



Rising Out of the Bottom 5%:

South Carolina District Makes Unparalleled Progress
With Its Commitment to Continuous Improvement

When Dr. Margaret Gilmore assumed the role of superintendent at Allendale County Schools in Fairfax, South Carolina, in 2018, all the district's schools were in the bottom 5% of South Carolina schools in terms of performance. The 1,100-student district, which includes the Little New Steps child care center, two elementary schools, a middle school, a high school, and an alternative education facility, had been taken over by the South Carolina Department of Education (DOE).

Required to provide intervention and support to at-risk schools, the South Carolina DOE partnered with Cognia™, a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization that focuses on continuous improvement and accredits primary and secondary schools globally. The largest education improvement organization in the world, Cognia worked with district leaders to conduct a root-cause analysis of the district’s mission and vision, instructional program, resources and supports, and strategic goals and objectives.

Cognia’s specialists initially worked with Allendale during the 2016–17 school year. “They brought a diagnostic review team into our schools,” says Dr. Gilmore, “to help us identify the goals and objectives we needed to help transform our schools.” A team then returned in 2019 to monitor the schools’ progress toward those goals.



Getting the Priorities Right

For the diagnostic review, Cognia assembled a team of high-performing education specialists. The team spent four days on campus, visiting classrooms, conducting eleot® (Cognia’s Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool®) observations, and interviewing stakeholders and students. “They look at your instructional program and do a deep dive into the classroom,” says Dr. Gilmore, “which are the reasons our kids come to school—to get a quality education.”

The Cognia team also asks “tons of questions,” she adds, “and, based on the preponderance of evidence, leaves you with improvement priorities.” Upon implementing the improvement priorities, schools could begin to transform themselves and rise out of their low, bottom 5% performance status.

“We’ve been working on the improvement priorities since Cognia left,” says Dr. Gilmore. Some of the key recommendations for Allendale were to:

- Develop and implement a system for school leaders to frequently monitor instructional practices to ensure strong student engagement
- Increase the emphasis on developing students’ critical thinking skills
- Help students use technology to learn and apply content knowledge

“If those priorities are implemented steadily and consistently, they can improve or even transform a school,” says Dr. Gilmore. Allendale’s school leadership and administration teams used the improvement priorities to implement a strategic plan of action for each institution. Each school’s team determined what action steps had to take place and who would be responsible for each step. They also set timelines for achieving the goals.

“Since 2019, we’ve been working with this framework to address the priorities,” says Dr. Gilmore. “We put the priorities on our faculty meeting agendas and our principal meeting agendas to ensure that each one is implemented with fidelity. We take them seriously.”

For example, one of Allendale’s improvement priorities involved analyzing student performance data and using it to transform classroom instruction every day. “The school district did not have a unified instructional process before this,” explains Dr. Gilmore, who addressed this gap by developing the “The Allendale Six”—a set of processes put in place to ensure that all teachers are engaging in practices like using bell-to-bell instruction, conducting formative assessment activities, and providing students with feedback in an active learning environment.

“The Allendale Six is about developing positive relationships, well-managed classrooms, and student-centered instruction,” Dr. Gilmore says. “This approach spun out of Cognia’s observation that we lacked a robust instructional process, which was one reason our students weren’t achieving.”

Dr. Gilmore says that using eleot, which focuses on students in the classroom rather than on teachers, also played a role in the district’s transformation. “With eleot, when you walk into a classroom, you’re looking at how students are responding and how they’re engaged,” says Gilmore. “If our kids are going to learn and grow academically, it has to start inside the classroom.”

The Allendale Six

Bell-to-Bell Instruction

Maximized classroom instruction; beginning, middle, end; engaged in rigorous coursework, discussions, and tasks; instructionally relevant engagement

Positive Relationships

Knows and cares about students' lives beyond class and school; respects and encourages students' efforts

Well-Managed Classroom

Teacher and students interact and speak respectfully with each other; establishes and knows classroom routines, behavioral expectations, and consequences

Formative Assessment (2x per Period)

Frequent checks for understanding; adjusts learning instruction; demonstrates understanding of the lesson

Standards-Based Instruction

Teaching the SC standards; rigorous curriculum; learning targets; essential questions; alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessments

Student-Centered Instruction

Student-directed activities; variety of learning styles (auditory, visual, kinesthetic); differentiated learning opportunities; student collaboration; use of technology as an instructional resource

Solid Foundation, Solid Data

For real transformation to happen, districts and schools need strong leadership teams beyond the district office—from curriculum and instruction staff, to human resources departments, to federal program coordinators. Dr. Gilmore sees each team contributing a piece to complete one big puzzle: Curriculum provides strong academics, human resources must hire highly effective teachers, and federal programs helps with intervention response.

“All those departments work together to create a level of support that projects out to classrooms or schools as a whole,” says Dr. Gilmore. “You also need principals and assistant principals who are strong as both operational and instructional leaders.” Professional development, which was lacking before Dr. Gilman’s tenure, is equally important.

In the past, teachers had challenges with classroom management, so the district began using data to assess, interpret, and transform instruction in classrooms. “We spend a lot of time doing instructional rounds, where we visit classrooms and provide teachers with feedback on how to grow their skills, become better classroom teachers, and instruct our students,” Dr. Gilmore explains.

The district also undertook two other key initiatives: assessing its core curriculum to ensure alignment with state standards and integrating technology in the classroom.

Results Worth Celebrating

One of the improvement priorities Cognia recommended, particularly for upper grades, was to provide students with equitable and challenging learning experiences. The students needed more opportunities to develop learning, become problem solvers, and learn thinking skills that will help them succeed at the next level.

“We took that recommendation to heart; now we have our kids involved in activities that encourage them to be critical thinkers and problem solvers,” says Dr. Gilmore.

The results have been impressive. The district’s middle school students recently won first place in a statewide app competition. The goal was to create a mobile app that would help society, and the students created a prototype and developed the concept and software for the invention.

Since implementing Cognia’s improvement priorities, the district’s graduation rate is 87.3%—the highest it’s been in the past 10 years—surpassing the state’s graduation rate. Plus, with plans to become an early-college high school (where students can earn a high school diploma

and a two-year associate degree, or up to two years’ college credit toward a bachelor’s degree), Fairfax High School has had more students taking dual enrollment courses, sent more graduates off to college, and received the highest scholarship amount ever in 2019–20. It recently formed a partnership with a local hospital, through which aspiring nursing students will be able to complete apprenticeships.

Today, none of the district’s schools is on the bottom 5% list. “The progress and improvement are unparalleled; it’s not the same school district,” Dr. Gilmore concludes. With Cognia’s help, the narrative coming out of Allendale has changed from being a low-performing school district to, one day, becoming one of the highest-performing school districts in South Carolina. Dr. Gilmore has no doubt about the district’s continued progress. “We’re not there yet, but we’re on a trajectory to get there. Allendale, forward!”



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. In 2020, the entities that came together to form Cognia mark 125 years of service to education.

Find out more at cognia.org.



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