructional strategies, such as using open-ended questions, encouraging learner-led discussions, and providing opportunities for learner feedback and evaluation, have proven to be helpful in promoting student voice in the classroom.[55] It is also important to engage learners in decision-making processes in the institution in order to increase their investment in the school community.[56]

By fostering learner agency, educators can also help to prepare learners for lifelong learning and success in a rapidly changing world. In high-quality institutions, learners are immersed in an environment that fosters lifelong skills including creativity, curiosity, risk-taking, collaboration, and design thinking (Standard 18). Experts know that educators play a crucial role in creating such environments through their pedagogical practices and behaviors, such as modeling creativity, providing constructive feedback, and encouraging risk-taking.[57] Evidence also suggests that when educators promote curiosity and support their learners in inquiry and exploration, they promote motivation and engagement, thereby improving the learning outcomes of their learners.[58]

Collaborative learning and social interactions also play a significant role in promoting creativity and innovation in the classroom.[59] In learning environments where learner agency and inquiry are nurtured, professional staff members integrate digital resources that deepen and advance learners' engagement with instruction and stimulate their curiosity (Standard 23). Several practices shown effective through research include using technology to differentiate instruction, provide timely feedback, and enhance learner engagement.[60] Technology use is also positively associated with learner learning outcomes, particularly in the areas of motivation, attitude, and engagement,[61] as well as 21st-century skills, including critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, and collaboration.[62]

Key Characteristic 4: Growth in Learning

Growth is a key component of educational excellence. By measuring growth over time, educators can gain a better understanding of learners' progress and identify areas for improvement in their instructional practices and curriculum. This can help to ensure that all learners are making meaningful progress toward academic and non-academic goals and achieving their full potential. Additionally, a focus on growth promotes a growth mindset among learners, which is critical for success in college, career, and life. By encouraging learners to view challenges and setbacks as opportunities for growth and learning, educators can foster resilience, persistence, and self-efficacy, which are important skills for lifelong success. Ultimately, by prioritizing growth in learning,

educators can create a more learner-centered and empowering learning environment that supports the success and well-being of all learners. Growth is evident when:

Learners possess non-academic skills that ensure readiness to learn

Learners should be supported in the acquisition of both academic and non-academic skills. Non-academic skills, which include 21st century skills such as collaboration, communication, and creativity, enable the attainment of academic skills and knowledge. Therefore, in the absence of non-academic skills, learners may not demonstrate a readiness to learn. Moreover, evidence suggests that non-academic skills are predictive of academic achievement, graduation rates, and postsecondary success.[63] School leaders and educators must ensure that learners' diverse academic and non-academic needs are identified and effectively addressed through appropriate interventions (Standard 27). Using evidence-based frameworks, such as Response to Intervention, can help institutions to create a collaborative school culture, identify and respond to learner needs, and monitor progress over time.[64] Additionally, experts suggest institutions utilize culturally responsive pedagogy within social-emotional learning interventions. Doing so has been shown to improve learner outcomes and is important for addressing the needs of diverse learner populations.[65]

The use of data is essential for understanding learner needs and addressing them. When school leaders use data and input from a variety of sources to make decisions for learners' and staff members' growth and well-being (Standard 24), they can provide necessary professional development opportunities, create a supportive school culture, and increase access to high-quality data sources.[66] This is possible when school leaders create a culture of data use in their institutions, which research shows supports educators in bettering learner outcomes.[67] Given the important role of professional development in staff growth, data-informed selections of opportunities can maximize the effectiveness of such learning. Further, research suggests that educators should engage in high-quality professional development that is ongoing, job-embedded, collaborative, and aligned with learning goals.[68]

Learners' academic achievement reflects preparedness to learn

In order to support learners in academic achievement and a preparedness to learn, school leaders and educators must ensure that learners' progress is measured through a balanced system that includes assessment both for learning and of learning (Standard 30). Evidence suggests that educators should utilize both formative and summative assessments in order to ensure a comprehensive evaluation of learning and to inform instructional decision-making.[69] This enables educators to provide continuous feedback to learners and gives learners the opportunity to reflect on their feedback and work collaboratively. Further, learners can work with educators to set goals and monitor progress.[70] Studies show that academic achievement is a key indicator of learners' ability to engage with and succeed in learning activities.[71] When learners demonstrate academic achievement, it suggests that they have acquired the foundational knowledge and skills necessary to engage with more advanced concepts and topics.

Additionally, school leaders should regularly evaluate instructional programs and organizational conditions to improve instruction and advance learning (Standard 26). School leaders and educators should evaluate instructional programs through careful consideration of learner progress and data, thereby fostering continuous improvement.[72] Experts have found that leaders' use of time is strongly associated with learner achievement. Instructional leadership activities, such as classroom observations and educator feedback, are significantly related to gains in learner achievement.[73] Therefore, school leaders ought to prioritize formative evaluations of instructional programs and organizational conditions to improve learning outcomes.

Learners attain knowledge and skills necessary to achieve goals for learning

In quality institutions, understanding learners' needs and interests drives the design, delivery, application, and evaluation of professional learning (Standard 29). In fact, effective institutions are characterized by a deep understanding of learners' individual needs, interests, and experiences, and personalization of instruction and support is key to meeting identified needs.[74] As discussed, the development of learners' non-academic and academic

skills is interconnected with their readiness to learn. Therefore, with support, learners should pursue individual goals including the acquisition of academic and non-academic skills important for their educational futures and careers (Standard 28). Goal-setting and self-assessment interventions have a positive effect on learner self-efficacy and learning.[75] Research has also shown that in response to behavior problems, goal-setting interventions show a positive effect on increasing academic engagement and achievement and reducing future incidents.[76] Therefore, by focusing on goal-setting and relevant skill attainment, educators can support learners' overall well-being and success, as well as create a more positive and inclusive learning environment.

Additionally, in order to promote academic achievement and learner preparedness, school leaders should promote action research by professional staff members to improve their practice and advance learning (Standard 25). Evidence suggests that school leaders play a crucial role in establishing evidence-informed institutions by creating a culture of evidence use and providing support for evidence-based practices.[77] Action research helps educators identify and address specific problems or challenges in their practice and develop more effective teaching strategies.[78] This also encourages reflection and leads to the development of practical solutions to real-world problems.[79]

Continuous Improvement

Cognia's Performance Standards promote continuous improvement in institutions by providing a research-based framework for assessing and enhancing educational practices. Understanding the research that underpins Cognia's Performance Standards establishes a strong connection between the standards and the principles of accreditation and continuous improvement. This foundation for institutions offers empirical evidence and scholarly insights to guide their growth and improvement efforts. By providing a common language and grounding practices in rigorous research, institutions can ensure that their initiatives are built upon sound pedagogical principles and proven strategies. Cognia's approach helps institutions move beyond mere compliance with accreditation requirements and fosters a culture of continuous improvement. Through Cognia's Performance Standards, institutions can leverage the collective wisdom of the education community, identify best practices, and adapt them to their unique contexts, thereby fostering sustainable growth and positive outcomes for all learners. Continuous improvement is evident when institutions review their practices, analyze data, seek out new research, and adapt their approaches to better meet the needs of their learners. The research-based design of Cognia's Performance Standards serves as a catalyst for such ongoing growth and improvement for institutions, leaders, and, ultimately, learners.

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