



Accreditation Handbook

**A Guide for Systems and Institutions
Seeking or Continuing Accreditation.**

**Creating a
world of opportunities
for every learner.**

Preface

This guide is designed to help you understand the expectations of Cognia™ accreditation and to easily access information about accreditation. The guide serves both systems and individual institutions that are continuously engaged in meeting accreditation policies, standards, and requirements. This handbook is strictly for accreditation. Cognia offers additional guides specific to early learning and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics), if those areas apply to your institution.

We hope you find our ever-evolving accreditation policies, standards and requirements relevant to the current education landscape and to your system or institution. As you progress through the handbook, we hope you also gain a realization that our accreditation process is responsive to variations in the purposes (missions, visions) of our education institutions. Above all, we hope your accreditation experiences through Cognia are relevant and meaningful on behalf of the learners you serve.

Cognia accreditation represents the unified requirements for the North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement (NCA CASI), the Northwest Accreditation Commission (NWAC), and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Council on Accreditation and School Improvement (SACS CASI). Institutions and systems seeking to earn and maintain NCA CASI, NWAC, and SACS CASI accreditation must continuously meet the Cognia accreditation policies, standards and requirements.

Thank you for creating an opportunity for all learners and for your commitment to accreditation. We welcome and encourage you to contact Cognia at any time at [cognia.org](https://www.cognia.org) under the “Contact” tab.

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Introduction to the Accreditation Handbook

The *Accreditation Handbook: A Guide for Systems and Institutions Seeking or Continuing Accreditation* is designed to provide you with comprehensive information about the Cognia approaches to accreditation and continuous improvement and what they mean to your system or institution. The handbook organizes into one location your access to information, resources and tools for your system's or institution's journey of improvement and your participation in Cognia Accreditation Engagement Reviews. The handbook is organized into two categories:

- **Narrative descriptions** of essential research, frameworks, policies, standards, requirements and approaches to continuous improvement. This detailed information sets the stage and rationale for and continuous improvement through accreditation.
- **Links to documents, resources, tools, and services** to assist systems and institutions in your improvement journey and pursuit and maintenance of accreditation. The links are routinely updated. While you may access this information at any time, Cognia encourages you to download documents just before you need them to ensure you have the most recent version.

Headings and subheadings will help you navigate to information pertinent to your interests and needs at the time. As always, Cognia welcomes your feedback and suggestions for making this handbook a more meaningful tool.

Accreditation may be conferred to an institution or a system. For systems accreditation, all schools managed by the system must be accredited or in the accreditation process. The system is granted accreditation in addition to the accreditation that is conferred upon each institution. Throughout this handbook, the term *institution* is used when referencing either the system or the institution.

Cognia Accreditation Policies

The *Policies and Procedures for Accreditation and Certification* represent the unified policies and procedures for accreditation and certification from Cognia and its accreditation divisions: the North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement (NCA CASI), Northwest Accreditation Commission (NWAC), and Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Council on Accreditation and School Improvement (SACS CASI). Therefore, all references to Cognia in this handbook collectively refer to NCA CASI, NWAC and SACS CASI.

Cognia maintains policies at all times that are available for public access on the Cognia website at cognia.org. As of July 1, 2015, any institution and system that is accredited by Cognia is awarded a seal that collectively reflects NCA CASI, NWAC and SACS CASI accreditation.

Definitions

The accreditation policies and procedures provide definitions for performance. This handbook aligns with these definitions as information is presented about accreditation. The handbook reflects accreditation only. Information about certification is presented in documents unique to the specific certification (for example, documents related to STEM Certification).

1. **Accreditation.** A voluntary method of quality assurance, developed more than 100 years ago by American universities and secondary schools that is designed primarily to recognize institutions adhering to a set of educational standards and policies. Accreditation applies to an entire institution or system.

2. **Certification.** A voluntary process of quality assurance that yields a documented recognition of achievement of a defined process or program. Certification may apply to a process or program of an institution or to an institution as a whole.
3. **Institution.** Any educational unit such as a school, association, charter school authorizer, corporation or Education Service Agency (ESA) that is seeking accreditation or certification as a single entity.
4. **System.** Any organization such as a corporation, district, ESA, or system of institutions that is seeking accreditation for the system as a whole, including the organization's system-level and all of the institutions managed by the system.

The policies and procedures provide applicability requirements specific to systems and institutions and procedural requirements to Cognia related to all aspects of accreditation recognition and management.

Resource

- [Policies and Procedures for Accreditation and Certification](#)

Introduction to Accreditation

Today, accreditation is used at all levels of education and is recognized for its ability to effectively drive improved student performance and continuous improvement in education.

Systems and institutions seeking to achieve or maintain accreditation understand, honor and embrace the concept of continuous improvement. These systems and institutions are engaged every day in a journey of improvement. They are dynamic and continuously evolving, with an unrelenting focus on becoming better on behalf of the students they serve. They operate as learning communities by demonstrating healthy cultures where individuals collectively analyze practices and results, engage in professional learning and dialogue, take meaningful action, and assume responsibility for results.

Accreditation: Improvement Journey

Accreditation requires systems and institutions to continuously meet the applicable Cognia Policies, Standards and requirements. Cognia refers to the collective efforts and actions of the institution to continuously meet accreditation expectations as the *improvement journey*. Cognia accreditation is responsive to variations in the purposes (i.e., missions and visions) of accredited systems and institutions. The improvement journey of an institution should progress in ways that are personalized, relevant and meaningful on behalf of the students served.

Periodically, Cognia will review the institution through on-site visitations that are specific to the purpose of the review. Such reviews may include Readiness Reviews, Engagement Reviews, Monitoring Reviews, or other Specialized Reviews as discussed later in the handbook.

Standards and Assurances: Systems and Institutions

Continuous improvement should be the goal of every institution. Cognia provides accreditation Standards and Assurances that are specific to varying types of systems and institutions. The improvement journey for each institution may look different but should always include measures of quality of learning and instruction.

The *Performance Standards and Key Concepts* provide a set of evaluative criteria that lays the foundation for improvement planning and implementation. Based on rigorous research and best practices, the Standards are a powerful tool for driving instructional change. Cognia is committed to quality and to assisting the needs of the institutions we serve by providing varied and appropriate accreditation Standards and Assurances.

The *Assurances* are compliance-oriented requirements of all accredited institutions. Assurances are comprised of requirements applicable to all systems and institutions and, in some cases, supplemented by any additional requirements unique to the system or institution type. Also, some institutions may have specialized assurances related to the institutions or to requirements of partnership agreements. If those apply, Cognia representatives conducting the Readiness Review will share that information with the institution.

Resources

System-level Standards and Assurances

System Type	Standards & Key Concepts	Assurances
Charter School Authorizer	Cognia Performance Standards and Key Concepts for Charter School Authorizers	Charter School Authorizer Assurances
Corporation and Corporation Systems	Cognia Performance Standards and Key Concepts for Corporations	Corporation Assurances
Education Service Agency	Cognia Performance Standards and Key Concepts for Education Service Agencies	Education Service Agency Assurances
School System (Public Districts, Nonpublic Systems)	Cognia Performance Standards and Key Concepts for School Systems	System Assurances

Institution-level Standards and Assurances

Institution Type	Standards	Assurances
Digital Learning Institutions	Cognia Performance Standards and Key Concepts for Digital Learning Institutions	Digital Learning Assurances
Early Learning Institutions	Cognia Standards for Quality Early Learning Schools	Early Learning Assurances
Extended Learning Institutions	Cognia Performance Standards for Extended Learning	Extended Learning Assurances
Postsecondary Institutions	Cognia Performance Standards and Key Concepts for Postsecondary Institutions	Postsecondary Assurances
Schools	Cognia Performance Standards and Key Concepts for Schools	School Assurances
Special Purpose Institutions	Cognia Performance Standards and Key Concepts for Special Purpose Institutions	Assurances for <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Adjudicated Youth <input type="checkbox"/> Travel Study <input type="checkbox"/> Tutoring <input type="checkbox"/> Wilderness

Resources and Tools

Cognia provides a wide range of useful services and tools to assist systems and institutions in your improvement journey and pursuit and maintenance of accreditation. The resources and tools are reserved for systems and institutions that are members of the Cognia network and are accessible by logging into the Cognia website at www.cognia.org/resources. Simply select the appropriate page for your type of institution to find the related resources and tools.

If you have any questions regarding the accreditation process, contact accreditationservices@cognia.org

Resources

- [Cognia Network Resource Pages \(for Cognia Network Members\)](#)
- [Cognia Offices \(Contact Us tab\)](#)

The Improvement Journey: Engaging in Continuous Improvement

Role of the Facilitator

Often the leader of the institution assigns a senior staff member to facilitate the accreditation process. The facilitator:

- Serves as the key point of contact between Cognia and the institution
- Oversees the accreditation management for the system, including working with individual institutions within the system
- Supports stakeholders throughout the process, answers questions and provides guidance
- Works with the Lead Evaluator to prepare for and host the Engagement Review
- Manages the logistics and oversees the schedule of the Engagement Review

Key Responsibilities of Systems and Institutions

Accreditation is based on a five-year term. Though the Engagement Review is a single event, that event is designed to measure the degree to which your institution is engaged in an ongoing improvement journey. The following table outlines the responsibilities of your institution.

Timing	Institution Responsibilities
Every Year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain membership in the Cognia Network. • Engage in ongoing self-analysis and continuous improvement using the tools in eProve™ and/or other tools that support your efforts. • Adhere to the Cognia policies, Standards and requirements. • Analyze and document results of improvement efforts. • Update system and institution demographic and contact information. • Notify Cognia of any substantive changes (using the Cognia Substantive Notification Change Form) that may affect how your institution meets Cognia policies, Standards and requirements (link provided below).

Timing	Institution Responsibilities
Year of Accreditation Engagement Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with Cognia to schedule the Engagement Review dates. • Work with the Lead Evaluator to establish the Engagement Review schedule and make arrangements for the team. • Host the Engagement Review Team. • Act on the Engagement Review Team's findings. <p>Upload at least four weeks in advance of the Engagement Review, via the Shared Folder in eProve workspace, the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Cognia Assurances report(s) and evidences, as deemed required (complete in eProve diagnostic and send to the workspace). ○ Improvement plan/strategic plan based upon an analysis of student achievement and organizational effectiveness (upload in eProve diagnostic or directly in the workspace). <p>Cognia encourages you to complete, and upload the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance Standards Worksheet(s) • Evidences that inform the Key Concepts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Label your documents with the Standard number(s). For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 1.1-Purpose and belief statements ▪ 1.4-Policies ▪ 2.5-2.6-Scope and sequence/analysis of student performance • Analysis of perception data (e.g. eProve surveys) • Analysis of experiential data (e.g. eProve inventories) • Analysis of student engagement data (e.g. eProve elect) • Analysis of program data • Demographics <p>Refrain from providing external links (e.g. Google Drive). Engagement Review Teams are not required to review any evidence provided through external links.</p>

	<p>When applicable, the above evidence should focus on trend information, results, and decisions made from the results. All evidences should be uploaded directly to eProve workspace or via eProve diagnostics. As you continue to gather evidence and anticipate the Engagement Review Team, we recommend that you to refrain from uploading the numerous guides, written curriculums, meeting minutes, and other such routine, operational documentation unless (1) the documents are specifically named in the Standards (e.g. Governing Policies) or (2) the documents reflect robust decisions aligned to priorities (e.g. meeting minutes that document decisions and next level actions for advancement or improvement plans).</p> <p>If you elect to engage with the School Quality Factors or System Quality Factors (SQF), you may access and submit the SQF in the eProve diagnostic. While we strongly urge you to complete and use the SQF to support meaningful dialogue, to drive continuous improvement in your institution, the SQF is not required for the Accreditation Engagement Review. The SQF questions are reflective for the institution and the summary narratives bring richness to understanding the institution, by both stakeholders and the Engagement Review Team.</p> <p>Refer to the Institution and System Evidence Guide for further evidence regarding practices, processes and programs that are embedded in the organizational practices.</p>
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Timing	Institution Responsibilities
After the Accreditation Engagement Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review and discuss the findings from the Engagement Review with all stakeholders. • Ensure that plans are in place to sustain the Standards rated as <i>Impacting</i> and the strengths noted in the report to maximize their impact on the institution. • Develop action plans to address the Standards rated as <i>Initiating</i> and findings of the report offered by the team. Include methods for monitoring progress in the action plans and documenting improved performance in the Standards. • Use the report to guide and strengthen efforts to improve student performance and institution effectiveness. • Continue to meet the <i>Cognia Performance Standards</i> and engage in continuous improvement and document results.

Resource

- [Substantive Change Notification Form](#)

The Improvement Journey: Using Diagnostics and Tools

Cognia's intent is for your institution to use appropriate tools for the diagnosis of your continuous improvement process. Your analysis of the results of these diagnostics will be critical not only to your ongoing improvement process, but also for your Engagement Review.

eProve™

Cognia's eProve™ diagnostic suite offers a comprehensive yet simple and convenient way of identifying your system's or institution's strengths and challenges. Cognia created eProve to support your institution's improvement planning framework and engagement in continuous improvement. The eProve system provides resources and tools for systems and institutions in collecting and analyzing information, developing informed improvement plans, and managing continuous improvement processes. All systems and institutions in the Cognia network have access to eProve and should use the tools in eProve regularly.

Understanding and Leveraging eProve diagnostics

Your institution should engage in an ongoing internal review to determine the current status of your system, including needs, goals and areas of successful improvement. During your improvement journey, your system also should focus on collecting and analyzing data concerning (1) perspectives (stakeholder perceptions about your institution gathered through surveys, interviews or other techniques), (2) experiences (activities your stakeholders engage in on a regular basis) and (3) data analysis (ongoing collection, analysis and use of data, particularly concerning student performance and organizational effectiveness). Among the many diagnostics and surveys available in eProve, SQF diagnostics are designed to facilitate a collaborative process of internal synthesis, analysis and reflection and assessment of your system's current reality. The SQF diagnostics can be used as often as needed, as a reflective process.

The [Cognia Glossary of Terms](#) provides definition for key terms and diagnostics related to the accreditation process.

Conducting eProve surveys and inventories

The purpose and value of surveys is to gain an understanding of what key stakeholders believe about the quality and experience of schooling. Cognia provides an array of valid and reliable surveys that a system can deploy to learn and gather stakeholder perspective.

The purpose of inventories is to gain an understanding of what key stakeholders experience within the school community. Stakeholder experiences reveal how the processes, practices, and conditions of schooling impact learners, parents, and educators.

Observing Student Engagement using eProve eleot®

Student engagement of the learning environment is a critical school quality indicator. Through the Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool® (eleot®), educators get a research-based instrument to learn and understand how learners engage the learning environment in their school. The results of eleot can inform and guide instructional design and delivery to improve the learner experience and performance. Systems and institutions that are currently accredited have access to eleot for their own use. Contact Cognia for additional details and support.

School/System Quality Factors in eProve diagnostics

While Cognia strongly urges you to complete and use the SQF to support meaningful dialogue, to drive continuous improvement in your institution and to support the review, the SQF is not required for the Accreditation Engagement Review. The SQF questions are reflective for the institution, and the summary narratives bring richness to understanding the institution, by both stakeholders and the Engagement Review Team.

The SQF diagnostics are built on seven factors concerning change in a system's culture, conditions, processes, practices and actions. The SQF is also an effective way for systems and institutions to organize and focus reflections on their improvement journey. As an institution uses the SQF for the first time, staff

members are encouraged to become familiar with the SQF diagnostic through a review of the factors and questions within the SQF.

A review of the SQF will help you determine the information and data analysis you need to engage in a data-driven process of internal reflection and assessment of your current reality. This analysis and reflection will guide the identification of strengths and areas of need that provide the necessary data for successful improvement planning. In addition, the SQF enables you to add narrative insights or a summary related to each of the factors. (The narrative is where your institution can capture what you have learned through the analysis of data related to each factor.) You also will have the ability to add relevant attachments for each factor that would be useful for the system to use as a part of the ongoing improvement journey. If your institution chooses to complete the SQF, Cognia recommends that your leadership team complete the diagnostic only after collecting and analyzing data from your other data sources, including the results of surveys, inventories and assessments.

Purpose of eProve Tools

eProve Tool	Purpose
Surveys	To gain an understanding of what key stakeholders BELIEVE about the quality and experience of schooling.
Inventories	To gain an understanding of what key stakeholders EXPERIENCE within the school community.
Observation of Learning Environment (elect)	To observe student engagement in the learning environment.
School/System Quality Factors Diagnostic	To conduct a self-assessment of the practices and conditions that impacts the quality of the system or institution community.

Resources

- [System Quality Factors Diagnostic](#)
- [School Quality Factors Diagnostic](#)

Using Alternative Tools

Cognia strongly encourages and expects systems and institutions to use certified, valid, and reliable tools and resources. Cognia Certified Content provides an institution with the ability to benchmark their results with systems throughout the Cognia Improvement Network. Benchmarking is a valuable tool that provides systems and institutions with the ability to understand their results in a greater context and gives access to the performance and experiences of systems throughout the network.

Cognia is committed to the customization and personalization of the improvement journey for each institution. As a result, Cognia offers institutions with three process options for gaining relevant stakeholder feedback that is meaningful to the institution.

Options for Systems and Institutions

Systems and institutions have three options in the survey/inventory process, two of which include using their own surveys or inventories as part of the Engagement Review. Only the third option requires institutions to notify Cognia, via submission of the *Notification of Alternative Survey or Inventory* form. This form is available at www.cognia.org/resources

Institutions can:

1. Exclusively, use the Cognia surveys and inventories accessible in eProve and access reports of results through eProve.
2. Use the Cognia surveys and inventories accessible in eProve and supplement the surveys/inventories with your customized questions. You will have access to reports of results through eProve that include the Cognia questions and your customized questions. The Cognia questions may not be altered or modified. You are not required to notify Cognia that the survey or inventory has been supplemented with customized questions.
3. Exclusively, use customized surveys or inventories from sources other than Cognia. You may input the questions into eProve and administer the instrument through eProve, or administer them externally. If you post your instruments/questions in eProve, you will have access to reports of results through eProve. Under this option, you must submit the notification form below to Cognia by loading the form into the Shared Folder of your eProve workspace no later than four weeks prior to your Accreditation Engagement Review.

The goal of this process is not to dissuade you from using an alternative survey or inventory. Cognia wants to encourage all institutions to link their improvement efforts to data relevant to those efforts by using Cognia certified content or an alternative.

Resource

- [Notification of Alternative Survey or Inventory](#)

The Engagement Review

The information below provides a general understanding of the purpose and functions of the Engagement Review. Your institution has the support of your Cognia Office and the Lead Evaluator, should you have questions.

As the Engagement Review date approaches, you will work closely with the Lead Evaluator to:

- Establish the on-site review schedule
- Coordinate logistics for the review team
- Address any questions and/or concerns related to review preparation
- Ensure the system and institutions are ready for the on-site review

Off-site Preparation of the Engagement Review Team

The Accreditation Engagement Review Team assigned to your system or institution will meet at least once in advance of the team's arrival. The format is usually an online meeting, but in some cases, face-to-face meetings are arranged. The purpose of this meeting is to review processes and procedures and discuss evidence provided by your system or institution in the workspace portion of eProve. This is why it is imperative that your evidences are uploaded into eProve at least four weeks before the on-site Engagement Review.

Developing the Review Schedule

The system's leader or designee (whom Cognia refers to as the System or Institution Facilitator) works with the Engagement Review Lead Evaluator to develop the review schedule. System reviews last a minimum of three full days; institution reviews last a minimum of two full days. A sample schedule for your particular type of system or institution can be found by first visiting www.cognia.org/resources then choosing your type of system or institution. The table shows the key components of an Accreditation Engagement Review for an institution. The table shows the key components of an Accreditation Engagement Review for an institution.

Key Components of the Engagement Review Schedule

	System Engagement Review	Institution Engagement Review
Arrival Day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Review team arrival <input type="checkbox"/> Evening team work session (team only) <input type="checkbox"/> May include system overview of improvement journey 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Review team arrival <input type="checkbox"/> Evening team work session (team only)
Day 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> System overview (if not completed during the previous evening) <input type="checkbox"/> Focus group interviews <input type="checkbox"/> Review of analyzed results and evidences <input type="checkbox"/> Evening team work session 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Institution overview of improvement journey <input type="checkbox"/> Focus group interviews <input type="checkbox"/> Review of analyzed results and evidences <input type="checkbox"/> elect observations if applicable (or classroom observations) <input type="checkbox"/> Evening team work session
Day 2	<p>Morning – school review(s)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Focus group Interviews <input type="checkbox"/> elect observations if applicable (or classroom observations) <p>Afternoon – school review(s)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Focus group interviews <input type="checkbox"/> elect observations if applicable (or classroom observations) <p><input type="checkbox"/> Evening team work session</p> <p><i>Note: For large systems, an alternative schedule for Day 2 is available if school reviews have occurred prior to the System Engagement Review.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Team work session <input type="checkbox"/> Follow-up interviews and elect observations, if necessary <input type="checkbox"/> Concluding meeting with head of institution <input type="checkbox"/> Departure of review team
Day 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Team work session <input type="checkbox"/> Follow-up interviews and elect observations, if necessary <input type="checkbox"/> Concluding meeting with head of system <input type="checkbox"/> Departure of review team 	

Evidence

Cognia has prepared a guide titled Institution and System Evidence Guide to assist systems and institutions in organizing quality evidence regarding the practices, processes and programs that are embedded in the organization. Download and study the Standards and Key Concepts document specific to your institution (links listed on pages 3-4). The Key Concepts should be used as a guide for collecting evidence.

Selecting Quality Evidence

As you select the evidence, you should consider providing high-quality, results-based evidence that focuses on the impact of improvement efforts on performance, professional practice and organizational culture. You will want to examine the continuum below in relation to your selection of evidence



For example, if you were to provide evidence about professional learning, you will want to consider the evidence that best demonstrates where you are in this continuum as shown in the following graphic.

Initiate	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Demonstrates engagement and quality of implementation	To demonstrate Initiate , you may provide evidence of how you are monitoring and adjusting your implementation to ensure quality and fidelity of implementation.
Improve	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Demonstrates the use of result to support improvement, particularly results over time	To demonstrate practices at the Improve level, you might provide evaluations of your professional learning and how you have analyzed and used that data to determine the effectiveness of your professional learning.
Impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Demonstrates changes to professional practice and organizational culture	To demonstrate Impact , you would provide evidence of how professional practice and student learning have changed as a result of your professional learning.

You may wish to include other information about your system's accomplishments, challenges, strengths and areas you have identified for improvement. Often this information is summarized in a slide deck presented to the team during the opening session with your leadership team. Having copies of these documents before any of these presentations is very helpful to the Engagement Review Team. Any documentation that supports the effectiveness and efficiency of the operation of your system (policies, practices, budgets and similar documents) is helpful as well.

Examples of faculty or parent meeting agendas, raw assessment data and detailed documentation about operations are of little value to the Engagement Review Team unless they need to investigate a specific issue or concern. If needed, the Lead Evaluator will ask your facilitator to provide the requested information.

Resource

- [Institution and System Evidence Guide](#)

The Institution Overview

At the beginning of the Engagement Review, the institution's leader should welcome the Engagement Review Team and provide an overview of the institution. The overview presentation should begin with a brief overview of the institution community (no more than five minutes) and address the following questions:

- What are the current strategic priorities and/or key goals for the institution?
- What data was used to identify the priorities and goals?
- How are you addressing those priorities and goals?
- What results do you have that measure your progress in meeting the priorities and goals?

The leader's overview should last no more than 30 minutes for institutions and 45 minutes for systems. It is helpful to provide team members with a copy of the leader's comments (slide deck or notes) for reference throughout the Engagement Review.

Activities Ongoing throughout the Engagement Review

The information below may help you in providing the Accreditation Engagement Review Team the resources and materials they need to conduct a successful review.

- **Additional Evidence or Information** – Your Lead Evaluator may contact your facilitator to ask for additional specific documents before the on-site portion of the review. Once the on-site portion of the review begins, the Lead Evaluator may ask for additional documentation based on findings from interviews and observations. (This does not mean you did not provide adequate information beforehand. In some cases, it simply means additional documentation is needed to verify, through multiple sources, that certain activities or practices are in place.)
- **Focus Group Interviews** – The purpose of the Focus Group Interviews is to provide an opportunity for the Engagement Review Team to gather information from a variety of stakeholders about their collective perceptions of your system. Your Lead Evaluator will work with you to determine if group interviews are applicable to your Engagement Review and when and where individual and group interviews will take place. Interviewees may include leadership and improvement team, teachers, parents and community members, support staff, and students.

Setting up Interviews

The facilitator, with support from the leadership team, invites and schedules stakeholders to be interviewed as part of a group or individually by members of the Engagement Review Team. However, be aware that team members also may choose to conduct brief impromptu individual or small group interviews with students, staff, parents and even visitors to your system. Group interviews will take approximately 45 minutes. Individual interviews will take approximately 15 minutes, with the exception of interviews with individual board members and the Head of System/Institution (for example, superintendent or chief executive officer).

Structure of the Interviews and Questions Asked for Scheduled Interviews. Interviews begin with a brief overview of the purpose of the interviews and the role of the Engagement Review Team. The interview will focus on questions and discussions about the work of the institution.

Selecting External Interviewees. The following guidelines are designed to help with inviting stakeholders to be interviewed, if applicable. Before proceeding with invitations, you should confirm the interview groups with your Lead Evaluator.

- Stakeholders should collectively reflect the system's broader community (socioeconomic levels, race and ethnicity and geographic areas served by the system)
- Provide a range of viewpoints and perspectives (strong and active supporters, critics, those who are less involved, etc.)
- Include parents and community members who are not employed by your system or institution
- Represent all levels and departments in the system
- Represent all major categories of positions in the system (leadership, administrative, teaching, guidance and support functions)
- Include individuals who can discuss the system's or institution's strengths and challenges

The overarching considerations when identifying stakeholders to be interviewed are:

- Will the stakeholders collectively provide an accurate assessment of the system for the Engagement Review Team? Will the stakeholders collectively yield information that will prove valuable to the institution in its continuous improvement efforts?
- While it may be tempting to identify only those stakeholders who are active and strong supporters of the system, that approach will not maximize the insights and richness of the findings that can ultimately benefit the system's improvement efforts. Therefore, Cognia recommends a random selection of participants.

Inviting External Interviewees. The Facilitator should begin inviting stakeholders to be interviewed as soon as the Engagement Review Schedule has been finalized (approximately six weeks prior to the review). The following sample language can be adapted and used as appropriate when inviting stakeholders to participate in the interviews.

Sample Invitation to Potential External Interviewees

Dear (Insert Name),

We would like to invite you to participate in the upcoming Cognia Accreditation Engagement Review for <Insert name of your institution>.

Our Engagement Review will take place <Insert dates>. The review is led by a team of professional evaluators. During the review, the Engagement Review Team conducts interviews with a range of stakeholders, reviews documents and student performance data, and makes professional observations about the quality of <Insert name of your institution>. The team is responsible for making an accreditation recommendation for review by Cognia Commissions. We will use the findings from the team to further our continuous improvement efforts.

On <Insert date>, the Engagement Review Team will be interviewing several stakeholder groups and individuals. Please join us at <Insert time> and location). As an option, you may be able to participate in an individual interview via telephone if you are unable to join us on-site. Please let me know if you would like this option. The interview will last approximately 45 minutes.

We believe that you have experience, knowledge and insights that would enhance the team's understanding of our system. Please reply to this invitation by <Insert date>. I look forward to your participation in this exciting and valuable process.

Sincerely,

Preparing External Interviewees. After stakeholders accept the invitation to participate in a Focus Group Interview, you should send a brief note to confirm the interview date, time and location. The confirmation note should emphasize the importance of arriving on time or being available for the arranged telephone call. The note should repeat some of the information from the invitation letter that highlights the purpose and activities of the team. Depending on the stakeholder being interviewed, you may wish to include supporting materials, such as a copy of the Standards Worksheet(s) or SQF diagnostic.

Classroom Observations

During the Engagement Review, team members will observe a variety of classrooms. In most cases, the team will use eLeot if applicable to the type of institution. The purpose of eLeot is to help the team identify and document observable evidence of classroom environments that are conducive to student learning. If you have already used eLeot as a data collection tool for your self-analysis, include the results and analyses of your observations in the Shared Folder in eProve workspace. The team will use your results, as well as their own, to corroborate information obtained from interviews, artifacts and student performance data. Lasting a minimum of 20 minutes, the observations provide an opportunity to see how improvement initiatives are implemented in classrooms and their impact on students. The observations allow the team to check for alignment between the administration and classroom.

The facilitator should notify teachers that the team may observe their classrooms during the review. The leader and/or system facilitator should explain the purpose of the observations, emphasizing that the team is observing processes and activities in the system, not evaluating teachers. Team members are instructed to be as unobtrusive as possible and to not disrupt the learning process. Teachers should conduct class as usual.

General Observations Around the Institution

In addition to the classroom observations using eleot, team members also will conduct informal observations throughout your institution. This may include system-level areas, resource rooms, media centers and technology labs, as well as informal observations of interactions in such non-instructional environments as hallways, playgrounds or the cafeteria. These general observations provide data regarding the overall culture and climate of the organization.

Professional Deliberations

The review team engages in professional deliberations regarding the data collected through interviews, observations and evidence throughout the review. Cognia asks that these sessions not be interrupted or have school personnel or volunteers present. The team uses diagnostic tools to engage in professional deliberations regarding your institution's adherence and commitment to Cognia Standards. These deliberations support the ongoing improvement journey of the system through the presentation of the team's findings and the Engagement Review Report.

Preparing for the Concluding Meeting

When the team has finished its deliberations and determined its findings, the Lead Evaluator meets with your Head of System/Institution and any staff members he/she designates to participate in the meeting. The facilitator schedules the meeting time and location and ensures all participants are informed of the meeting. The meeting provides an opportunity for the Lead Evaluator to discuss the team's findings with your institution's leadership, answer questions and address any concerns.

Coordinating Team Logistics

Your leader and facilitator are responsible for coordinating the logistics with the Lead Evaluator. The following checklists can help with this task:

At least six weeks prior to the Engagement Review:

- Coordinate morning and evening transportation for the team members to and from the institution and other locations as needed for each day of the review.
- Secure hotel room reservations for each team member.
- Make all meal arrangements for the team for each day of their stay (and coordinate any necessary deals for meal delivery).
- Reserve meeting space at the hotel each night of the review. The meeting room should be organized as a hollow square, with enough chairs to accommodate all members of the team. Reliable internet access, a screen, LCD projector, power cords (two-three), flip chart paper (at least one full pad), markers (at least one for every member of the team), masking tape and sticky notes (standard square size, at least one pad for each member of the team) should be provided. Water and light refreshments are appreciated.
- Reserve a team meeting room at the institution where the team can work, discuss their findings and review artifacts. The room should include reliable internet access and power cords for multiple computers.
- Secure rooms for the interviews, if applicable.
- Make name badges for the team members, including any security clearances needed and ensure that system personnel wear their name badges.
- Please note that team members are not allowed to accept gifts from the system (pens, pads and other items of nominal value, with or without the system's logo, that will assist the team with their work are acceptable). Please refer to Cognia Policy 2.07(b).

At least four weeks prior to the Engagement Review:

- Complete the Assurances in eProve diagnostic and send to the eProve workspace.
- Complete and upload reports and evidences via eProve diagnostic and/or workspace, ensuring all documents are in the workspace at least four weeks in advance of the team's arrival.
- Complete the Fact Sheet and submit to the Cognia Office.

At least one week prior to the Engagement Review:

- Confirm all details related to the schedule and check in with the Lead Evaluator.
- Ensure that all stakeholders involved in the review have a copy of the Engagement Review Team schedule.
- Email and/or send a reminder to all interviewees.
- Confirm hotel reservations for the team, if applicable.
- Confirm air and ground transportation arrangements for each team member, including special requirements such as international travel visas, vaccinations, and immigration or entry requirements, if applicable.
- Confirm meals and dinner reservations for the team.

Expenses: The Cognia Engagement Review fee is based on the length of the review and the size of your institution (enrollment and/or number of schools). In addition to the Engagement Review fee, your institution is also responsible for all expenses related to the review, including hotel accommodations, airfare and mileage, if applicable, and other incidental costs associated with the review (e.g., meals). Reimbursement for mileage is based on the current standard mileage rate published by the Internal Revenue Service.

Lodging: Your institution is responsible for securing and sponsoring (i.e., payment) hotel accommodations in consultation with the Lead Evaluator. The team will arrive on the afternoon prior to the first on-site day of the review. The Lead Evaluator will work with you to finalize the dates for accommodations.

Hosting the Engagement Review Team

The review schedule serves as the primary guide for the review. The institution leader and facilitator manage the schedule and ensure all activities of the review occur as planned. The leader and/or facilitator should maintain the schedule and extra copies at all times during the review. He/she should be available for questions and to help the team access needed information throughout the review. It is a good idea for the leader and system facilitator to provide the Lead Evaluator and members with their contact information (including cell phone number) and the names and contact information of other key leadership staff should questions or emergencies arise. Providing the contact information of a clinic or hospital the school works with is also helpful in the event any team member requires medical attention.

Attending to the Details

Once the Engagement Review Team has arrived, the facilitator ensures all details unfold as planned.

Arrival and Orientation

- Confirm lodging and dinner reservations for the team, if applicable.
- Provide team members with hard copies of any information needed for the review, name badges, a final schedule, maps, floor plans and any other additional materials team members may need.
- Check to see that the meeting room for the team's evening orientation is properly set up per the Lead Evaluator's requirements, which may include internet access, flip charts, sticky notes, markers, masking tape, LCD projector, power cords, screen, any system artifacts that the system wants in the team's work room, water and refreshments.



Below is a sample of activities for a three-day, system review.

Day 1

- Ensure all team members have transportation to the institution.
- Make sure the team's meeting room at the institution is ready and meets the team's needs.
- Ensure easy access to artifacts the team will need.
- Manage the schedule and ensure that all activities stay on schedule.
- Provide lunch for the team.
- Make coffee, water and light refreshments available throughout the day for the team.
- Provide transportation to and from the hotel, if needed.
- Ensure dinner reservations are confirmed and transportation is provided, if needed.
- Ensure that the team's meeting room at the hotel (if applicable) is ready.

Day 2

- Ensure all team members have transportation to the schools selected for on-site reviews (announced).
- Ensure transportation is available once the school sites have been announced.
- Manage the schedule and ensure that all activities stay on schedule.
- Make arrangements for team members for lunch at school sites.
- Make coffee, water and light refreshments available throughout the day for the team.
- Prepare for the final meeting between the Lead Evaluator, leader and any designated staff.
- Ensure team members' transportation needs are addressed.

Day 3

- Ensure all team members have transportation to the system as well as transportation to the airport following the review (for out of state members).
- Manage the schedule and ensure that all activities stay on schedule.
- Make arrangements for team members for lunch.
- Make coffee, water and light refreshments available throughout the day for the team.
- Prepare for the concluding meeting between the Lead Evaluator, leader and any designated staff.
- Ensure team members' transportation needs are addressed.

Resource

- [Engagement Review Sample Schedule](#) (select the Resources and Tools page that align with your institution type)

Keys to a Successful Review

Systems and institutions that have hosted Engagement Reviews offer the following advice to their colleagues:

- **Be open and honest with the team.** The more authentic and accurate your responses are to the team, the better the team is able to assess the strengths and needs of the institution.
- **Stay on schedule.** Use the Engagement Review schedule to guide the progress of the review.
- **Communicate with all stakeholders about the review.** The more people who know about the review and the activities of the team, the better. Be as open and transparent about the process as possible.
- **Use and refer to the Standards and Key Concepts.** Identify with the Standards and the i3 Rubric to maximize the team's time and their ability to provide meaningful feedback to the institution. Refer to the SQF, if your institution elected to complete the diagnostic.
- **Share and encourage the team to review specific artifacts.** The artifacts that you feel are critical to the team's understanding of your institution should be shared.
- **Remember that you and your system will get out of the process what you put into it.** Your institution has the ability, through its own commitment to the process, to make the most of the Engagement Review. The more committed the institution is to gaining valuable support and feedback from peers, the more meaningful the Engagement Review will be as well.

Continuing the Journey

While the majority of this handbook is devoted to the Accreditation Engagement Review, the majority of the system's or institution's time is spent following the review, acting on the team's findings and continuing the improvement journey. This section reviews the key activities that occur on an ongoing basis as you maintain your processes of continuous improvement.

The Written Report of the Engagement Review Team

After the conclusion of the Engagement Review, the Lead Evaluator works to finalize the written report of the team's findings. The report is submitted to Cognia for review and acceptance. Within about 30 business days of the conclusion of the review, your institution will receive notification that the final report is available in the Shared Folder in eProve workspace.

Upon receipt of the written report, you should communicate the Engagement Review Team's findings to internal and external stakeholders. Sharing the results of the review with a wide range of stakeholders helps educate the broader community about the system's or institution's accreditation and engagement in continuous improvement. It also garners stakeholder buy-in with regard to next steps your institution will take to respond to the findings of the report.

Notice of Accreditation, Celebrating with the Community and the IEQ™

Consistent with the focus of engagement on continuous improvement with an emphasis on student success, Cognia has introduced an innovative framework for classifying institution performance called the Index of Education Quality® (IEQ®). Your institution will receive an IEQ score along with an accreditation status. You will receive more information about the IEQ after your report has received final approval.

The Cognia Accreditation Office submits the Engagement Review Team's report to the Cognia Global Commission. The Cognia Global Commission meets four times per year, and acts on all accreditation recommendations. Upon the conclusion of the meeting, results of the Global Commission's action will be shared with you. For details regarding the approval process and future or expected accreditation status, please visit the *Policies and Procedures for Accreditation and Certification*.

Upon receiving the official accreditation letter, you should communicate the final results to internal and external stakeholders. Your institution will receive and should proudly display your certificate of accreditation. Press releases, flags, Q&A guides, and more are available from Cognia to help systems and institutions share and celebrate your accreditation with your community.

Practices many systems and institutions find useful include:

- Sharing information about their Engagement Review with parents at every parent meeting and through brochures or handouts
- Displaying the Cognia accreditation seal on the institution websites, stationery and student transcripts
- Posting information about accreditation in a regular column of newsletters
- Including a section on accreditation and its importance in annual reports to the community.

Acting on the Engagement Review Team’s Findings

The Engagement Review Team report will serve as a resource to you as your institution furthers its continuous improvement efforts. Upon receiving the Engagement Review Report, the institution is encouraged to implement the following steps:

- Review and share the findings with stakeholders.
- Develop plans to address the standards rated as Needs Improvement 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.

Be sure to celebrate and strengthen the successes and accomplishments noted in the Engagement Review Report. Make it your goal to build on these accomplishments, enhancing their impact across your institution.

The Standards rated as *Insufficient* require action by the institution to enhance effectiveness and improve student learning. Your institution will be held accountable for making progress on each of the Standards with this rating.

To begin acting on the team’s findings, review the full team report with institution stakeholders. Spend time discussing the team’s descriptions of trends and their impact on the institution. These descriptions provide greater clarity, guidance and direction.

After you and your team have thoroughly reviewed the Engagement Review Team’s findings, you should establish a plan of action by engaging representative stakeholders in the process. The plan typically outlines next steps related to the team’s findings and clear strategies for improving quality, effectiveness and learning. In addition, your plan should include implementation strategies and methods for monitoring, documenting and analyzing results.

Implement the strategies you have selected for responding to the team’s finding, track the progress your institution is making and be prepared to answer the questions: “What steps have been taken? What progress has been made? How do you know you’ve made an impact?”

Conclusion

Congratulations on your commitment to accreditation. Your engagement in the continuous improvement process through accreditation will enhance all elements of your institution. As your understanding of a systemic approach to continuous improvement increases, your institution will become more effective/efficient as an education organization. Your entire system, community, and, most importantly, students benefit as the organization works to improve its systems and processes to increase system wide effectiveness and enhance student learning.

Cognia looks forward to supporting you throughout the accreditation process.