

## Jefferson County, Alabama

# Data-Driven Improvement

Jefferson County Schools, located in Birmingham, Alabama, has engaged in Cognia's continuous improvement-driven accreditation process for the last 15 years. Building on the strength of this work, the district enacted a partnership in 2021 to expand and develop its improvement planning through a Cognia Diagnostic Review. With a focus on an integrated system of support for intensive school improvement, the partnership aimed to roll out a cohort model, enrolling five schools each year, until all district schools participated in the review process. This study examines the initial impacts of the partnership on individual schools and on the broader district, including early indications of improvement relating to staff motivation and engagement, and to key learner outcomes.

## Partnership Structure

Jefferson County's partnership with Cognia for Diagnostic Reviews and Improvement Services is designed in phases for each cohort. **In the initial phase**, schools undergo the diagnostic review process to identify their strengths and areas for improvement. This phase includes comprehensive data collection, self-assessment and reflection, and an external review conducted by educational leaders to provide unbiased, third-party feedback on a variety of key measures and characteristics related to the school and learning environment. **This is followed by a second phase** focused on leadership coaching, customized professional learning, and increased focus on gathering and using teacher feedback to promote agency. The model works to accomplish the district's overall goal of an integrated system of support utilizing multiple measures and data-driven planning to develop improvement strategies for learners.

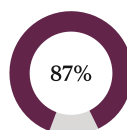
## Data Insights

Following the Cognia Diagnostic Review, school leaders were asked to evaluate and describe the impact of the review and subsequent supports for improvement.

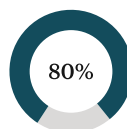
### Survey responses



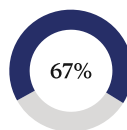
100% of respondents noted that as a direct result of the review process, their school had begun work toward their improvement priorities, with 80% also indicating an increased eagerness toward positive change.



87% of respondents felt the Cognia Diagnostic Review identified practical and relevant improvement priorities for their school and that the report provided valuable information to guide improvement.



80% of respondents affirmed a strengthened sense of collective ownership and commitment to improvement among the community (e.g., staff, students, families).



67% of respondents had no recommendations to improve the process.

Respondents (n=15) from 10 out of 15 schools across cohorts one, two, and three indicated high levels of agreement relating to the value and effectiveness of the partnership in guiding, fostering, and supporting their improvement journey.

## Personal insights

Additional insights were provided by individual school leaders regarding the outcomes of the Cognia Diagnostic Review partnership in their schools.

- **Hueytown Middle School** (cohort 1, 800 students) described increased leadership capacity and ability to implement initiatives with fidelity. They have experienced greater transparency and an increase in student ownership of learning since their review in 2021.
- **McAdory Middle School** (cohort 2, 850 students) highlighted the importance of teacher voice and involvement. They have experienced increased teacher empowerment and agency, as well as collective solutioning across all levels. This has led to greater buy-in for schoolwide implementation of evidence-based practices.
- **Clay-Chalkville Middle School** (cohort 1, 800 students) felt the review process helped illuminate differences in the perception versus the reality of their school's culture. This led to improved observational feedback, increased focus on teacher retention, and stronger distributed leadership by elevating teacher voice in decision-making.

## Demonstrated Success

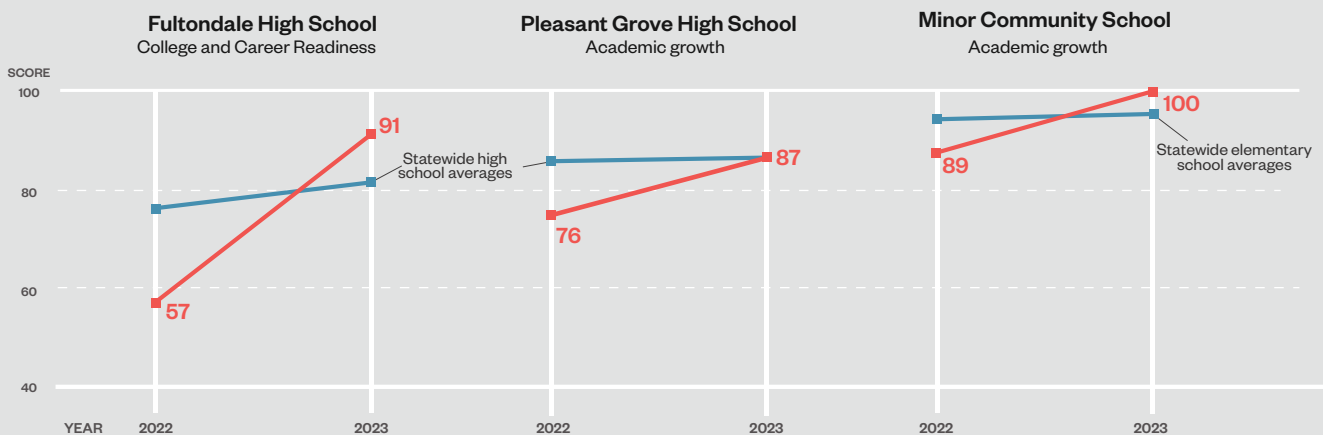
School improvement takes time. Still, even one or two years into the diagnostic review partnership, Schools in Jefferson County are demonstrating notable gains in a variety of outcome measures, including state-level

accountability indicators such as college- and career-readiness, academic performance (e.g., achievement and growth), and chronic absenteeism. For example, cohort one high schools Fultondale and Pleasant Grove made significant gains in college- and career-readiness and academic growth, as well as significant reductions in absenteeism rates, particularly compared to the statewide high school averages (see below). Fultondale was in the 99th percentile for growth in college- and career-readiness in 2023, meaning the school demonstrated more improvement in this indicator than 99% of all other high schools. Similarly, Pleasant Grove demonstrated more improvement than 86% of all high schools in academic growth.

Lipscomb Elementary and Minor Community School showed impressive results compared to statewide elementary school trends in academic growth. These cohort two schools both scored above 99 points (out of 100) for the academic growth indicator, with Minor Community's change in growth exceeding 91% of all other elementary schools' progress.

## Continuing Improvement

Jefferson County Schools' partnership with Cognia has improved academic and leadership practices through an integrated support system. The ongoing collaboration, anchored by the Cognia Diagnostic Review, provides a foundation for continuous improvement as the district anticipates further positive impacts on academic growth, leadership, and school culture.



In just one year, Fultondale HS moved from below-average to above-average scores.

Pleasant Grove HS closed the Academic Growth gap, achieving performance on par with the state average.

Minor Community School made significant Academic Growth gains, surpassing statewide averages.