



**Case Study:**  
**Liberty Public Schools**  
Liberty, Missouri



# Data-Guided Progress

Liberty Public Schools uses knowledge gained through the Cognia accreditation process to rework its strategic plan

Liberty Public Schools (LPS) in Missouri is a high-performing school district that consistently meets the standards of the Missouri School Improvement Program, the state's accountability and accreditation system. In 2019, LPS saw an opportunity to move beyond simply complying with state standards and decided to reset its strategic plan to be “more agile and flexible.”

Located just northeast of Kansas City, the suburban district of LPS serves more than 12,500 students spread across an early childhood center, 11 elementary schools, four middle schools, two high schools, and one alternative school.





LPS Superintendent, Dr. Jeremy Tucker, set out to redesign the district's strategic plan. "We value innovation, whether it's for students who are struggling, Title One, free to reduced lunch, minority populations, or gifted students," stated Dr. Tucker. "So, we wanted something that really focused on innovation, diversity, equity, and inclusion."

Dr. Tucker and his strategic leadership team consulted with Cognia™, a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization that focuses on continuous improvement and accredits primary and secondary schools globally, to help guide the strategic planning process through accreditation.

As part of that process, Cognia's specially trained Engagement Review Team used its proprietary Performance Standards Diagnostic, based on rigorous research and best practices, to evaluate how well the district was meeting learners' needs. Cognia's performance standards laid the foundation for improvement planning and implementation, serving as a powerful tool for driving institutional change.

"Cognia is an additional layer for us," Dr. Tucker said. "It ratchets up our area of focus beyond just our state accreditation system. For us, it's a blend of the two because we really feel the value in both."



## Data Collection to Guide Improvement

Prior to partnering with Cognia, LPS, like many districts, had found comprehensive data collection, management, and analysis to be challenging. Now, each of the district's 19 schools use the parent, staff, and student versions of Cognia surveys. During the accreditation review, the Cognia team regularly reviewed those surveys to assess the schools' climate, educational programs, and resources to inform decision making.

In addition to Cognia surveys, the Engagement Review Team also held focus groups with district leaders, building-level leadership teams, elementary and middle school students, and parents. Dr. Tucker especially appreciated the insights gained from these interviews. "It's incredibly rich information that you don't get from just clicking survey boxes," he said.

Conducting classroom walkthroughs was another critical component to data gathering. "It's one thing for our administrators or board members to share what's going on and another thing for the team to actually walk through a classroom and see everything in action," Dr. Tucker stated. "All of that produces the data that we can cull through, whether it's open-ended comments or the ratings of our evaluators as it relates to the Cognia standards."

Building-level leaders echoed Dr. Tucker's appreciation. "Cognia's data collection process helped me reflect on our work because it validated what we are already doing, but it also provided windows to look for further growth opportunities," said one assistant high school principal.

## Making Data a Part of District Practices

Cognia's review team returned to LPS in December 2021 to conduct a virtual engagement review (due to pandemic concerns) and monitor the district's progress. The team also reviewed numerous documents related to the district's strategic plans initiatives and provided feedback.

The district's innovation and learning department analyzed the collected data to decide next actions. Additionally, Dr. Tucker and his team shared Cognia reports with the Board of Education to keep them updated on how the district fared in the reported areas.

Dr. Tucker plans to continue this approach to data collection and analysis so that LPS educators will know where learners are on the learning continuum at any given time. "We look at what the data tells us in terms of placement and gifted courses or advanced placement, dual credit, ACT scores, or what types of supports specific students need," he said.

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## Tools to Map a New Direction

To steer the work on its new strategic plan, LPS created a graduate profile and a Vivid Vision guide. The knowledge and insight gained from Cognia's surveys, interviews, and walkthroughs helped guide the creation of those two documents. The graduate profile outlines the skills and dispositions that should be instilled in LPS students to ensure their lifelong success. It states that all students should be able to do the following:

- Apply skills attained from literacy, mathematics, humanities, sciences, technology, the arts, and physical education across a variety of contexts in meaningful ways.
- Interact, work, and develop authentic relationships with people from diverse cultural backgrounds with respect for all unique beliefs, customs, and perspectives.
- Cultivate a deep understanding of self and the ability to leverage strengths while recognizing and addressing areas of needed growth.
- Engage and contribute to a work environment in a professional manner, equipped with necessary skills to succeed.
- Recognize opportunities for success while applying divergent thinking and bias toward action to their work.

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## Guiding Documents

The Vivid Vision document includes the graduate profile and presents the district’s vision of “a future where learning is personalized to meet the academic and social emotional needs of all learners, while ensuring their aspirations are within reach.”

“We did that work just before the pandemic, and we’ve been rolling it out during the pandemic,” said Dr. Tucker. He reported that people have latched onto both documents. “They recognize the skills and dispositions that we’ve identified really can equip students to be successful in whatever they pursue in life,” he said.

## Realigning During a Pandemic

Dr. Tucker is extremely proud of the way his district team adjusted to Cognia’s accreditation process during the pandemic. “It is a testament to our team in terms of how they structured it, organized it, gathered all the information, leveraged Zoom calls and technology, and so forth,” he said. “They did a phenomenal job while juggling their regular day job. And they did it all during a pandemic.”

He reported that, like many districts across the nation, LPS students’ learning was affected by the pandemic. “A select number of students were impacted by the transitional instructional approaches during the past few years, and their engagement and performance suffered as a result,” he said. However, Dr. Tucker noted that the processes and programs that the district has put in place helped educators to address those student needs, and, as a result, LPS did not see significant decreases in student achievement.



## Student Performance

For example, the proportion of students scoring as proficient or advanced on Missouri's English language test has declined by only 3.5 percentage points, from 62.9% in 2018 to 59.4% in 2021. Additionally, the district adapted quickly to the needs of student subgroups such as English learners (ELs). In 2020, disrupted learning led to the percentage of EL students who became proficient in English falling from 67% to 28%. But the following year, despite students still recovering emotionally from school lockdowns, isolation, and pandemic deaths, the percentage of EL students gaining English proficiency rose to 44.5%.

Another particularly noteworthy milestone has been the district's science scores. Through the efforts of teachers and district leadership, the percentage of students scoring as proficient or advanced on the state test has risen from 10% in 2018 to 44% in 2021. A major key to this significant increase is the 2021 review finding that LPS had succeeded in fully meeting 10 of Cognia's 12 standards for an effective learning culture. Also, the district had implemented quality practices that were effectively meeting improvement requirements for the other two standards.

The district's educators also made note of progress in instruction and learning. "We continually look for ways to increase student engagement," said one elementary school principal. "And we are continually looking for evidence of learning and creating personal paths toward learning. The more efficient we become in truly understanding and breaking down standards, the more we're able to personalize learning and provide necessary feedback for student growth and relevancy."

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## Planning for the Future

The two-year strategic plan reset was a success. The district's Board of Education formally adopted the updated strategic plan in fall 2021, and Dr. Tucker is already looking to the future. "We don't want to assume at any point that we've mastered this. Because in education, the work's never really done," he stated.

School leaders are reviewing past data to plan future actions. "Reengaging students post-pandemic has been a journey, and it was powerful to rewind and review past practices that were enhancing our school," said a principal at one of the high schools.

The district is also exploring the possibility of a system that not only develops students' skills and dispositions but also results in real-world learning experiences. Dr. Tucker envisions experiences such as internships in which students earn credentials or badges. The system would provide students with an extended transcript or documentation that they can incorporate into resumes.

Dr. Tucker believes his experience with Cognia has equipped him with deeper knowledge about effecting accountability and accreditation as a district leader. He said, "We value continuous improvement. We value innovation, and that's where I think Cognia is invaluable—it keeps us moving forward in an effort to try to create our innovative culture while at the same time reflecting and remaining in that constant cycle of continuous improvement."





# 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 marked 125 years of service to education.

**Find out more at [cognia.org](https://cognia.org).**





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