



# Alabama's Holistic Approach to School Improvement

HOW DATA AND OBSERVATION TOOLS BUILT FOR EDUCATION  
HELP INFORM DECISION-MAKING





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Improving student outcomes was vital before the coronavirus pandemic. Though the worst of the COVID-19 crisis is hopefully behind us, its impacts on education continue. Post-pandemic, the stakes for students are even higher, as explained in a [special report](#) from the US Department of Education:



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“COVID-19’s impacts have fallen unevenly and preliminary data indicate that they appear to be deepening disparities in educational opportunity and achievement, many of them generations in the making. With the pandemic’s spotlight on these longstanding challenges, we have a rare moment as a country to take stock and to begin the hard work of building our schools back better and stronger.”

Educators need to grasp this rare moment to address urgent needs: Recover lost learning, overcome generations-long inequities and improve the quality of education for all our children. It’s time for school leaders to look for new approaches that enable continuous improvement.

## IMPROVEMENT IN ACTION

The Alabama State Department of Education implemented a continuous improvement model across the state. Its goal was to improve outcomes for all schools, regardless of their academic achievement, according to Melissa Shields, NBCT, coordinator at the Office of School Improvement at ALSDE.

“We often say there is no perfect way to write a plan, but there are certainly inadequate ways to do so,” Shields says. Alabama’s plan aimed to be “differentiated and actionable based on the data, resources, structures, and accountability requirement.”

To get there, ALSDE adopted Cognia’s research-based continuous improvement framework



and platform. Cognia was selected because of its commitment to high-quality work and strong track record of improving schools.

“Our relationship with Alabama goes back approximately a decade,” says Mark Quintana, EdD, vice president of Cognia’s Southeast region. “The Department of Education has evolved with us as our continuous improvement framework has evolved and as we’ve integrated our best practices resources. Our model has become more future thinking, planning out for three to five years. What I see is that when you have that articulation and alignment for continuous improvement within a district, parents have confidence in the quality and rigor of the system.”

Using the framework, each school created a school improvement plan that aligned with district and state strategies.

## CONCRETE STEPS TOWARD IMPROVEMENT

Cognia’s platform simplified reporting for all stakeholders, from the state office to individual classrooms, according to Shields.

Cognia tools were already in use for other initiatives and “having everything in one place was appealing,” says Shields.

The system includes data tools designed to help inform decision-making. “Our formative resources measure teaching practice and student engagement to support continuous improvement and, ultimately, professional growth,” explains Quintana. Data sources include classroom observations, stakeholder surveys and needs assessment diagnostics to “help make decisions for professional learning.” These tools help ensure fidelity to curriculum program implementation and provide insight about what is working and what needs to be adjusted.

Alabama is also implementing Cognia’s Teacher Observation Tool statewide in 2022-23 to help support equity between schools in alignment with their approved Every Student Succeeds Act plan.



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# A HOLISTIC MODEL: 6 Steps for Ongoing Success

**C**ognia's comprehensive framework includes six steps that support the envisioning, planning, implementing and evaluating necessary for strategic decision-making and ongoing success.

**1 Imagine the possibilities:**  
We must plan differently to address learning loss and inequity.

**2 Communicate with stakeholders:** We won't get there alone, but together we can define priorities that align with our vision.

**3 Plot the journey:** We're more successful when we understand the quest and how it will help us meet our goals.

**4 Initiate the journey:**  
We increase acceptance and adoption when staff and stakeholders are scaffolded for success.

**5 Build momentum and capacity:** We need everyone moving forward to achieve the improvement we envision.

**6 Reflect, evaluate and adjust:** We can always do better.

One Alabama district reaping the benefits of this process is Escambia County. District leaders got together to create a continuous improvement plan focused on four themes: culture and climate, students and learning, professional learning, and resources for learning, according to Assistant Superintendent Michele Collier.

"Our themes are guiding conversations with schools so that we are aligned in our efforts to put students first in Escambia," says Collier.

For learning initiatives, Escambia aligned their resources and curriculum documents across all schools. It provided school teams with dedicated time for collaborating on common lesson plans and common assessments and taking part in professional development.

"The entire district participated in Capturing Kids Hearts and ongoing training to support teachers as we implement the new lesson plans and assessments," says Collier.

The plan paid off, Collier notes.

"We are seeing an increase in student engagement through the new strategies teachers implement from their training and the follow-up support," Collier says. "Professional development is not a one-time effort. We believe these efforts will increase student achievement." ■



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# Combining Data to Drive Improvement

**C**hange is most effective when input comes from multiple sources. Examining data from different tools on the Cognia Improvement Platform can lead to better initiatives and outcomes.

**Observations** of the classroom yield insight into the effectiveness of learning environments and instructional techniques. **Surveys** of student sentiment reveal whether students feel included and involved. The **Diagnostics** tool helps educators identify root causes of challenges.

Analyzing all these sources — and understanding how they work together — lets teachers identify gaps and correlations and develop or revise practices that create the classroom community they envision.

**1 OBSERVATIONS.** Cognia has observation tools that measure instruction and the learning environment:

- **eleot®**, the effective learning environment observation tool®, measures student engagement in the classroom. It looks for observable evidence of classroom factors that create positive, engaged classroom communities.
- **The Teacher Observation Tool** measures instructional practice in the classroom. “Teacher observation provides the opportunity for an educator to receive valuable feedback from school instructional leaders to sharpen skill sets, to enhance techniques and to gain awareness of best practices,” explains Jeff Langham, director of Cognia’s Southeast region. The tool observes culture and climate, learning, essentials, agency and relationship.

Using data from both tools is invaluable because it creates what Langham calls “a 360-degree view of the classroom” that “can lead to valuable recommendations and coaching that can make true magic in the classroom all based on structured, quantifiable data.”

**2 SURVEYS.** Cognia’s survey module features curated best practice surveys and templates so schools and districts can create their own.

Surveys allow users to gather input from all stakeholders: students, teachers, parents or even the community. The most popular polls assess culture and climate to measure stakeholders’ engagement and satisfaction.

**3 DIAGNOSTIC REVIEWS.** Cognia delivers a root cause analysis into the current status of the teaching and learning process at schools.

The Cognia Performance Standards help with identification of strengths and opportunities to elevate instructional quality even further. “That gives you a roadmap to next steps needed to advance learning,” Quintana notes.

Multiple types of data from different sources enable decision-making “from firsthand evidence of which practices and strategies need to be enriched and embraced and those which need to be revisited and/or abandoned,” Langham adds. “One educator has described the professional learning opportunities that can be connected to the use of these observation tools as ‘the future of professional development.’” ■



"We plan to help schools align their plans, PLCs and instructional rounds to constructs and have created an Alabama Continuous Improvement Plan [resource page](#) outlining Beginning of the Year, Mid-Year and End-of-Year protocols, trainings and tools," explains Shields.

The department will continue to grow this resource and coordinate with other state offices. Use of this observation tool is critical. The state has been training educators to ensure data obtained has the highest degree of reliability and validity.

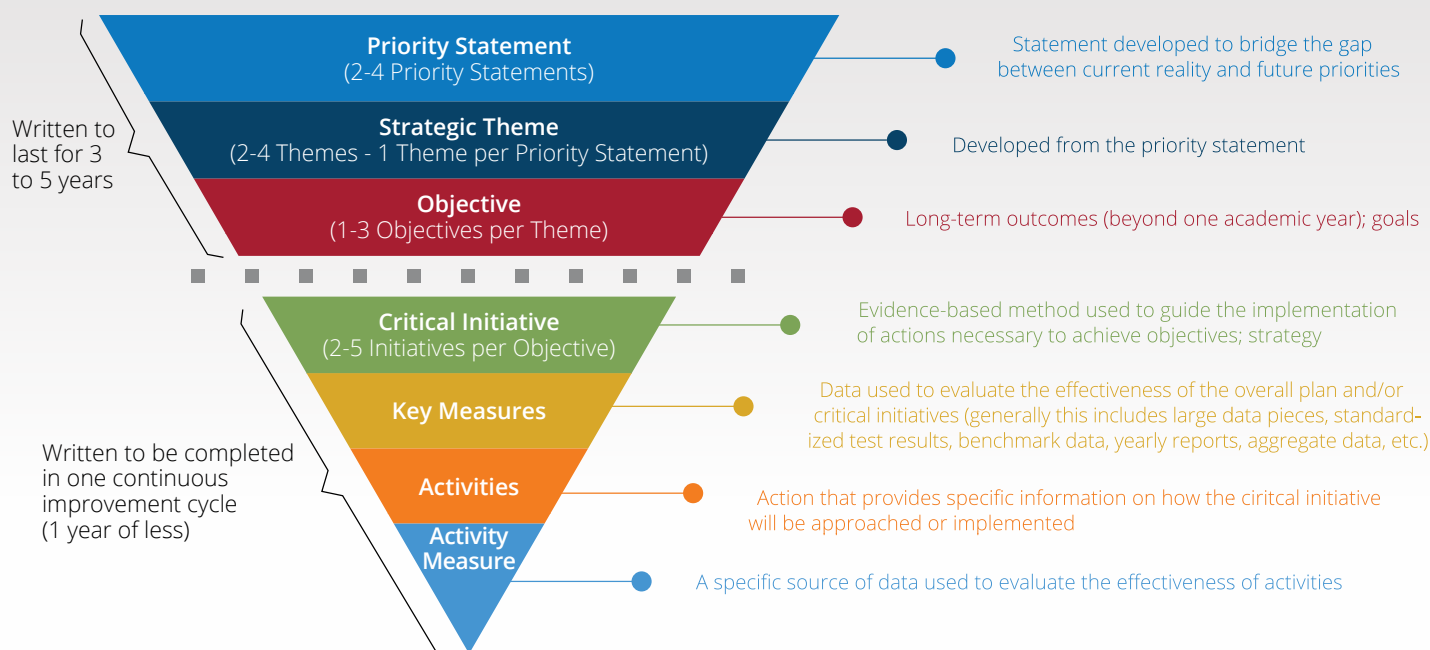
The ALSDE created a map to help guide schools in building an action

plan, using Cognia's continuous improvement model.

Since implementing Cognia's framework and tools, Alabama educational leaders have reported an uptick in stakeholder engagement and richer, more focused conversations about goals and equitable outcomes.

"More than ever, effective avenues to school improvement must be a priority," says Jeff Langham, director of Cognia's Southeast region. "What investment could be more important than our children's education and well-being? Their future — and ours — is at stake." ■

## ALABAMA CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT PLAN



## ABOUT Cognia

Cognia™ is a global, nonprofit improvement organization dedicated to helping institutions and other education providers grow learners, teachers, and leaders. Cognia offers accreditation and certification, assessment, and professional services within a framework of continuous improvement. Serving 36,000 public and private institutions from early learning through high school in more than 90 countries, Cognia brings a global perspective to advancing teaching and learning.

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20221216\_Community Story-AL Improvement-FW-3