

Measuring What Matters

School Excellence in 2024

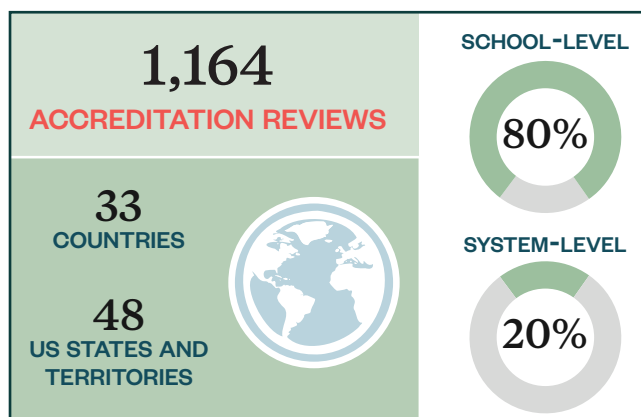
In a diverse educational landscape, accreditation standards can serve as a powerful unifying framework, enabling institutions to benchmark their performance against established markers of excellence. Cognia® has over a century of experience in school accreditation and continuous improvement, sharpening institutional priorities, and helping education leaders make more informed decisions about resource allocation and strategic initiatives. Examining the outputs of accreditation reviews illuminates collective strengths and opportunities, providing insight into where institutions stand. This data-driven perspective helps validate successful practices and informs areas of greatest need.

Analyzing reviews from across the globe

During the 2023–24 school year, Cognia completed 1,164 accreditation reviews for K–12 schools across the globe. Early learning institutions, which require a separate protocol and accreditation standards, were excluded from the analyzed sample. Cognia accreditation reviews may occur at the school- or system-level (e.g. district-level). Nearly 80% of the reviews included in the analysis were conducted at individual schools, with the remaining 20% being system-level reviews. These accreditation reviews spanned 48 U.S. states and territories, and 33 countries worldwide. Accreditation reviews yield ratings on a 1 to 4 scale across 30 standards, sorted by key characteristics such as school culture, growth, and leadership. Further, each accreditation report uses data and evidence from the review process to identify areas for improvement and noteworthy practices.

Shining strengths: school culture, relationships, and wellbeing

Analysis reveals that institutions excel most notably in cultivating environments of respect, fairness, equity, and inclusion. Moreover, leadership teams across our network consistently demonstrate exceptional skills such as fostering bias-free learning spaces and keeping learner well-being at the heart of institutional principles, emerging as the most frequently identified noteworthy practices in our reviews. These standards demonstrated consistently



high ratings, averaging 3.1 or higher on the 4-point scale.

A sustainable focus on school culture, positive relationships, and prioritization of learner well-being represents a significant achievement across our network. Research consistently demonstrates that strong, positive school cultures can dramatically impact student success by creating supportive learning environments. Our institutions achieve this through the intentional engagement of all

Most frequently cited noteworthy practices

- Standard 1: Leaders cultivate and sustain a culture that demonstrates respect, fairness, equity, and inclusion, and is free from bias.
- Standard 2: Learners' well-being is at the heart of the institution's guiding principles such as mission, purpose, and beliefs.
- Standard 4: Learners benefit from a formal structure that fosters positive relationships with peers and adults.

stakeholders—from parents and educators to students—capturing diverse experiences and perspectives that inform their approach to relationship-building and student growth.

Growth opportunities: alignment and evaluation

While the 2023–2024 review cycle revealed many strengths, it also highlighted two key areas where institutions can deepen their impact. First, there exists a notable opportunity to better align professional development with specific learner needs. Although schools regularly engage in professional learning activities—from student engagement strategies to digital resource integration—these efforts often lack systematic connection to data on learner outcomes, teacher-identified needs, and strategic priorities (n=432). The most effective institutions in our network demonstrate how involving educators in professional development planning can create more targeted, impactful learning experiences that directly support student growth.

Second, many institutions face challenges in embedding action research into their continuous improvement efforts (n=394). While research affirms action research as a powerful driver of educational enhancement, our data indicates that many schools struggle to establish sustainable systems for iterative improvement. Those institutions that have successfully implemented formal structures for longitudinal data collection and analysis demonstrate significantly enhanced ability to evaluate and adapt their instructional practices based on student outcomes. This evidence-based approach enables more precise, responsive decision-making in service of student learning.

From insight to action

Cognia's 2023–24 accreditation reviews reveal compelling evidence that many network schools excel in fostering inclusive environments that prioritize learner well-being. Through effective leadership and intentional stakeholder engagement, these institutions have cultivated supportive school cultures that demonstrably enhance learner success. These achievements provide a strong foundation for implementing more advanced improvement strategies, particularly as schools work to expand and sustain these positive practices.

To leverage these strengths while addressing key

Most common areas for improvement

- Standard 25: Leaders promote action research by professional staff members to improve their practice and advance learning.
- Standard 26: Leaders regularly evaluate instructional programs and organizational conditions to improve instruction and advance learning.
- Standard 29: Understanding learners' needs and interests drives the design, delivery, application, and evaluation of professional learning.

opportunities, schools should focus on two strategic priorities. First, professional development must be systematically aligned with specific learner outcomes and educator needs, supported by regular data collection and analysis. This alignment ensures that teacher training directly impacts classroom effectiveness and learner growth. Second, schools should formalize structures for ongoing action research, enabling educators to evaluate instructional strategies and adapt to evolving learner needs in real time. Cognia's professional learning solutions, including [Cultivating Teacher Growth and Strategic Thinking and Planning](#), provide research-based frameworks and practical tools to help schools implement these data-driven practices effectively. By partnering with Cognia to embed these approaches into daily operations, schools can create sustainable systems that not only meet accreditation standards but also drive continuous improvement.

Further reading and resources

[Cognia Performance Standards Research Paper](#)

[Cognia Accreditation Research Brief](#)

Cervantes, D. J., & Gutierrez, A. S. (2019). Stories from the Field: Fostering Positive Peer Relationships. Transforming Education.

Cookson Jr, P. W. (2017). Exploring Equity Issues: Building Relationships for Student Success. Center for Education Equity, Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium.

Darling-Hammond, L. (2017). Effective teacher professional development. Learning Policy Institute.

Hingston, T. (2024, February 22). Action research as an improvement driver in international schools—ISC Research. ISC Research. <https://iscresearch.com/action-research-as-an-improvement-driver/>

Starkey, J. (2023). Effective strategies for building and sustaining a positive school culture and climate. *Academy of Educational Leadership Journal*, 27(S2), 1–3.

For more information about Cognia Accreditation Standards, visit www.cognia.org/standards.