



# Educational Practices Reference Guide

# Table of Contents

- Introduction..... 3**
- Leadership Capacity ..... 4**
  - Purpose Statement..... 4
  - Continuous Improvement ..... 4
  - Governing Authority..... 4
  - Policy Content ..... 5
  - Additional Resources..... 5
- Learning Capacity ..... 7**
  - Curriculum ..... 7
  - Early Learning ..... 7
  - Primary and Elementary Levels..... 7
  - Middle School and Junior High Levels ..... 7
  - High School and Secondary Level ..... 8
  - Supplementary Institutions ..... 8
  - Digital Learning Institutions ..... 8
  - International Schools ..... 9
  - Instruction ..... 9
  - Instructional Time ..... 9
  - Digital Learning Requirements for Instructional Time..... 9
  - Instructional Planning Time ..... 9
- Resource Capacity ..... 11**
  - Professional Learning..... 11
  - Professional Qualifications ..... 11
  - Instructional Personnel Qualifications ..... 11
  - Early Learning Staff Qualifications ..... 11
  - Superintendent Qualifications..... 12
  - School and District Administrator Qualifications..... 12
  - Counselor and Media Specialist Qualifications ..... 12
  - Non-teaching Professional Staff Qualifications ..... 12
  - Paraprofessional Staff Qualifications..... 12
  - Digital Learning Programs/Courses Staff Qualifications..... 12
  - Staffing Levels for Administrative, Counseling and Media Staff ..... 12
  - Class Size and Teacher/Student Ratios..... 13
  - Early Learning Teacher/Student Ratios..... 13

Digital Learning Teacher/Student Ratios.....	13
Library/Media Services .....	14
Best Practice Recommendations .....	14
<b>Additional Digital Learning Guidelines .....</b>	<b>15</b>
Digital Learning Institution Definition .....	15
Authenticity of Student Work .....	15
Student Engagement.....	15
Awarding Course Credits and Grades.....	16
Graduation Requirements .....	16
Credit Recovery.....	16
Proficiency-based Learning .....	16
Programs that Support Adult Students .....	17
Marketing and Promotion .....	17
Third-Party Curriculum .....	17
Position on High School Equivalency .....	17
Background .....	17
Position Statement .....	17
Terms and Definitions.....	17



# Introduction

This *Educational Practices Reference Guide* describes the educational practices that Cognia has found can assist in providing a quality learning environment. **For specific Cognia requirements, institutions should refer to the Cognia Performance Standards, Assurances and Policy.** The *Educational Practices Reference Guide* is designed to serve as a supplemental resource to institutions that want a reference point or example of practices that are aligned with the Cognia Performance Standards. This guide also provides information related to Early Learning and Digital Learning institutions. Institutions seeking further guidance in these areas are strongly encouraged to review the Cognia Performance Standards for Early Learning Schools and the Cognia Performance Standards for Digital Learning for specific expectations for accreditation for those institution types.

Cognia is focused on quality. Quality is about the dynamic combination of inputs, processes and results working in harmony to achieve the institution's vision for student learning. The Cognia Performance Standards provide this comprehensive view of quality. Institutions should use the Standards to focus on the end goal of quality. The educational practices referenced in this guide can be used to support the Standards when institutions are looking for a guidepost for inputs; however, they should do so always recognizing that many paths lead to quality.

The practices highlighted address those areas where Cognia is most often asked for examples or benchmarks of good practice. The guide is organized into practices that support Standards found within the three Domains: Leadership Capacity, Learning Capacity and Resource Capacity.

This reference guide is a supplemental guide for best practices to design and implement programs and practices that will meet accreditation Standards, Assurances, and Policy. The practices provide institutions with a starting point for comparison. They do not represent the exclusive end point, nor should they limit creative and innovative practices that best meet the needs of students.

The ultimate goal of the accreditation process is to help institutions maximize student success and organizational effectiveness. Institutions are encouraged to use the educational practices referenced in this guide only so far as they find them useful in achieving this goal.



# Leadership Capacity

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.

## Purpose Statement

An institution's purpose statement, which may also be known as a vision or mission statement, assists in engaging all stakeholders defining and communicating the organization's purpose. The purpose should guide and inform the development of goals and plans to achieve the institution's purpose. Elements of a quality process include the following:

- A systematic and documented process in place for regularly reviewing the vision and purpose of the school and for involving input of all stakeholder groups in the review process.
- Procedures for clearly communicating the vision and purpose to all stakeholders.
- Evidence that the vision and purpose of the school focus on clearly defined and measurable expectations for student learning.
- Includes shared beliefs about teaching and learning that are used to guide decisions.

## Continuous Improvement

Continuous improvement refers to process that unfolds progressively, without a fixed or predetermined end point, and is sustained over extended periods of time. The concept also encompasses the general belief that improvement is not something that starts and stops, but it's something that requires an organizational or professional commitment to an ongoing process of learning, self-reflection, adaptation, and growth. The concept of continuous improvement also reflects recognition that improving the effectiveness of schools and teaching is highly complex. Progress requires a sustained commitment to incremental, ongoing improvements, rather than the execution of rapidly implemented, breakthrough changes that deliver up the desired results in a predictable fashion. The continuous improvement process should reflect the following:

- A focused and data-driven collaborative planning process
- Consideration of the beliefs, perspectives and experiences of all stakeholder groups
- Analysis of student and organizational performance results
- Analysis of research-based factors of school quality and identification of areas in need of improvement
- Clearly identified and specific goals, strategies, timelines, activities and measures of success.
- Processes to monitor and adjust the plan based on the analysis of results and to communicate the results to stakeholders

## Governing Authority

Cognia defines the governing authority as the person or group of people with the highest level of control over an institution that generally has the responsibility for oversight and policy-setting. The role of the governing authority includes primary responsibility for the establishment and implementation of policies and practices that lead to the effective operations of the institution. In addition, the governing authority should implement a code of ethics and ensure that they operate within the defined roles and expectations. The following information supports the effective operations of the governing authority:



- Ongoing processes to develop, review, and revised policies based on applicable laws, regulations, research, and best practices.
- Monitors the effective implementation of institution policies.
- Establishes and adheres to a code of ethics, and ensures that decisions and actions are in accordance with defined roles and responsibilities free of conflict of interest principles of conduct.
- Engages in professional learning to stay current regarding roles and responsibilities as well as applicable laws, regulations, and organizational best practices.

## Policy Content

Institutions should develop policies that support effective operations. The following are types of policies that institutions should consider for the effective implementation of practices.

- Support the effective operations of the institution, including the following functions:
  - Monitoring strategic and continuous improvement plans
  - Establishing and monitoring policies regarding nondiscrimination in all actions regarding student and stakeholders
  - Hiring and oversight of the administrative head of the institution
  - Monitoring of effective instruction and assessments that produce equitable and challenging learning experiences for all students
  - Providing for the professional growth and development of all staff
- Provide clear direction and oversight of fiscal and legal management, including the following functions:
  - Ensuring that the accounts of the institution are kept in accordance with generally accepted accounting principles and are audited annually by an independent, licensed accountant
  - Managing debt service or lines of credit to ensure that fiscal responsibility remains under the control of the governing authority.
  - Maintaining a policy for funds in reserve.
- Ensuring the financial stability of the institution and that it is neither in nor at risk of financial reorganization under the protection of bankruptcy by:
  - Maintaining policies for fund raising and adhering to accepted standards for reporting and recognizing gift revenues and fund-raising expenditures.
  - Maintaining adequate insurance or equivalent resources to protect its financial stability and administrative operations from protracted proceedings and claims for damage.
  - Maintaining adequate risk management policies for the protection of the institution, including governance policies in the event of an emergency.
  - Maintaining access to legal counsel who can advise or obtain necessary information about the legal requirements and obligations that exist in the state, federal, or other jurisdiction in which it operates.

## Additional Resources

Institutions seeking additional practices and resources regarding effective governing authority practices and school management may wish to visit the National School Board Association's website at [www.nsba.org/](http://www.nsba.org/). The Key Work of School Boards, which outlines key action areas to guide school boards in their efforts to improve student achievement, can be found at <http://www.nsba.org/services/school-board-leadership-services/key-work>



The National Association of Independent Schools at [www.nais.org/](http://www.nais.org/) offers Principles of Good Practice <https://www.nais.org/learn/principles-of-good-practice/>, which defines standards and ethical behavior in key areas of school operations for independent schools.



# Learning Capacity

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.

## Curriculum

Cognia offers the following information and practices to support institutions as they review and evaluate their curricula. In highlighting these practices, Cognia recognizes that the institution's chosen curriculum and its implementation of that curriculum define the institution (e.g., comprehensive high school, college preparatory school, career technical school, early learning school). The institution's curriculum should be aligned with its purpose and expectations for student learning and structured to meet the unique needs of the students served. As a result, institutions should review and use the practices identified below in conjunction with their stated vision, mission, and student population to best evaluate the quality of their curricula.

## Early Learning

Curriculum content and learning experiences provide young children with challenging and equitable opportunities that address the cognitive, emotional, social, creative, and physical growth and development of the student. The curriculum also:

- Incorporates developmentally, culturally and linguistically appropriate instructional practices.
- Promotes children's success at the next level.
- Provides for different levels of ability, development and learning styles.
- Provides opportunities for students to actively explore and interact with the environment, other students, and adults in a positive manner.
- Incorporates learning about literacy, math, science, social studies, health and other content areas.
- Reflects differences in cultures, growth and interests.

## Primary and Elementary Levels

The curriculum is broad in scope and provides for a range in student readiness and potential for learning that:

- Places an emphasis upon the development of cognitive, psychomotor and affective skills.
- Develops the knowledge and skills necessary for student success at the next level of education.
- Includes learning experiences in language arts (including technical writing, technical reading, and speech communications at the appropriate levels), mathematics, science (including experimental activities), social studies, foreign language exploration, health and safety, physical education, the arts, and the application of technology as a tool for learning.

## Middle School and Junior High Levels

The curriculum has sufficient breadth to serve both general and specific needs of early adolescents through a variety of exploratory experiences and courses that ensure students are prepared to be successful at the next educational level. The curriculum includes:





- Language arts (including English, reading, writing, technical reading, technical writing and speech communications)
- Social studies
- Mathematics (including preparation for algebra at the appropriate levels)
- Science (including experimental activities).
- Fine arts
- Practical and technical arts
- Foreign language
- The application of technology as a learning tool
- Physical education, social and emotional health, and safety

## High School and Secondary Level

The curriculum includes a core set of offerings to enhance academic skills, college and career readiness, application of knowledge, application of technology, and to ensure successful transitions to employment or postsecondary education. **For diploma-granting high schools, including digital learning institutions, the curriculum includes a minimum of the following course offerings:**

- Four language arts courses including content focusing on literature, grammar, writing, reading, technical reading, technical writing and speech communications
- Four mathematics courses (three at or above the Algebra I level)
- Four science courses (at least two which are laboratory based)
- Four social studies courses
- Four courses in the practical and technical arts
- Two courses in the same foreign language
- Three courses in fine and performing arts
- One course in physical education, social and emotional health, and safety
- Additional elective courses

## Supplementary Institutions

Supplementary schools provide educational services to pre-K-12 level and adult students. They offer programs of instruction that are a portion of a comprehensive educational program leading to a diploma or degree. The programs of instruction are based on clearly defined learning objectives related to the school's identified purpose.

## Digital Learning Institutions

Digital learning instructional programs are where comprehensive and/or supplementary learning takes place with the teacher and the student at separate locations. The teaching and learning processes may also take place at different times. Digital learning integrates the effective use of technology to strengthen the student learning experience and gives students some element of control over time, place, path, and/or pace. Delivery of instruction can be synchronous (with simultaneous interaction between the teacher and student) or asynchronous (where the teacher and student interaction is delayed over time). Instructional methodologies, materials, and resources may be facilitated by internet, video, audio, print, online, computer, travel study, and/or mail. The curricular program is



based on clearly defined course objectives, and the institution has a written policy for granting credit for each digital learning course.

## International Schools

International institutions are guided by board-approved purpose statements that demonstrate a commitment to providing either an American or an international curriculum. The curriculum provides instruction in and promotes the benefits of tolerance and respect for all cultures and nations. Instruction may be offered either in English and/or an English-language focused, bilingual program delivered by a faculty qualified to represent and deliver an American and/or international modeled curriculum.

In addition to assessing an institution's adherence to Cognia Performance Standards and Cognia Assurances for International Schools, review teams will validate the qualifications of leadership and the school's use of the terms "American" and/or "international" in regard to mission, school name, and school publications.

## Instruction

Cognia recognizes the importance of providing teachers and students with uninterrupted instructional time. To make the most of this instructional time, teachers need adequate planning time. Cognia shares the following practices for instructional time and planning time.

## Instructional Time

The school meets any applicable governmental requirements for the number of instructional days in the year or provides a school year that consists of at least 180 instructional days and the following minimum total hours:

- Early childhood and pre-kindergarten: A planned program
- Kindergarten: 900 hours
- Elementary school: 900 hours
- Middle school: 990 hours
- High school: 1100 hours
- Digital learning (see digital learning requirements below)

## Digital Learning Requirements for Instructional Time

The school has a written policy for instructional time for digital learning programs/courses that includes the requirements for the following:

- Student engagement within each course
- Student progress within each course
- Completion of each course
- Eligibility for accessing the next or additional courses upon previous course completions
- Documentation of the student's instructional work for each course

## Instructional Planning Time

The school meets any applicable governmental requirements for planning time, or provides a master schedule that includes a minimum of 200 minutes per week of planning time for all full-time instructors that is



unencumbered by teaching or supervisory responsibilities. Part-time professional instructional staff have appropriate planning time within their designated workday.



# Resource Capacity

The use and distribution of resources support the stated mission of the institution. Institutions ensure that resources are distributed and utilized equitably so that 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.

## Professional Learning

- Cognia shares the following practices regarding professional learning activities: Program of Professional Learning and Development Quality institutions implement a program of professional development that is aligned with the institution's purpose, expectations for student learning and continuous improvement goals. The program addresses those areas where staff development is most needed to support identified interventions. Professional development activities are research-based, include follow-up activities as appropriate, encourage innovation and risk taking, and include evaluation for their effect on instructional practice and student performance. Professional learning activities should address both institutional and individual learning needs of all staff related to their role within the institution.
- Time Spent in Professional Learning and Development Activities All professional personnel meet governmental requirements for participation in professional development activities necessary to maintain certification and/or earn at least six semester hours of credit or the equivalent during each five years of employment. Six semester hours of credit is equivalent to 120 clock hours of participation in professional development activities (e.g., workshops, seminars, conferences and professional learning communities).

## Professional Qualifications

Cognia recognizes that the definition of "qualified" in relation to hiring qualified professional staff encompasses more than a person's education. The definition also includes the person's experience, unique talents, professional attitude and general aptitudes. Hiring qualified professional staff requires a thorough examination of all the attributes of the individual. In the end, the hiring decision is based on good professional judgment.

At the same time, Cognia recognizes that educational leaders find it useful to know what is generally accepted by the profession. As a result, Cognia provides the following practices.

## Instructional Personnel Qualifications

The instructional personnel meet all governmental certification requirements, hold an endorsement for the grade level(s) at which they are teaching and hold an endorsement for the subject area being taught. For personnel who are not required to meet governmental certification requirements; instructional personnel have an earned bachelor's degree that includes:

- 18 semester hours of professional education (as part of, or in addition to the degree, and including at least six semester hours of student teaching) from a regionally accredited institution
- A major or at least 24 semester hours in their assigned field

## Early Learning Staff Qualifications

Early Learning institutions or programs serving pre-K students within K-12 institutions should refer to the Cognia Standards for Early Learning Schools for requirements for staff qualifications, class sizes, and health and safety standards.



## **Superintendent Qualifications**

The superintendent meets all applicable certification requirements or has an earned graduate degree from a regionally accredited institution, with 30 semester hours in educational administration or supervision.

## **School and District Administrator Qualifications**

The principal or administrative head, assistant administrators, and district-level administrators meet all applicable certification requirements or have an earned graduate degree from a regionally accredited institution, with 18 semester hours in administration, curriculum, supervision, or related subjects. Administrators serving in American or international schools must meet local and national requirements and possess qualifications to represent an American or international program of study.

## **Counselor and Media Specialist Qualifications**

Counselors and media specialists meet all applicable certification requirements or have an earned graduate degree in their assigned field from a regionally accredited institution.

## **Non-teaching Professional Staff Qualifications**

Other non-teaching professional staff (nurses, nutritionists, physical therapists, athletic trainers, etc.) meets applicable certification/licensure requirements or the requirements from their relevant professional association.

## **Paraprofessional Staff Qualifications**

Paraprofessional staff meets applicable state, territory and/or national requirements and have appropriate training to complete their assignment and serve under the direct supervision of professional personnel.

## **Digital Learning Programs/Courses Staff Qualifications**

For digital learning programs/courses, the number of personnel necessary to fill all the roles and responsibilities is determined by the institution's purpose, educational programs, delivery of online instruction, and continuous improvement. While institutions may use a variety of technology systems to provide digital learning instructional content and media resources to students taking digital learning courses, the Cognia requirements for teacher qualifications apply to those digital learning programs and/or courses. Qualified teachers must provide instructional guidance and oversee the progress of students within each course. The teacher's role should include the facilitation of instruction to support personalized learning that reflects the skills and knowledge students are expected to master throughout the course.

## **Staffing Levels for Administrative, Counseling and Media Staff**

Quality institutions provide sufficient staff to meet the needs of the whole child and ensure effective operations. At the same time, they recognize that providing staff does not automatically translate to quality programs. As a result, they examine staffing decisions in light of the institution's purpose, learning goals, student needs, and staff qualifications and make staffing decisions based on what will best advance their work with students. As institutions make decisions about appropriate staffing levels, they should meet applicable state, territory, and national laws and regulations.

In the absence of such laws, Cognia shares the following practices for staffing levels for administrative, counseling and library/media staff.



- Every institution must have an administrative head who serves as the instructional leader of the institution.
- For elementary schools with enrollments of 500 or more students, the school should add 0.5 assistant administrators for every additional 250 students.
- For middle and high schools with of 250 or more students, the school should add 0.5 assistant administrators for every additional 250 students.
- Counselor-student ratios should be 250 to 1, with additional staff added for each additional 250 students (American School Counselor Association recommendation). For more information on school counseling programs, please visit their website at <http://www.schoolcounselor.org/>
- Library Media Specialist ratios should be 250 to 1, with additional staff added for each additional 250 students.

## Class Size and Teacher/Student Ratios

Instructional quality and student achievement can be enhanced when the learning conditions are supported by smaller class sizes. Small class sizes alone, however, will not impact student learning unless instructional methods are aligned with the needs and learning styles of students. Differentiated instruction and effective classroom practices are critical to taking advantage of the more individualized learning environment that smaller classroom sizes afford.

Context also plays a role in class size – a science lab and a swimming class, for example, require different class sizes to maximize the success of students and accomplish class objectives. While it may be tempting to focus discussion and resources on class size, the primary focus for institutions should be on improving classroom instruction and providing an environment that best meets the objectives of the class.

Emphasizing the importance of what happens in the classroom and the overall context for the class; Cognia also recognizes that many institutions find it helpful to have a reference point for what is generally accepted as good practice regarding class size. At a minimum, institutions should meet applicable governmental class size requirements. In the absence of such requirements, Cognia shares the following practices regarding maintaining class sizes conducive to student learning:

- Grades K-2 18-22 students per class
- Grades 3-6 22-25 students per class
- Grades 7-12 25-28 students per class

These practices assume a minimum of one full-time equivalent teacher in each of the class sizes noted above. For additional information on class size recommendations, please review the Southern Regional Education Board policy brief on class size available at <https://www.sreb.org/publication/smart-class-size-policies-lean-times>.

## Early Learning Teacher/Student Ratios

Early Learning institutions or programs serving pre-K students within K-12 institutions should refer to the Cognia Standards for Early Learning Schools for requirements for staff qualifications, class sizes, and health and safety standards.

## Digital Learning Teacher/Student Ratios

Instructional quality and student achievement can be enhanced when the learning conditions are supported by appropriate class sizes and student course loads for teachers. Effective digital education practices that support personalized learning and teacher engagement are critical to providing a successful student experience in a virtual school.



The institution should have a written policy for staffing ratios. The nature of digital learning requires transparent and quality communications between the institution and the student regarding instructional support for each digital learning course. The institution should consider the course objectives, technology systems and resources, and student needs in determining appropriate instructional support. Cognia shares the following practices regarding maintaining student-to-teacher ratios conducive to student learning in digital learning programs/courses:

- Optimal: 25 students assigned to a teacher per course roster
- Maximum: 150 students assigned to a full-time teacher in multiple course rosters determined by subject being taught and aligned to the institution's policy

## Library/Media Services

The following guidelines for quality library media programs are recommended by the American Association of School Librarians (AASL). For more information on school library/media centers, please visit their website at <http://www.ala.org/aasl/>.

## Best Practice Recommendations

The library media program:

- Is built on a long-term strategic plan that reflects the mission, goals and objectives of the institution
- Has a minimum of one full-time certified/licensed librarian/media specialist supported by qualified support staff sufficient for the institution's instructional programs, services, facilities, size, and numbers of teachers and students
- Includes flexible and equitable access to well-developed physical and virtual collections of resources that support the curriculum and meet the diverse needs of all learners
- Has sufficient funding to support priorities and make steady progress to support the program's mission and to attain its goals and objectives
- Includes policies, procedures, and guidelines that support equitable access to ideas and information throughout the institution's community

# Additional Digital Learning Guidelines

## Digital Learning Institution Definition

An institution that predominately provides its educational program in a virtual model where learning takes place when the teacher and the student may be at separate locations or the teaching and learning processes take place at different times.

- Digital learning integrates the effective use of technology to strengthen the student learning experience and gives students some element of control over time, place, path and/or pace. Some or all of the following criteria typically apply to digital learning institutions:
- Curriculum and instruction are delivered to students using a digital content or learning management system.
- Students and teachers are often located in different geographical locations.
- Students complete coursework using a flexible model regarding both time and location.
- Delivery of instruction can be synchronous with simultaneous interaction between the teacher and student or asynchronous where the teacher and student interaction is delayed over time.
- Instructional methodologies, materials and resources may be facilitated by internet, video, audio, print, online, computer, onsite and/or mail.
- The institution often serves students beyond its defined school boundaries and demographics.
- A blended learning model is often implemented that utilizes both virtual and onsite instruction and learning experiences. In blended learning institutions, the teaching and learning processes may take place at separate locations and at different times and may also require some or all of its students to periodically attend onsite at a brick-and-mortar location away from home.
- Qualified teachers are typically onsite but may also be located virtually.
- An institution that always requires students to attend onsite, but integrates digital resources into curriculum, is not considered a digital learning institution.

## Authenticity of Student Work

The institution must have a written policy or procedure that describes how the institution reasonably ensures students are completing their own assessments and assignments within the online course. An authenticity of student work policy (i.e., academic integrity policy, student academic contract) should include a comprehensive approach starting with the integrity of the student login process, the ongoing submission of assignments and assessments, and should include student attendance and communication expectations.

Examples may include the use of proctors, assessment centers or other on-site attendance options, Skype or other visual technology tools for synchronous communications, conference calls, discussion based assessments or the use of an academic integrity database (e.g., Turnitin.com). Institutions should implement a combination of practices for ensuring the authenticity of student work throughout the completion of each course.

## Student Engagement

The institution must have a written policy and procedure that describes student accountability related to course deadlines, synchronous and asynchronous attendance requirements, any face-to-face attendance requirements and course communication channels and expectations, and should include the consequences for lack of engagement. Students enrolled in a digital learning institution must demonstrate engagement in online coursework on a consistent basis.





Engagement can consist of a combination of records for student logins, number of hours on task in the digital environment, student progress records and/or a variety of attendance systems as determined by the institution. The institution should have practices in place to determine when a student is not engaged and a procedure that requires action in contacting the student to discuss academic progress.

## **Awarding Course Credits and Grades**

The institution grants secondary course credits based on defined course criteria and sufficient instructional hours to meet international college and university entrance requirements. The student work for each course is aligned to an appropriate amount of time and/or mastery of the subject, which ultimately awards an appropriate number of credits upon successful course completion. The institution has a policy and practice(s) in place to ensure the validity and accuracy of credit transfer in and out of the institution for each student. The credit transfer policy should align with comparable industry governmental norms.

The final course grades earned by students and assigned by teachers aligns with student engagement and submitted coursework. Consistency exists with regard to student content mastery, time on task in the course and reported attendance to align with the final course grade. The institution has grading policies with clear expectations that have been communicated to both students and instructors. The institution has a process in place to monitor and audit final course grades to ensure adherence to policy.

## **Graduation Requirements**

The institution has written policy defining graduation eligibility and the requirements for earning a diploma. The policy should include the criteria for students graduating from the institution to complete at least 25 percent of the courses required for graduation at the institution. The policy may include a provision to, under specialized circumstances, modify the credit requirement for a student(s) on a case-by-case basis. The policy should clearly describe the comprehensive process to review the circumstance of the student(s) and the policy must include 1) an assessment component supporting required academic benchmarks, 2) a thorough review of a student's education history from regionally accredited institution(s) and 3) graduation credit requirements that meet the expectations set by the state or country in which the school is operating.

## **Credit Recovery**

Credit recovery is coursework and instruction that is designed for students who have previously failed a course. A credit recovery scenario may not be invoked for students who are engaging a course for the first time. Also, credit recovery tends to be for high school students only. Digital Learning institutions must meet state requirements and have a written policy for credit recovery programs.

## **Proficiency-based Learning**

Proficiency-based learning (sometimes called competency-based learning) refers to courses that enable students to demonstrate mastery of key benchmarks/knowledge in ways other than completing "seat time". Proficiency-based credit (course) is generally (but not always) for students who have not yet attempted a course but may already possess the knowledge and skills taught in the course. For digital learning schools, seat time is defined differently and encompasses student engagement and course completion. Digital learning institutions must meet state requirements and have written policies for competency-based or proficiency-based programs.

## Programs that Support Adult Students

Institutions providing programs for adult students that may include certificates, GED preparation courses, and/or postsecondary programs should consult the Cognia for the most appropriate accreditation protocol prior to application for accreditation.

## Marketing and Promotion

Cognia requires that institutions use truthful and ethical practices within their marketing and promotion, including:

- Providing factual information regarding the institution's policies and operations
- Presenting information to stakeholders in a clear, concise manner that does not mislead the public
- Confirming with partners that the institution's accreditation does not extend to the partnership
- Confirming that accreditation is appropriately represented to the public and through any of the institution's partners

## Third-Party Curriculum

Many digital learning institutions contract with third-party vendors to supply the curriculum and assessments to students in the digital learning environment. While this is a common and acceptable practice, the responsibility to validate that the curriculum and assessments meet the educational requirements of the institution, align with the appropriate standards, and meet the institution's mission and purpose remains with the institution. Institution representative(s) should be tasked to regularly review all resources coming from third-party vendors for alignment in meeting the institution requirements.

## Position on High School Equivalency

As of September 1, 2014, the following position related to high school equivalency is in effect for all Cognia accredited digital learning institutions.

## Background

The education industry is evolving as new standards, technologies and models are considered for how to best educate students in the 21st century. These changes include recent legislation updates and regulation by governmental education authorities involving the recognition of what constitutes high school equivalency.

## Position Statement

A digital learning institution may not offer its students a high school equivalency credential for the completion of a program that does not meet the state's graduation requirements for a diploma. This position reflects what an accredited digital learning school may provide in order to help a student prepare in earning a recognized high school equivalency credential as determined by a governmental education authority.

## Terms and Definitions

**Governmental Education Authority** | Department of Education or governing authority, as determined within each state or country.

**Recognized High School Equivalency Exam** | As stated in legislation, statute, or policy within each state or country.



**High School Equivalency Test Preparation** | The school prepares student to take an official high school equivalency exam recognized/authorized by the governmental education authority.

**Program** | An accredited institution may provide a high school equivalency test preparation program. A digital learning institution accredited through Cognia may offer high school equivalency test preparation to assist students as they study to take a high school equivalency exam that is recognized by a governmental education authority. The preparation program may consist of instructional resources and practice questions aligned to the exam. An institution may not offer programming that suggests a student can earn a high school equivalency credential at their institution. Only governmental education authorities can define how a student can gain the recognized high school equivalency credential as an alternative to a high school diploma. The Cognia position applies to all high school equivalency programs regardless of their title or description. As it relates to high school equivalency, Cognia accredited institutions are not permitted to have programming with alternative titles beyond high school equivalency test preparation.

**Completion** | Course completion is documented through a transcript issued by the institution. The completion of a high school equivalency test preparation would be documented through a transcript issued by the institution. The course description should clearly indicate that the student has studied in preparation to take a recognized high school equivalency exam. Typically, test preparation courses do not result in any type of certificate beyond the transcript. If a certificate is issued, it should clearly state that it is a course completion certificate, it is related to the test preparation courses only and is not a high school equivalency credential. A digital learning institution may not offer a certificate comparing itself to a high school equivalency credential as recognized by the governmental education authority. A transcript or certificate issued upon the completion of high school equivalency test preparation may not be described, represented, or marketed as equivalent to the high school diploma, high school equivalency, or, for example, General Educational Development Tests (GED), High School Equivalency Tests (HiSET), High School Equivalency Exam (HSE), or Test Assessing Secondary Completion (TASC) as recognized by a governmental education authority.

**Representation** | A digital learning institution must be transparent and ethical in its marketing efforts. A digital learning institution offering high school equivalency test preparation should place an affirmative statement in their marketing messaging that substantially states the following:

*The high school equivalency test preparation program provides help with passing a high school equivalency test approved by the governmental education authority in the student's state of residence. The completion of this coursework or program does not lead to a high school diploma, equivalency certificate or any type of official credential.*

**Implication of Accreditation** | A digital learning institution that issues a high school diploma or high school equivalency certificate for the successful completion of a test preparation program does not meet the Cognia accreditation requirements. Any false, inaccurate or misleading representation concerning the credential issued through high school equivalency test preparation may result in an institution being recommended to the Cognia Global Commission for revocation of accreditation