

COMMUNITY STORY



How Data and Inclusive Leadership Improve School Outcomes

WHEN REAL-TIME DATA AND COLLABORATION
DRIVE DECISION MAKING, SCHOOLS SEE THE BENEFIT

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A photograph of a female teacher with glasses and a red and orange striped sweater, wearing a blue lanyard with "STAFF" written on it, interacting with a young male student. The student is wearing a red sweater and glasses, and is looking down at a book or paper on a desk. The background is a blurred classroom setting with bookshelves.

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Today's school leaders are responsible for imparting knowledge while adapting, innovating, and guiding their students and teams through rapid changes. This convergence of challenges and opportunities emphasizes the need for school leaders to reassess how they approach their roles, allowing data and collaboration to guide next steps in school improvement.



While access to actionable data is essential, successful school development strategies hinge on the active involvement of classroom teachers, school administrators, and other staff working together as a cohesive team.

This collaborative sentiment is not just superficial – it's backed by research. Consider this:

- [Analysis published in the journal American Educator](#) concluded that effective school leadership actively involves teachers in decision making, which correlates positively with higher student achievement.
- [Research published in the American Journal of Education](#) found that teacher job satisfaction, including the feeling of “being heard” by leadership, positively affects student achievement in math and reading.
- A [Qualtrics survey of nearly 900 teachers](#) listed engagement and inclusion as two of the top five factors of job satisfaction that further ensures their intent to stay in their current role.

It's clear that educators' feedback is valuable to retention, student success and overall school improvement – but how do we create the conditions for a collective data-inquiry process? And what role does access and analysis of data play in developing and implementing school improvement plans?

By embracing the collective intelligence of educators and implementing data-driven decision making, schools can lay the groundwork for sustained development and emerge as even stronger centers of excellence in education.

THE VITAL ROLE OF DATA AND COLLABORATION IN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

At the heart of successful school improvement lies the interplay of data-driven decisions and collaborative leadership. The strength of data is harnessed when leaders and educators unite to decipher it, navigating the nuanced dimensions of school culture and catalyzing teacher agency.

Dr. Orletta Rush, deputy superintendent for the Jefferson County School District in Alabama, shares that her district prioritizes data-driven decision making, with an emphasis on collaboration.

“My district’s Continuous Improvement Framework details a laser focus on leadership, culture and climate, teaching and learning, and effective ways of utilizing learning supports,” Dr. Rush says.

After conducting several instructional diagnostic reviews in her district, Dr. Rush identified climate and culture as vital areas of improvement in the district.

To help achieve this end, her district partnered with Cognia®, a nonprofit organization that equips educators and leaders with the tools to foster meaningful school improvement by providing research-based insights, data-driven solutions, and innovative resources. Cognia consultants collaborated with district and school teams, both on-site and remotely, to ensure these services were successfully customized to the district’s needs.

“To yield true data-driven results,” Dr. Rush said, “we collaborated with Cognia to ensure that diagnostic reviews and professional learning services aligned with our district’s strategic plan.”



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Dr. Orletta Rush

Deputy Superintendent, Jefferson County School District



PHOTO CREDIT: JEFFERSON COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT, AL

Dr. Rush's team used several tools available from Cognia to improve culture and climate, giving educators more agency and resources to do their best work. One was Cognia's Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool® (eleot®) – created to measure and encourage an environment that puts learners at the center, where they actively engage and direct their learning.

Another way Dr. Rush and her team approached school improvement was through regularly and effectively hearing feedback from educators and staff at all levels of the district. To do this, Dr. Rush made use of the [MyVoice](#) online platform that empowered teachers to give regular input, specific to what was happening in the district and aligned to 48 research-based healthy school culture indicators.

"MyVoice has allowed school and district leaders to be more intentional and systemic in effectively progress-monitoring the school's and district's comprehensive needs," Dr. Rush said.

Additionally, her district made use of direct input from stakeholder surveys to adjust practices based on educator feedback.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT EMPOWERS EDUCATORS TO PARTICIPATE AND GROW

True transformation in education stems from continuous learning and professional development, but understanding how to best collaborate in school environments takes training. Coaching and professional development can support teachers and district leaders to formulate a collaborative approach to school improvement.

Paul Furthmyre is the school administrator at the Montana School for the Deaf and the Blind, serving students ranging in age from 18 months old to 22 years old. The students at the school were hit especially hard with learning challenges during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic – leading Furthmyre and his team to seek out a new strategic plan that included more robust professional development opportunities for its educators.

"We wanted to have one focus – not just doing one thing, but everybody going in the same direction to meet the same common goals," Furthmyre said. "We've been working with the

professional development resources from Cognia for about two years now and this part of our strategic plan has really blossomed in that time.”

Furthmyre says that he particularly likes the way that professional development and strategic planning through Cognia use the “team approach.”

“We really want educators to take ownership of where we’re going and what we need to do,” he said.

Cognia’s repertoire of professional learning experiences acts as a compass, guiding educators in their quest for excellence. The four pillars of high-quality schools—healthy culture, leadership, student engagement, and growth in learning—are integral to Cognia’s framework, ensuring educators have a blueprint for transformative change.

[Professional Learning from Cognia](#) provides comprehensive growth opportunities, ensuring educators can make positive and generative changes in their instructional practices.

THE RIGHT TOOLS ENABLE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Data and collaboration are two sides of the same coin in the quest for school improvement. By embracing Cognia’s holistic approach to collective improvement, schools can pave the way for sustained advancements and unlock their potential to become even stronger centers of excellence in education.

Dr. Rush underscores the vitality of actionable data in shaping real-time decisions. “To gain authentic buy-in from all stakeholders,” she said, “it is imperative to provide opportunities for input to be given.” ■



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 improvement services within a framework of continuous improvement. Serving 40,000 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.

Find out more at [COGNIA.ORG](https://www.cognia.org).



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