



Case Study:
Hawkins Mill Elementary and
Trezevant High, Memphis-
Shelby County, Tennessee



Empowering Education in Tennessee

Relentless collective efficacy and trusted partnerships reshaped two schools

When Tennessee enacted its School Turnaround Pilot Program Act of 2021, Hawkins Mill Elementary School and Trezevant High School in the Memphis-Shelby County Schools were selected to be pilot schools. Both schools were struggling with chronic absenteeism and their students' academic performance ranked in the state's bottom 5%. As a result, the two schools had been on the state's list of Priority schools since the list was created in the 2011–12 school year. "Priority school" is Tennessee's designation for low-performing schools.

Hawkins Mill and Trezevant are urban schools on the northside of Memphis. Both schools are in underserved, low-income areas that are dealing with issues such as gangs and illegal drugs. Hawkins Mill serves more than 250 elementary students while Trezevant has a little over 450 students. A significant majority of the student populations at both schools are economically disadvantaged (89% for Hawkins Mill and 77% for Trezevant). In addition, Trezevant’s graduation rate was consistently below the state requirement of 67%.

Partnering for school turnaround

Out of 22 applicants, the Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) approved two organizations to support low-performing schools as part of its four-year school turnaround pilot program. Cognia®, a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization that supports continuous improvement in schools around the globe, was one of the two approved providers.

Dr. Thomas D. Rogers, the assistant superintendent of Memphis-Shelby County Schools, worked with Hawkins Mill’s and Trezevant’s turnaround committees—made up of school faculty, students, parents or guardians, community partners, school board members, and district personnel—to choose the partner for each school.

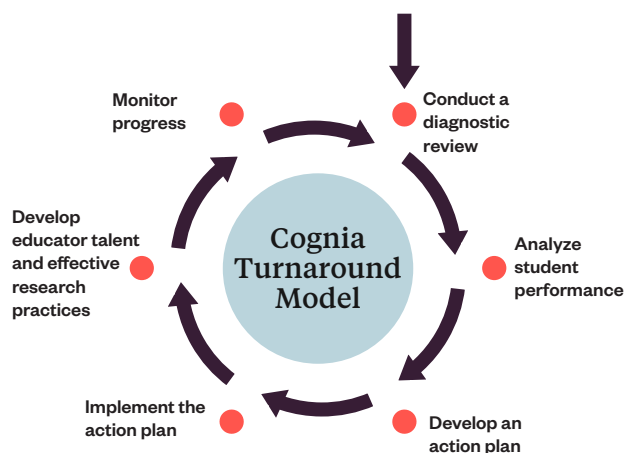
Dr. Connie Smith, vice president of Cognia’s Office of School Transformation and state director for Tennessee, led the nonprofit’s presentation of a two-fold approach for helping the schools exit the priority list: the Cognia Diagnostic Review (a root cause analysis of underperformance) and the Cognia School Turnaround model (a side-by-side, “boots on the ground” approach that emphasizes ongoing collaboration with educators in the schools and district).

After a rigorous vetting process, both schools’ committees voted to partner with Cognia, and Memphis-Shelby County’s Board of Education unanimously approved the contracts. “Even though this was an investment made by the Tennessee

Department of Education, we wanted to make sure that we would be good stewards over the funds with which we were being entrusted,” said Dr. Rogers.

Diagnostic data collection

Cognia began working with the two schools in 2021. That year constituted the planning phase. The nonprofit’s diagnostic review team examined both schools’ previous action plans and relevant performance data, interviewed stakeholders, observed the schools’ operations, and conducted classroom observations focusing on the level of student engagement by using the Cognia Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool® (elect®).



Upon identifying areas of underperformance with a diagnostic review and analyzing student data, action planning begins.



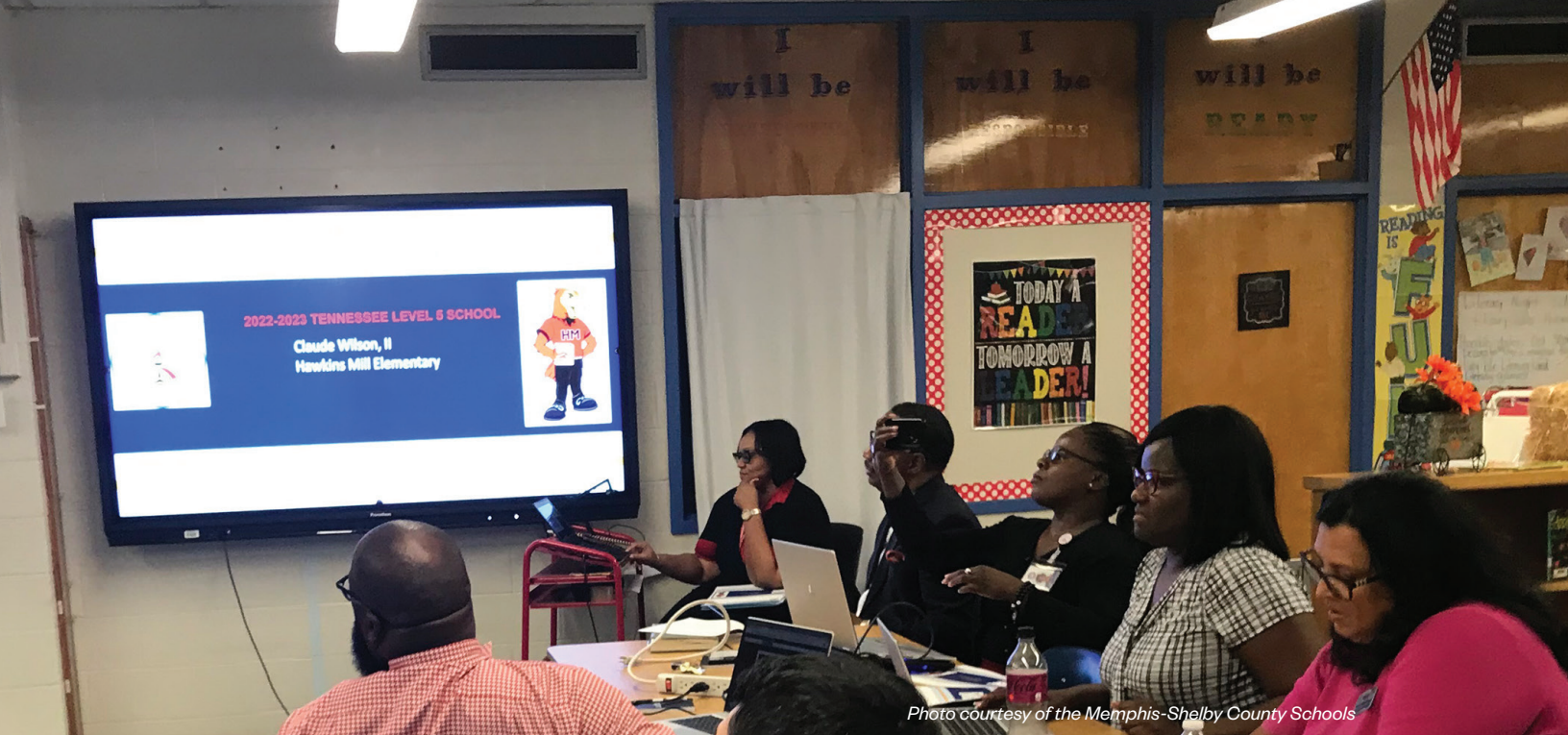


Photo courtesy of the Memphis-Shelby County Schools

Claude Wilson II, principal of Hawkins Mill Elementary, said that as soon as the Cognia Diagnostic Review team left, his teaching staff wanted to hear the team's feedback and recommendations. "They wanted to be able to implement strategies immediately," he reported. Principal Wilson called the process not only informative but also "an eyeopener" in terms of the ways his staff could improve.

Trezevant High's principal, Eric Brent, was particularly appreciative of how the diagnostic review helped the school's math department. "The diagnostic review discussed the questioning and rigor in our math classes," he said. "So, we were able to go back to the drawing board and come up with some strategies that helped us perform."

Building strategic plans and data-driven, short-term action plans

While the diagnostic review team carried out its work, the turnaround team met with the schools' leadership teams, professional learning communities, teachers, and support staff to build trust that would be required for moving forward with the implementation plan.

As they conducted those collaborative conversations, Cognia turnaround team members used the following four questions to pre-assess each school:

- What are they teaching?
- How are they teaching it?

- How long are they teaching it?
- How are they assessing it to know if they're being successful?

The Cognia team combined the diagnostic review data with the input from school faculty, students, families, community partners, board members, and district personnel. Members of the Cognia team and schools' turnaround committees worked together to create strategic plans these schools now use to guide their improvement efforts and craft yearly goals in the following areas:

- Leadership capacity
- Teaching and learning
- School and community engagement
- Resources

Cognia also worked with the schools' staff to "chunk" the strategic plans into 30-, 60-, and 90-day Action Improvement Plans. Every quarter, each principal reports their progress on the action plans to the TDOE.

According to Principal Wilson, the action plans provided a framework that made it easier for school administrators and teachers to reach established goals within a set timeframe. In addition, they were better able to craft a roadmap for future goals and gauge how strategies were being implemented as well as how the changes affected students' learning and wellbeing.



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Growing by steps, leaps, and bounds

Measurement is an important and necessary component of improvement. The measurement of student and school outcomes provides evidence of improvement and demonstration of the ongoing attainment of goals. State and federal accountability systems annually report on a variety of student and school outcomes to identify low and underperforming schools in need of improvement. As previously described, both Hawkins Mill Elementary School and Trezevant High School were identified as in the bottom 5% of schools, therefore listed as “Priority.” All Priority schools receive additional support and funds to aid in improvement activities. Despite these efforts, in many instances, schools identified under such designations are often reidentified year after year, unable to meet the state or federal exit criteria. In 2022, Hawkins Mill met Tennessee's exit criteria and was listed as a Reward School, Tennessee's designation for schools that show strong growth. Further, Trezevant High School also met exit criteria and was removed from Tennessee's list of Priority schools in 2023. This demonstration of improved academic and non-academic outcomes for their students marks the end of 13 years of state identification. Though continuous improvement is just that, continuous, both schools are able to celebrate a significant milestone in their improved results.

To fully examine the degree of effectiveness in the improvement efforts and activities of Hawkins Mill

Elementary School and Trezevant High School, it is worth further unpacking indicators of student performance and growth. While state assessment data are only one data point and often a lagging indicator following improvement interventions, understanding student performance, particularly relative to similar schools and districts can serve as a clear, useful, and meaningful marker regarding the success and value of improvement actions.

Tennessee uses a value-added growth model, Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS) as one such measure of student performance, focused on the impact of schools and teachers on students' academic progress. The measure uses available assessment data from statewide K–2 assessments, grades 3–8 assessments, and high school end-of-course (EOC) assessments. This growth-centered measure can be used to help evaluate whether students are improving, particularly relative to students in similar schools. In 2023, both Hawkins Mill Elementary School and Trezevant High School demonstrated significant growth, not only compared to other Priority schools, but even when comparing to all schools in Tennessee. While in some instances we see moderate growth in Hawkins Mill and Trezevant compared to all Tennessee schools, there is striking growth compared to their peers worth noting.



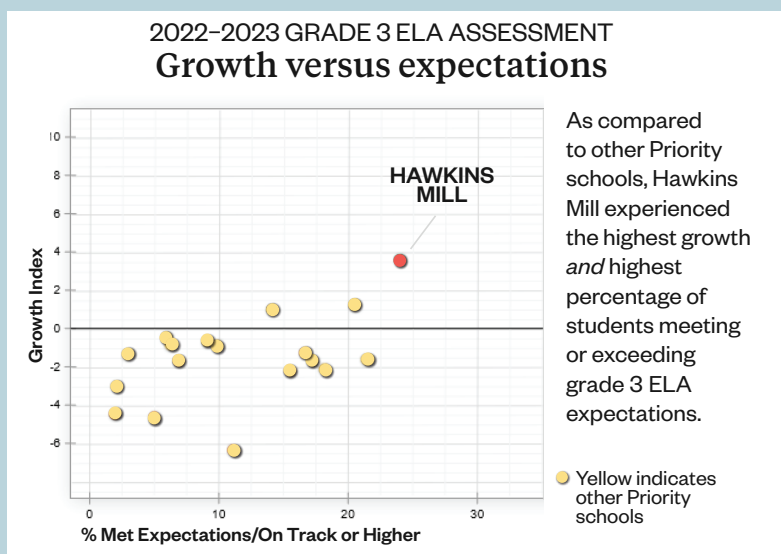
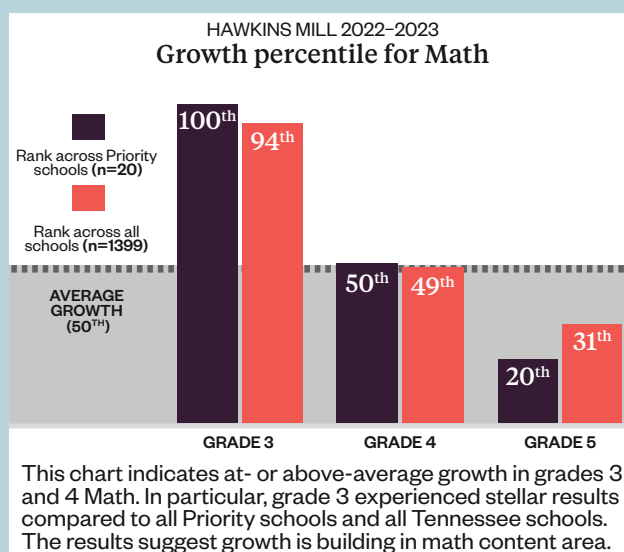
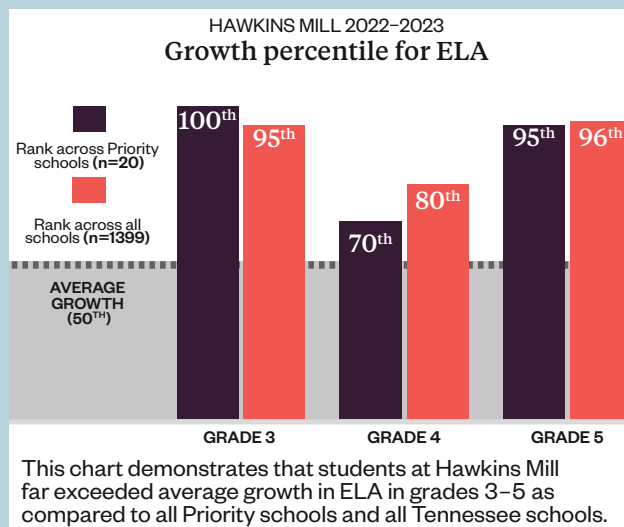
Hawkins Mill Elementary School

Leading in Literacy, rising in Math

When examining relative student growth, it is important to examine growth rates and values alongside a peer group. Therefore, this analysis includes comparisons of Hawkins Mill's TVAAS growth compared to all other Priority elementary schools (i.e., its "peers"), as well as all Tennessee elementary schools. To better understand the meaning of the TVAAS growth scores, growth percentile ranks were calculated for both peer schools and all schools. Growth percentile ranks take the subject- and grade-specific growth scores and apply rank order, where 1.00 corresponds to the 100th percentile or the highest growth score within the group. Therefore, a school with a 0.80 growth percentile rank would have a higher growth score than 80% of the schools within the group and a school at the 0.50 growth percentile rank would have average growth.

Compared to its peer schools in 2023, Hawkins Mill demonstrated astounding growth, particularly in English Language Arts (ELA). Across all grades, Hawkins Mill had the second highest growth, outperforming 95% of its peers. In grade 3 ELA, they exhibited the highest growth score of any Priority school. Grades 4 and 5 ELA also presented impressive growth at the 70th and 95th percentiles, respectively. While Math growth across all grades was more modest, Hawkins Mill had the highest grade 3 Math growth of any Priority school.

Even when compared to all Tennessee schools, including historically high-performing and more affluent schools, across-grade ELA growth was still at the 98th percentile. Grade-level specific ELA growth was similarly impressive at 95th (grade 3), 80th (grade 4), and 96th (grade 5). Math growth reflects a similar pattern across all schools as within the peer group, with a strong showing in grade 3 at the 94th percentile and average in grade 4 (49th percentile). These data suggest that the investments, strategies, and efforts undertaken by Hawkins Mill and its community are yielding positive gains.



Scatter plots are extracted from Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System reporting tool (2023). Growth vs. Expectation data set. <https://tvaas.sas.com/scatterplot.html?as=a&aj=a&w4=116&ab=dD&x9=8&xp=2023&yb=32&wD=3&x7=3>



Trezevant High School

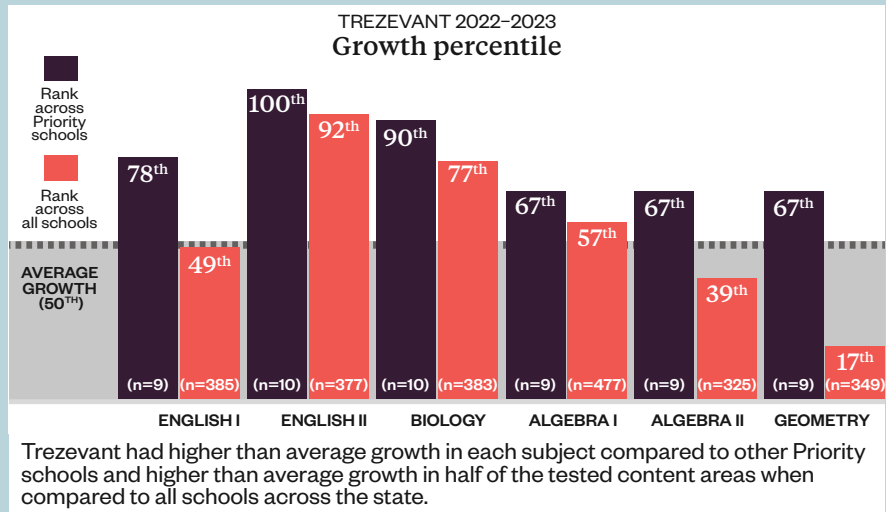
Steady growth across all subjects

High school assessments in Tennessee are administered by course completion, as opposed to assigned grade level. These end-of-course (EOC) tests are used to generate TVAAS growth scores and were similarly ranked to examine Trezevant’s relative growth compared to its peer schools and all schools. Due to the subject-specific nature of

the EOC tests, not all high schools had a growth score for each subject. Therefore, n counts of schools are noted at each subject-test-level.

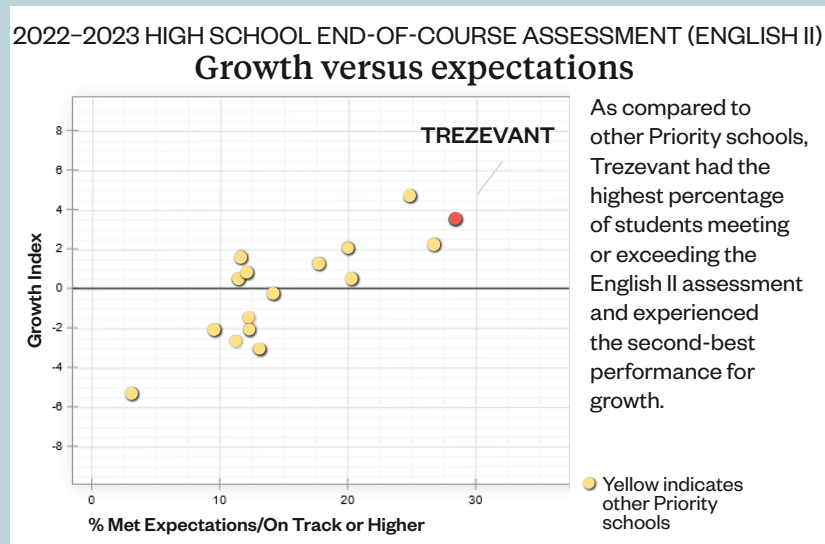
When looking across other Priority high schools, Trezevant is the leader in English II growth (100th percentile) and a strong performer in both Biology (90th percentile) and English I (78th percentile). Further, across each Math subject-test, Trezevant performs at the 67th percentile. Across all EOC tests, Trezevant’s growth was higher than the majority of all Priority schools, ranging from the 67th to 100th percentile.

Trezevant’s notable performance, particularly in English II and Biology, are also reflected in an all-school comparison. Trezevant’s English II growth was higher than 92% of all high schools in Tennessee. Similarly, they demonstrated more Biology growth than 77% of other schools. Though they were below the 50th percentile growth in English I, Algebra II, and Geometry when comparing to all schools, we note that among Priority schools, Trezevant remains a leader.



Continuous improvement needs continuous measurement

Examining multiple measures helps us understand what is working and where additional opportunities remain. As no one single data point or measure can tell a full story, it is imperative to continue monitoring, measuring, and evaluating. Student growth data shows that both Hawkins Mill and Trezevant have made significant progress in the academic gains of their students. Coupled with exiting Priority status, both schools have demonstrated significant improvement across multiple facets of student and school outcomes. The removal of Priority status indicates measurable improvement across indicators such as academic achievement, growth, chronic absenteeism, and graduation—a testament to the schools’ commitment to meet the needs of all students.



Pursuing success through collaborative conversations

Both Hawkins Mill Elementary and Trezevant High are members of the district's Innovation Zone (IZone) turnaround program, overseen by Dr. Rogers. The IZone provides participating schools with a centralized support team that includes principal supervisors, principal coaches, managers, and content leaders in the areas of ELA, math, and science. Schools receive instructional support, resources, and professional development based on their needs.

Under Dr. Rogers' leadership, the IZone has earned a strong reputation for transforming low-performing schools. In fact, the program's tagline is "Winning with relentless collective efficacy."

Hoping to listen, learn, and add value for the teachers and leaders of Hawkins Mill and Trezevant, the Cognia team actively participated in IZone training sessions. This enhanced their understanding of the vocabulary, the culture, and the established practices within the IZone framework.

One of those practices was the development of alliances with external partners. The Cognia team was already experienced in leveraging outside partnerships to increase improvement measures. Together, they established partnerships with outside agencies such as the Tennessee Home Builders Association and Jobs for Tennessee Graduates. Those institutions provided Trezevant high schoolers with a paid summer scholarship program, certified training, and a vocational certification with a job following graduation. These programs helped the students to see their education as meaningful.

Job-embedded professional development

As the Cognia team members started sharing suggestions and insights at the IZone training sessions, they further gained the confidence of Dr. Rogers and the IZone staff. As a result, Dr. Rogers encouraged the Cognia team to deliver professional development of their own.

The team responded with tailormade professional development. These "job-embedded" professional development sessions took place when there was an opening in teachers' monthly schedules—during extended days, planning sessions, or in professional learning communities. The team followed up the sessions with classroom observations during which they often modeled relevant practices with the teachers' permission.

The Hawkins Mill's principal reported that the training helped immensely with fulfilling the action plans. "We were able to have professional development around tasks required in the 30-day plan, 60-day plan, etc.," he said.

One of the topics covered by the training was creating a standards-based classroom. The Cognia team had found that the schools' faculty were often using workbooks and other content resources that were not aligned to the standards being assessed. They also found that teachers and students would benefit if more time were allotted to teaching the content standards. The standards-based classroom training helped teachers "unpack" the language of relevant standards so that they could better ensure that their instruction met the state's requirements.

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Cognia also helped Hawkins Mill and Trezevant educators resolve some culture differences that were impeding teacher-family communication. While most of the students at both schools are economically disadvantaged, many of their teachers are middle class. That difference in life experiences had led to some unintended misunderstandings, especially during teacher-caregiver conversations. Dr. B.J. Worthington, one of the Cognia team members, led a discussion on how to engage those stakeholders. The talk centered around strategies and insights put forward by the noted researcher Dr. Ruby Payne, and discussing those ideas helped teachers better understand the values, attitudes, and language of students' families.

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Delving deeper with a summer retreat

While Cognia could support educators' practices during the school year, teachers' heavy workload hindered more intensive training during that time. The two schools were used to participating in summer IZone trainings and—after consulting with Dr. Rogers—the Cognia team implemented their own summer institute for the staff at Trezevant High School in the summer of 2022.

This two-day tailormade professional development workshop focused on using student performance data to plan for improvement. “We were able to have 10 teachers, administrators, and four Cognia team members meet,” said Principal Brent. “It was just us and our minds and being able to dig deeper into what's important for a high school.”

He appreciated having that time to bounce ideas and problem-solve with Cognia experts. “They are previous superintendents,” he said. “They know the work. They provided the knowledge they have utilized over the course of their years of being educators. We were able to start the school year on a very positive note and be very aggressive with implementation.”

Photo courtesy of the Memphis-Shelby County Schools

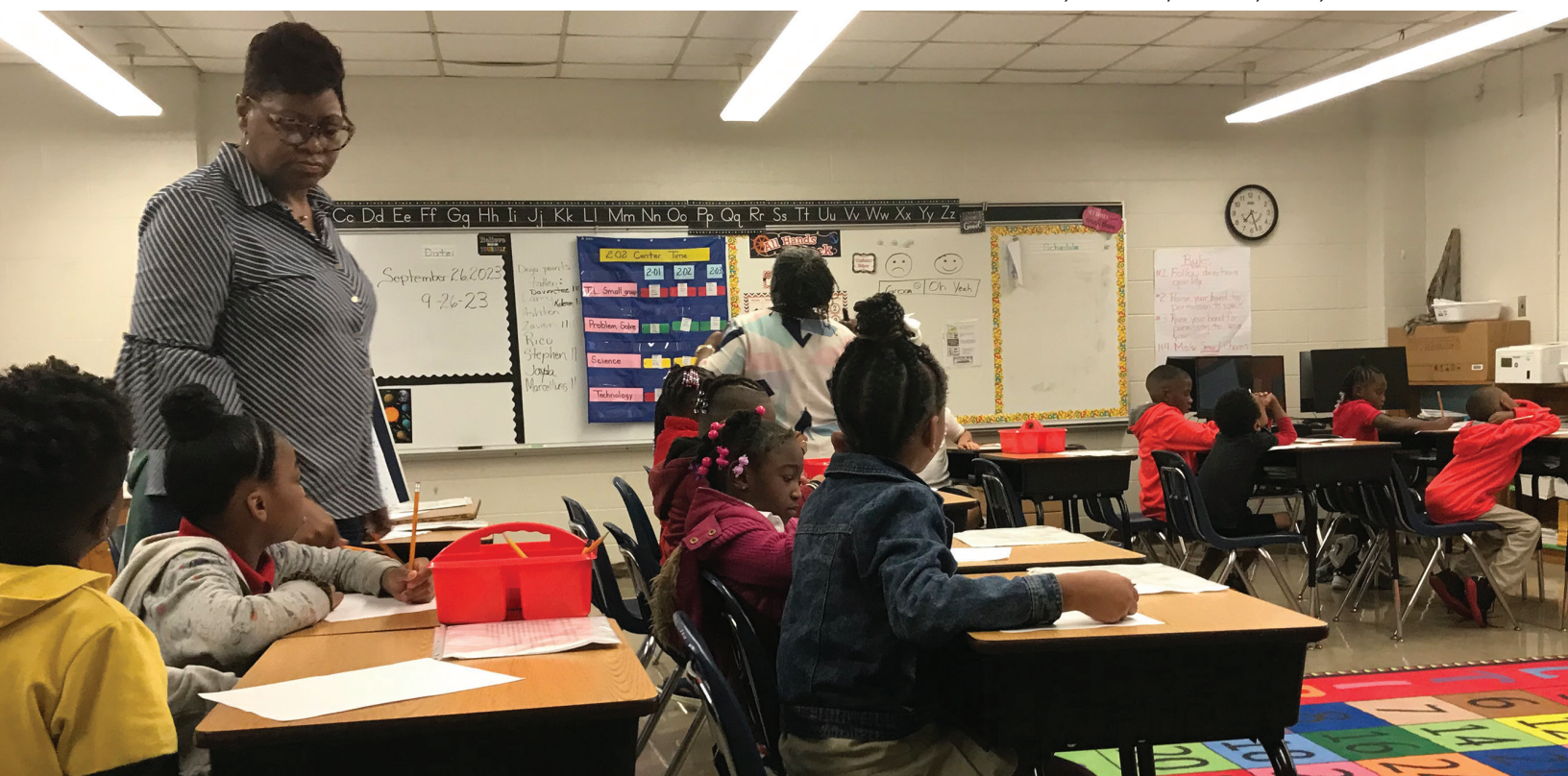




Photo courtesy of the Memphis-Shelby County Schools

Building capacity for continued improvement

The schools' collaborative work with Cognia and the IZone has paid off. For example, Hawkins Mill Elementary's counselor served as a pivotal liaison with outside partners for the creation of a program incentivizing school attendance. Between 2020 and 2022, the school's chronic absenteeism rate dropped from 29.2% to 13.6%.

Trezevant High met the state-required graduation rate of 67% during the 2021–22 school year—the highest in over 10 years—and grew to 70% in 2022–23. In addition, the percentage of chronically absent students fell from 38.3% in the 2020–21 school year to 29.4% in the 2021–22 school year.

Even though Cognia team members will leave both schools at the end of the turnaround program, their mission is to build educator capacity for continuing the improvement process. Therefore, during 2024, the team will focus on enhancing the schools' ability to sustain effective teaching and learning habits. The results mentioned above are positive early indications of the capacity for improvement becoming established in both schools.

By focusing on a collaborative approach with educators in Hawkins Mill and Trezevant, school faculty and leadership are able to keep moving forward in a unified manner rather than trying to fulfill “scattershot” requirements. The level of involvement, shoulder-to-shoulder support walking alongside school staff, and capacity building is not something that has been done in Hawkins Mill or Trezevant in the past. Even the legislators have recognized that Cognia's work is different and that it's having a positive impact.

Cognia's Dr. Smith credits the effectiveness of the approach to the relationships that Cognia first focuses on building. “You've got to trust the people,” she said. “After all, it's not my school. It's their school. Sometimes culture is a very tough nut to crack, but you can't do anything without being a part of the culture. So, you have to do a lot of listening on the front end. Trust: that's the key word.”

Dr. Rogers appreciates Cognia's staunch partnership. “From the leadership development to the teacher development to garnering more parent and community support—we walk in lockstep,” he said. “It never seems like it's disjointed. It always feels like a true partnership.”

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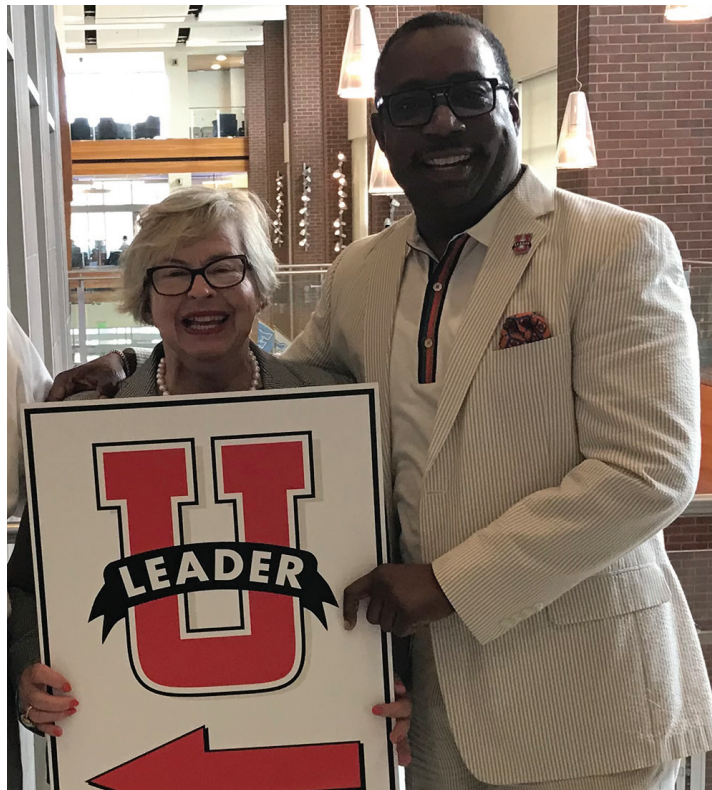


Photo courtesy of the Memphis-Shelby County Schools

Dr. Connie Smith, Cognia, featured with Thomas D. Rogers, Ed.D., Memphis-Shelby County Schools.

Dr. Rogers is a lifelong Memphian and has spent the past 20 years in public education. Dr. Rogers has matriculated to the district office in Memphis-Shelby County Schools, in the Office of Schools, where he serves as Assistant Superintendent for IZone 3.0/ Priority Schools. In this role, he coaches and supervises principal supervisors, content managers, and highly specialized advisors in a portfolio of assigned schools.

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.

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