

Minot Public Schools

**Creating Shared Improvement Initiatives and Momentum
for District and School Leaders in North Dakota**



As part of its efforts to ensure that North Dakota students have access to equitable, high-quality education, the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction requires all schools in the state to develop a strategy map and participate in a continuous improvement process with its collaborative partner, Cognia™.

Cognia is a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization that focuses on continuous improvement and accredits primary and secondary schools globally. When district leaders at Minot Public Schools (MPS) started working with Cognia, they engaged in a diagnostic review and improvement process to address the root causes for underperformance, guide improvement actions, and build leadership capacity to champion meaningful change and continuous improvement districtwide. Along the way, MPS leaders experienced firsthand how a defined and tangible strategy map enhanced their district and school planning processes and helped them move toward a shared vision.

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Building the Strategy Map

Minot, settled as a western boom town in the late 1800s, is the fourth-largest city in North Dakota, with a rich history in aviation and a large Scandinavian population. Minot Public Schools (MPS) is a district of 16 schools serving 7,720 students in grades K–12.

To guide Minot’s improvement initiatives, Cognia helped MPS leaders create a district strategy map. “We wanted the district to be the role model for all our schools,” said Pam Stroklund, MPS Career and Technical Education Director. “By going through the process first, district leaders would be able to assist our schools in their planning processes, while also ensuring that each school’s mission aligned with the district’s long-term vision and mission to drive continuous improvement plans.”

District leaders learned how to use Cognia’s tools and resources and to integrate them with what MPS was already doing to make the district and its schools more efficient and accountable. The process was flexible enough to adapt to changing and challenging circumstances, which was called into play with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in spring of 2020. When schools were closed, students were forced to learn remotely. Though MPS’s immediate needs were altered, the district kept making progress.

“Regardless of what’s going on around us and what external factors interfere, we can’t just ‘do the work’ and then forget about it,” said MPS Superintendent, Dr. Mark Vollmer. “We have to change what we’re doing right along with the times.”

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Focusing on Continuous Improvement

With the initiation process completed and a strategy map in hand, Cognia worked with district leaders, principals, and other stakeholders to develop a plan and timelines for establishing three key strategic themes: student success, climate and culture, and resources and processes.

Critical initiatives were developed to support each theme, along with metrics to evaluate the initiatives’ success. For example, climate and culture involves investing in processes and programs for students at all levels, and focuses on creating a safe and secure learning environment. To improve its climate and culture, MPS is leveraging its professional learning communities and developing family engagement and community partnerships.

Cognia also assisted district leaders in thinking strategically, exploring the future to consider what might be in the pipeline for students, and

engaging in visionary thinking beyond improving student performance. Leaders began asking questions such as “What do we hope for our students?” “What can students accomplish if we improve their environment and expand opportunities?” “What changes in our community might affect students in the next few years?”

Based on his conviction that the district’s students and their families deserve the absolute best teachers and administrators, Dr. Vollmer feels it’s important to keep improving. “As leaders we can either sit around feeling like victims, or we can work to make things better,” he said. “In addition to guiding instruction, education leaders must support students who are impacted by trauma, help teachers manage students’ behavioral issues, and take other steps to sustain learning and the school community even during challenging times like those experienced during the pandemic.

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Moving the Needle for Students and Families

After the on-site Diagnostic Review, Cognia’s improvement specialists helped the district analyze the resulting data and address improvement priorities. Through this process MPS identified two key opportunity areas: family engagement and data-informed practices. “If there was ever a time that we needed to engage our families, it was in the midst of the pandemic,” said Dr. Vollmer. “We kept our eye on the ball and kept family engagement in play. Our team has been working hard on these initiatives and cemented them in a way that’s user friendly for both our individual school teams and our district team.”

Stroklund added that she particularly liked Cognia’s step-by-step approach, which included:

- Determining evidence-based strategies and interventions to improve student performance
- Prioritizing use of resources to increase organizational effectiveness
- Developing an improvement plan to guide continuous improvement and school turnaround efforts

“These steps allowed the district and our schools to move the needle without imposing unrealistic deadlines or burdensome responsibilities on

our school and district team members,” said Stroklund. “We appreciated the coaching that Cognia provided and especially welcomed the training sessions and workshops.” In fact, during the 2020–2021 school year, Cognia was in Minot three times to work directly with the district leadership team and individual schools.

“The process of creating a strategy map helped our district communicate openly and consistently with educators and families,” said Stroklund. “As we added new activities, it was transparent as to which school was doing what. And the strategy map provides a great graphic of all the initiatives that we can look at, quickly, to make sure we’re still on track.”

Melissa Stanley, MPS Professional Learning Coordinator, offered an additional perspective. “Cognia has respectfully honored the district’s voice, which might otherwise get drowned out in favor of outside ideas, initiatives, and plans. When our improvement team questioned a proposed approach, for instance, Cognia made specific suggestions to assuage the concerns.”

This flexibility led to a good working relationship between district administrators and Cognia, and ultimately translated to constructive relationships across the entire school district.

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Moving Forward

As part of its improvement initiatives, MPS set achievement goals related to math and reading. “Right now, the most alarming thing we’re hearing is that some students were rock stars at remote learning and others have really fallen behind,” said Dr. Vollmer. Although it’s difficult to gather data on behavior and social emotional learning, district leaders feel these aspects are important to measure as well.

In spring 2021, the district identified a robust summer-school program, and offered incentives to get families to enroll their children. “We’re also trying to dig into our current interventions to see if they’re working, and whether we’re accomplishing what we set out to do with these interventions,” said Dr. Vollmer. “Then, the next big conversation will be around getting rid of whatever isn’t working and doing what we need to do to fix it.”

Some of those “fixes” will fall on the shoulders of individual schools. “As we’ve continued this process, one thing I’ve noticed is that our schools are coming to the table better prepared because they value their time,” said Dr. Vollmer. “It’s a bit like a church potluck in that if you come to the table and walk away hungry, it’s your own fault. It’s all there—you just have to dig in and do it.”

The district expects to implement its three-year improvement strategy by 2024. “I’m excited for our future,” added Stanley, who has been an working on both the family engagement and data-informed practice strategies over the past year. “I had a school leader tell me that it’s been exhausting year. But he also said, ‘I have never felt better about Minot Public Schools than I do right now with all the pieces coming together and the direction we’re going.’”

About Cognia

Cognia is a global nonprofit improvement organization dedicated to helping institutions and other education providers grow learners, educators, and leaders. Cognia offers accreditation and certification, assessment, and professional services within a framework of continuous improvement. Serving more than 36,000 public and private institutions from early learning through high school in 85 countries, Cognia brings a global perspective to advancing teaching and learning.

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