

Richmond County: Reimagining Continuous Improvement

COGNIA'S STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS GUIDES
BETTER DECISIONS



All photos courtesy of RCSS

The best schools run on a plan. However, crafting an effective school improvement plan requires in-depth analysis that can be daunting for administrators already neck-deep in federal mandates, state requirements, and local demands.

Richmond County School System (RCSS) in Augusta, Georgia, has developed a data-driven process for continuous improvement with the help of Cognia®, a nonprofit that supports continuous improvement in schools around the globe. The school system has enhanced stakeholder collaboration and integrated customized action plans based on ongoing data analysis — all without overburdening its administrators.

The process began in 2024, after Dr. Lloydette Young, RCSS's strategic planning coordinator, supervised the system's accreditation renewal with Cognia. "When we looked at our accreditation report, we saw how we could use the strategies embedded in Cognia's continuous improvement model to help our system grow," she said.



That realization was reinforced by RCSS's experience using the Cognia platform to create its state-mandated Comprehensive LEA Improvement Plan (CLIP). According to Young, the process was seamless. "All of the Cognia components aligned with our work and were embedded in research," she said. "We could just use Cognia for all things to do with continuous improvement."

RCSS's then-associate superintendent (and current superintendent) Dr. Malinda Cobb authorized the expanded partnership. RCSS began working on the Cognia Strategic Thinking and Planning framework, creating an improvement plan for 2025 through 2030.

A New Improvement Process

The Cognia Strategic Thinking and Planning Process consisted of four main phases:

1. The Envisioning Phase, in which the school system team conducted in-depth research into its current reality and students' potential future to form a solid foundation for decisions on goals and strategies.
2. The Planning Phase, in which the system decided on critical initiatives, outcomes and measures of progress, and then communicated that information to stakeholders.
3. The Implementing Phase, in which the system devised the steps for conducting its critical initiatives as well as for monitoring progress and reporting updates.
4. The Evaluating Phase, in which the system assessed the impact of its critical initiatives.

RCSS formed a Strategic Thinking and Planning core team that included students, parents, local community members, teachers, and school- and district-level administrators. Cognia facilitators guided the RCSS team through each phase, enabling all team members to participate fully without worrying about managing the process.

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Mission Statement:
Empowering Every Learner Every Day.

Vision Statement:
To prepare every student to thrive, adapt,
and lead in an ever-changing world.

Belief Statements:

- Success is attainable for everyone.
- All students deserve a quality educational experience.
- Education is a shared responsibility.
- Transparency is a foundation of trust.
- Safety for all is a priority.

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Data-Driven Visions for Success

As part of the Envisioning Phase, ROSS created four focus groups: parents, students, community members, and employees across all departments, from administrative to operational. Each group shared their perceptions of the school system as well as concerns and suggestions.

In addition to obtaining feedback from stakeholders, the ROSS Strategic Thinking and Planning core team examined quantitative data from multiple sources:

- The state's College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI)
- The Cognia Accreditation Review Report
- Average daily attendance reports and absenteeism data
- Discipline data
- Academic data
- Perception data from the Georgia School Health and Climate Surveys

Additionally, core team members examined trends that could affect students' futures by reviewing articles provided by Cognia facilitators. For example, members discussed how to help students and teachers approach digital learning, digital citizenship, and artificial intelligence effectively and responsibly. They also discussed providing students with new pathways to careers in cybersecurity and medical industries, two powerful economic forces in Augusta.

“Looking at multiple data points helped us prioritize what our critical initiatives would be,” said Young. “Every critical initiative, every goal, every activity that we have planned is aligned to what the data is telling us.”

Four strategic themes (also called focus areas) emerged from the team's analysis: 1) Student Achievement, 2) Stakeholder Engagement & Communication, 3) Talent Development, and 4) Safe & Secure Learning Environments. Each strategic theme had its own team, and each team orchestrated four to five critical initiatives aligned with their theme.

Changes to RCSS Administrative Processes

Previously, RCSS used the Cognia Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool (eleot®) during walkthroughs to collect student engagement data for accreditation reviews. During the 2024-25 school year, the school system instituted “cross-functional walkthroughs,” with teams of five to seven people using the eleot to gather data for both accreditation reviews and non-evaluative teacher feedback. “We also used the results to help us determine what our professional learning would look like,” said Young.



Federally-identified schools (participants in the Title IV student aid program) received four cross-functional walkthroughs, two per semester. Non-identified schools had one cross-functional walkthrough per semester but could request a second walkthrough at any time. Walkthrough teams also used the Cognia Teacher Observation Tool to monitor new teachers and determine their professional learning needs.

RICHMOND COUNTY SCHOOL SYSTEM 2025-2030 Strategy Map

Student Achievement	Stakeholder Engagement & Communication	Talent Development	Safe & Secure Learning Environment
Objective Empower Every Learner to Take Ownership of their Learning.	Objective Engage with our Community using a Variety of Consistent Two-Way Communication Tools.	Objective Foster Student and Staff Potential to Embrace Ongoing Growth and Development.	Objective Provide a Safe and Secure Environment for All.
Critical Initiatives	Critical Initiatives	Critical Initiatives	Critical Initiatives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide professional learning in evidence-based teaching methods. Provide all learners with access to engaging learning opportunities in a comprehensive curriculum. Promote student ownership of learning by fostering voice, choice, and accountability. Improve measurable academic outcomes using data-driven decision making. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Streamline and centralize communications platforms. Develop a district-wide communications plan. Train staff and school district leaders in effective communication strategies. Create systems, processes and opportunities for student and staff achievement stories to be disseminated across multiple platforms. Enhance partnership program to foster community involvement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish a framework for adult-centered professional learning opportunities based on staff input, experiences and roles. Enhance student agency for increased student opportunities for enrollment, enlistment and employment. Refine the comprehensive recruitment and retention plan for students and staff. Leverage technology integration to enhance student and staff performance and productivity. Develop a system for monitoring the implementation of professional learning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Define and develop a positive system culture. Ensure physical and emotional safety by enhancing security measures and providing emotional support for students and staff. Develop a comprehensive safety training plan. Design fiscally responsible processes and procedures for operational effectiveness.

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Principals, assistant principals, and school system-level personnel attended professional learning for strategic thinking and planning during the summer of 2025. School administrators shared what they learned with their own leadership teams as well as with parents and community members to expand buy-in for school improvement plans.

To further gain community support, Superintendent Cobb brought a booklet explaining the ROSS strategic plan to every community meeting so attendees could see the school system’s priorities and direction for themselves.

School systems have the option of extending their strategic thinking and planning work with Cognia annually. ROSS exercised that option, and in 2026, it started its second year of strategic planning partnership with Cognia.

The school system also implemented “quarterly impact check” meetings where each strategic theme chair, along with core members of the theme groups, shared progress reports with each other and a Cognia facilitator. Young noted that a critical initiative for one strategic theme could affect results in another theme, so cross-group communication was crucial. “We may have achieved an initiative’s goal via another theme and critical initiative,” she explained. “Our strategic plan is a living document, so we might determine that we may not need a particular critical initiative anymore.”

Young appreciated that the Cognia facilitators asked probing questions and helped theme group members see how the strategic themes connected to one another. The facilitators also ensured that the groups were aware of the Cognia tools and resources available to support their work.

As a result of its new strategic planning process, ROSS moved administrative activities such as master scheduling, HR allocations, and budgeting from June to early spring. “We decided that we needed our school improvement plans to align with those areas,” explained Young.



Positive Stakeholder Responses to the New Normal

The strategic thinking and planning process has received favorable feedback, including from new board members and administrators. A new deputy superintendent told Young that with the Cognia process, planning now made sense. In addition, principals have enjoyed doing school improvement planning “the Cognia way.”

RCSS has been such an avid fan of its new process that Cognia invited Young to host a session at one of the nonprofit’s Impact Conferences. There, she shared RCSS’s strategic plan and described its school improvement planning process.

Young is happy to recommend the Cognia Strategic Thinking and Planning Process to other school systems. “This process has increased our inter-department collective efficacy as well as stakeholder involvement,” she said. “People and departments are able to see where they fit in the strategic plan. In fact, everything that Cognia is offering us really fits together nicely.”

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