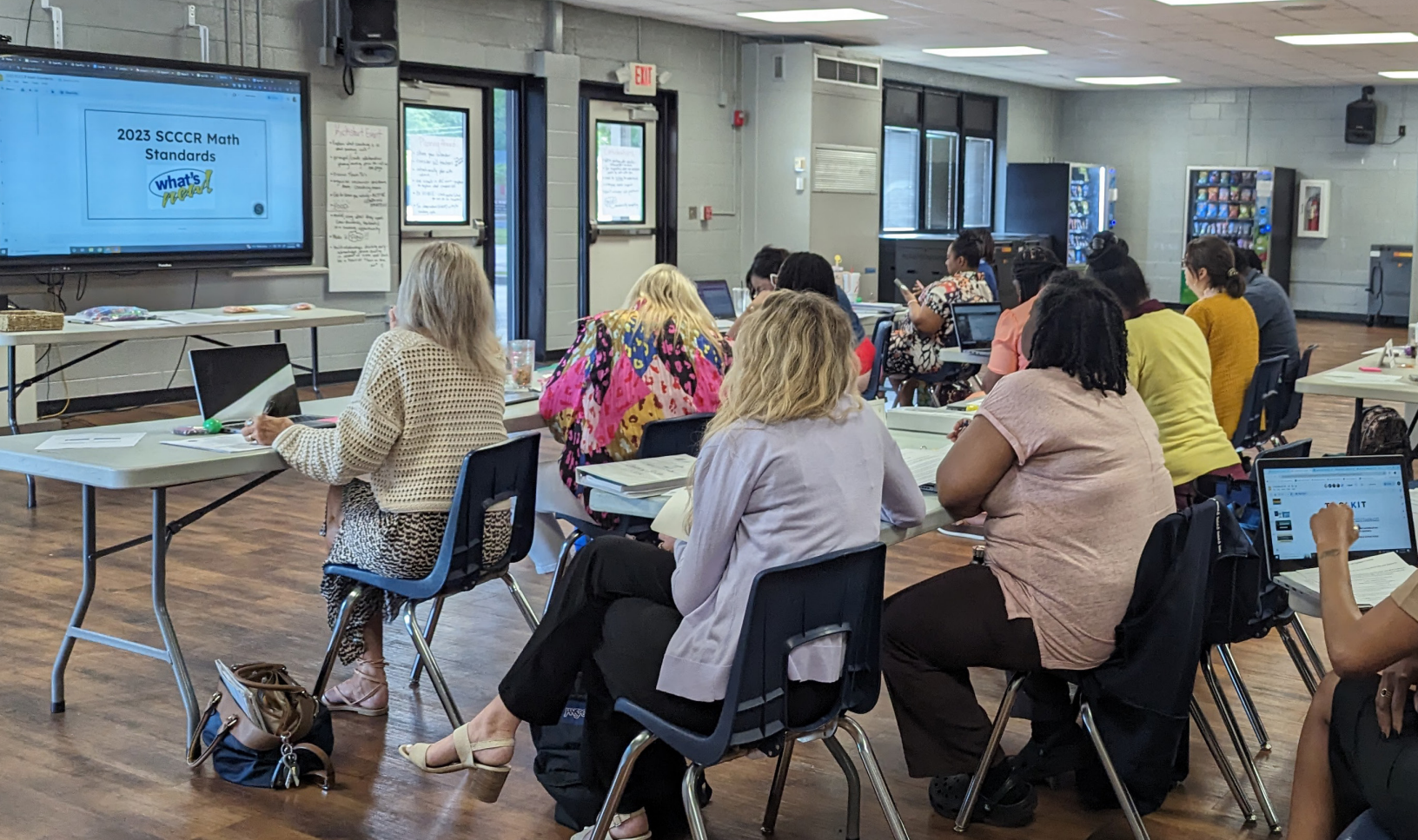
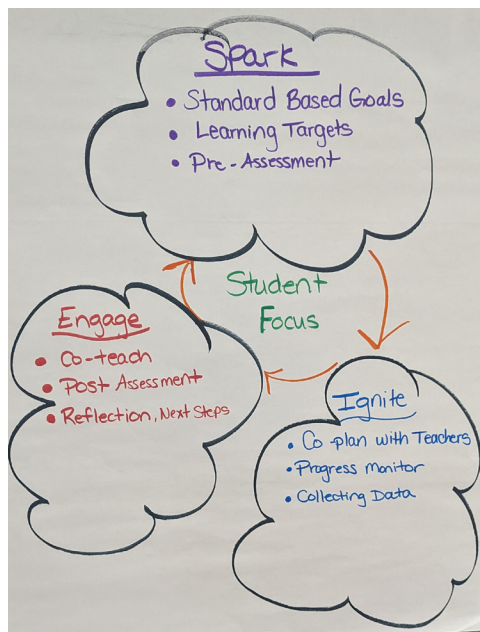


Sumter School District Sees Gains in Student Engagement

**CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS AND PROFESSIONAL
DEVELOPMENT DRIVE IMPROVEMENT**



All photos courtesy of the Sumter School District



According to educational research, student engagement is a powerful factor for academic success. When students are actively involved in their own learning and feel a positive emotional connection to their learning environment, they are much more likely to retain what they're being taught and develop critical thinking skills. But educators face two questions: (1) how to gauge the extent of students' engagement in learning and (2) how to determine what spurs learning engagement.

To answer those questions, Sumter School District partnered with Cognia®, a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization that focuses on continuous improvement for PreK–12 schools worldwide. The partnership has had a significant impact on academic performance districtwide.

From 2021 to 2024, the percentage of Sumter students meeting or exceeding expectations on the South Carolina College- and Career-Ready Assessment (SC READY) rose from:

- 24% to 37.7% in English language arts—a 57% increase.
- 17.6% to 25.5% in math—a 45% increase.

One factor contributing to this growth is Sumter's new, data-driven, learner-centric approach to student engagement and continuous improvement.

Getting started with learner-focused observations

Sumter's student engagement initiative began during the 2018–19 school year with a soft rollout of the Cognia Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool® (eleot®). The eleot assesses specific behaviors, attitudes, and actions that play crucial roles in fostering engagement and effective learning experiences across seven domains. For example:

1. For **equitable learning**, learners might engage in differentiated learning opportunities.
2. For **digital learning**, learners might use digital tools and technology to conduct research, solve problems, or create original works.
3. For **active learning**, learners might collaborate on projects, activities, tasks, or other assignments.
4. For **high expectations**, learners might engage in coursework or tasks that require the use of higher-order thinking (e.g., analyzing, applying, evaluating, synthesizing).
5. For **progress monitoring and feedback**, learners might receive feedback from teachers, peers, or other resources for work revisions.
6. For **supportive learning**, learners would have a congenial relationship with their teacher.
7. For **well-managed learning**, learners would follow classroom rules and behavioral expectations.

District educators planned to use the data to gain insights into their schools' overall atmosphere as well as how educators interacted with students and used learning spaces.

"We like that the eleot is research-based and that our improvement would be data-driven. We also like that it's student-focused and validated on an ongoing basis through research studies," said Monica Pate, Sumter's K–5 math/science coordinator.

Sumter conducted 393 observations in 2022 and found that the average score for active learning was 2.73 on a 4.0 scale. That data highlighted a need to equip teachers with models and strategies for improving instruction.

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K–5 Math/Science Coordinator



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—Jamie Lessard
Professional Learning Coordinator

Introducing data training and protocols

“As we learned more about the elect and the training that came with it, we knew that we needed to be using it with fidelity,” said Pate. By the end of the 2023 fall semester, all schools were on board. Sumter enrolled principals, assistant principals, and instructional coaches in a Cognia certification course for using the elect. In addition, Cognia provided other Sumter leadership teams with training on the observation tool.

During training, some leadership teams revealed they weren’t sure what indicators to look for. So, Sumter leaders created training videos that featured district teachers and classrooms exhibiting active learning strategies as demonstrated in the domains the tool examines.

Jamie Lessard, the district’s professional learning coordinator, referred to the staff training as “an extra layer of support.” She said, “It wasn’t just a resource that was ‘one-and-done’ in an hour. It really helped add in that extra layer so everyone was speaking a common language. When we talk about active learning, for example, they know those indicators on the elect tool.”

The district also formalized the use of the observation tool. “We came up with protocols for what we expected, and all our administrators now provide us with a schedule of elect observations,” said Pate.

Schools’ observation schedules varied according to the size of their faculty. “We wanted schools to commit to what was doable,” said Lessard. “We have one small school that has one teacher per grade level and one administrator. Then we have Sumter High,



which has seven administrators and over 100 staff members.” The small school followed the district’s minimum of two observations per quarter per teacher. Larger schools, however, conducted observations more frequently.

During the summer of 2024, Sumter provided school leaders with professional learning on using eleot data to inform instructional practices and identify next steps for improvement. Leaders also learned how to correlate eleot data with data from other sources to obtain a more holistic view of students’ progress. The other data sources include state and district assessments, discipline and attendance reports, Cognia stakeholder surveys, and even information on student participation in afterschool organizations. Triangulating data from all these sources has allowed for informed decision-making regarding targeted improvements for both specific schools and the district.

Making data part of the leadership process

Pate reported that eleot data is now a regular part of teachers’ professional learning. “It drives a lot of our training on our half-day, school-level professional learning days as well as our full-day, district-level days,” she said. “The observation data is also used to coach new teachers. The data’s focus on learners makes teachers feel less pressured.”

In addition, the professional learning and academics teams hold monthly meetings with school leaders where they examine and relate data findings to leaders’ progress on their professional learning plans. The teams provide advance notice to encourage leaders to familiarize themselves with the data beforehand.

Sumter’s weekly update newsletter for school principals also includes a running slide deck that prompts readers to review their data or reflect on information shared during a previous data meeting. These protocols help the schools and teams understand that collecting, reviewing, analyzing, and, most importantly, acting on data is a continuous school improvement process.



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Integrating the Cognia Learning Community

To build on its improvement model, Sumter adopted the Cognia Learning Community platform. “Back in 2022, team members attended Cognia’s South Carolina Impact Conference, and that is where we first learned about the Cognia Learning Community,” said Lessard. She and her colleagues saw the professional learning platform as a way to give teachers voice and choice according to school, grade-level, and subject area needs.

As with the elect, Sumter conducted a soft rollout of the platform. “We introduced it to our instructional coaches first,” said Lessard. The professional learning team presented the platform as a resource coaches could use to facilitate work with schools’ professional learning communities.

Lessard was especially excited about the platform’s module related to using data collected from the elect. “So, if the coaches saw a need to refine teachers’ approach to active learning, for example, we could have a professional learning community pull up that module,” she said.

“I love the setup where you watch a video at the beginning, and you have a time to reflect and grow and tinker,” Lessard continued. “They have done a beautiful job with getting all the pieces of a great professional learning experience on an online platform. We’ve loved it.”

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Establishing a solid foundation for the future

Since partnering with Cognia, Sumter has made great strides in improving student engagement and achievement, leading to higher school performance. From 2022 to 2023, the number of schools designated as underperforming decreased from 12 to seven.

Sumter conducted 2,700 eleot observations across 24 schools in 2023, establishing accurate baseline data for moving forward.

During the 2023–24 school year—its first year of widespread implementation—the district’s highest-rated domain on the eleot, the supportive environment, earned a score of 3.05 on a 4.0 scale, surpassing Cognia’s network average of 3.0.

While the district still has challenges to overcome, the professional learning team is working to ensure that all Sumter educators understand that success depends on maintaining a continuous cycle of improvement. “Everything about Cognia is continuous improvement,” Lessard said. “Even when we think we’re done, we need to be reflecting and working on the next part of growth.” Through detailed analysis and ongoing data collection, Sumter is continuing to create a more effective and accessible educational experience that prioritizes the needs and well-being of all learners.

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.

Find out more at cognia.org.



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