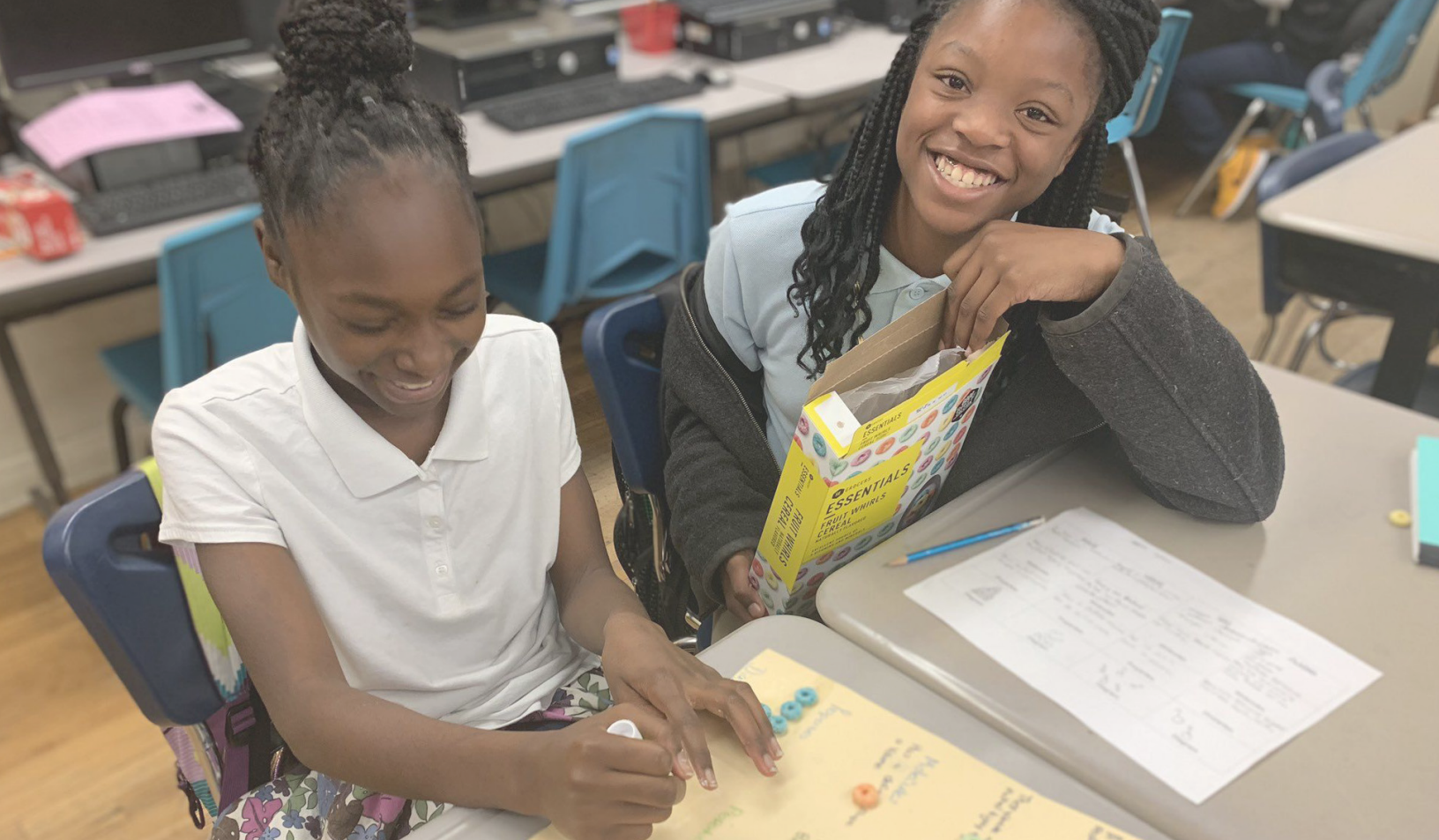




Steady improvements

Montgomery Public Schools move out of state intervention
and restore the public's confidence in only two years

When Dr. Ann Roy Moore agreed to be the interim superintendent for Montgomery Public Schools (MPS) in Alabama in 2018, the district was struggling with finances, board governance, academic performance, and student absenteeism. More than half of the schools in the city, the third largest in Alabama, had been designated as underperforming by the state.



In 2017, the Alabama Department of Education (DOE) had placed MPS under intervention. Among the district's 50 schools—which include a children's center, two career academies, six magnet schools, 27 elementary schools, nine middle schools, and five high schools—27 were identified as needing Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI).

As part of its intervention, the state partnered with Cognia™ (then AdvancED), a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization that focuses on continuous improvement and accredits primary and secondary schools globally. Cognia conducted an in-depth Special

Review to diagnose root causes of underperformance in Montgomery.

“The state relies on the Cognia review as a benchmark of whether we are meeting standards,” said Dr. Moore. Based on her own and the state superintendent's previous roles, they understood how Cognia evaluations worked from the school level through the central office and were part of the state's approach to accountability.

“It is credible. Educators know that if you are doing what Cognia says you need to do, and if you are meeting or exceeding the standard, the state board will accept the decisions.”

Where to begin?

Cognia's Performance Standards are at the foundation of its approach to school improvement and accreditation. During a Cognia review, specially trained teams evaluate areas in which an institution meets the standards. The report includes a color-coded pie chart indicating where an institution or system is improving and meeting the standards (green), where work has been initiated and is emerging (yellow), and where performance is insufficient (red).

In 2018, notes Dr. Moore, "the report was virtually all yellow and red. We had a 3% green sliver because we had achievement information readily available. Unfortunately, other aspects of the report showed that we weren't using the information." After analyzing the district's policies, instructional programs, resources, and overall operations, Cognia identified a daunting 31 areas in need of improvement at MPS.

County residents were alarmed at the possibility of MPS losing accreditation. "There was a concern that this might have been the worst review anybody in the world ever had," Dr. Moore said. But she had previous experience with Cognia and with getting a district out of intervention. She knew that she and her team could overcome the challenges.

Particular focus fell on four areas of improvement.

FINANCES

Both the balance sheet and oversight fell short. The district had no Chief Financial Officer, had failed to maintain the required reserve fund balance of one month's worth of operating expenses, and hadn't filed required monthly financial reports with the state for more than five years.

LEADERSHIP

The district's policy manual was 35 years old. The board was interfering in day-to-day operations of the district, and needed to reset its roles and responsibilities. The board hadn't completed an annual evaluation in several years. There was discord within the board and with the central office.

STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Although test scores were already improving, the review showed that MPS was falling short in providing equitable learning opportunities and a learning culture for success. Student engagement—a critical factor in student success—was low.

DATA SYSTEMS

On the plus side, student achievement data was readily available. However, it wasn't being effectively used to inform decisions for improvement. Some information systems showed inaccurate data, and the systems were cumbersome, which discouraged teachers from using them appropriately.

Concrete support from Cognia

The Cognia process and relationship were crucial to the district's efforts. To support Dr. Moore's efforts, Cognia President and CEO Dr. Mark Elgart attended one of the school board's meetings and emphasized the importance of meeting standards. "It wasn't just me saying it. It was the head of an organization that has helped schools around the world," said Dr. Moore. "I used that as leverage."

Cognia Vice President for Accreditation Services Dr. Harrison was another source of aid. "If we needed to ask him anything, we could just call him up," said Dr. Moore. "He was always available as an advisor."

Dr. Moore also appreciated that Cognia's Special Review team interviewed multiple district members and community groups. "By getting information from across the board, we were satisfied that the findings were solid," she said. It was even more reassuring to know that the review team members were educators, so they understood the inner workings of a school system. "I felt that even though they're giving bad news, these people know what they're doing. It also meant a lot when they would give us a pat on the back for things we were doing well," she said.

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Facing the challenges

Once the issues were identified, Dr. Moore established a leadership team and, using the information obtained from Cognia, wrote a strategic plan to address the issues and help school staff with implementation.

The plans included roundtables for principals and leadership group meetings in which principals and central office staff discussed action items and what to cover in faculty meetings. Central staffers also attended the faculty meetings. “It was rather intense because our folks are not used to the central office sitting in on those meetings,” said Dr. Moore. “But we did it in a very helpful manner. And if we needed to chime in, we could.” But she noted that the combined leadership group meetings helped principals prepare for their staff meetings, and principals were able to handle matters very effectively.

Repairing finances

Dealing with financial issues was particularly painful. Alabama requires that every district set local taxes at a \$10 million match, at minimum. That was not enough for MPS to thrive. Other districts in the state had anywhere from \$28 million to \$100 million.

Additionally, Alabama required that the district’s budget for the central office be 5% of the total budget. As a sign that the administration was willing to take its own medicine, MPS central office reduced its budget to 3% of the total budget and “we even reduced staffing in the central office,” said Dr. Moore. The remaining office staff stepped up and took on double and triple their previous workload. To accomplish their goals, MPS officials sometimes worked until 10 p.m. and on weekends to put the strategic plan into action. Overall, MPS reduced the district workforce by 100 people across various job categories.

Board effectiveness

Another issue identified by Cognia was board governance. Board members weren’t getting along, the board’s annual evaluation had not been conducted for several years, and its bylaws hadn’t been updated in at least 15 years. Dr. Harrison conducted private retreats with board members to help them understand their roles and responsibilities and to resolve relational issues.

Board members also performed self-evaluations to determine what they needed to improve. New members learned about the legislative actions, policies, and procedures that regulated board actions. The board also

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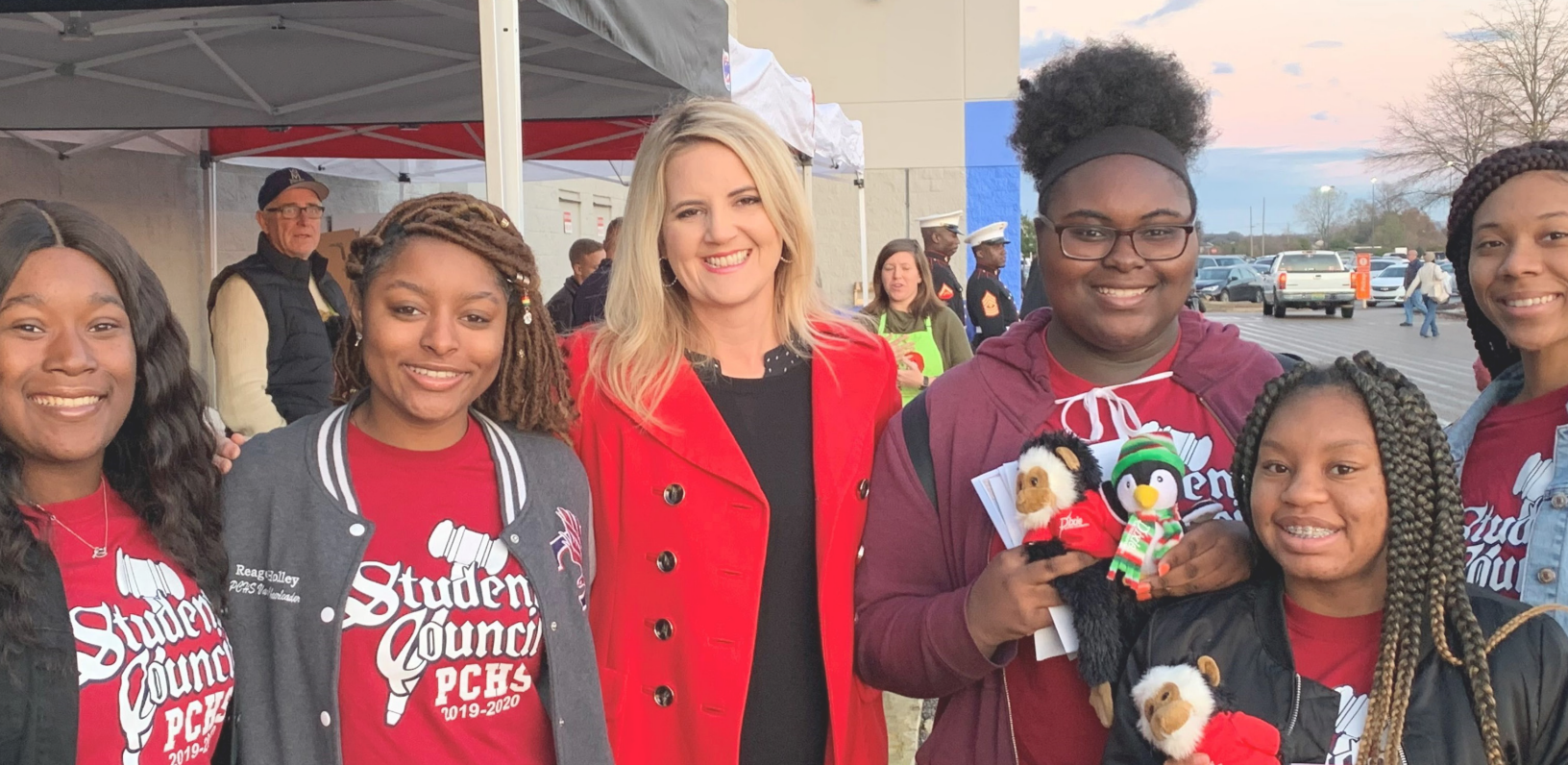
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worked on their goals, first at a dedicated retreat held by Dr. Moore, and later during training at the school board association office.

Increasing student engagement for better outcomes

Student learning and attendance were major areas of concern. Cognia provided MPS educators with training on its Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool® (eleot®). The eleot is a student-centered tool to gather data on how students respond to various aspects of instruction in classrooms. The eleot data helped teachers figure out what professional development they needed and how to increase student engagement. Additionally, teachers who were exemplary at engaging students became models for their colleagues.





Recognizing “suitable and significant progress”

All of the district’s planning and hard work paid off. In June 2021, the state board voted to release MPS from intervention. The vote was the result of a resolution stating that the district had “achieved suitable and significant progress.” On December 1, 2021, the district became independent of state oversight, to great local acclaim.

As in many states, the Alabama DOE gives schools and districts an annual “report card”—a grade based on test scores, graduation rates, measures of college and career readiness, and the percentage of students who missed more than 15 days of school in a school year (chronic absence). In just two years, MPS’s grade climbed from a D (69 out of 100) to C (74 out of 100). (The state waived 2020 accountability results due to the COVID-19 pandemic.) The district demonstrated improvements in each of the focus areas.

FINANCES

Among the fiscal improvements, the district:

- Reduced its annual budget by \$13 million
- Reduced locally funded staff by 240
- Reestablished and exceeded monthly operating budget reserve; MPS has a cash reserve containing three months’ worth of operating expenses (\$58–\$59 million)

LEADERSHIP

Relationships among board members have greatly improved, and members understand the boundaries for their goal setting and decision making.

STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

The data tell the story. For example, MPS’s academic achievement score, which reflects overall test results, rose from 45.21 to 51.06 (scores indicate points earned), with 78% of the schools improving test scores. Also, in 2017, only 44% of schools had shown progress reducing chronic absences. By 2019, all schools showed improvement. Highlights of the improvements are shown below, for CSI schools, non-CSI schools, and the district overall.

Percentage of schools showing improvement

	CSI	Non-CSI	Overall
Report Card score	100%	79%	86%
Academic achievement (test scores)	60%	85%	78%
Academic growth	73%	74%	73%
Chronic absence	100%	91%	94%
Graduation rate	67%	60%	63%

DATA SYSTEMS

Every aspect of the system was studied, resulting in a redesign that improved accuracy and ease of use, and streamlined the use of data to inform instruction and decision making.

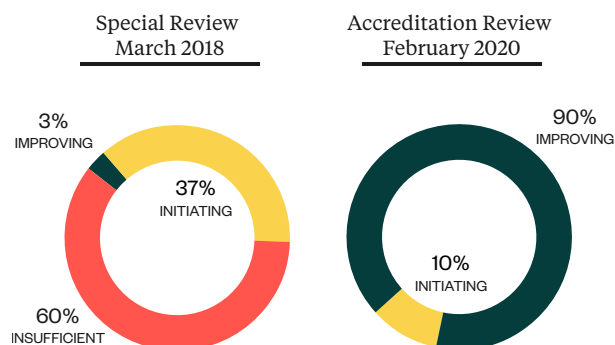
Additional areas of success

In the district's drive to provide students with equitable and engaging learning, it also converted some schools into STEM-focused institutions. Cognia provided training on STEM instruction and how to create STEM-certified schools. As of 2021, the district had two fully certified STEM schools, with three more engaged in the certification process.

And in Cognia's report from its 2020 Accreditation Engagement Review, that 3% green pie-chart sliver indicating emerging improvement transformed to 90%, with only 10% still showing as red. Looking back, Dr. Moore says "For some people, this challenge might have been overwhelming. But I like challenges and Cognia was there to help us move in the right direction."



Cognia Reports



Changing the narrative

In the past, recalls Dr. Moore, when something went wrong, community members would consider it typical of MPS. Dr. Moore was keenly sensitive to community perceptions. "As we got different reports back on our progress, we made sure the public knew what was happening. We let everyone know that we'd accomplished something new. We told them on billboards, put it on the website, shared with local media, and made sure the state superintendent knew.

Now, says Dr. Moore, the whole narrative has changed. "If I go to the grocery store, people will tell me, 'You all are really doing a good job.' It's so gratifying to know that the community recognizes the results of our hard work."

Of course, the hard work doesn't let up. But according to Dr. Moore, the processes that seemed so challenging several years ago are now routine. "The next review will be smooth sailing because we carry out our improvements 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. 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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