



A Competency-based Success Story

**STRONG PARTNERSHIPS TRANSFORM
WESTMINSTER PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

A pioneering district in suburban Denver avoids state intervention by partnering with Cognia and using innovations in personalized learning and continuous improvement



Photo courtesy of Westminister Public Schools

Since 2009, Westminister Public Schools has been moving in a very different direction than its neighboring districts in suburban Denver. The district has shifted to a competency-based system model to end the practice of advancing students to the next grade level based on their age rather than their academic readiness. Instead, it advances its 8,500+ students (76% of whom are Hispanic and 80% of whom are eligible for free and reduced lunch) as they attain mastery of specific skills and content knowledge.

However, state tests are still administered by age. To deal with that disparity, Westminister kept modifying its practices to better accommodate state proficiency standards. But those constant changes compromised the district's competency-based implementation. As Oliver Grenham, Westminister's then-chief education officer put it: "We kept recreating year one because we kept changing things every year."

Things came to a head in 2010 when low student test scores resulted in 13 of the district's 18 schools being put on the Colorado Department of Education's accountability "clock." Westminister had five years to improve the schools' performance or risk state action such as a takeover or a forced merger with another school district.

Test scores improved under Dr. Pamela Swanson who became the interim superintendent in 2011. However, when Colorado changed standardized assessments in 2016, the scores of eight Westminister schools dropped. The district had to act quickly to avoid a state takeover.

That's when they turned to Cognia® (then known as AdvancED), a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization that excels in providing evaluation and improvement services to schools around the globe.

A lens of innovation

“The thing that intrigued me the most was that Cognia was looking at us through a lens of innovation instead of as a traditional system,” Swanson said. “They came to us as friends and advocates.”

The nonprofit conducted a districtwide review to identify the areas where Westminster’s competency-based system had been implemented inconsistently. “They told us, ‘You guys have built an amazing Lamborghini, but not everyone knows how to drive it,’” recalled Swanson.

Cognia helped identify three root causes for Westminster’s ongoing performance challenges:

- Inconsistent implementation of its instructional model
- A lack of accountability around competency-based learning
- A need for culture building at the secondary level (which began implementing the competency-based model later than the district’s elementary and middle schools)

Forging a new and collaborative pathway

In 2017, Westminster created a managed pathway plan focused on continuous improvement, one of several options available to low-performing schools and districts on the state’s accountability clock. The plan requires districts to work with external partners, so Cognia became Westminster’s continuous improvement and accountability partner. At the same time, Marzano Research was brought on board as an instructional partner focused on professional development and instructional strategies (the three organizations would later deepen that partnership).

To support implementation of its competency-based system, Westminster improved the frequency and rigor of its “learning walk” classroom observations. “We now include everybody, even our director of communications, Steve Saunders, and our operations team,” said Deputy Superintendent Jeni Gotto, Ed.D. “We wanted to make sure that all aspects of our system were aligned and that we all were looking for the same things.”



Photo courtesy of Westminster Public Schools

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Westminster also introduced the use of Cognia's Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool® (eleot®). The tool helps educators to collect data on how students responded to various instructional practices, reinforcing the practices' consistent use across all classrooms. "We focus on the student aspect of learning—what's happening in the classroom—as opposed to watching the teacher," Gotto explained.

"Some principals were skeptical about the potential for real change with our learning walks," said Gotto. "Once it became clear that the walks were being done with 'positive intent,' the suggestions were quickly embraced." Cognia also provided principals with coaching on how to provide effective feedback to all their teachers, from novices to veterans.

A remarkable turnaround

By the 2017–18 school year, the number of Westminster schools in the top tier of the state rating system doubled. In August 2018, Swanson called school staff employees into Westminster High School's gym and announced that the district was officially off the accountability "clock." "Some said it couldn't be done statistically," she told the crowd. "We knew better."

Attendees in the gym bleachers held up color-coded cards that showed the status of Westminster's accountability system indicators. Previously, the cards had included red rows that indicated schools' status as on probation. Now there were no reds in sight.

Westminster's success garnered interest and support across the country. In 2017, the district hosted a national conference on competency-based education. In 2019, Cognia asked Swanson and other members of Westminster's leadership team to present at an event in Atlanta. Now Westminster educators hold a summit on competency-based education every other year. "People come from a lot of other districts, and Cognia is always there as our partner as is Dr. Marzano," said Swanson.

Westminster inspires a new Cognia offering

At the Atlanta event, Swanson had spoken with Cognia CEO Mark Elgart. "I said that we want to be the first district to have a competency-based certification to go along with our accreditation," she said. "And he guaranteed me at that meeting that we would be."

Elgart also attended Westminster's 2021 summit where they revisited the topic. "We brought Dr. Marzano to the table along with Cognia and said, 'How can we figure out this certification?' And that's when we started working," said Swanson. "That's how the competency-based education certification came to be."

The cards indicated schools' accountability status: yellow for improved schools; green for well-performing schools.



Integrating expertise and gaining new tools

Westminster has also incorporated Cognia's standards into its work with Marzano Research. To enhance its efforts, the district is implementing two Marzano-created frameworks: high reliability teacher (HRT) and high reliability school (HRS). The frameworks define levels of performance that teachers and schools respectively must provide evidence of demonstration. Teachers must progress through three levels while schools must work through five levels.

“We integrated all the Cognia Performance Standards into each one of the HRS levels where appropriate because the high reliability schools didn’t account for everything that Cognia standards did,” said Brian J. Kosena, Ed.D., the district’s director of teaching and learning. “Those Cognia Performance Standards gave us some additional insights as to what a successful school looks like.”

For example, schools earn a Level Two designation in the HRS framework for implementing effective instruction in every classroom. For that level, Westminster incorporated the Cognia Performance Standard: The school leader cultivates and sustains a culture that demonstrates respect, fairness, equity, inclusion, and free from bias.

In addition, Westminster has organized resources from Cognia, Marzano Research, and the Colorado Department of Education into one tool—a guiding document district leaders call “The Playbook.” That document is now in place in all Westminster schools to help faculties design competency-based systems and measures of success. “It has created just one focus for our principals rather than us throwing all those different things at them,” said Gotto.

During Westminster’s turnaround, Cognia had also helped district leadership conduct more focused action planning to support priorities such as attracting and developing effective educators and leaders. Administrators worked with the nonprofit to refine use of the district’s PDCA (Plan, Do, Check, Adjust) model. In addition, Cognia helped principals use data to set individual targets and indicators for their schools.

Recognition and resiliency

During the 2020 pandemic, the district closed schools in March, flipped to remote learning within two days, and reopened in person in the fall. That year, Swanson was named the Colorado Superintendent of the Year by the Colorado Association of School Executives (CASE). Westminster students’ strong recovery since the turmoil of the closings shows why Swanson and her team deserve recognition.

Although most Westminster students are Hispanic and low-income, they defied the trend in how “at risk” students have fared during and after the pandemic. Education experts across



Photo courtesy of Westminster Public Schools

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the nation have reported that students of color and students from low-income families were the hardest hit by the pandemic and are struggling to recover lost ground. However, Westminster students have regained that ground.

Westminster has maintained its rating of accredited with improvement since 2018.

WESTMINSTER PUBLIC SCHOOLS
State Accreditation Designations

2010	
Schools	Points
Crown Pointe	82.0
Sunset Ridge ES	66.7
Flynn ES	53.4
Tennyson Knolls ES	51.6
Metz ES	50.6
Shaw Heights MS	46.0
Harris Park ES	44.5
Skyline Vista ES	43.8
Westminster ES	43.8
Westminster HS	39.5
Ranum MS	39.1
Scott Carpenter MS	36.8
Hidden Lake HS	29.6
Mesa ES	27.1
Sherrelwood ES	26.7
Fairview ES	26.6
FM Day ES	26.3
Hodgkins ES	26.3

2018	
Schools	Points
Col. STEM Academy	88.0
Metz ES	67.7
Mesa ES	64.2
Westminster Academy	64.2
Fairview ES	60.4
Skyline Vista ES	60.4
Scott Carpenter MS	55.9
Hodgkins ES	54.6
Sunset Ridge ES	54.3
Hidden Lake HS	54.3*
FM Day ES	52.7
Sherrelwood ES	50.9
Flynn ES	50.7
Ranum MS	50.3
Shaw Heights MS	49.2
Harris Park ES	45.8
Tennyson Knolls ES	42.9
Westminster HS	40.8

2023	
Schools	Points
Col. STEM Academy	85.8
Westminster Academy	69.4
Sherrelwood ES	65.9
Mesa ES	63.8
Sunset Ridge	60.8
Harris Park ES	60.0
The MET	58.8
Flynn Marzano	53.5
Fairview	50.8
Shaw Heights MS	45.9
Orchard Park Academy	44.9
Colorado Sports LA	44.6
Westminster HS	44.2
Tennyson Knolls Prep	43.8
Hodgkins LA	35.0
Hidden Lake Secondary	

District	30.9
Academic Achievement	25.0
Academic Growth	30.6
Academic Growth Gaps	31.1
Postsecondary Readiness	33.9

District	44.5
Academic Achievement	34.3
Academic Growth	61.3
Postsecondary Readiness	31.9

District	44.6
Academic Achievement	34.0
Academic Growth	55.1
Postsecondary Readiness	42.3

School Plan Assignment	Points
*Distinction	> 74
Performance	53 - 73.9
Improvement	42 - 52.9
Priority Improvement	34 - 41.9
Turnaround	< 33.9

District Plan Assignment	Points
*Distinction	> 74
Performance	53 - 73.9
Improvement	42 - 52.9
Priority Improvement	34 - 41.9
Turnaround	< 33.9

* WPS began recognition of schools of distinction in 2018

Hidden Lake High School is designated an Alternative Education Campus and is included in a separate accreditation calculation (results unavailable at time of publication)

District leaders credit Cognia with having the courage to support the innovative instructional model and working with school leaders toward the shared goal of improvement.

“Working with Cognia was not in any way like pounding a square peg into a round hole,” Swanson said. “Cognia’s team members were good listeners and adapters, using their expertise and sometimes coming out of their own comfort zone to meet us where we are.”



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.