



Case Study:
Fairmont Schools
Orange County, CA



Creating a Cohesive Culture of Improvement

Cognia's expertise and flexibility help unify a private school with multiple campuses and international programs.

Fairmont Schools, a private school organization based in Orange County, California, operates multiple campuses within the state as well as partner programs across Asia. As a leader in education since its founding in 1953, Fairmont continually looks for ways to bolster its reputation for excellence. The organization valued Cognia’s tools, support, and personal approach that brought depth and breadth to the accreditation process, resulting in an increased understanding of Fairmont’s continuous improvement efforts and cohesiveness to its community.

In 2015, Fairmont Schools consisted of four domestic campuses serving almost 1,900 students:

- Anaheim Hills Campus (Preschool through 8th grade)
- Historic Anaheim Campus (Preschool through 8th grade)
- North Tustin Campus (Prekindergarten through 8th grade)
- Preparatory Academy (9th through 12th grade)

In addition, the school’s international division (now called Fairmont International School) worked with eight schools in mainland China, South Korea, and Taiwan. Those partner schools supplement their own curriculum with Fairmont’s coursework and programming for students who want to pursue postsecondary studies in the United States. The Fairmont International School division also helps partner schools with teacher recruitment and training, and it provides students with academic support and college counseling. “It’s a unique way to partner with another school,” said Fairmont’s Director of International Education Rebecca Wood.



Leveraging Cognia’s global and local experience

As a global provider of education improvement services, the staff at Cognia® identified with Fairmont immediately. “Cognia shared their local and global expertise and insight, and quickly understood our organization,” said Wood.

In 2016, Fairmont Schools took up the Cognia accreditation process using a Corporation System model, allowing Fairmont to go through the accreditation process as one organization while also recognizing the individual campuses. Wood expressed appreciation for the way Cognia personnel recognized and embraced the school’s structure and offered a human approach to a data-driven, research-based protocol.

Wood continued, “There are protocols, there are requirements, there are standards to be met, and ways to show what you do, but Cognia also understands that those protocols need to be inclusive and responsive—that they should help schools to find ways to improve. No matter what that school looks like or what its differences are, there are ways to improve.”

Comprehensive data collection

During that first year, Fairmont’s domestic and international teams began collecting data using the tools that come with Cognia membership, including the Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool® (eleot®) as well as online surveys for students, families, and school staff. Later, in the 2021–22 school year, Fairmont implemented Cognia’s Teacher Observation Tool.

Wood reported that the school’s faculty has obtained a great deal of useful information from each tool. For example, Fairmont uses data from the eleot to steer its teacher training and mentoring efforts. The tool evaluates aspects of instruction (e.g., progress monitoring, active learning, digital learning, etc.) that contribute to a successful learning environment. The school administrators conduct the observations, and teachers use analyses from the observations to plan their professional learning.

Fairmont collects a wide range of stakeholder survey data from families, students, and staff. The domestic campuses conduct the survey about twice per year while

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the Fairmont International School division surveys its partner schools on an annual basis. Wood loved the fact that the survey tools were a built-in part of Fairmont’s membership in Cognia’s global network of schools. “They proved helpful right away,” she said. “Our domestic and international operations also appreciated that those tools were available and that we had the ability to produce reports directly from them.”

Data-based action

The different stakeholder groups know that their input is valued; the school adjusts relevant areas in response to its analyses of the survey data. For instance, Fairmont’s data department uses the parent survey data to create a “Top 10” list of what attributes parents consider to be most important for their children’s academic success (results on page 4). The list helps school staff to keep those most-valued features top of mind and monitor how they are doing in those specific areas.

In 2021, Fairmont used what it had learned from the Cognia surveys to create a new survey in which parents rated the quality or effectiveness of 48 different facets of the school’s academic programming. Over 400 parents responded in 2022, and the results conveyed that their overall satisfaction with programs decreased slightly. The decrease was primarily due to the fact the pandemic caused Fairmont, like many schools, to experience high teacher turnover in 2021. The school administrators were made aware of the scores and created goals to specifically address the drop in satisfaction.

The instructional staff also had a special appreciation of the Teacher Observation Tool. That tool is a valid instrument that provides formative, actionable feedback in the areas of culture and climate, agency, relationship, and how to improve teaching. “The observation forms are so helpful in giving feedback and measuring growth,” Wood said. “That’s been the area where we’ve seen the most impact and the most use.”

SPRING 2022 PARENT SURVEY

Ranked responses to the question: **How important are the following to the success of your student?**

- 1 HIGH-QUALITY TEACHING
- 2 PROBLEM SOLVING
- 3 CRITICAL THINKING
- 4 SAFE & SECURE CAMPUS
- 5 READING COMPREHENSION
- 6 SPEAKING & LISTENING
- 7 STUDY HABITS
- 8 WRITING/GRAMMAR
- 9 STUDENT-TEACHER RATIO
- 10 CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

Collaboration and collegiality as core values

Since Fairmont staff had access to more system-wide data, they were better able to compare programs and levels of satisfaction across all the domestic and international campuses. That holistic perspective also helped the school maintain a shared sense of culture, commitment, and belonging throughout its campuses and partner schools. Since Fairmont's operations are dispersed throughout Orange County and Asia, staffers benefit from a common understanding of its identity, values, and mission to keep the school running as an effective whole.

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Accordingly, Fairmont uses its analyses of stakeholder survey data to guide periodic revisions of its purpose documents: mission, vision, and value statements as well as the Fairmont Code. The school seeks stakeholder input on areas ranging from teaching quality to attributes such as counseling, conflict resolution, diversity appreciation, and ELL support.

The purpose statements serve as integral pillars of Fairmont's learning environment. For example, the Fairmont Code unites the purpose of all facets of the school. It states:

At Fairmont, we provide a safe environment where all members of our community show respect and kindness to one another and protect and honor each other's rights, dignity, and individual differences. Everyone within the Fairmont community—including students, parents, teachers, and administrators—are expected to adhere to this code.

The Fairmont Code drives all members of the school community and forms the basis for their work across campuses and divisions. For example, educators ensure that students have adult advocates and remain at the center of the learning community.

The practices centered around the Fairmont Code and other purpose documents align with several of Cognia's Leadership Capacity Standards:

- **1.10** - Leaders engage stakeholders to support the achievement of the organization's purpose and direction.
- **1.12** - Leaders collect and analyze a range of feedback data from multiple stakeholder groups to inform decision-making for improvement.
- **1.13** - The organization implements a documented quality assurance process for its institutions to ensure organizational effectiveness and student learning.

Additionally, the practices have contributed to the sense of family and community shared by all stakeholders.

Maintaining cohesion amid change

The value of a common vision and a coherent school culture came to the fore when the 2020 pandemic caused border closures, stay-at-home orders, and abrupt shifts to schooling in the United States and around the world. Wood was not able to visit many of Fairmont International School's partner schools until late 2022. That meant her work with the international school partners was fully remote for almost two years. "It was important for us to pay attention to our team's feedback on how we were working together to support students and support learning," she said.

Wood and her Fairmont International School team also had to make sure that the partner schools'



leadership, teachers, parents, and students retained an understanding of Fairmont's culture and offerings. "Cognia's data was incredibly helpful," she said. "It helped us understand how we needed to change as the whole world changed. We changed how we reach out, how we work with the schools we couldn't meet with in person, and how we offered college counseling when students were unsure whether they could leave their country, sometimes even their city. The data helped us continually monitor and adjust."

Growth and improvement despite the pandemic

Despite many school closings and the social turmoil of 2020, Fairmont added another domestic campus for preschool through 12th grade in the city of San Juan Capistrano. The International Schools program also added one of its new partner schools in Taiwan in 2020 and another Taiwanese school joined in 2021 although the country did not lift border restrictions until the fall of 2022.

Fairmont's eleot scores continued to climb across all dimensions even as its educators dealt with governmental stay-at-home orders within California and border closings in other countries in 2020. The school was able to continue its improvement initiatives

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despite the pandemic's chaotic aftermath in the years that followed. For example, Fairmont's eleot score for progress monitoring was 2.94 out of 4.0 in 2019 and rose to 3.0 in 2020, 3.10 in 2021, and 3.30 in 2022. This upward trajectory was unusual compared to other schools across the Cognia global network during this post-COVID period.

Likewise, the school's eleot score for active learning increased from 2.98 in 2019 to slightly above 3.10 in 2020. By 2022, the score had soared to 3.28.

Strong testing and exam scores

Additionally, while Fairmont was able to reopen by August 2020, some students still opted for remote learning while others returned to in-person instruction. The school staff made a point of keeping remote learners on task for the same amount of time as in-person learners.

Photo courtesy of the Fairmont Schools



However, there was still a concern about the possibility of “COVID slide.” Education experts across the nation were predicting that students could experience a decline of up to eight months in reading and drop a whole grade level in math.

In fall 2020, Fairmont performed benchmark testing for grades 3 through 8 on its domestic campuses, and staff members’ concerns proved unfounded. While students across the nation were showing significant declines in reading and math, Fairmont’s benchmark tests found that their students were, on average, above the norm.

Students in grade 3 had the most impressive results. More than half (54%) were above the norm for reading and only 10% were below the norm. Their math results were even more impressive. The vast majority (96%) of students scored above the norm and none of them were below the norm.

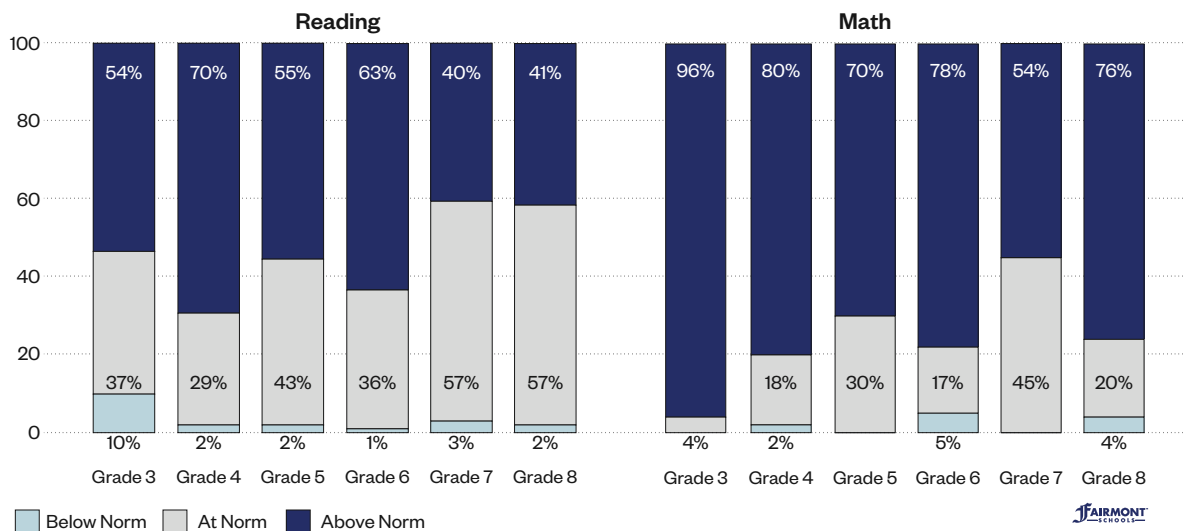
Another area in which Fairmont has excelled is in its Advanced Placement® scores. The school offers Advanced Placement (AP) courses at its Preparatory Academy and San Juan Capistrano campuses and in its Fairmont International School division. The two domestic campuses have averaged about an 81% AP pass rate. San Juan Capistrano’s pass rate grew significantly, from 35% in 2020 (its founding year) to 82% in 2022. Despite the global turmoil since 2020, Preparatory Academy’s 2022 AP passing rates surpassed the global average for that year.

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In 2019, 327 students in the Fairmont International School division took AP exams, earning a pass rate of 85%. Despite the sudden and extraordinary changes, such as school closings and social distancing, resulting from the 2020 pandemic, the schools’ instruction served students well, resulting in an 81% pass rate, only slightly lower than the previous year’s rate.

The number of 2020 exam takers had also increased to 340. By 2021, Fairmont International School had 443 students taking AP exams, a 35% increase over 2019. The larger group of test takers included students from a Fairmont International School program launched in Shanghai in 2018. Although the Shanghai students were new to AP exams and all students were dealing with the long-term effects of living through a global pandemic, they achieved an 80% pass rate, dipping by just one percentage point.

FALL 2020 MILESTONES BENCHMARK TESTING



Benchmark testing revealed nearly all students were at or above national norms in reading and math despite the challenges of the pandemic. Special note: percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.



Comparable pass rate data for 2022 is unavailable because Beijing and Shanghai, the locations of Fairmont International Schools' two largest programs, were under lockdown in May of that year. Consequently, no AP exams were administered in either city.

In addition to AP programs, Fairmont Schools is one of only 19 schools within the United States—and 500 schools worldwide—to offer its students all three International Baccalaureate (IB) programs: IB Primary Years, IB Middle Years, and IB Diploma. In 2016, 12 students throughout the school took the IB Diploma examination and 10 passed (an 83% pass rate). That pass rate was the same in 2020 despite the pandemic-induced turmoil. In 2022, five Fairmont students sat for the IB Diploma exam, and they achieved a 100% pass rate.

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Public trust and recognition

In addition, Fairmont has fared better than many other private schools in the state. Between the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years, California's private school enrollment declined by about 18,000 students, a nearly 4% decrease. In contrast, Fairmont's new San Juan Capistrano campus opened in 2020 with only 75 students but had nearly 450 enrolled by the end of 2022, an increase of approximately 500%.

Fairmont's teachers and school leaders are regularly recognized for their accomplishments. In 2022, seven of them were named among the best educators in Orange County. Additionally, Fairmont President Chad Jackson was honored as Orange County's Top School Leader of 2022.



Photo courtesy of the Fairmont Schools

Wood believes that Fairmont's holistic and data-based approach to continuous improvement has enabled the school to grow in strength and size, and she appreciates Cognia's support of the school's comprehensive approach. "Cognia understood that 'different' can be good, 'different' can be helpful to students," she said. "Finding a good solution that could look at Fairmont as a whole organization domestically and internationally was huge for us and proved very helpful right away."

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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