

COMMUNITY STORY



Shaping Tomorrow's Achievers

LLE EDUCATION GROUP AND COGNIA PARTNER TO ELEVATE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

cognia[®]

High-quality early childhood programs lay a strong foundation for students' intellectual and socio-emotional development.



Photo courtesy of the LLE Education Group

Neuroscience has established that the first five years of life are the most critical for optimal brain development. High-quality early childhood programs help families take advantage of this vital stage by developing children's executive function and foundational academic skills as well as their physical, social, and emotional abilities. [Multiple studies](#) have found that people who attended quality early learning programs are "more likely to attend college, have higher SAT scores, and higher high-school graduation rates."

However, there is still a great deal of debate within the education field about what constitutes a "high-quality" early childhood education program. As a result, many early childhood education programs seek out external expertise to help them achieve their desired outcomes.

To meet the highest standards in early childhood education, LLE Education Group, the largest early childcare provider in the Commonwealth of Virginia, opted to work with Cognia®, a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization that provides accreditation, certification, and improvement services worldwide.

LLE Education Group operates 50 schools that serve approximately 4,000 children, from infancy to school age, across 15 Virginia counties. By 2023, about half of the schools had been accredited by Cognia. The nonprofit's accreditation review teams visited another 14 schools during the 2023–24 school year.

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—Chantel Clayborn, M.Ed.
LLE Education Group, District Director

A collaborative and supportive experience

LLE Education Group's primary objective for choosing to go through Cognia's rigorous accreditation process was to demonstrate its commitment to high-quality early childhood education. Chantel Clayborn, M.Ed., and Erin Kruppenbacker, two of LLE Education Group's district directors, are responsible for overseeing multiple sites. Both took part in the initial accreditation process of 12 schools, and both praised the experience for being collaborative rather than punitive. As Clayborn put it, the accreditation review team didn't "ding" a school for "a one-time mistake."

Clayborn also was impressed by the supportive hands-on attitude of Cognia's experts. "If we email anyone in the organization, someone typically gets back to us, if not that day, within 24 hours. Even if they're on the road! I think that connectivity has been very important."

Cognia helped the schools identify which indicators of quality gave the best return on investment as well as measure and promote those quality indicators. Throughout the process, the schools' teams reported feeling respected and recognized as professionals who were doing good work even when Cognia review teams made recommendations for improvement.

Kruppenbacker also expressed appreciation that rather than expecting perfection during a review visit, the Cognia team adhered to a continuous improvement mindset. "It's not just a 'one and done' where we do everything beautifully for one day, and then we don't have to think about them until the next visit," she said. "This was really about continuously supporting our schools, and together, we focus on where there are opportunities for improvement."



Photo courtesy of the LLE Education Group

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Rigorous standards bring the centers together

While Cognia was supportive, its standards were rigorous. The schools had to submit evidence on the ways they were meeting 368 criteria for high-quality early learning.

The sites came together as a cohort to figure out what evidence was required and where to find it. The cohort was divided into subgroups, with one group dealing with one set of criteria, another group tackling the second set, and so on. “We did some brainstorming sessions,” Clayborn recalled. Group members discussed how their site met a particular criterion and where to find the relevant information, e.g., in their family handbook or documents describing corporate standard operating procedures.

“It was nice to see everybody really thinking through the process of what we actually did,” Clayborn said. She also appreciated that the brainstorming process enabled the team members to reflect on the areas in which they excelled as well as where they could improve.

Since then, Cognia has updated and refined its early learning standards. Now early childhood education programs align their practices to 32 performance standards in four areas:

1. Culture of Learning: An institution's focus on the challenges, joys, and opportunities for learning, and the coherence with its mission and vision.
2. Leadership for Learning: The responsibility of an institution's leaders to influence and impact all aspects of the institution in positive ways.
3. Engagement of Learning: The inclusion of all learners in the learning process, and their development of confidence and love of learning.
4. Growth in Learning: The growth of learners in the programs and curricula provided by the institution and their readiness to successfully transition to next levels of learning.

Cognia tools yield valuable insights

The schools also began using Cognia tools, such as the Environmental Rating for Early Learning™ (erel™) observation tool to evaluate their instructional and operational efforts. The erel organizes an early learning environment into four domains for rating:

1. Supportive interactions environment: The supportive adult-child interactions and peer interactions occurring within a classroom.
2. Intentional learning environment: The intentional planning and preparation of the classroom environment.
3. Positive guidance environment: The curriculum, instruction, and guidance that support children's learning, growth, and development.
4. Safe and healthy environment: The safety and health of the physical environment.

Teachers loved that the tool gave them a comprehensive view of their classroom environment. Clayborn loved that she was also able to “drill down” into specific focus areas such as health and safety.

The erel only records about 30 minutes of class time, and some teachers tended to fret if they weren't recorded performing specific tasks. “That's when Chantel and I swoop in,” said Kruppenbacker. Both would assuage those teachers' “all or nothing” perspective through reminders that not every task or activity could be captured within the observation's limited timeframe. “You're not going to record that the children had a meal if you're doing an observation during a time when there's no meal,” Clayborn explained.

On the other hand, the erel did indeed identify occasions when teachers had overlooked a required task. Those findings led to conversations about how to ensure that task is done going forward. “So, there have been talking points on both sides, which has been great,” Kruppenbacker said. The schools found the erel tool so useful that they have incorporated it into their own four-page teacher observation.

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Cognia's online surveys were also a source of valuable information. For example, the parent surveys revealed that parents felt that the schools did not communicate enough. "That was eye opening for me because I thought we were good communicators," said Clayborn. "But that was our perception. The perception of others is always important."

District directors and school managers discussed the matter and resolved to ask for parents' preferred methods of communication. Managers also made a note of any other preferences such as the types of incidents specific parents did or did not want to be notified about. The schools also created a standard practice for communicating with families. "You need to have three forms of communication, whether it's paper, email, text, whatever," Kruppenbacker said.

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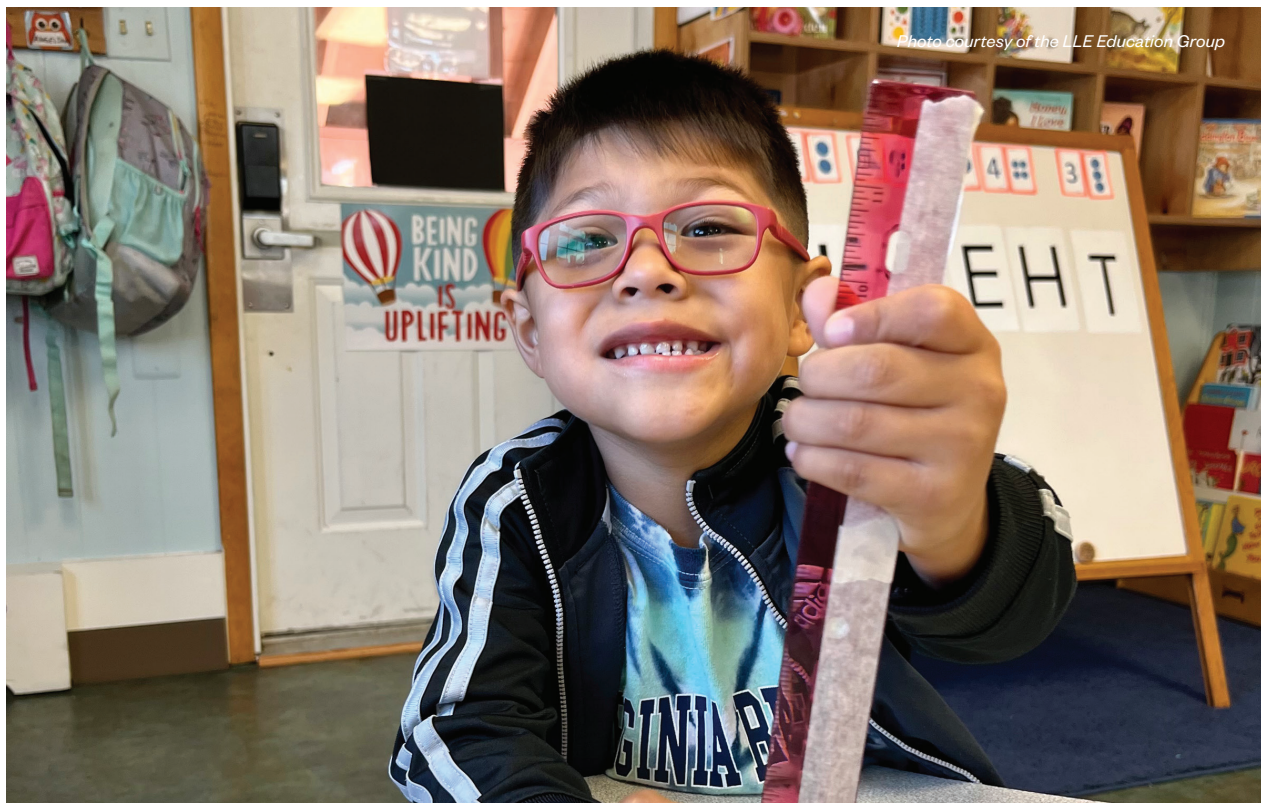
Adding STEM certification to the mix

LLE Education Group has spearheaded many innovative practices such as early STEM learning. In addition to accreditation, two of the schools have received Cognia Early Learning STEM Certification, which confirms that their STEM programs are aligned to a research-based framework and criteria. In fact, those two schools were the first institutions in the nation to receive Cognia Early Learning STEM Certification.

One of the requirements of the STEM certification standards was that STEM learning must be happening continuously throughout the day. Kruppenbacker stated that STEM activities had always been part of the centers' activities. "But we started putting more emphasis on it," she said. "That's just how we develop. It's our continuous process. Now, every day includes STEM."

Clayborn explained that STEM learning can also be embedded in children's other activities. She sometimes shows teachers how to reinforce an activity's STEM aspect during visits to the centers. "For example, you're in a two-year-old classroom and one has blue paint, and another child has red paint and reaches over and touches and rubs it together. Now I have purple paint."

Two of the pilot schools were the first institutions in the nation to receive Cognia STEM Certification.



Maintaining a solid reputation throughout the organization

LLE Education Group strives to maintain its reputation as the premier provider of early childhood education. Clayborn shared that parents regularly tell her that elementary school teachers praise LLE Education Group and say that the children from its early learning facilities are always prepared with the skills and fundamental knowledge required to do well.

Clayborn, Kruppenbacker, and other staff members from the first 12 accredited schools regularly share their experiences and what they learned with other LLE Education Group schools that are pursuing Cognia Performance Accreditation. “Hearing from people like me and Chantel who went through it brings a different perspective,” Kruppenbacker said.

Clayborn has also reviewed other companies’ early learning centers as part of a Cognia accreditation engagement review team. “It’s interesting to see how we approach things versus how they approach things,” she said. Both she and Kruppenbacker were invited to speak about their experiences and practices at a state conference.

“I feel like the world is ever changing,” said Kruppenbacker. “Chantel and I have seen numerous changes throughout our time here. But being able to have these relationships and people—like our Cognia partners—who understand us has been a blessing.”



Photo courtesy of the LLE Education Group

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).