

Mandaree School District, North Dakota

A Journey of Holistic Improvement and Cultural Resilience

Mandaree School District (MSD), located in rural North Dakota, serves a unique student population, primarily from tribal communities. This small district, housing grades K–12 within the same building, faces the dual challenge of honoring local cultural values while adhering to the oversight of both the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction and the Bureau of Indian Education. Mandaree schools were designated as Comprehensive Support schools under the state and federal accountability system as they ranked in the bottom five percent of performance. With over 90% of MSD’s 200+ students considered economically disadvantaged, the district sought to address its complex needs through a focused and strategic improvement plan.

Strategic Vision and Community Engagement

In 2022, MSD partnered with Cognia®, a global, nonprofit education improvement organization, on a transformative journey of evidence-based practices and strategic planning. Utilizing the Cognia Strategic Thinking and Planning framework, the district engaged stakeholders, analyzed data, and developed an actionable improvement plan. This four-stage process—Envisioning, Planning, Implementing, and Evaluating—emphasized co-creation, shared responsibility, and ongoing monitoring. Recognizing the importance of cultural preservation, Mandaree actively involved the tribal community in every step of the planning process, ensuring that the district’s initiatives were not only effective but also culturally relevant.

Setting Priorities: A Data-Driven Approach

To create a strategic plan that truly reflected the district’s goals and challenges, MSD began with comprehensive data collection. Feedback from students, teachers, families, and community leaders was

gathered alongside critical metrics such as attendance, discipline, academic performance, and readiness indicators. This collaborative effort resulted in a five-year plan focusing on four key areas: culture, leadership, teaching and learning, and technology. Eighteen critical initiatives were identified, each with clear benchmarks and measures to track progress and make adjustments as needed.

A Holistic Approach to School Improvement

To achieve MSD’s vision of students becoming self-sufficient, culturally responsible, contributing members of the global community, a holistic approach to school improvement was critical. Beyond academic interventions, the district launched initiatives like the Culture Elder Committee and Pow-Wow collaboration to celebrate Native American heritage, which deepened community engagement and upheld the district’s commitment to cultural resilience. Students benefited from enrichment opportunities such as the Cultural Drum Club and Ribbon Skirt Making Club, and for the first time, participated in the Annual Math Competition and Science STEM Competition at local universities.

Enhanced communication efforts, including new digital calendars, family newsletters, and event flyers, further strengthened ties with the community. The intentional integration of tribal culture into daily instruction, teacher professional development, and community events led to a nearly 50% increase in community partnerships.

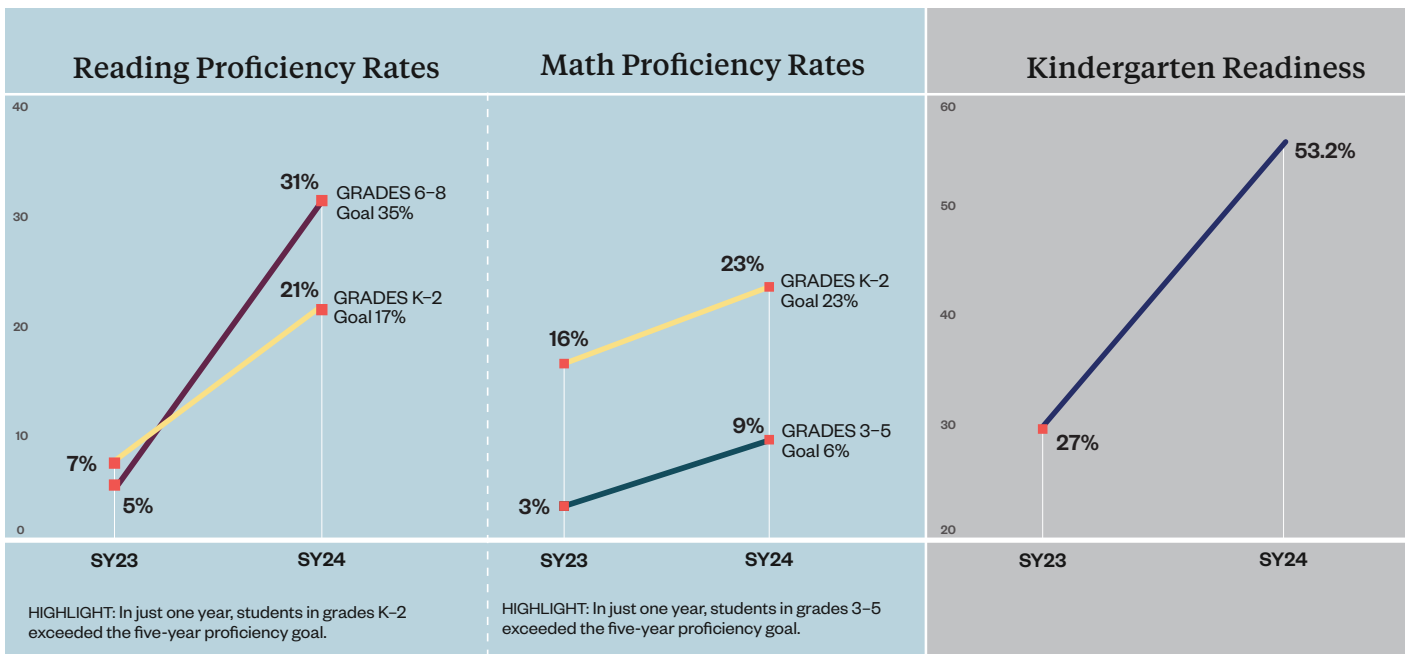
Measuring Success: Academic Gains

MSDs improvement plan was driven by data, with student performance and engagement metrics guiding instructional decisions. Strengthened protocols for Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), data reviews, and observations provided teachers with the support and resources needed to align with state standards and reflect on their practice. The results have been remarkable. Reading proficiency at the K–8 level saw significant gains, with rates increasing from 7% to 21% in grades K–2, from 8% to 13% in grades 3–5, and from 5% to an impressive 31.3% in grades 6–8. Math proficiency also improved, with rates rising from 16% to 23% in grades K–2, from 3% to 9% in grades 3–5, and from 3% to 4% in grades 6–8. Additionally, kindergarten readiness surged from 27% to 53%.

Looking Ahead: Sustaining the Momentum

MSD’s success is a testament to thoughtful planning, rigorous monitoring, and a commitment to cultural integrity. Continued support from Cognia has provided the district with an external perspective and accountability partner, furthering their mission. The early successes, particularly in the elementary and middle school grades, have energized the entire district. The implementation team of educators grew from 5 to 20 in the second year, with increased participation from high school staff. Enthusiasm is high, with a district-wide focus on growth mindset and solution-oriented approaches. Strengthened communication and collaboration with families, especially Title I families, have fostered deeper relationships and engagement.

Mandaree school leaders understand that sustainable improvement is an ongoing process. Their five-year strategic plan is a living document, open to revisions as the district evolves. With an inclusive approach and unwavering dedication to the values of their community, the district is well-positioned to continue its journey of growth, ensuring that every student is supported, culturally enriched, and prepared for the future.



Learn more about our strategic thinking and planning approach in our Professional Services catalog at cognia.org/professional-learning/#solutions.