



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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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

Empowering school collaboration with MyVoice



According to [research](#), when professional development is paired with on-site coaching and teacher collaboration, outcomes are significantly improved compared to environments without such programs. As education leaders and district administrators look for ways to rectify challenges in their school systems, they should look to programs that combine data and insights from their colleagues.

One such program is the MyVoice online platform for educator feedback that leadership can view and analyze. MyVoice identifies 10 Drivers of Healthy School Culture that provide valuable insights into leveraging culture's power as a foundation for improving schools.

Dr. Brian Keefer, now executive director of professional learning and leadership development at Fulton County Schools in Georgia, saw a need to address culture challenges and staff disconnection at one school where he was serving as principal. Dr. Keefer successfully utilized Cognia's comprehensive framework, consisting of 6 critical steps, to guide his team.

STEP 1

1 Dr. Keefer attended a conference in the summer of 2022 led by Superintendent Robbie Hooker and Rob Neu, a Cognia representative and two-time superintendent. During those presentations, Keefer could already see the vision for how better collaboration would positively affect his team.

"It became clear early on," Dr. Keefer said, "that the MyVoice online platform could address staff disconnection and the need for an increased voice in operations and decision-making."

STEP 2

2 Sharing the new approach to garner feedback was crucial for Dr. Keefer's team to take ownership of school improvement strategies. "We needed quick wins to build trust across our staff that MyVoice was not just another survey but was driving actual change," said Dr. Keefer.

STEP 3

3 Once Dr. Keefer and his team had input from their staff, they wanted to streamline an improvement plan. By starting with the "Clear and Unified Direction" driver, specific pain points within the school

were identified. Specifically, Dr. Keefer says his staff felt disconnected from district- and school-level decision-making, so this was an area that his team wanted to address through improved educator engagement to encourage a culture of continuous, collaborative improvement.

STEP 4

4 Dr. Keefer initiated the process by notifying stakeholders and involving his staff.

To start this process, the school's leadership team reviewed the MyVoice statements with their own teams to further understand and interpret the meaning of each statement. Leadership team members then returned and shared the voice of their teammates with the larger leadership team.

Through these share outs, the leadership team drew consensus about steps that would align with the individuality of staff members.

The leadership team then drafted solution steps within the MyVoice platform to ensure the action steps were aligned with the language of the driver, as well as the staff.

"We built necessary accountability steps to ensure we followed through with our commitments," Dr. Keefer said.

STEP 5

5 Next, leadership team members spoke at a faculty meeting to share the data, the solution steps they agreed they would implement, and progress along the way.

"We agreed to cycle through soliciting modified scores from stakeholders quarterly with development of action steps by the leadership team," Dr. Keefer said.

This open dialogue showed staff that their feedback was being taken seriously and led to authentic action.

STEP 6

6 Lastly, Dr. Keefer and the leadership team instituted a regular feedback/action cycle throughout the year, fostering a culture of collaboration and trust. The result was significant growth in all 10 drivers from baseline to end-of-year scores, indicating an improved school culture grounded in honest feedback and proactive action.

"We implemented the MyVoice online platform with tremendous success," Dr. Keefer concludes. "MyVoice serves as a tool to measure the unmeasurable: culture. By engaging the leadership team in leading the school improvement efforts, we committed to collaboration while ensuring our educators' voices were heard."



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Dr. Brian Keefer

Executive Director
of Professional Learning and
Leadership Development,
Fulton County Schools
Georgia

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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