



Building on Strength

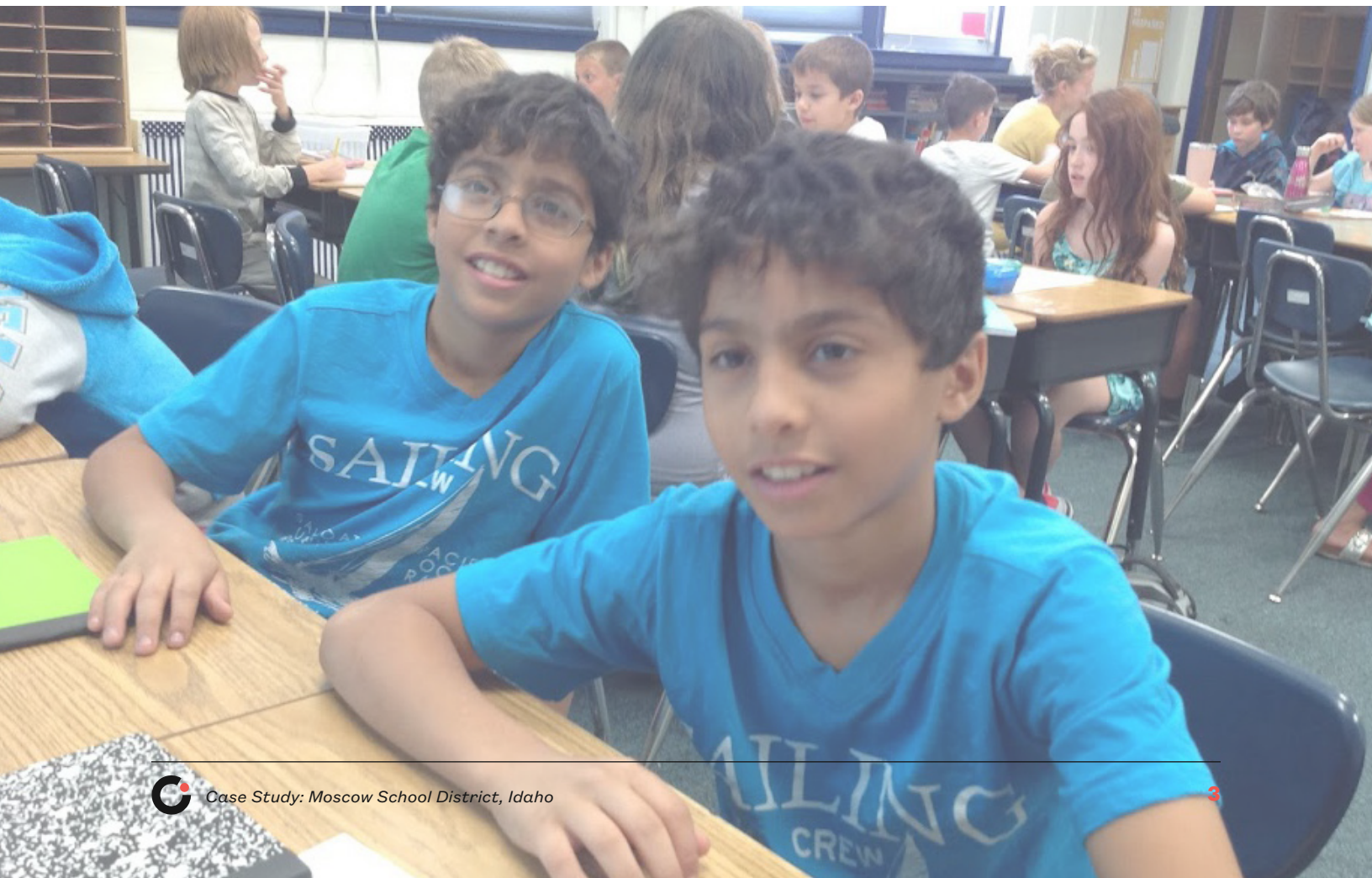
Idaho district reaches new heights by breaking down 'silos' and driving student engagement

Moscow School District (MSD) in Moscow, Idaho, already had a reputation as a high-performing district when Carrie Brooks arrived as its new curriculum director in 2014. MSD's 2,400+ students, spread across seven schools—four elementary schools, a middle school, a high school, and an alternative education high school—were outperforming the averages for the Idaho Standards Achievement Test system. However, MSD leaders were committed to providing equitable learning opportunities for all students and believed there was more they could do.

A year before Brooks joined the district, MSD embarked on the accreditation process offered by Cognia™, a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization that focuses on continuous improvement and accredits primary and secondary schools globally. Cognia and district leaders analyzed MSD's policies, instructional programs and practices, learning conditions, and cultural contexts to determine how well all those components worked together to meet the needs of learners. In addition, a team of Cognia specialists gathered firsthand evidence and information to evaluate the district's performance against

Cognia's research-based performance standards. A team returned in 2020 to monitor MSD's progress toward the goals that had been set.

Brooks began her work at MSD just as implementation of the district's improvement goals got underway. It was Brooks' first time serving as a curriculum director. "But it was a beautiful way to start, because you learn so much about your district when you go through an accreditation process," she says.



Finding new answers through four questions

Brooks and MSD leaders did a thorough review of their district, analyzing student performance and collecting stakeholder feedback. “We turned over every rock and looked under it,” Brooks says. “We wrote goals as a district.”

Educators returned to their own schools and worked in building-level teams to meet the new goals. MSD’s professional learning communities used four questions to guide their collaborative conversations and instructional practices:

- What do we want students to know and be able to do?
- How are we going to know when they’ve gained the knowledge or skills, and what does that evidence look like?
- What are we going to do for students who already know what we’re teaching their peers?
- What are we going to do for students who still need help with something we’ve taught?

“Those four questions were powerful,” Brooks says. “Every grade level was working through those questions and answering them, and conversations occurred not only within grade-level teams but also between the teams. We would periodically come back together as a district and share information on our progress, which was great because we were starting to work as a district-level team in that we were sharing ideas.”

The districtwide collaboration significantly differed from what teachers had done in the past. “We were concerned that there was a perception every building was an island,” Brooks explains.

“There wasn’t alignment and collaboration to figure out the best approach for the curriculum and driving student engagement.”

Enhancing student engagement

One of the major benefits Brooks has seen from implementing Cognia’s continuous improvement process is what she describes as rich conversations about student learning progress, student engagement, and parent and family engagement.

As a result of analyzing data recorded from observing students using Cognia’s Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool® (eleot®), MSD classrooms showed an increase in instructional practices that engage students in their learning. Rigorous coursework, discussions, and tasks that require the use of higher-order thinking (e.g., analyzing, applying, evaluating, synthesizing) are more prevalent. Students across the district are more actively engaged in learning activities, make connections between lesson content and real-life experiences, and demonstrate or verbalize their understanding of lesson content. In addition, MSD teachers have continued their efforts to maintain a positive, welcoming learning environment within each school building.

The new practices arising from MSD’s eleot analysis also helped keep students engaged during the disruptions initiated by COVID-19. Cognia Student Engagement Surveys administered during the 2020–21 school year showed that only 7% of MSD students were “cognitively disengaged” (i.e., no longer invested in learning). That figure is lower than the statewide percentage of 9%. It is also less than half the 18% of K–12 students nationwide who

described themselves in a 2020 Education Week survey as being “much less motivated” in their studies. (It should also be noted that the same survey indicated 48% of teachers nationwide considered their students to be much less motivated.)

Unexpected communication boost

MSD selected improved communication as one of its continuous improvement goals, and several stakeholder groups verified the need for it through Cognia’s stakeholder interviews and survey results. Improved internal communication would enable educators to align practice so students could move into upper grades more smoothly. Additionally, the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory reports that research shows “a positive and convincing relationship between family involvement and benefits for students, including improved academic achievement.”

While the COVID-19 pandemic caused MSD to pause its pursuit of some goals, the district ramped up communication. “We all learned to Zoom,” Brooks says. “Before, we’d spend 15 to 20 minutes driving from one building to another to have a meeting. Suddenly we’re more efficient. And we could pull in large numbers of people.” District Superintendent Dr. Greg Bailey started having weekly before-school “coffee with the superintendent” zoom meetings with staff to share information. “Teachers were able to ask questions, and share concerns and struggles,” Brooks says.

Dr. Bailey also conducted virtual community chats every other week, and both he and building principals sent out email updates. “Parents had opportunities to raise their hand and ask questions during the community chats,” Brooks says. “And our board meetings were done via Zoom. Everything became way more transparent. Thanks to Superintendent Bailey, communication really did improve.”





When the district reopened for the 2020–21 academic year, MSD leaders did not let what they’d learned about communication go to waste. “We started the school year off with task force committees made up of parents, teachers, and administrators,” Brooks says. “Some also had students on them.” Having a variety of stakeholders working together helped keep communication channels open and reduced the disorder and uncertainty caused by the pandemic. “I told Dr. Bailey that we really made gains on the communication goal,” Brooks says.

Great results

Due to the disruptions caused by COVID-19, Idaho’s Department of Education decided to forego gathering much of the academic performance data for 2020 and the first half of 2021. However, 2019 test scores show that MSD’s collaboration and engagement efforts boosted its already high performance. One of the biggest gains was the percentage of students who ranked as advanced on state science tests. During the 2014–15 school year, nearly 39% of students achieved advanced scores. In 2019, that percentage jumped to 46%.

As part of its dedication to continuous improvement, MSD leaders have been conducting annual reviews to gauge progress toward their goals and opportunities for improvement. Brooks believes the ongoing, cyclical practice is enabling the district to build on strength. “It’s a process that should never end—that you should always continue doing,” she says. “It should be a built-in habit of mind for every school and district.”

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.

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