




Case Study: Fleming
County Schools



A district in rural Kentucky moves
from turnaround to transformation

In 2018, leading education nonprofits AdvancED and Measured Progress came together. With more than a century of experience in accreditation and school improvement and decades of leadership in student assessment solutions, the new organization—Cognia™—brings institutions around the world a new, holistic way to view school performance and student achievement.

The activities described in this paper were carried out before the merger by AdvancED in partnership with the institutions described. We've retained references to AdvancED to avoid confusion.



A district in rural Kentucky moves from **turnaround** to **transformation**

Case Study: Fleming County Schools

Flemingsburg, KY

Study Dates: 2013–2016

Using AdvancED’s Diagnostic Review process, Fleming County Public Schools went from being one of the state’s lowest-performing districts to one of its most successful—A Distinguished District—in just three years.

It’s not easy to turn around a failing school or school system, but educators believe in the value of our craft—and more importantly—that our students are worth the effort. How do underperforming schools turn around and improve? Let’s look at one school system that did just that. With great intention and deliberate analysis and action, this district implemented a turnaround plan that worked.



About Fleming County Public Schools

Fleming County Public Schools, located in an agricultural area on the edge of the Appalachian foothills of Kentucky, is a small school system serving approximately 2,300 students across four elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. About 70 percent of students participate in the free and reduced price lunch program. Most families were educated in Fleming County; those who attend college often return.

The community loves its school system, but there was concern about whether the schools were providing a quality education for every child. Poor academic performance on past state accountability assessments drew scrutiny from state officials. As a result, Fleming County High School was identified as a Priority school in 2013—meaning it was in the bottom five percent of Kentucky’s schools as measured by state assessment results.

In Kentucky, this meant the school and the district would receive a comprehensive diagnostic review based on AdvancED’s powerful and conclusive internal review and its evidence-based external review.

The diagnostic review was an important stimulus and guide for the school system’s efforts to improve student performance and take ownership of its process of continuous improvement.

“Though initially apprehensive, once they reviewed data and delved into the root causes of underperformance, district staff accepted they needed to make improvements in how they were educating all students. They undertook a careful diagnostic review and adopted a common set of AdvancED standards which helped school leaders and administrative staff to identify areas for improvement and begin the hard work of transforming the school system and its culture.”

District Leadership

When a new superintendent, Dr. Brian Creasman, began the 2014–2015 school year, he and the board of education immediately set a new vision for the district.

He wanted the district to move out of Priority status and become a District of Distinction, a label given to Kentucky schools and school systems performing in the top five percent of the state. He enlisted instructional supervisor Lesia Eldridge—who had served as a teacher, principal and district administrator—to help. Together, senior leadership and principals formed a team that served as the core for the system-wide change to come.

By this time, the teachers and staff were apprehensive about how the system was going to improve. They were working hard, but the results were not paying off in the way of improved across-the-board academic performance. Part of the diagnostic review process entails conducting a self-assessment, which enabled district leadership to be introspective and to confront their challenges head on. Though initially apprehensive, once they reviewed data and delved into the root causes of underperformance, staff accepted that they needed to make improvements in how they were educating all students. They undertook a careful diagnostic review and adopted a common set of AdvancED® standards which helped school leaders and administrative staff to identify areas for improvement and begin the hard work of transforming the school system and its culture.

How to Transform Schools: The Diagnostic Review Process

The AdvancED Diagnostic Review process uncovers root causes for underperformance, guides improvement actions and energizes the accountability process. After its first Diagnostic Review, based on thorough internal and external analyses using the **AdvancED Standards for Quality Schools**, Fleming County Public Schools received 18 Improvement Priorities that first year; a second Diagnostic Review would be conducted the following year.

A team of highly trained experts was deployed to provide support and technical assistance throughout the process. The AdvancED Kentucky Operations Office trained district staff on understanding the **AdvancED Standards for Quality Schools**. Still, initially, the results left district leaders and teachers feeling discouraged and overwhelmed by the number of areas that required improvement. “Because of our culture at the time, we could not help but see it as a negative rather than someone trying to help us,” Eldridge said. “We were heartbroken in April 2015,” Creasman said. “We had a lot of information and data but we had to correct so many things.”

Even though the Diagnostic Reviews had focused on the high school, the district leadership deliberately chose to address the underlying issues in K–8.

While Fleming leaders did not agree with everything in the 2015 Diagnostic Review report, their Self-Assessment, corroborated by the evaluation conducted by the Diagnostic Review team, helped validate that the district was on the right track. “Once we realized that, it changed our mindset,” Creasman said. With this mentality shift came a kind of acceptance that enabled district leadership to take on the challenge of changing the culture, which would enable the school system to confront its challenges and to own its improvement journey. Eventually, teachers and staff began to identify and accept where they needed to improve and began to work toward systemic change.

The Findings

The Diagnostic Review Team identified that Fleming County Public Schools needed to establish a common curriculum across all grade levels. In order to address this need, the leadership involved the teachers. Eldridge explained, “In the past, a common curriculum did not materialize because teachers had not bought in. Involving teachers was the most powerful thing we have done. They were at the table deciding what our students would learn and how they would learn it. Everything else followed.”

The District Maps Out Its Strategy

Upon establishing a common curriculum, the district began to assess and benchmark performance from kindergarten through eighth grade, including formative, summative and at times common assessments. Now, student progress toward proficiency is gauged in grades K–8; the high school is developing its own benchmarks. Teachers report results in Professional Learning Community (PLC) meetings and through Teaching and Learning Reports. District leaders indicate that because of the curriculum and assessment system, teachers now can predict student performance, identify gaps and know how to focus their work.

As leaders for the system’s turnaround efforts, Creasman and Eldridge clearly understood the importance of monitoring the work of the district and schools. To address this need, they, along with principals, developed their own internal review called the Formative Quality Review. Their diagnostic, which district officials believe is a primary factor of their success, is aligned with the **AdvancED Standards for Quality Schools** and also incorporates day-to-day operations and attendance.

“In the past, a common curriculum did not materialize because teachers had not bought in. Involving teachers was the most powerful thing we have done. They were at the table deciding what our students would learn and how they would learn it. Everything else followed.”

—Instructional Supervisor Lesia Eldridge

Self-evaluation is at the heart of the system's monitoring process. Not only do the leaders and principals use the AdvancED Standards to assess their district and schools, an internal Quality Assurance Team has been used for two of the past three years to assess system-wide performance. Consisting of administrators, teachers, classified employees, and a parent, this team independently analyzed the district using the AdvancED Standards to provide leaders valuable information on the system's progress and validate the district's self-assessment.

As part of the Formative Diagnostic review process, all classrooms are observed using the AdvancED eProve™ Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool® (eleot®), which is used to ascertain the quality of the learning environment across seven crucial aspects of student engagement, the results of which can be aggregated to identify school- and district-wide trends.

Several outcomes have become evident. Principals and administrators are able to calibrate and discuss what they see, which clarifies expectations and provides continuous improvement feedback from their colleagues. Teachers have embraced the indicators and are using eleot to identify gaps, make adjustments and observe in one another's classrooms. Both the district and individual schools continuously compare new eleot results to their baseline data to identify ways to improve student engagement and share the data in a weekly public newsletter.

As it moves beyond the state-mandated diagnostic reviews, Fleming County Public Schools has adopted the **AdvancED Standards for Quality Schools** as a framework for continuous improvement. "We have chosen to use the AdvancED Standards as our turnaround model because we needed the standards as a road map for improvement from the top (district level) down to the school level," school officials said.

Fleming County Public Schools has incorporated the AdvancED framework into a broad range of routines at the system and school levels. Using AdvancED's Concept Map as a reference system, leadership discuss weekly how well they are doing against the Standards. "Every time we engage in self-assessment, we gain a better understanding of the Standards and we ask better, more focused questions, which leads to a deeper understanding of what we need to do."

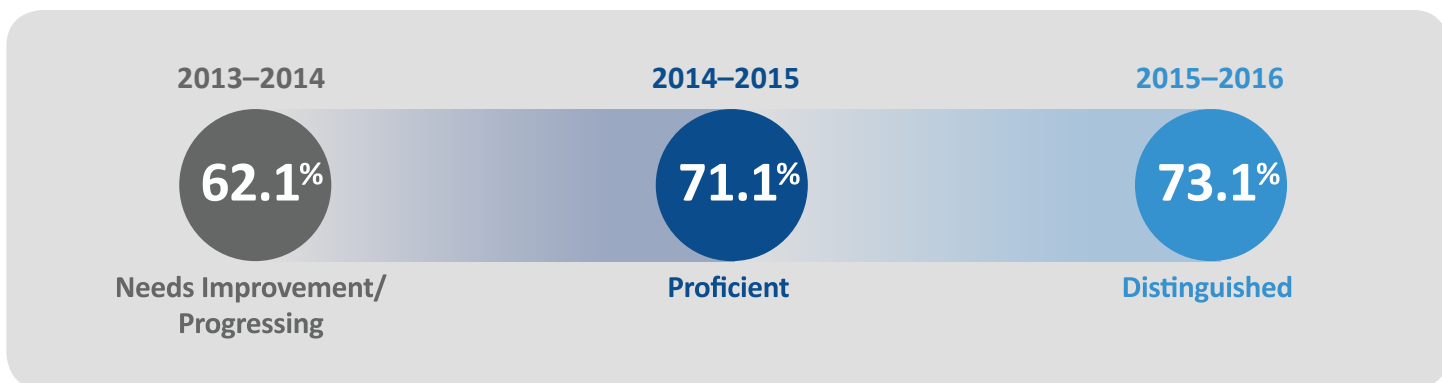
“Every time we engage in self-assessment, we gain a better understanding of the Standards and we ask better, more focused questions, which leads to a deeper understanding of what we need to do.”

—Fleming P.S. Officials

The Results— Improved Outcomes

The district is pleased with its accomplishments and is especially proud of having achieved its vision of becoming a Distinguished District in only three years. However, as of this publication, the process for continuous improvement had only begun. Another Diagnostic Review in conjunction with Fleming's first External Review for System Accreditation was to take place in 2017. The changes across the district by 2015–2016 already provided evidence of transformation. Year-over-year student achievement growth was extraordinary. According to Kentucky's 2013–2014 School Report Card, Fleming County's overall performance was at the 37th percentile statewide. On a 100-point scale, the district's overall score rose steadily from 62.1 (2013–2014), to 71.1 (2014–2015) to a score of 73.0 for the 2015–2016 school year. This also means that the district's accountability classification changed from "Needs Improvement/Progressing" in school year 2013–2014 to "Proficient" in 2014–2015 and impressively, "Distinguished" for 2015–2016.

Fleming County Public Schools Scorecard



After one year of using the AdvancED Standards as a roadmap, Fleming County accelerated to the 78th percentile for the 2014–2015 school year. At the high school level, scores increased in reading, math, science and writing. Remarkably, the middle school calculations climbed extensively in every subject tested. Furthermore, the Novice, Apprentice, Proficient, Distinguished (NAPD) points from the 2013–2014 school year to the 2015–2016 school year have increased for most subjects across elementary, middle and high school levels. This also means that the district’s accountability classification has changed from “Needs Improvement/Progressing” in the 2013–2014 school year to “Proficient” in 2014–2015 and impressively, “Distinguished” for 2015–2016.

Fleming County Public Schools Novice, Apprentice, Proficient, Distinguished (NAPD) achievement points from the 2013–2014 and 2015–2016 school years

Based on a formula, districts are awarded reading, math, science, social studies and writing/language mechanics achievement points according to students’ performance levels of Novice, Apprentice, Proficient and Distinguished. From the 2013–2014 school year to the 2015–2016 school year, Fleming County’s subject area achievement points increased for most subjects across elementary, middle and high school levels.

School Level	School Year	Reading Points	Mathematics Points	Science Points	Social Studies Points	Writing/Language Mechanics Points
Elementary	2013–2014	12.3	12.0	17.2	13.2	11.4
	2015–2016	15.6	17.0	Not Tested	16.4	14.7
Middle	2013–2014	12.8	12.2	14.7	12.5	11.7
	2015–2016	18.5	19.9	Not Tested	20.5	18.3
High	2013–2014	8.6	9.4	8.1	11.8	12.5
	2015–2016	11.5	10.6	8.9	11.3	11.4

NAPD Calculation comes from the formula: Novice = 0; Apprentice = .5; Proficient/Distinguished = 1 (Bonus of .5 is added if there are more distinguished than novice).

Points come from the NAPD Calculation multiplied by the equal weight of content areas: Reading, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies are 20% and Writing/Language Mechanics is 20% (Writing 16% and Language Mechanics 4%). If content area data is not available weights are redistributed proportionally.

Source: Kentucky Dept. of Education Commonwealth school Report Card. To find Fleming County’s data, select Fleming County under the pull down menu in the District Report Card box. Then select the Accountability tab and Learners tab for the 2013–2014 and/or 2015–2016.

These results demonstrate that the district was able to use the Standards and feedback from the Diagnostic Review to correct issues. With the establishment of the system-wide curriculum and assessments, administrators and teachers could predict student performance and identify gaps.

The Benefits

“Undertaking a Diagnostic Review and Implementing the AdvancED Standards has resulted in a profound change in the district’s culture.”

Designed to lead Fleming County to its vision of becoming a District of Distinction, the district’s strategic plan focuses on leadership and accountability, teaching and learning, operations and support systems, culture, communications, and community. Aligned to the AdvancED Standards, each area includes a belief statement, objective, core belief, guiding questions, and methods for monitoring and evaluation.

Undertaking a Diagnostic Review and Implementing the AdvancED Standards has resulted in a profound change in the district’s culture. Eldridge has worked for Fleming County Public Schools for 20 years as a teacher, principal and district administrator. She said, “This is the first time we have truly had a vision and set purpose for what we do in Fleming County. This has helped us reach goals we have set so far. The management audit and Diagnostic Review were correct. We did not know our roles because we did not have a purpose.”

The culture of continuous improvement at Fleming County Public Schools has moved well beyond making changes for compliance. The school system now dives deep beneath the surface to find ways to create success for students. District leaders will tell you that the goal of becoming a District of Distinction was never really about a score, but rather about student success and preparedness, parent/community involvement and celebrations.

It was about simply doing whatever it takes to improve outcomes for students.

“This is the first time we have truly had a vision and set purpose for what we do in Fleming County. This has helped us reach goals we have set so far. The management audit and Diagnostic Review was correct. We did not know our roles because we did not have a purpose.”

—Instructional Supervisor Lesia Eldridge

At the beginning of the 2014–2015 school year Fleming County Public Schools would not have met the requirements for AdvancED Accreditation. However, in three years, this district has transformed from being a turnaround school—one of the lowest performing schools in the state—to a Distinguished District.

The AdvancED Standards laid the foundation for Fleming County School District leaders to create a culture where the adults adapt and adjust to ensure student success. Pleased with their progress, but determined not to become complacent, the district is looking ahead and has begun the process for AdvancED Systems Accreditation as the next step in its improvement journey.

This time, no longer motivated by state-mandated compliance requirements, the district will voluntarily submit itself to a rigorous accreditation process as a mark of quality and distinction. District leaders and staff are no doubt looking to validate the improvements they have achieved, but also will challenge themselves to push further as they renew their commitment to continuous improvement—and to their students. Having taken ownership of their improvement journey, Fleming County Public Schools now lives this process every day.

About Cognia

Cognia™ is a global nonprofit that has the knowledge to help schools improve. Cognia offers accreditation and certification, assessment, professional learning, and improvement services. The result of the merger of AdvancED and Measured Progress, Cognia was formed to bridge the gap between school evaluation and student assessment. We are the largest education improvement organization in the world and an undeniable force for enhancing schools, engaging students, and driving better outcomes for all.

Find out more at cognia.org.



cognia.org