



# Florence School District #1

Florence, South Carolina

**May 8 – 11, 2022**

**System Accreditation Engagement Review**

215693

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# Cognia Continuous Improvement System

Cognia defines continuous improvement as "an embedded behavior rooted in an institution's culture that constantly focuses on conditions, processes, and practices to improve teaching and learning." The Cognia Continuous Improvement System (CIS) provides a systemic, fully integrated solution to help institutions map out and navigate a successful improvement journey. In the same manner that educators are expected to understand the unique needs of every learner and tailor the education experience to drive student success, every institution must be empowered to map out and embrace their unique improvement journey. Cognia expects institutions to use the results and the analysis of data from various interwoven components for the implementation of improvement actions to drive education quality and improved student outcomes. While each improvement journey is unique, the journey is driven by key actions. The findings of the Engagement Review Team are organized by the ratings from the Cognia Performance Standards Diagnostic and the Levels of Impact within the i3 Rubric: Initiate, Improve, and Impact.

## Initiate

The first phase of the improvement journey is to **Initiate** actions to cause and achieve better results. The elements of the **Initiate** phase are defined within the Levels of Impact of Engagement and Implementation. Engagement is the level of involvement and frequency of stakeholders in the desired practices, processes, or programs within the institution. Implementation is the process of monitoring and adjusting the administration of the desired practices, processes, or programs for quality and fidelity. Standards identified within Initiate should become the focus of the institution's continuous improvement journey toward the collection, analysis, and use of data to measure the results of engagement and implementation. Enhancing the capacity of the institution in meeting these Standards has the greatest potential impact on improving student performance and organizational effectiveness.

## Improve

The second phase of the improvement journey is to gather and evaluate the results of actions to **Improve**. The elements of the **Improve** phase are defined within the Levels of Impact of Results and Sustainability. Results come from the collection, analysis, and use of data and evidence to demonstrate attaining the desired result(s). Sustainability is results achieved consistently to demonstrate growth and improvement over time (a minimum of three years). Standards identified within Improve are those in which the institution is using results to inform their continuous improvement processes and to demonstrate over time the achievement of goals. The institution should continue to analyze and use results to guide improvements in student achievement and organizational effectiveness.

## Impact

The third phase of achieving improvement is **Impact**, where desired practices are deeply entrenched. The elements of the **Impact** phase are defined within the Level of Impact of Embeddedness. Embeddedness is the degree to which the desired practices, processes, or programs are deeply ingrained in the culture and operation of the institution. Standards identified within Impact are those in which the institution has demonstrated ongoing growth and improvement over time and has embedded the practices within its culture. Institutions should continue to support and sustain these practices that yield results in improving student achievement and organizational effectiveness.

# Cognia Performance Accreditation and the Engagement Review

Accreditation is pivotal in leveraging education quality and continuous improvement. Using a set of rigorous research-based standards, the Cognia Accreditation Process examines the whole institution—the program, the cultural context, and the community of stakeholders—to determine how well the parts work together to meet the needs of learners. Through the accreditation process, highly skilled and trained Engagement Review Teams gather first-hand evidence and information pertinent to evaluating an institution's performance against the research-based Cognia Performance Standards. Review teams use these Standards to assess the quality of learning environments to gain valuable insights and target improvements in teaching and learning. Cognia provides Standards that are tailored for all education providers so that the benefits of accreditation are universal across the education community.

Through a comprehensive review of evidence and information, our experts gain a broad understanding of institution quality. Using the Standards, the review team provides valuable feedback to institutions, which helps to focus and guide each institution's improvement journey. Valuable evidence and information from other stakeholders, including students, also are obtained through interviews, surveys, and additional activities.

## Cognia Standards Diagnostic Results

The Cognia Performance Standards Diagnostic is used by the Engagement Review Team to evaluate the institution's effectiveness based on the Cognia Performance Standards. The diagnostic consists of three components built around each of three Domains: **Leadership Capacity**, **Learning Capacity**, and **Resource Capacity**. Results are reported within four ranges identified by color. The results for the three Domains are presented in the tables that follow.

Color	Rating	Description
Red	Insufficient	Identifies areas with insufficient evidence or evidence that indicated little or no activity leading toward improvement
Yellow	Initiating	Represents areas to enhance and extend current improvement efforts
Green	Improving	Pinpoints quality practices that are improving and meet the Standards
Blue	Impacting	Demonstrates noteworthy practices producing clear results that positively impact the institution

Under each Standard statement is a row indicating the scores related to the elements of Cognia's i3 Rubric. The rubric is scored from one (1) to four (4). A score of four on any element indicates high performance, while a score of one or two indicates an element in need of improvement. The following table provides the key to the abbreviations of the elements of the i3 Rubric.

Element	Abbreviation
Engagement	EN
Implementation	IM
Results	RE
Sustainability	SU
Embeddedness	EM

## Leadership Capacity Domain

The capacity of leadership to ensure an institution's progress toward its stated objectives is an essential element of organizational effectiveness. An institution's leadership capacity includes the fidelity and commitment to its purpose and direction, the effectiveness of governance and leadership to enable the institution to realize its stated objectives, the ability to engage and involve stakeholders in meaningful and productive ways, and the capacity to implement strategies that improve learner and educator performance.

Leadership Capacity Standards										Rating
1.1	The system commits to a purpose statement that defines beliefs about teaching and learning, including the expectations for learners.									Impacting
	EN:	4	IM:	4	RE:	3	SU:	3	EM:	
1.2	Stakeholders collectively demonstrate actions to ensure the achievement of the system's purpose and desired outcomes for learning.									Impacting
	EN:	4	IM:	3	RE:	4	SU:	4	EM:	
1.3	The system engages in a continuous improvement process that produces evidence, including measurable results of improving student learning and professional practice.									Impacting
	EN:	4	IM:	3	RE:	3	SU:	3	EM:	
1.4	The governing authority establishes and ensures adherence to policies that are designed to support system effectiveness.									Impacting
	EN:	3	IM:	4	RE:	4	SU:	3	EM:	
1.5	The governing authority adheres to a code of ethics and functions within defined roles and responsibilities.									Impacting
	EN:	4	IM:	3	RE:	3	SU:	3	EM:	
1.6	Leaders implement staff supervision and evaluation processes to improve professional practice and organizational effectiveness.									Impacting
	EN:	4	IM:	4	RE:	4	SU:	3	EM:	
1.7	Leaders implement operational processes and procedures to ensure organizational effectiveness in support of teaching and learning.									Improving
	EN:	4	IM:	3	RE:	3	SU:	2	EM:	
1.8	Leaders engage stakeholders to support the achievement of the system's purpose and direction.									Impacting
	EN:	4	IM:	4	RE:	4	SU:	2	EM:	
1.9	The system provides experiences that cultivate and improve leadership effectiveness.									Improving
	EN:	4	IM:	3	RE:	3	SU:	2	EM:	
1.10	Leaders collect and analyze a range of feedback data from multiple stakeholder groups to inform decision-making that results in improvement.									Impacting
	EN:	4	IM:	4	RE:	3	SU:	3	EM:	

Leadership Capacity Standards										Rating
1.11	Leaders implement a quality assurance process for their institutions to ensure system effectiveness and consistency.									Improving
	EN:	4	IM:	3	RE:	3	SU:	2	EM:	

## Learning Capacity Domain

The impact of teaching and learning on student achievement and success is the primary expectation of every institution. An effective learning culture is characterized by positive and productive teacher/learner relationships, high expectations and standards, a challenging and engaging curriculum, quality instruction and comprehensive support that enable all learners to be successful, and assessment practices (formative and summative) that monitor and measure learner progress and achievement. Moreover, a quality institution evaluates the impact of its learning culture, including all programs and support services, and adjusts accordingly.

Learning Capacity Standards										Rating
2.1	Learners have equitable opportunities to develop skills and achieve the content and learning priorities established by the system.									Impacting
	EN:	4	IM:	4	RE:	3	SU:	3	EM:	
2.2	The learning culture promotes creativity, innovation, and collaborative problem-solving.									Improving
	EN:	3	IM:	3	RE:	3	SU:	3	EM:	
2.3	The learning culture develops learners' attitudes, beliefs, and skills needed for success.									Impacting
	EN:	4	IM:	3	RE:	3	SU:	3	EM:	
2.4	The system has a formal structure to ensure learners develop positive relationships with and have adults/peers that support their educational experiences.									Impacting
	EN:	4	IM:	4	RE:	3	SU:	3	EM:	
2.5	Educators implement a curriculum that is based on high expectations and prepares learners for their next levels.									Improving
	EN:	3	IM:	3	RE:	3	SU:	3	EM:	
2.6	The system implements a process to ensure the curriculum is clearly aligned to standards and best practices.									Impacting
	EN:	3	IM:	4	RE:	3	SU:	3	EM:	
2.7	Instruction is monitored and adjusted to meet individual learners' needs and the system's learning expectations.									Improving
	EN:	3	IM:	3	RE:	3	SU:	3	EM:	
2.8	The system provides programs and services for learners' educational futures and career planning.									Impacting
	EN:	4	IM:	4	RE:	3	SU:	3	EM:	

Learning Capacity Standards										Rating
2.9	The system implements processes to identify and address the specialized needs of learners.									Impacting
	EN:	4	IM:	3	RE:	3	SU:	3	EM:	
2.10	Learning progress is reliably assessed and consistently and clearly communicated.									Improving
	EN:	4	IM:	2	RE:	3	SU:	2	EM:	
2.11	Educators gather, analyze, and use formative and summative data that lead to the demonstrable improvement of student learning.									Improving
	EN:	4	IM:	2	RE:	2	SU:	2	EM:	
2.12	The system implements a process to continuously assess its programs and organizational conditions to improve student learning.									Improving
	EN:	2	IM:	2	RE:	2	SU:	2	EM:	

## Resource Capacity Domain

The use and distribution of resources support the stated mission of the institution. Institutions ensure that resources are distributed and utilized equitably, so the needs of all learners are adequately and effectively addressed. The utilization of resources includes support for professional learning for all staff. The institution examines the allocation and use of resources to ensure appropriate levels of funding, sustainability, organizational effectiveness, and increased student learning.

Resource Capacity Standards										Rating
3.1	The system plans and delivers professional learning to improve the learning environment, learner achievement, and the system's effectiveness.									Impacting
	EN:	4	IM:	4	RE:	3	SU:	3	EM:	
3.2	The system's professional learning structure and expectations promote collaboration and collegiality to improve learner performance and organizational effectiveness.									Improving
	EN:	4	IM:	2	RE:	3	SU:	2	EM:	
3.3	The system provides induction, mentoring, and coaching programs that ensure all staff members have the knowledge and skills to improve student performance and organizational effectiveness.									Impacting
	EN:	4	IM:	4	RE:	4	SU:	4	EM:	
3.4	The system attracts and retains qualified personnel who support the system's purpose and direction.									Impacting
	EN:	4	IM:	4	RE:	4	SU:	4	EM:	
3.5	The system integrates digital resources into teaching, learning, and operations to improve professional practice, student performance, and organizational effectiveness.									Impacting
	EN:	4	IM:	4	RE:	4	SU:	3	EM:	

Resource Capacity Standards											Rating
3.6	The system provides access to information resources and materials to support the curriculum, programs, and needs of students, staff, and the system.										Impacting
	EN:	4	IM:	4	RE:	3	SU:	3	EM:	3	
3.7	The system demonstrates strategic resource management that includes long-range planning and use of resources in support of the system's purpose and direction.										Impacting
	EN:	4	IM:	4	RE:	4	SU:	4	EM:	4	
3.8	The system allocates human, material, and fiscal resources in alignment with the system's identified needs and priorities to improve student performance and organizational effectiveness.										Impacting
	EN:	4	IM:	4	RE:	4	SU:	4	EM:	4	

## Assurances

Assurances are statements that accredited institutions must confirm they are meeting. The Assurance statements are based on the type of institution, and the responses are confirmed by the Accreditation Engagement Review Team. Institutions are expected to meet all Assurances and are expected to correct any deficiencies in unmet Assurances.

Assurances Met		
YES	NO	If No, List Unmet Assurances by Number Below
X		

## Accreditation Status and Index of Education Quality®

Cognia will review the results of the Accreditation Engagement Review to make a final determination concerning accreditation status, including the appropriate next steps for your institution in response to these findings. Cognia provides the Index of Education Quality (IEQ) as a holistic measure of overall performance based on a comprehensive set of standards and review criteria. This formative tool for improvement identifies areas of success and areas in need of focus. The IEQ comprises the Standards Diagnostic ratings from the three Domains: Leadership Capacity, Learning Capacity, and Resource Capacity. The IEQ results are reported on a scale of 100 to 400 and provide information about how the institution is performing compared to expected criteria. Institutions should review the IEQ in relation to the findings from the review in the areas of Initiate, Improve, and Impact. An IEQ score below 250 indicates that the institution has several areas within the Initiate level and should focus its improvement efforts on those Standards within that level. An IEQ in the range of 225–300 indicates that the institution has several Standards within the Improve level and is using results to inform continuous improvement and demonstrate sustainability. An IEQ of 275 and above indicates the institution is beginning to reach the Impact level and is engaged in practices that are sustained over time and are becoming ingrained in the culture of the institution.

Below is the average (range) of all Cognia Improvement Network (CIN) institutions evaluated for accreditation in the last five years. The range of the annual CIN IEQ average is presented to enable you to benchmark your results with other institutions in the network.



Institution IEQ	350.65	CIN 5-Year IEQ Range	278.34 – 283.33
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## Insights from the Review

The Engagement Review Team engaged in professional discussions and deliberations about the processes, programs, and practices within the institution to arrive at the findings of the team. These findings are organized around themes guided by the evidence, with examples of programs and practices, and suggestions for the institution's continuous improvement efforts. The Insights from the Review narrative should provide contextualized information from the team's deliberations and analysis of the practices, processes, and programs of the institution organized by the levels of Initiate, Improve, and Impact. The narrative also provides the next steps to guide the institution's improvement journey in its efforts to improve the quality of educational opportunities for all learners. The findings are aligned to research-based criteria designed to improve student learning and organizational effectiveness. The feedback provided in the Accreditation Engagement Review Report will assist the institution in reflecting on its current improvement efforts and to adapt and adjust its plans to continuously strive for improvement.

The Cognia Engagement Review Team (team) identified five themes as a result of proceedings, review of evidence and survey results, stakeholder interviews, and team deliberations to support the continuous improvement processes of Florence School District 1. These themes reflect some of the system's outstanding strengths, including its committed, effective, future-focused leadership, and its climate of purposeful, systemic, and systematic collaboration. A third theme recognizes that the system has embraced a common mission and vision for its schools, which are responsively grounded in communities and dedicated to the families they serve. Themes also include acknowledgment of the district's many comprehensive initiatives and exemplary practices in instruction and delivery that may be shared and brought to scale as the district continues to focus on common expectations for systemic support structures. The fifth theme addresses the system's development of clearly articulated quality assurance and improvement processes, aligned intentionally with increasingly informative data analysis and practices. The team offers the themes in this narrative to provide input and suggest guidance as Florence School District 1 plans its next steps on its improvement journey.

**The district's effective leadership has built trust, based in respect of the system's history, recognition of the community's rich expertise and generosity, and its focus on a future of excellent preparation for a quickly changing society.** The system's comprehensive strategic plan has been in place since 2018 and has been extended until 2024. However, in 2021, the board adopted a condensed, revised three-year plan to guide actions. The revised plan, created through an iterative, inclusive process, is based on four major objective areas that reflect the stated goals of the district as per its website: 1) Exemplary Community Engagement, 2) Superior Student Achievement, 3) 21<sup>st</sup> Century Facilities and Security, and 4) Professional Talent in Every Role. Within each objective, the system has identified priorities. Included under the Engagement objective is the priority, "Ownership of Florence 1 Schools' vision by every person in every school." Included under the Superior Achievement objective is the priority, "Imagine Forward, a dedicated technology initiative." Included in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Facilities and Safety objective are four priorities that specify increased investments in classrooms, programs, and technologies, a detailed blueprint for annual maintenance and repairs, sophisticated strategies for enhancing safety and security, and an extensive framework for facility design and modernization. Included in the Professional Talent objective are priorities addressing creative incentives for attracting and retaining top talent and a systematized structure for policies, protocols, and procedures.

Before the team's remote "arrival" at the district, evidence was shared relative to each of the Cognia Systems Standards for study and review. Additional artifacts continued to be contributed to the file by the district contacts, among which was a video, entitled, "Florence 1 Builds." The video provided views of each of the district's schools, before and after renovations, repairs, additions, and rebuilding had occurred. The transformations were undeniable, impressive, and inspiring. From a leased athletic stadium shared by three high schools emerged individual school stadiums with home team facilities, locker rooms, and visitor locker areas. Images ranged from reconstructions to restoration of the beauty of a welcoming approach to a building and encompassed the entire district. The pride in saying, "my school," was palpable. Throughout the remote interviews, stakeholders gleefully and proudly reminded team members of the upgraded facilities through their testimonies. Investing in the future can take many forms. The leadership of Florence School District 1 has communicated faith in the future of the schools, learners, and their families through investments in infrastructures and identity.

The epithet of the district, as stated on the website and in the presentation by the superintendent, is, "One Vision, One Voice, One Future." The mission is succinct – "Students First," and the vision, "All students will be highly motivated, successful and responsible members of an ever-changing society," was reflected or paraphrased in the schools' media, literature, and across all stakeholder groups interviewed. Reinforced motivation, commitment to increasing students' success, options and innovations for achievement, and the creation of pathways for futures of promise were the most common themes shared among constituents interviewed. Interview themes were reflected in the analysis of survey results, including a preponderance of community support for the district's innovative, modified, year-round calendar. The district's three-year plan has been made available in graphic, one-page form through the website and various media. Progress toward the objectives is shared with the community through social, print, and broadcast media by design. The use and effectiveness of communication modalities are monitored by leadership and adjustments occur as indicated.

The Florence School District 1 Board of Trustees has committed to the use of social media and utilizes School Board Connections to provide announcements, updates, minutes, and agendas. The website provides access to reports approved, policies, procedures, rules, and other details and is searchable. In response to stress and the pandemic, the board officially resolved to support teachers and personnel. In part, this support has provided a therapist based in each school, a \$500.00 Gas Hike Rebate (in response to rising gasoline prices), salary increases, and health benefits. Board meetings are held live on Facebook. To ensure that the members of the board speak with one voice and hold one vision, all leaders attend an annual retreat to work together to create an annual plan and improve leadership for the system.

The annual retreat serves as the culmination of self-evaluation of the board and evaluation of the superintendent. Accountability, transparency, growth, and trust have been the foundations of supervision in the district. Administrators establish annual goals for performance and are coached and provided feedback to improve. All supervision and staff evaluations utilize data to inform and provide feedback. School leaders analyze student performance and survey results. One leader interviewed reported a custom-made site survey created to provide feedback toward a personal performance goal. Certified staff uses the common rubrics of a comprehensive supervision system, and the district has chosen to employ the optional Value-Added Model, calculated locally, that includes student performance data to inform professional practice. Classified staff all meet or exceed required training specifications and the district has provided additional training, workshops, mentorships, and handbooks to further prepare and increase proficiencies across all work assignments. The team noted the guide for custodians that provided specific information for the care and maintenance of the district's buildings.

Guides, handbooks, and manuals throughout Florence School District 1 are current, easily navigated, accessible through multiple modalities, clearly written, helpful, and revised on a proposed cycle with

those who use them. The district conscientiously collects information from exit interviews to add to direct and survey feedback as policies are revisited. Leadership's valuing of feedback was evident to staff, students, and parents who shared examples of leaders' responses to surveys, emails, and conversations. Documents and interviews identified changes to policies and practices made as a result of the analysis of feedback, including continuous updating of responses to the pandemic, revision of protocol, End-of-Year processes for reporting budgets and technology inventories, bus routes, grade-level configurations, and processes at various elementary schools.

Active solicitation of feedback from constituents has brought the district closer to its objective of "Exemplary Community Engagement." The system also values community expertise and experience in many forms, including leadership of initiatives. Parents are welcomed to the schools' Parent-Teacher-Organizations (PTOs) and are valued on schools' school improvement teams (SITs).

The three-year strategic plan's objective to ensure professional talent in every role has included the internal development of leaders through its Aspiring Leadership Academy, mentorships, and solicited grant funding for attendance at conferences and training. Staff leadership opportunities also include serving on committees for textbook adoptions, site improvement teams, and district initiative teams.

The district's commitment to excellence has led to the creation of forward-focused recruitment and hiring processes. Beginning in January of each year, leaders meet with human resource personnel, representatives from the district office's program directors, and the superintendent to review projections and determine staffing needs and priorities. The district did present a 5-year supply and demand tally, but available funding and legislation are not constant. Therefore, consideration of possible signing bonuses for some positions and other options require consultation. The district has produced effective, welcoming literature and video communications to promote the district or possible employees.

Recruitment has included a down payment and staff daycare/pre-school. Established incentives at Florence School District 1 include tuition reimbursement and partnerships with highly respected area college and university degree programs.

Community involvement for Florence School District 1 includes recognition of the resources available locally. The system purchases locally as often as possible with efficacy. Stewardship of public funding and families' trust is respected by the district's leaders. The system's budget is presented for public response and is approved by the board. The budget is posted and responsibly monitored. Bookkeepers have trained annually. The district's budget includes operating and maintenance costs, and a 5-year maintenance plan has been created. Diligent use of funds has allowed the district to invest in upgrades and improvements to equipment and technology.

Due diligence, careful, conscientious monitoring, and commitment to transparency have improved the perception of management of Florence School District 1. Investments in infrastructure and technology have required funding and revision and reform. Interviews and documentation identified the district's improved, commendable current risk status as 11, which is low risk. The district's risk status in 2019 was 27, which was considered a medium risk. Interviews and documents identify the district to be in full compliance with federal funding and special education requirements.

Gaining and maintaining a position of trust and pride in the community it serves, Florence School District 1 appears to be on a path to attaining its vision. The team recommends continued consistent transparency and systematic solicitation of and follow-through from constituent feedback.

**The district has systematically and systemically established a climate of collaboration across and within constituent groups.** One parent interviewed attributed the "rapid and impressive" improvements in the district's graduation rate, academic performance, levels of community satisfaction, and varied and exciting options for learners over the past four years to, "the tremendous shift in focus to

the students.” “We all could get behind that,” stated another parent. The “Students First” mission statement is displayed on communications and the three-year strategic plan revision. A key priority of the revised plan is “re-energize collaborations in our business community,” and another is to institute a “synergistic approach to improving parent connections and engagement.” These relationships were to be established and nurtured through a “cohesive communication system district-wide and community-wide.” The district’s community and business collaborations and partnerships’ focus have been “Students First,” and have proliferated, growing to include 37 businesses, at least three institutions of higher education, 22 service agencies, and many, varied and unique options for students to experience internships and gain mentors. Partnerships include health care providers.

The district has worked with internal and external personnel, including the use of telehealth options, to establish seamless support for learners and families experiencing trauma, mental illness, and impacts of the pandemic. Healthcare, service agencies, and wrap-around services have worked with the schools’ personnel and district programs to decrease those students who qualify for special education services receiving services outside of their mainstream classrooms. Deliberate and strategic determinations of least restrictive environments have increased achievement and quality of experience for students identified.

Providing opportunities for learners’ futures has served as a uniting force for the schools and communities. Community partners shared stories of how bringing students into their worlds, their businesses, factories, operations, and careers has enriched all involved. Parents and community partners told the team about speaking in classrooms and visiting with learners about career choices, advising and advocating for the sustaining of the district’s strong arts focus, STEAM and STEM initiatives, modern agriculture and environmental studies, and enriching the district’s Career and Technical Education tracks to ensure that real-life lessons, both “intentional and embedded,” occurred across all learners’ experiences. The district’s Advantage Academy and added options for aviation and hospitality industry preparation were sources of pride across constituencies.

The district’s “Students First,” mission and “One Vision, One Voice, One Future,” epithet were echoed across all stakeholder groups interviewed and illustrated through internal and external examples of initiatives that had gained momentum through collaboration, shared resources, and expertise. The district’s office of accountability catalogs, collates, categorizes, analyzes, evaluates, and ensures compliance through strategic, systematic, and systemic data collection. The office provides analysis from perception, behavior, compliance, supervision, and performance data that yields useful, essential, cross-referenced, compared, and accessible information to inform district, program, school, classroom, individual student, cohort, discipline, demographic, projection, and accountability decisions. The office provides trend and comparative data as emerging and its leadership has cultivated an appreciation for the power of well-informed decisions while defining data as meaningful only within contexts. Interviews and review of minutes provided a history of the district’s growing understandings of data as tools, illustrations, and abbreviations, not as capable of telling whole stories in isolation or to be used solely in determining decisions for learners.

The system has committed to strive for recognition of excellence and to use the Blue-Ribbon Schools processes to systemically identify large-scale areas of limitations as well as areas of strength. All of the district’s 26 schools have committed to being recognized as Blue Ribbon Schools, requiring comprehensive self-study processes and external perspectives as part of application and continued distinction. Utilizing the common Blue-Ribbon Schools Survey, the district collaborated to address common areas of limitations through professional development and to celebrate areas of strength.

Communication was identified as a perceived area of strength across all of the schools and of the district as a system. Surveys and interviews with parents, community partners, staff, and students agreed that

communication is a strength in the district and that communication has been essential as the district has collaborated to implement several major initiatives during the past 3-4 years. These major plans have required coordination, monitoring, adjustments, and continuous feedback to ensure success. The use of benchmark perception, behavior, supervision, observation, and performance indicators district-wide, across the scope of grade levels and inclusive of all of the district's populations to consistently inform progress and provide opportunities for just-in-time adjustments, have contributed to the successful, impactful implementation of "Read to Succeed," a revised English Language Learner program, South Carolina's Imagine Forward initiative, implementation of a year-round calendar, and the district's 2020-21 Innovation Re-opening.

The district's re-opening, after moving to remote learning only during the height of the pandemic, was a collaboratively planned series of events. Using numerous drafts, sufficient response times, patience, and respect for one another, the board and leaders responsively crafted a plan with multiple options for learners, including an option to remain fully online. The district had ensured that all learners were provided access to digital learning and resources throughout the months of schools' closings, using buses with wi-fi broadcasting capacities, partnering with public spaces such as libraries, and bringing technology to learners as much as possible. During the height of school closures, the district utilized funds made available to purchase additional devices and applications, and provide training. The district provided all staff Google training through an online platform. All classrooms are equipped with smartboards, sound systems, Google Classrooms, and assessment programs. The district provides each elementary school with a technology coordinator and a technology contact at each secondary school. Instructors reported working toward the incorporation of flipped classrooms and teachers expressed appreciation for the technology support available.

Technology is often used to assess learning in formative ways. Common summative assessments are utilized to review at grade level and to inform district-level discussions. Teachers are provided common planning and collaboration time by grade level. Expectations for professional learning community work may include the use of data walls, unit planning, pacing, and calibration as well as reflection and celebration. First-year teachers are assigned to their own professional learning community. Interviews and the team's review of minutes and handbooks identified protected time for collaborative work for grade-level and subject-area teams. However, common expectations for outcomes of professional collaborations were not presented.

The collaborative climate of the district, with its clear focus on its students, has created multiple networks of constituents striving with a common purpose to attain the system's vision "that all students will be highly motivated, successful, and responsible members of an ever-changing society." Collaborative initiatives are in place and successful with multiple external partners and across schools. As the district continues to move forward, the team suggests that grade-level and subject-area opportunities for collaboration may be accelerated by common expectations for review of student work, planning protocol for all to gain mastery and for those who will benefit from enrichment on key standards. Capitalizing on the system's remarkable goodwill and capacity for strong collaborative practices may provide the next steps for learners at all levels to progress toward key standards and for instructors to provide strategic interventions through timely, customized means.

**The schools of Florence School District 1 serve their local communities and neighborhoods directly, strategically connecting families with resources, supporting and providing customized pathways to achieve high expectations, and offering an array of welcome, accessible opportunities to learn and grow.** The superintendent, in his presentation to the team, described the school system as part of the structure, the "backbone" of the communities. Florence School District 1 has served its constituents since 1866, and, as stated by one community member, "We are our history, and so much more than our history." The district's story includes struggle, survival, uncertainty, and

sustained change as well as remarkable successes and celebrations. Included in the district's strategic objectives is "Exemplary community engagement," which, as noted by district office personnel interviewed, "requires that we communicate, listen and reach out." The plan calls for a "synergistic approach" to improving parent communications. Creating synergy requires combined effort, building to new levels of service and understanding, ultimately resulting in increased success for the learners in the schools. A key partner in achieving the goals of the district has been the School Foundation, a local educational non-profit organization whose mission includes local involvement in schools, preparing children for kindergarten, and helping the schools to write grants to fund initiatives. The Florence School District 1 School Foundation is the largest education non-profit in the state, according to evidence and interviews.

The district's strategic plan includes the objective of "Superior Student Achievement." To address this objective, the system's priorities include the creation of a "comprehensive array of academic options, exposures and experiences, a renewed emphasis on special education and student well-being, and "large-scale arts and culture infusion across all schools." The district's board and leaders reached out to the community and, through collaborations, have increased academic options by adding 60 new programs, moving from 14 offered Advanced Placement courses to 22, including Advanced Placement Studio Arts, and continued the schools' strong support for the arts and athletics despite the Covid pandemic. In addition, the district added a Montessori elementary option for families, incorporated telehealth access, added sections of band, renovated to provide piano and band labs, and designed curriculum and licensure pathways for aviation and agriculture. The district has chosen to capitalize on the strengths, resources, and expertise of its community and has increased options for learners to deepen or explore their faiths through partnerships with churches. Neighborhood, regional, and area professional organizations and individuals have reached out or responded to establish mentorships, internships and other beneficial connections that expose learners to possibilities after graduation. To address equity of exposure to science and engineering concepts, the district purchased a STEM bus, which is a fully-functioning laboratory on wheels that can be driven to any of the district's schools.

Renovation, restoration, and remodeling of the district's facilities have increased structural and physical safety for learners and staff. These updates and upgrades have also increased buildings' capacities for technology. The district committed to preparing staff to utilize educational technology and also created F1S Tech Parent Training to prepare parents to assist their children as the schools moved to 1-1 device-to-student ratios. As these advances in technology were occurring, the district administered systematic surveys to gather feedback and modify and adjust in response. The team reviewed the results of multiple surveys and noted changes made. As the pandemic tragically interrupted the world and schools closed their doors, the district established multiple sites to ensure sufficient internet access, and all constituents interviewed expressed gratitude for the technological preparation that had occurred before closed schools and remote learning. Throughout remote learning, the district conducted surveys and solicited feedback through multiple means. The School Foundation awarded many thousands of dollars in pandemic grants and continues in its remarkable, invaluable partnership.

When classes resumed, the district committed to engaging all schools to apply as Blue Ribbon Schools. This rigorous process required comprehensive self-studies, surveys, and analysis. Blue Ribbon Schools processed the schools' applications and provided detailed analysis in nine critical areas that included school, family, and community partnerships. Interviews with staff, students, and parents provided examples from all groups indicating excitement about the direction of their own school(s).

The district has worked to bring the world to the neighborhood school in safe, grounded, and responsible ways. All teachers utilize "Go Guardian," to monitor learners' use. The district provides tutoring through Extended Day and a vetted internet option. Teachers have engaged in professional development to provide instruction using Flipped Classroom models and the district offers blended learning options. The

system's Extended Day options include service learning, health and fitness, character education, multiple arts opportunities, leadership training, and many clubs. On the district's Tech Tools for Parents site is a list of district-approved applications and resources, as well as hints and directions for Chromebooks, Google Classrooms, and a link to the system's help desk.

Parents, staff, students, and leaders provided examples of increased community involvement over the past four years. They cited strong participation in open houses, musical and drama performances, visual arts, athletic events, and inter-and intra-mural competitions and celebrations. Students reported that school-sponsored dances were viewed as important and fun social opportunities. Parents told the team that they frequently check the website and their portal to keep up with the calendar and that they are appreciative of their local schools' role in their communities. One parent stated, "Our middle school has a welcoming atmosphere from when you walk in the door." When asked to describe their school, using a word or very short phrase, parents and students from across the district most often used the words, "family," "welcoming," "opportunity," and "proud." One student said, "loving," and another told the team that their school was, "one perfect mix."

Remaining integral in communities may continue to require the "synergy" specified in the district's strategic plan. The team encourages the district to monitor the effectiveness of its communications, systematically solicit feedback from all constituent groups, and remain current regarding emerging possibilities, trends, and needs of each school's community.

**Florence School District 1 prioritizes systemizing structures and determination of common expectations to ensure all staff and students benefit from effective practices, processes, and procedures.** The district's strategic plan's "professional talent in every role" objective includes a priority to create shared, system-wide structures for policies, protocols, and procedures. The plan also calls for "renewed emphasis on special education and student well-being." The team noted the district's progress toward these priorities as evidenced in revised handbooks, systematic Board of Trustees review of policies, and creation and adoption of procedures for effective uses of new technologies and processes for optimization.

The system has addressed students' well-being in several ways, including a successful initiative to utilize the least restrictive environment principles to revisit individual education plans for opportunities to reduce students' time spent separated from their classmates. Interviews with district directors, special education teachers, and support staff provided examples of how students qualifying for special education services have benefitted from remaining in their classrooms while receiving support through research-based, innovative practices. The district has significantly reduced the number of students and time spent in support outside of mainstream classrooms. The district has monitored its delivery of English Language Learner (ELL) services, Gifted and Talented and Gifted and Talented Arts programs, credit recovery, and tutoring support. Access to Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) data and Response to Intervention (RTI) data district-wide has informed support, assisted communication, and provided a common language for educators, parents, administrators, and support staff to plan and implement successful interventions, accommodations, and modifications for learners, proving especially helpful as students transition from grade levels or schools.

Communication of expectations across a district the size of Florence 1 has required conscientious collaboration and continuous input, updates, and monitoring. The team's review of provided curriculum documents, the district's reports, and interviews with teachers, leaders, and learners indicated frequent use of the system's curriculum maps, excellent sample lessons, and pacing guides. Curriculum documents and common assessments are available to district employees through a digital platform that includes links to resources, templates, and other useful tools. Team members' review of curriculum maps identified alignment with standards. Strand and standards-alignment were delineated for some

core subject high school courses reviewed. Subject area coordinators, coaches, and administrators note pacing and instructional practices during walk-throughs. Faculty and staff new to the district are conscientiously introduced and mentored to utilize the district's many resources.

Large-scale assessment results, including end-of-course and state tests, are disaggregated, and multiple sets of data are provided to schools for review and analysis. Schools were not required to follow common protocol for review of student work or planning; however, time for collaboration has been provided for all faculty teams. Interviews with district personnel indicated that students' dashboards – digital collections of individual student data -- are under construction. Class level or cohort level data sets may be available but were not presented. Individual students' records of standards mastery were not presented. Interviews indicated that a review of results occurred at school levels in various and varied forms and formats.

The district offers myriad choices for learners to explore and follow their interests and passions. Elementary students may be enrolled in schools that have environmental, Montessori, International Baccalaureate, science, math, engineering, technology, leadership, or other or all of these focuses. Middle-level learners can engage in programs that harness virtual reality, create professional-level music, enter into the world of health care and bio-science and explore politics, medical forensics, policy agriculture, and fly drones, just to name some of the options offered. By the time learners enter their high school years, students may be on pathways to licensures, completion of college credits, internships, production of artistic works and so many amazing possibilities! The experiences of one learner may vary extremely from the experiences of others, which can be enriching and exciting. The priority for systematizing, however, to ensure, that no matter how widely varied the pathways, all Florence 1 learners are guaranteed assessment of key standards mastery has been recognized in the strategic plan. Common end-of-course for core courses and state assessments are analyzed at the schools and reviewed at the district level. Plans to address results were not provided to the team. Results are reportedly used to inform professional development.

Professional development offerings in the district align with its stated beliefs in collaborative study, expertise exchange, and professional dialog. A review of professional development days' rich and varied offerings included sessions focused on social-emotional learning, wellness, technology, and programs such as AVID and Orton-Gillingham and No Red Ink. Interviews and evidence indicated that the professional development offerings are determined from staff input and current research and follow-up surveys check for effectiveness. Staff are provided time during late-start days for planning, professional learning or to use assessment data at the schools. A review of the district's Three-year plan for Curriculum and Instruction indicates that the district's professional development has focused on increased rigor, the creation of common structures in lesson and unit planning, and the implementation of pacing guides, learning walks, and textbook purchases. Professional development focus on curricular areas to deepen subject area knowledge was not apparent.

A common structure for communication of mastery of subject area standards included the district's grading policy. Some confusion was expressed regarding the use of terminology in the district's digital platform as not aligned with the uniform grading policy. Teachers and students indicated that grading policy may allow compliance to alter communication of mastery of standards using the current policy.

Communication targeting mastery of subject area knowledge is explicit in the district's grading expectations and is measured by the end-of-course and state assessments. Less clear are metrics communicating mastery of problem-solving, creativity or creative processes, innovation, collaboration, communication, critical thinking, and self-direction. Students and teachers proudly and excitedly told team members about creative, cross-curricular projects, such as an industrial revolution arts project, a basic camera invention project, and many artistic works that engaged critical thinking, self-direction, and



creativity. Others reported the completion of projects that resulted in original music composed by an entire band, creation of a relief map of a continent, and building an escape room as if it were an additional stop for Odysseus and his sailors. One group of middle school students eagerly showed team members the propulsive arc of a recently constructed catapult – all projects that had required problem solving and collaboration, some self-direction as well. Students have been provided with templates to track their own assignments, but students interviewed did not share their own current goals or identify the next steps within their courses for individual improvement. Teachers' interviews and evidence indicated that inquiry was employed during intersession remediation and enrichment, but was not necessarily uniformly occurring during the regular calendar. Professional development provides support for arts-infused curriculum, problem-based learning, STEM and STEAM teaching, and resources; the district has provided curriculum support for text-dependent analysis and writing, but follow-up for implementation was not presented. Digital platforms provide prompts for increasing depth of knowledge in questioning and complexity in exposition, but documentation of effective use was not in evidence. Those schools that incorporate AVID do focus on self-direction, as do schools incorporating Leader in Me programs; however learners across the district may or may not receive commensurate instruction.

Expectations ensuring that all learners are explicitly taught to employ these skills were not presented. Curriculum scope and sequences utilized higher-order options often but did not require recording or explicating the scope and sequence of creative processes collaboration, critical thinking, or self-direction across all learners' educational plans. Means through which exemplary assignments and projects that teach and measure 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills were shared, but not systemically or systematically documented for learners' mastery. Systemic protocol for collaborative review of student work and expectations to use review of student work to inform instruction, remediation, extension, and revision in schools were not presented or shared in interviews.

As the district moves forward to build digital records for each learner, incorporation of metrics marking mastery of each of the state's standards, as well as those "21<sup>st</sup> Century" skills identified as valued by the system can ensure that whatever the path chosen, every learner is provided opportunities to master key skills and understandings determined essential to thrive in any field, anywhere in their futures.

Consideration of systemic expectations for systematic, collaborative review of student work against key standards could increase opportunities to bring best practices to scale and continually refine instruction.

**Florence School District 1 is committed to the development of data-informed, meaningful, articulated, effective systematic quality assurance and continuous improvement processes.** The district has created robust systems of data use and communications, providing expedient, disaggregated results of state and common district assessments and surveys to schools and grade levels for use in planning and determination of interventions. A review of the district's longitudinal analysis reports noted predictive and proficiency data displayed in multiple layers, including sub-strand breakdowns and correlations. Interviews with district and building leaders indicated increased confidence and capacity for use of achievement and perception information to inform the work of the schools. All schools have completed comprehensive applications as Blue Ribbon Schools, which required a review of academic performance data, constituent surveys, and an external review that included consideration of attendance and extra-curricular offerings. Each school, upon completion of the Blue-Ribbon Schools process, received feedback and coaching to create data-informed improvement plans. Florence School District 1 was the first full school district in South Carolina to engage in the Blue-Ribbon Schools processes, according to a provided press release.

The district has built a substantial and impressive store of valuable information. Interviews with district leaders indicated that the district's data resources and staff are prepared to create and implement formal quality assurance cycles and processes for the system's programs and practices. Curriculum review cycles, program evaluation schedules, and initiative effectiveness monitoring have not been formalized

across the district. The district's strategic plan is in place and its goals are being met; however, the relationships between the strategic plan's objectives and priorities, improved student learning, and organizational effectiveness are not directly measured or documented. Determination of the effectiveness of initiatives to inform decisions regarding bringing programs to scale across the district has not been measured or directly reported.

The district has engaged in many impressive changes and risen to many challenges over the past several years. Determination of the efficacy of these changes and embedding metrics into programs and processes to formally monitor effectiveness could capitalize on the district's growing capacity to use data to inform decisions. The team recommends continued determination of clearly articulated formal evaluation cycles for curriculum and the district's programs and initiatives to assure quality and ensure continuous improvement.

The Engagement Review Team has submitted the findings included in this report after deliberations based on a review of documents, analysis of survey results, and virtual interviews conducted across the system's constituencies with the purpose that these findings may prove helpful as the district continues its progress. The team was impressed by Florence School District 1's future focus, sincerity, heart, dedication to learners and their families, respect for the history and expertise of the community, and the wisdom of those who were met. The team was inspired by the system's commitments, beliefs, courage, perseverance, and ready adaptability to meet the needs of its learners and our times. Going forward, ensuring that the district continues to clearly systemically articulate and align its improvement and quality assurance processes and that work throughout the system continues to systematically provide support for valued student achievement may prove helpful as the district strives to attain its vision. Florence School District 1 and its community have created trusting, collaborative partnerships that will serve all well, as this remarkable school system continues to live and honor its mission and prepare its learners to thrive far into their futures.

## Next Steps

Upon receiving the Accreditation Engagement Review Report, the institution is encouraged to implement the following steps:

- Review and share the findings with stakeholders.
- Develop plans to address the areas for improvement identified by the Engagement Review Team.
- Use the findings and data from the report to guide and strengthen the institution's continuous improvement efforts.
- Celebrate the successes noted in the report.
- Continue the improvement journey.

## Team Roster

The Engagement Review Teams are comprised of professionals with varied backgrounds and expertise. To provide knowledge and understanding of the Cognia tools and processes, all Lead Evaluators and Engagement Review Team members are required to complete Cognia training. The following professionals served on the Engagement Review Team:

Team Member Name	Brief Biography
<b>Dr. Julia Williams, Lead Evaluator</b>	Julia Williams, Ph.D., is a professor emeritus of education at the University of Minnesota Duluth. She holds a doctorate in educational leadership, a master's degree in curriculum and instruction, and a B.S. in secondary English education. Her areas of specialty include assessment, continuous improvement processes and planning, and program evaluation. She is a licensed secondary principal and district superintendent. Dr. Williams' research and publications include studies of schools and the integration of leadership, staff development, student achievement, and supervision. She has served as a primary investigator and as an evaluator on grants awarded by the National Science Foundation and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Over the past 25 years, Dr. Williams has served as Lead Evaluator for over 200 reviews for schools, systems, digital schools, corporations, corporation systems, and other protocols across the Cognia organization. She had been a member of the Minnesota State Council for many years and received the Excellence in Education Award for the state in 2013. She has served as a member of the Commission on Schools and serves as a Cognia Lead Evaluator Mentor for systems, schools, and corporations.
<b>Katinia Davis, Associate Lead Evaluator</b>	Chief Special Education Officer, Richland School District 2, Columbia, South Carolina
<b>Dr. Annette Melton</b>	Senior Director, Mid-Atlantic Region, Cognia
<b>Dr. Katherine Gehr</b>	Director of School Improvement, Charleston County School District, Charleston, South Carolina
<b>Dr. Scott Smith</b>	Director of Assessment and Accountability, Spartanburg District 5, Duncan, South Carolina

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