

Performance Standards

for Extended Learning Programs



Introduction: What makes a good school?

The quality of a school goes beyond its name, location, or reputation. An education institution succeeds when it supports every learner every day, offering opportunities for every learner to reach further.

One hallmark of a good school is that it continually strives for improvement. Like the member institutions we serve, Cognia® works to innovate and improve. In 2024, we completed a research and development cycle examining and updating the Cognia Performance Standards for Extended Learning Programs to acknowledge changes and set expectations for quality education institutions in a new era. Based on current research in education, input from practitioners, and expert reviews, this cyclical development process assures that the standards at the foundation of our improvement and accreditation strategies continue to be viable, feasible, and relevant to educators in today's world.

Aligned across PK–12 education

If you're familiar with the previous Cognia standards for different institution types, you'll notice a significant change: One set of standards now applies to all K–12 and postsecondary institution types, and the revised extended learning standards are closely aligned to both the early learning and the K–12 school and system standards.

All education institutions share a fundamental common goal: to inspire and equip learners so that they succeed to their highest potential. The new, research-based standards acknowledge that commonality. They are appropriate for all institutions, placing emphasis on quality and effective practices that benefit all learners in any PK–12 or postsecondary non-degree granting setting. The details relevant to different types of institutions will be addressed in Assurances and in other Cognia Accreditation resources that will be available to members. This alignment supports the integration of best practices across the education spectrum, starting at birth.

Important concepts

Every iteration of Cognia's Performance Standards builds on the prior version to support ongoing improvement. Many of the themes of the previous standards are reflected in the new standards. The 2025 standards include several significant concepts to guide institutions forward, including:

LEARNER-CENTERED: Cognia's new standards focus on the learner, describing the impact on the learning journey of processes and practices, which reflect the performance of the institution. Further, the standards emphasize student agency.

LEARNER WELL-BEING: Learning depends on more than skilled instruction. Institutions must address multiple aspects of learners' circumstances and environment, so that every learner can grow.

INQUIRY-BASED APPROACH: Action research fosters inquiry and dialogue among educators, guiding informed improvements to instructional practices.

Quality characteristics

Four key characteristics are evident when institutions effectively adopt the Cognia Performance Standards and engage in Cognia's peer review process for accreditation and continuous improvement.

CULTURE OF LEARNING: the institution's focus on the challenges, joys, and opportunities for learning, and the coherence with its mission and vision

LEADERSHIP FOR LEARNING: the responsibility of an institution's leaders to influence and impact all aspects of the institution in positive ways

ENGAGEMENT OF LEARNING: the inclusion of all learners in the learning process, and their development of confidence and love of learning

GROWTH IN LEARNING: the growth of learners in the programs and curricula provided by the institution and their readiness to successfully transition to next levels of learning

These characteristics serve as our model for identifying and discussing school and system quality. Additional information will be available to members to show how the standards align with these characteristics.

Framework for improvement

Our new standards and the key characteristics are the foundation for Cognia's approach to continuous improvement—not just to accreditation. These are the elements that should guide every educational institution to ensure high-quality teaching and learning and overall organizational effectiveness.

The Cognia Performance Standards, in effect as of July 1, 2025, define the practices of a good extended learning program and provide the criteria for improvement efforts that will energetically and visibly grow learners, teachers, leaders, and organizations.

Key Characteristic 1: Culture of Learning

What it means

A good institution nurtures and sustains a healthy culture for learning. In a healthy culture, learners, parents, and educators feel connected to the purpose and work of the institution as well as behave in alignment with the stated values and norms. The institution also demonstrates evidence that reflects the mission, beliefs, and expectations of the institution (e.g., student work; physical appearance of the institution; participation in institution activities; parents attendance at institution functions).

Keys to A Culture of Learning

A healthy culture is evident where:

- Stakeholders are actively engaged and supportive of the institution's mission
- Learners' academic and non-academic needs and interests are the focal point
- Stakeholders are included and supported

STANDARD 1

Leaders cultivate and sustain a culture that builds community, demonstrates respect and fairness for all learners, 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 3

Leaders actively engage stakeholders to support the institution's priorities and guiding principles that promote learners' development, learning, and well-being.

STANDARD 4

Learners benefit from a formal structure that fosters positive relationships with peers and adults.

STANDARD 5

Institution leaders, educators, and support staff embrace collegiality and collaboration in support of learners.

STANDARD 6

Institution leaders and educators receive the support they need to strengthen their professional practice.

Key Characteristic 2: Leadership for Learning

What it means

The ability of a leader to provide leadership for learning is a key attribute of a good institution. Leaders who engage in their own learning while tangibly supporting the learning process for learners and teachers have a significant positive impact on the success of others. Leaders must also communicate the learning expectations for all learners and teachers, continuously, with consistency and purpose. The expectations are embedded in the culture of the institution, reflected by learners', teachers', and leaders' behaviors and attitudes toward learning.

Keys to Leadership for Learning

Leadership for learning is demonstrated when school leaders:

- Communicate expectations for learning
- Influence and impact the culture in positive ways
- Model and engage in learning while supporting others to do so

STANDARD 7

Leaders guide educators and support staff in the continuous improvement process focused on learners' experiences and needs.

STANDARD 8

The governing authority demonstrates a commitment to learners and their families by collaborating with leaders to uphold the institution's priorities and to drive continuous improvement.

STANDARD 9

Leaders cultivate effective individual and collective leadership among stakeholders.

STANDARD 10

Leaders demonstrate expertise in recruiting, supervising, and evaluating educators and support staff to optimize learning.

STANDARD 11

Leaders create and maintain institutional structures and processes that support learners, families, educators, and support staff in both stable and changing environments.

STANDARD 12

Educators implement curriculum and instruction that are aligned for relevancy and effectiveness for each and every learner.

STANDARD 13

Qualified personnel instruct and assist learners and each other in support of the institution's mission, purpose, and beliefs.

STANDARD 14

Curriculum and instruction are augmented by developmentally appropriate materials and resources that advance learning and support learners' personal interests.

STANDARD 15

Learners' needs drive the allocation and management of human, material, digital, and fiscal resources.

STANDARD 16

Institution leaders, educators, and support staff demonstrate a commitment to learners' health and safety.

STANDARD 17

Institutions serving varied age groups or learners with special needs demonstrate the capacity to support their unique needs.

Key Characteristic 3: Engagement of Learning

What it means

A good institution ensures that learners are engaged in the learning environment. Learners who are engaged in the learning environment participate with confidence and display agency over their own learning. A good institution adopts policies and engages in practices that support all learners being included in the learning process.

Keys to Engagement of Learning

Engagement is demonstrated when all learners:

- Are included in the learning process
- Participate with confidence
- Have agency over their learning

STANDARD 18

Learners experience curriculum, materials, and instruction that emphasize the value of different cultures, backgrounds, and abilities reflective of the global community.

STANDARD 19

Learners have the support and opportunities to realize their learning potential.

STANDARD 20

Learners are immersed in an environment that fosters lifelong skills including creativity, curiosity, risk taking, collaboration, and design thinking.

STANDARD 21

Learners are immersed in an environment that promotes and respects student agency and responsibility for their learning.

STANDARD 22

Learners engage in experiences that promote and develop their self-confidence and love of learning.

STANDARD 23

Instruction is characterized by high expectations and learner-centered practices.

STANDARD 24

Instruction is monitored and adjusted to advance and deepen individual learners' knowledge and understanding of the curriculum.

STANDARD 25

Educators integrate the use of developmentally appropriate tools and technology into learning activities to deepen and advance learners' engagement with learning activities and stimulate their curiosity.

Key Characteristic 4: Growth in Learning

What it means

A good institution positively impacts learners throughout their journey of learning. A positive impact on the learner is reflected in readiness to engage in and preparedness for the next transition in their learning. Growth in learning is also reflected in learners' ability to meet expectations in knowledge and skill acquisition.

Keys to Growth in Learning

Growth is evident when:

- Learners possess non-academic skills that ensure readiness to learn
- Learners' academic achievement reflects preparedness to learn
- Learners demonstrate growth in meeting expectations of learning as defined by the institution
- Learners attain knowledge and skills necessary to achieve goals for learning

STANDARD 26

Leaders use data and input from a variety of sources to make decisions for learners' and educators' growth and well-being.

STANDARD 27

Leaders promote action research by educators to improve their practice and advance learning.

STANDARD 28

Leaders regularly evaluate educational programs and organizational conditions to improve instruction and advance learning.

STANDARD 29

Learners' developmental, physical, social, emotional, and intellectual needs are identified and effectively addressed through appropriate interventions.

STANDARD 30

Learners are supported in pursuing individual goals and interests that address the acquisition of non-academic and academic skills important for their educational futures and careers.

STANDARD 31

Understanding of child development, curriculum learning objectives, and developmentally appropriate instructional strategies drive the design, delivery, application, and evaluation of professional learning.

STANDARD 32

Learners' development and learning progress is measured through a balanced system that includes assessment both for learning and of learning.



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