



Case Study:
North Dakota Department
of Public Instruction



Building Partnerships

The North Dakota Department of Public Instruction turns a system of silos into a collaborative whole through trusting relationships that spur progress over time

The start of something new

The North Dakota Department of Public Instruction (NDDPI) wanted to promote statewide educational excellence by providing all schools with one robust, structured system for continuous improvement. NDDPI staff members, the state's Council of Educational Leaders (NDCEL), and other state-level education organizations formed an investigative committee to identify the most suitable partner. After a year of exploration, they selected Cognia® (then known as AdvancEd), a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization that supports continuous improvement in schools around the globe.

Some districts within North Dakota were already working with Cognia. However, in 2013, the nonprofit contracted with NDDPI to provide continuous improvement services for all districts within the state.

While the statewide partnership was a bold and innovative step, it was just the beginning. Baesler often paraphrases the famous "speed of trust" phrase from Stephen M. R. Covey, former CEO of Covey Leadership Center. She tells NDDPI members and partners, "Progress moves at the speed of trust." As the NDDPI-Cognia partnership has continued over the years, the deepening trust between the two organizations has driven progress and improvements on both sides.

Collaborating on ESSA

The next development in NDDPI's partnership with Cognia occurred in the spring of 2016. The department was considering how best to create an accountability plan that met the requirements of the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

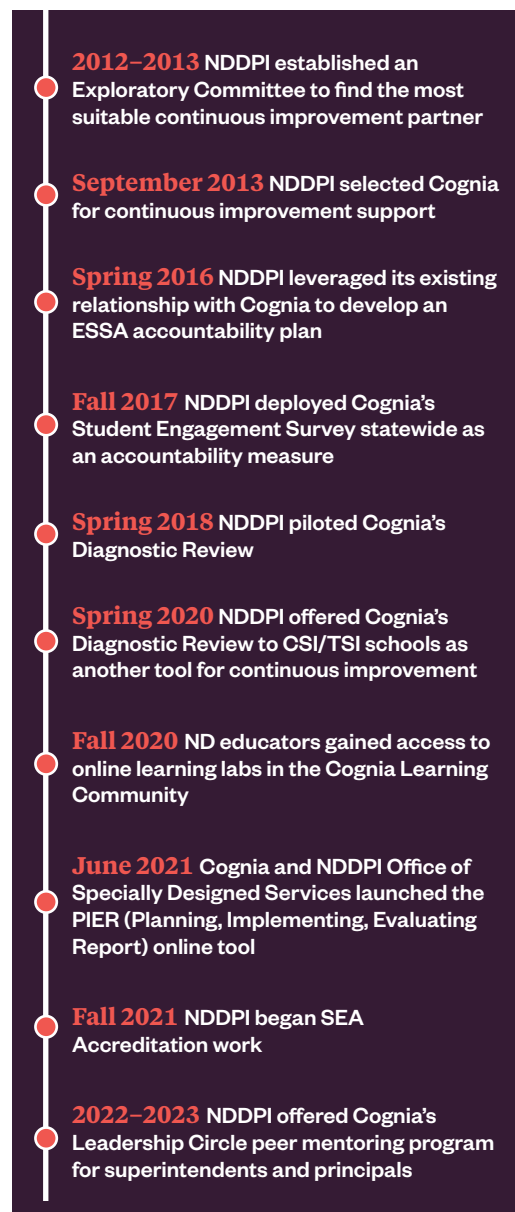
"I am not one to create a plan and then go to partners and say 'Hey, will you support my plan?' That's not partnership," stated Baesler. She knew it would be best for students if the different stakeholders within the education community developed the plan together.

Accordingly, Baesler and Assistant Superintendent Laurie Matzke put together the ESSA Planning Committee. The committee consisted of more than 50 stakeholders from large districts, small districts, higher education, the school boards association, PTO/PTA, and tribal leaders on and around ND borders.

Despite the comprehensive representation, some committee members, such as Assistant Director Lea Kugel of the Office of Specially Designed Services, were daunted by the task before them. "We were given this project from the federal level and given the freedom to create our own state plan, but we'd never really done anything like that before," she said.

"This was a new process, a new team," Matzke agreed. After the first meeting, the committee members decided it would be helpful to have a thought partner who was well versed in accountability, school improvement, and educator quality. "And obviously one of the first partners that came to mind was Cognia," said Matzke.

“Progress moves at the speed of trust.”



How the partnership expanded: A timeline

Baesler had been intrigued by what Dr. Mark Elgart, Cognia's president and CEO, had written about states helping schools continuously improve via growth metrics. "We were very, very focused on growth," she said. Baesler began speaking with Dr. Elgart about those ideas and how NDDPI could leverage them. "That's where our first real partnership and trust relationship came in," she recalled.

From then on, Dr. Elgart or another Cognia representative attended the committee meetings. "We were getting feedback from a national expert on not only the growth model but just so many of the things that were part of the plan," said Matzke. "And along with him came this whole team that was able to help support us in this process. The knowledge and experience that the Cognia staff brought was just invaluable."

NDDPI wanted its plan to include a growth metric as an academic factor. That way, educators would have an accurate view of learners' actual progression instead of just knowing whether students had met a benchmark. The committee also wanted to make sure that they had measures within the system that made the most sense for North Dakota. Rather than do exactly what other states had done, they wanted their system to reflect their values and priorities. But having the U.S. Department of Education sign off on that idea was not an easy task.

Cognia not only coached and advised NDDPI staff but also joined in the talks with the federal department. "We pulled in Dr. Elgart and his team to be on calls with us

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and the U.S. Department of Education as we negotiated," recounted Baesler. NDDPI and Cognia's joint effort proved successful, and NDDPI secured approval for its ESSA plan.

A new way of doing things

The growth metric was not the only innovative approach the committee adopted. Examples of new practices the committee implemented were:

- Implementing teacher evaluation systems that facilitate reporting on high-quality instructional practices so that educators can learn from one another
- Creating a ["Choice Ready" framework](#) that measures whether high schools are producing students who are ready for success upon graduation
- Customizing Cognia's student engagement survey to meet the state's ESSA criteria and annually administering the survey throughout North Dakota's public schools

Since 2017, North Dakota has administered statewide student engagement surveys developed in partnership with Cognia. In addition to collecting the data, Cognia assists NDDPI with analysis and arranges to have the results uploaded to the state's Insights dashboard. After this work with North Dakota, Cognia made customized versions of the survey available to other states. This is one of the ways working with North Dakota has helped the nonprofit better serve schools across the country.

To further align continuous improvement efforts across the state, NDDPI also adopted Cognia's school strategic planning and improvement process and contracted with the nonprofit to conduct training and guided-work sessions across the state during the 2018-19 school



Photo courtesy of the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction

year. Since then, Cognia has worked with NDDPI to review school plans and analyze data and information. The schools and districts make updates and improvements based on the feedback and support received from NDDPI and Cognia.

In 2023, North Dakota had two school systems recognized as a System of Distinction by Cognia, a recognition shared by only 38 other school systems in the world. Lone Tree and Northern Cass school districts demonstrated evidence of growth in learning, a healthy culture for learning, engaging and high-quality instructional environments, and effective leadership for learning. They have fully embraced and represent a system of continuous improvement

Districts embrace new practices

Baesler is especially appreciative of Cognia's support in helping districts adopt the new practices and expectations, given the size of the state and the variety of environments in and around school districts. "A district along our eastern border is very different from one located in central North Dakota," she said. "There are state-level expectations for uniformity of opportunities, but it's important to find that partner—and that partner for us is Cognia—that is able to work with local school districts to differentiate what's needed



Cognia held professional learning workshops at strategic points throughout North Dakota

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In addition to the student engagement surveys, districts also obtain data from Cognia's Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool® (eleot®) and surveys designed for other members of the school community (e.g., teachers or families). Additionally, Cognia's external review teams visit schools to evaluate those institutions' progress and areas for improvements. The nonprofit also holds an annual Cognia IMPACT Conference where it partners with NDDPI to provide professional advice to educators and obtain their feedback on current supports and processes.

“Adapting was painful at first,” said Alexander Public Schools Superintendent Leslie Bieber as she related her efforts to obtain faculty buy-in on the new initiatives. But now, Alexander Public Schools staff have completely integrated Cognia's data-based tools and practices into their improvement initiatives. They regularly use data from the eleot to make decisions on professional learning and instructional programs. They also use Cognia's surveys to monitor perceptions and progress. In fact, Alexander Public Schools has embraced Cognia's data-based approach to the point of adding in an additional survey they created

for district-specific issues. “Now, it’s embedded in our culture,” Bieber said of the data-based practices. “It’s who we are.”

Dr. Mark Vollmer, superintendent of Minot Public Schools, reported that district educators are shifting away from the idea that they can simply “know” what they’re good at and what students need. “We really had to drill down to the idea that it’s okay to not be perfect,” Vollmer said. “It’s okay to show your data and say, ‘We’re struggling here. Anybody have any ideas of how we can work to make our situation better?’ So, we’re moving away from that old-school view and seeing that we are only as good as our entire system.”

Tioga Public Schools Superintendent Carolyn Eide found that things really clicked into place for her when she attended a 2022 conference that Cognia held for North Dakota educators. “One of the best sessions I went to was one where they talked about the North Dakota State Assessment (NDSA) and how to put drivers in place and come up with goals,” she said. “It’s not rocket science; it’s what everybody should be doing. But for some reason it really hit home.” When Eide returned, she and her team began working with an instructional strategist on setting goals and evaluating outcomes.

The annual student engagement surveys have also contributed to educators’ new perspectives on instruction. Dr. Vollmer said that the survey results sparked some “tough conversations” in Minot Public Schools. “If you ask most of our teachers, they’ll tell you that they’re standing on their head trying to meet the needs of kids,” he said. “So, hearing ‘I’m bored in your class’ isn’t a real easy thing to take.” But Minot educators at both the district and school levels have used that information to improve their use of differentiated and targeted small-group instruction.

Expanding support to struggling schools and students

In 2018, the NDDPI decided to add Cognia’s Diagnostic Review to the toolset available to consistently underperforming schools, schools ranking in the bottom 10% for more than three consecutive years. The department provided grant opportunities for schools to apply for these useful needs assessment and in-depth reviews.

A Cognia Diagnostic Review is a deep root cause analysis of underperformance that guides improvement actions and builds leadership capacity to champion meaningful change. It includes an in-person review from a trained team, which involves review of data; interviews with

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teachers, leaders, students, families as well as community members; and observations of student learning, instruction, and school operations.

According to Director of Educational Improvement and Support Amanda Peterson, the department decided to offer the root cause analysis as an optional enhancement to the schools’ regular continuous improvement program. She stated, “If you have a school that is performing in the bottom 10% and they are up for accreditation, it makes sense to do a deeper dive with the Diagnostic Review.”

As mentioned, North Dakota schools are required to be actively engaged in a continuous improvement process as a part of their school approval process. The state provides support for schools to engage in a Cognia accreditation review as part of that continuous improvement process. Between 2018 and 2022, 12 of the underperforming schools also chose to do an in-depth Diagnostic Review.

“That was a high percentage of the schools that were going through their regular scheduled accreditation review,” said Peterson. “The majority of the schools that were up for accreditation did take us up on it.” In fact, two districts had all their schools undergo Diagnostic Reviews, not just the lowest performers. Peterson reports that the schools have provided very positive comments regarding the Diagnostic Review experience. “They really took the feedback to heart,” she said.

Partnering with special education

Cognia’s work with NDDPI has steadily grown more comprehensive. “Superintendent Baesler is not satisfied for Cognia to work in isolation,” noted Betsy Deal, Cognia’s regional vice president for the Midwest. “She really has been a connector and because of that, we’re working with other affiliate organizations across the state as well as more and more divisions within NDDPI. It feels like a true collaborative effort.”

An example of this is the expanded partnership with NDDPI's Office of Specially Designed Services. The office supports 31 special education units that help districts' special education case managers and monitor the implementation of and compliance with special education laws. Each special education unit works with district case managers in different regions of the state.

Every year, the Office of Specially Designed Services submits reports on its special education units to the federal government. One of those reports included information on the evidence-based practices used in schools throughout the state to help students with emotional disturbances graduate within a six-year cohort.

Like many other states, North Dakota is a local control state, which means that every district is able to choose what evidence-based practices they wish to use. "We really had no idea what evidence-based practices were being used at the local level," said Office of Specially Designed Services Assistant Director Kugel. "We'd been having a hard time with reporting."

Cognia was already helping NDDPI with efficiency and capacity building in other areas of data reporting, so their experts developed additional resources and supports to assist in this area of need. They worked with NDDPI to create an online reporting tool to help both the districts and special education units efficiently provide the information and data necessary to fully report this information as required.

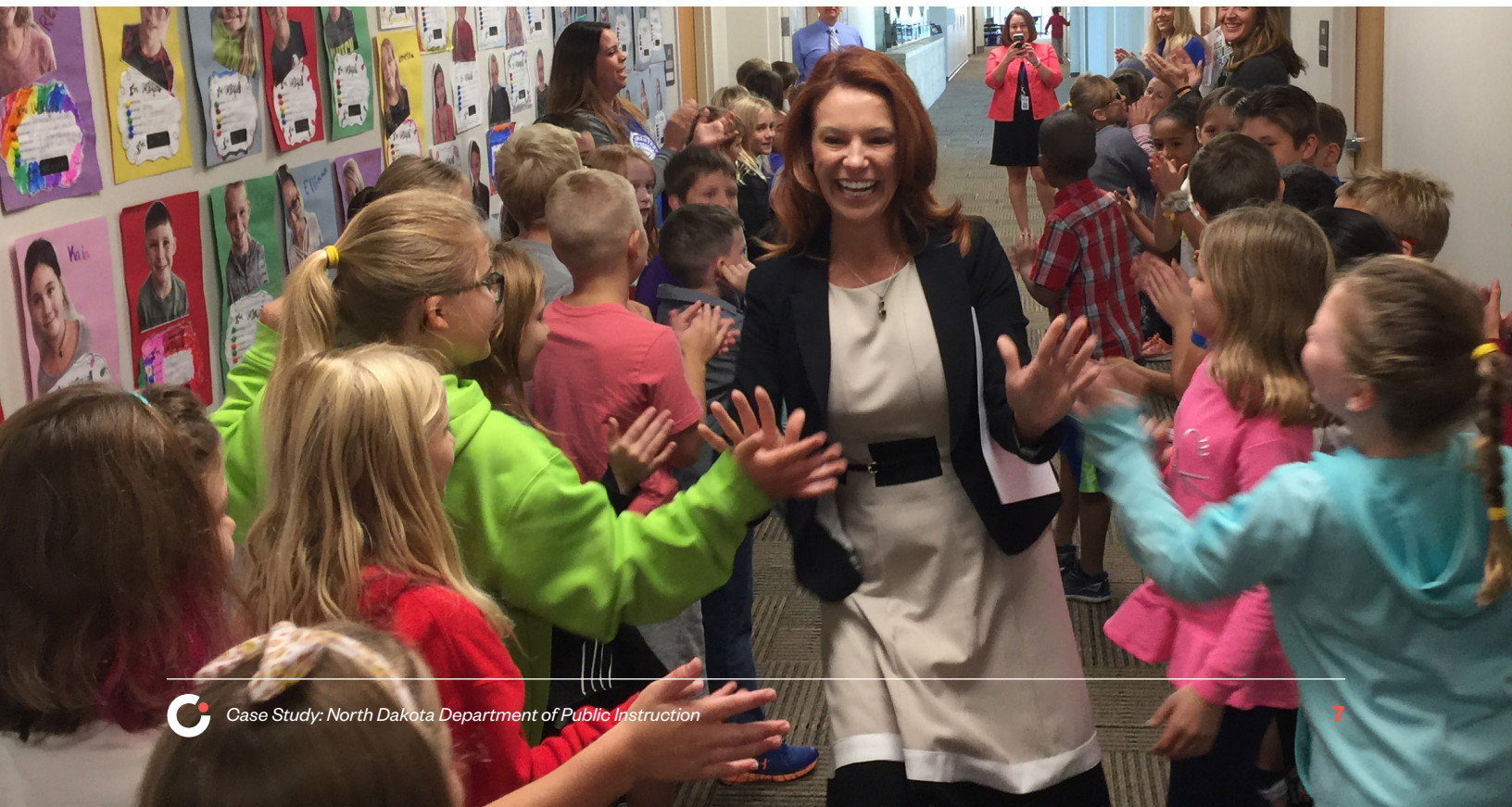
Photo courtesy of the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction

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In June 2021, Cognia and the NDDPI Office of Specially Designed Services launched the PIER (Planning, Implementing, Evaluating Report) online tool. Kugel estimates that the special education units sent Cognia 54 lists with a wide range of different practices districts were using to support their exceptional learners.

"We realized some of the list items were programming, some of them were curricular, but some of them were not even evidence-based practices," she said. As a result, Cognia and the Office of Specially Designed Services adjusted the PIER tool so that it suggests four evidence-based, research-based practices known to increase the graduation rates of students with emotional disturbances.

"The PIER tool also enables us to see whether the units are implementing those evidence-based practices with fidelity," said Kugel. "If you're not implementing them with fidelity, they're not going to do what they're supposed to do."



Expanding educators' learning opportunities

In March 2020, the pandemic forced North Dakota schools—like schools across the nation—to abruptly switch to remote teaching. NDDPI met with educators who had gained recognition as “distinguished teachers” (e.g., former teachers of the year or teacher representatives) to tap their expertise on how best to support teachers in general. The distinguished teachers pointed out that most educators were unfamiliar with digital tools and best practices for virtual instruction.

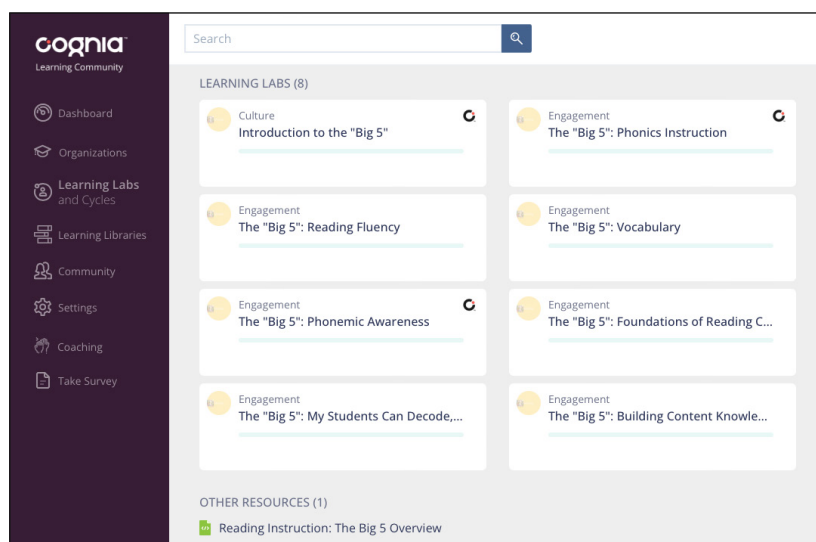
In response to NDDPI's needs, Cognia leveraged the fact that North Dakota districts, as Cognia members already involved in a continuous improvement program, had access to learning modules in what would become the [Cognia Learning Community](#), a 24/7, online platform for professional development. Cognia worked with NDDPI to highlight relevant learning labs in the library and developed additional labs and resources for the Cognia Learning Community platform to address the needs of North Dakota teachers and leaders during this critical time.

Additionally, in 2021, the North Dakota legislature passed a law requiring teacher training in the Science of Reading as part of the statewide literacy initiative. Cognia worked with NDDPI to develop resources to meet these new needs and then hosted those resources on the Cognia Learning Community platform. The platform supported NDDPI's training rollout for the literacy initiative via six Science of Reading professional development modules. “Cognia worked with the Office of Academic Support and developed those modules,” said Matzke. “It’s not part of the required training, but it provides a great in-depth introduction to this initiative. It’s been a great resource.”

Since its creation for North Dakota educators, the Science of Reading and Early Learning learning labs in the Cognia Learning Community are being made available to all Cognia members across the country. This is an example of how this partnership has resulted in improved resources for both entities, which is the true mark of a good partnership.

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The Cognia Learning Community, which currently has approximately 14,000 user accounts in North Dakota, gives teachers access to a multitude of topics: student engagement, higher-level thinking, critical thinking, and more. NDDPI reported that school districts are using the Cognia Learning Community as a supplement to their professional learning plans. Educators consult their strategy maps, survey results, eleot data, and other tools provided by NDDPI in partnership with Cognia to determine their professional development needs. Then they address those needs through the Cognia Learning Community's multi-modal professional learning opportunities.



Cognia Learning Community dashboard for the six Science of Reading modules

North Dakota's input improves Cognia's leadership support

In 2022, Baesler expressed an interest in strengthening supports for North Dakota's education leaders. Cognia suggested that district superintendents could join its [Leadership Circle](#), a program that uses the professional learning community model to provide education leaders with peer support across the United States as well as access to leadership development with top education leaders from around the country.

In the Leadership Circle, program members are part of a professional learning community where they can elicit help from thought partners on an issue, consult with peers to think through solutions, and learn from accomplished experts. The group leader submits the scenario or problem and peer members examine the problem and discuss possible solutions. In addition, Leadership Circle members can attend online Leader Chats with Cognia's Senior Vice President of Leadership Development Dr. Jeff Rose, and thought leaders like Dr. Robert Marzano, Daniel Pink, and Dr. Linda Darling-Hammond. There are also opportunities for educators to gather for in-person training events as well as problem-solving Solution Circles.

As this was being implemented in North Dakota, Baesler suggested improving the program by including another group of important school leaders. Initially the Leadership Circle included only district superintendents. "That's not what we need most," she said. "We need principals to have access." Baesler felt that extending peer mentoring support to principals would drive improvement, especially in lower-performing schools. In response to this feedback, Cognia extended the Leadership Circle to include principals in 2022.



Photo courtesy of the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction

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Post-pandemic performance

Like other states, North Dakota experienced a decline in students' academic performance due to the pandemic. NDDPI knew that in order to recover, schools and districts would need a strategic plan and trusted partners that would help them implement and focus supports for the necessary improvements. New investments in tutoring, summer school expansions, and after-school programs complemented the existing pedagogical foundation created through NDDPI's partnership with Cognia and the literacy initiatives already making a difference.

"We're already seeing some upward trending," said Baesler. "We're making stronger recovery gains in English Language Arts than we are in mathematics." In the 2021–22 school year, the state's ELA assessment data showed a 3-percentage-point gain of students ranked as proficient or advanced compared to the previous year.

"Certain grade levels are making stronger recovery progress than others," noted Baesler. The improvements are not limited to ELA. For example, students in the 11th grade demonstrated stronger math recovery with a 5-percentage-point gain over the prior year.

Baesler also cited "some bright spots" in the 2022 NAEP findings. Fourth and eighth grade scores are above the national average, and the fourth grade reading scores for Native American students increased by four points.

As schools across North Dakota implemented common practices for continuous improvement, other student performance metrics have shown increases as well. The percentage of students who graduated Choice Ready, which means the percentage of students who graduate having acquired the Essential Skills and attained readiness levels within the state framework in Post-Secondary, Workforce, and/or Military/Life Skills, increased from 45% to 61% in SY 2021–22.

NDDPI is also leveraging its practice of having educators learn success strategies from one another. The department worked with other partners to conduct a growth projection analysis that found that 40% of schools and districts had met or exceeded pre-pandemic expectations on state ELA assessments for grades five through eight. Also, 30% of schools and districts had students in that same grade range meeting or exceeding pre-pandemic expectations on the state's math assessments.

Baesler plans to closely examine those exemplars. "We want to take a look at what they did," she said. "We will try to identify demographics, school size, and do some lookalike sharing so we can scale that to other school districts in the state." She foresees incorporating that data analysis into Cognia's work with NDDPI so that school districts can include the exemplary practices in their strategy maps.

NDDPI used a combination of effective existing strategies, promising new strategies, and grants for schools to make available diagnostic assessments, professional development in the Science of Reading, as well as curricular supports and supplies. These efforts have enabled schools and districts to maintain a comprehensive and coordinated focus on continuous improvement. Established and trusted partnerships, like the one they have with Cognia, provide resources and supports aligned to those efforts.

Creating the first-ever state education agency accreditation

North Dakota and Cognia are working together to break new ground: designing the first SEA accreditation process in the nation.

During the fall of 2021, NDDPI began talks on finding ways to improve collaboration and consistency across the department. Baesler reached out to the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) to embark on a review of the function and capacity of the department. After undergoing this capacity review and outlining areas of strength as well as opportunities for growth, the department also wanted to focus on continuous improvement in the same way they were asking schools and districts to do. "We're not going to ask our teachers and school leaders to do anything we're not willing to do ourselves," stated Baesler.

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Throughout 2022, Cognia and NDDPI co-created standards for a formal accreditation review process for a state education agency, something that did not exist and had never been done. "Superintendent Baesler really wanted NDDPI to be the first state in the nation to go through this process," said Matzke. "We know that this is going to improve our agency and only make us better. We really value that process and we're glad that we've had the opportunity to work with Cognia on this issue."

NDDPI successfully completed their candidacy review, are in the accreditation process, and will have a thorough on-site review in the summer of 2023. They are excited to be engaging in a comprehensive continuous improvement process just as their schools and districts do.

Partnerships have the power to transform education

The power of partnership is bringing the whole community together to embrace the goal of improvement. Cognia knows that state education leaders as well as school and district leaders need valued partnerships to achieve their continuous improvement goals.

"NDDPI has so many partnerships in place and that number has quadrupled due to the ESSER funding," Matzke said. "But I feel comfortable saying that both Superintendent Baesler and I would agree that of all the partnerships we have, Cognia is one of our most valuable and important partnerships. If we need anything, we can reach out and the response is just phenomenal."

“As gratified as Cognia has been to help NDDPI chart an immensely innovative way forward for state-level educational leadership, the benefits have run both ways,” said Dr. Elgart. “Their input has helped Cognia better serve schools and districts across the nation by refining existing offerings, like our student engagement survey and Leadership Circle, and even introducing new benefits such as the Cognia Learning Community. We have learned so much about listening to and responding to state leaders’ needs, and we’re bringing this approach to our other state-level relationships.”

These types of partnerships help develop and strengthen student engagement, instructional strategies, and meaningful community partnerships, which have the power to not only improve school performance but build a foundation to sustain it.

“I always say, ‘progress travels at the speed of trust’ and ‘trust begins with relationships.’ Relationships are the beginning for that foundation of trust,” said Baesler. “We have traveled quickly because of trust, but we have built that trust over the last decade because of the relationships and the time that we’ve taken to invest in the relationships between NDDPI and Cognia.”

About Kirsten Baesler



Kirsten Baesler is the state school superintendent and administrator of the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction. The Superintendent and her team have led significant improvements in the graduation rates and academic success of the state’s Native American students, improved access to quality early childhood programs,

and enhanced access to computer science and cybersecurity instruction in grades K–12.

Before taking office in January 2013, Superintendent Baesler had a 24-year career in the Bismarck Public School system—the state’s largest school district—as a vice principal, library media specialist, classroom teacher, and instructional assistant. Superintendent Baesler also spent nine years as an elected member of the Mandan School Board. She was board president for seven of those nine years.

In November 2022, Superintendent Baesler became president of the Council of Chief State School Officers, representing state education organizations nationwide. Superintendent Baesler serves on more than a dozen North Dakota state boards, was one of 25 leaders chosen from across the country for the Governing Institute’s Women in Government Leadership Program, and is a Hunt-Kean Leadership Fellow.

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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