

Board of Public Education
Public Comment
March 2025

1. Christine Lewanski
Hamilton School District

Hamilton School District has received correspondence from Cognia requesting that I share support for aligning OPI and Cognia Accreditation Standards for Cognia members.

I can share that Hamilton School District is fortunate to carry Cognia accreditation and would appreciate having the two standards aligned to streamline the administrative process of submitting accreditation standards through OPI's portal and applying for Cognia accreditation, respectively.

2. Megan Conrow
Beaverhead County High School

I am writing to express my strong support for aligning the OPI Accreditation and Cognia Accreditation for Cognia members schools. This alignment would eliminate duplicate requirements while maintaining rigorous standards for schools toward school improvement and self-reflection.

Beaverhead County High School underwent the Cognia accreditation process last year, and we found it to be a very valuable framework for continuous improvement. Aligning these processes would allow schools to focus resources on student success rather than redundant reporting.

I appreciate your consideration and encourage you to support this effort when it is brought before the Board of Public education. Thank you for your commitment to Montana's schools and students.

3. Stephen Schreiber
Glendive Public Schools

I am writing to express my support for aligning the OPI Accreditation and Cognia Accreditation processes for Cognia member schools. Our district has been engaged in both accreditation processes, and reducing duplication would allow us to focus more on meaningful school improvement rather than redundant reporting. Thank you for your time and consideration.

4. Dave Thennis
Stevensville Public Schools

Effective procedures for school accreditation are critical to continuous improvement cycles in public schools. In the fall of 2022, the Stevensville School District initiated the Cognia Accreditation process, leading to important improvement efforts across our schools. The process revitalized collaboration and sparked curriculum, instruction, and assessment efforts. Additionally, our action plans improved relationships with all stakeholders.

Specifically, Stevensville schools have implemented the Corwin PLC+ model to improve student learning, staff collaboration, and effective instruction. The Cognia Accreditation review exposed the need to evaluate

curriculum and instruction as well as the importance of collaboration in addressing specific needs. After completing the Montana OPI Accreditation process in 2023-24 and continuing in 24-25 there is important alignment between these two accreditation models. Both models emphasize the importance of a comprehensive needs assessment, stakeholder engagement, and the determination of prioritized educational outcomes.

Both models are comprehensive, based on research, and focused on student learning. These systems compel districts to deeply evaluate and develop structures for evaluating curriculum and instruction. Most importantly, do current curriculum and instruction structures produce the desired results? Finally, the systems require the collection and evaluation of stakeholder perception data during the process.

I'm writing to encourage continued efforts to align the Montana OPI and Cognia Accreditation processes for Cognia member schools. I believe these efforts will provide districts with systematic evaluative procedures for continued improvement.

**5. Larry Crowder
Montana Rural Education Association**

The Montana Rural Education Association would like to voice its support for Cognia to be recognized as an alternative accreditation option for Montana public schools.

Cognia has a longstanding reputation of quality and rigorous accreditation requirements for public schools that was separate and independent of the Montana Office of Public Instruction and the Montana Board of Public Education. Cognia has now taken additional steps to develop a comprehensive crosswalk that coincides with every section of the framework of the accreditation process of the Montana Office of Public Instruction and the Board of Public Education for Montana public schools.

Allowing Cognia as an accreditation option for public schools in Montana makes sense and we ask the Board of Public Education to approve this option. Thank you very much for your time and consideration.

**6. William Ruff, EdD
Healing through Education and Art for Resiliency Teaching (HEART) Project**

I have reviewed the Memo of Understanding outlining a partnership between Cognia and the Office of Public Instruction and, as a private citizen, urge your support for the partnership. Cognia's accreditation process has been adopted by several states in the Northern Plains region as well as throughout the United States because it is a high-quality program focused on student learning, sound school governance and school improvement. Furthermore, the Cognia's accreditation process provides both a sound assessment system for schools to self-evaluate as well as providing the guidance to school leaders, faculty, staff and school boards on how to use evidence-based processes in performing self-evaluations. School visits by Cognia accreditation teams validate the school's self-evaluation and assist schools in understanding appropriate evidence for demonstrating the quality of various core school programs as well as improving the shared understanding of the standards for quality schools and how to develop paths of improvement toward meeting or exceeding the accreditation standards.



Subject: Letter of Support for the Memorandum of Understanding Between Cognia and the State of Montana

I am writing on behalf of the Montana School Boards Association (MTSBA) to express our strong support for the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between Cognia, the Montana Board of Public Education, and the Montana Office of Public Instruction. This collaborative effort represents a significant step forward in promoting and ensuring quality education throughout Montana's K-12 educational system.

As you are aware, the mission of Cognia is to foster improved educational performance and student outcomes through its evidence-based accreditation processes. Their commitment to continuous improvement and high standards aligns perfectly with our values at MTSBA. By ensuring that schools undergo rigorous accreditation reviews, we can help foster an environment of excellence and accountability that directly benefits our students and their learning experiences.

Of particular significance to us is Section 1.5 of the MOU, which states, "The State will recognize accredited Cognia schools as accredited by the state of Montana. All Accreditation Reports will be provided to the State's Accreditation Unit at the OPI for review." This recognition of Cognia-accredited schools by the state reinforces our unified approach to ensure that all schools in Montana are held to high standards of quality and accountability. By integrating Cognia's accreditation system with our state's recognition, we can streamline processes and ensure that our schools are not only striving for accreditation but are also receiving the necessary support and resources to succeed.

In conclusion, the Montana School Boards Association fully supports the MOU between Cognia, the Montana Board of Public Education, and the Montana Office of Public Instruction. We believe this partnership will significantly enhance our state's accreditation practices and ultimately lead to improved educational outcomes for all Montana students.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Lance Melton", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Lance Melton
Executive Director
Montana School Boards Association