


COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

October 30, 2019

To: Karen Molchanow, Executive Director
State Board of Education

FROM: Matt Stem, Deputy Secretary 
Elementary and Secondary Education

SUBJECT: Recommendation that AdvancED¹ be approved as an accrediting body for pre-K (nursery), kindergarten, elementary, secondary and special education private academic schools and tutoring centers

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Cognia has requested renewal of its approval from the State Board of Education to act as an accrediting body for the above-noted types of private academic schools in lieu of licensure by the State Board of Private Academic Schools.

Cognia's renewal application was reviewed by a team of four professional staff in PDE's School Services Office. The team's review consisted of an analysis of Cognia's basic accreditation protocols and processes, including its self-study process, accreditation standards, complaint process, monitoring processes, and policy on background checks. Following its initial review, PDE responded to Cognia with a list of questions and requests for clarification. Based on its review of the application and the additional information received, our team found that Cognia has strong accreditation protocols and procedures for reviewing initial applications, granting candidacy status, initial accreditation and renewal of accreditation. Our team gave ratings of "Good Quality" for attributes dealing with policies relative to the accrediting process, fee schedule, elements to be evaluated and methods of evaluation and unannounced evaluation visits.

Based on its review, PDE recommends that Cognia be approved as an accrediting body for pre-K (nursery), kindergarten, elementary, secondary and special education private academic schools and tutoring centers.

Organization

Cognia is a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization committed to leading and empowering the education community to ensure all learners are afforded the educational opportunities they need and deserve to realize their full potential. They pursue this mission through thoughtful leadership and advocacy, research and development, and by providing research-based standards, tools, resources and direct support and services to all types of educational institutions. Cognia is a non-

¹ AdvancED merged with another education nonprofit, Measured Progress, in November of 2018, and recently the combined organization changed its corporate name to Cognia. Thus, Cognia, formerly known as AdvancED, will be referenced herein with.

profit accrediting organization with headquarters in Alpharetta, Georgia, and is made up of three component accrediting bodies (NCA CASI, NWAC and SACS CASI).²

Cognia reportedly services 34,000 schools and school systems across the United States and internationally. It accredits schools in all 50 states.

Self-Study Process

Schools engage in a self-study process in preparation of hosting a readiness/candidacy engagement review. As part of the self-study process, schools must complete and submit the Readiness Diagnostic which assesses the school's readiness for accreditation. The Readiness Diagnostic Tool is built around three domains of the Index of Educational Quality (IEQ) which consists of leadership capacity, learning capacity and resource capacity.

Our review found that Cognia's accreditation process places a strong emphasis on continuous improvement using tools in eProve a diagnostic suite that offers a comprehensive yet simple and convenient way of identifying an institution's strengths and challenges. Schools seeking initial accreditation must ensure that plans are in place to meet Cognia's Performance Standards, develop actions plans to address areas rated as Needs Improvement and be committed to strengthening efforts to improve student performance. Schools can use eProve surveys to gain an understanding of what key stakeholders believe about the quality and experience of schooling. Further, eProve provides an array of valid and reliable surveys that can be used to learn and gather stakeholders' perspective which reveals how the processes, practices and conditions of schooling impact student, parents and educators.

Readiness Review and Candidacy Status

After completion of the self-study Readiness Diagnostic, Cognia conducts a readiness review with schools seeking accreditation. The purpose of the Readiness Review is to make a determination regarding the school's readiness for accreditation through a validation of the school's Readiness Diagnostic and examination of its practices in relation to the Cognia Performance Standards. A Cognia staff member reviews the Readiness Report for quality and completeness and then approves the school for Candidacy or continued Applicant status. If the school is granted Candidacy status, then Cognia staff sends the Readiness Report along with the Candidacy Letter and may engage in its first Engagement Review.

Engagement Review Site Visit

The Engagement Review team consists of a Cognia certified Lead Evaluator and a rigorously trained review team. During the Engagement Review site visit, the team will perform classroom observations using the Cognia Effective Learning Environment Tool (ELEOT). In addition to classroom observations, the review team will also review student performance and stakeholder feedback, conduct internal and external interviews which may include the leadership and improvement team, teachers, parents and community members, support staff and students,

² North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, Council on Accreditation and School Improvement (NCA CASI); Northwestern Accrediting Commission (NWAC); and Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Council on Accreditation and School Improvement (SACS CASI).

determine to what extent the school meets the Standards for Quality compiled by the Cognia Index of Education Quality (IEQ) as well as examine other quality evidence related to practices, processes and programs.

Standards Review

Cognia performance standards are organized under three Domains to include leadership capacity, learning capacity and resource capacity. The Domains are statements that define the capacity of a school to provide quality education and meet the rigorous demands of continuous improvement.

The Cognia Performance Standards describe conditions that are necessary for schools to support organizational effectiveness and improve student performance.

In addition to the Domains and Standards, two performance rubrics are aligned to the Standards to help provide measurable progress and an overall assessment of practices. The rubrics consist of four performance levels that contain evaluative criteria related to concepts contained within the Standards statement.

Monitoring

Accreditation status is based on the performance of a school in areas related to policies, Standards, and Assurances. There is nothing that would prevent a school's accreditation status from being changed upon a different timeline established due to the findings of a special investigation and/or possible subsequent monitoring reviews.

A school classified as being "under review" is given an opportunity to come into full compliance. The school will submit an annual progress report(s) to Cognia on Improvement Priorities identified in the most recent review report, host an onsite monitoring review within one year of the previous review, and host subsequent monitoring reviews as prescribed by Cognia. A school will have a status identified as Accredited Under Review, which will continue until the school successfully documents adequate progress in Improvement Priorities and/or by providing documented evidence of substantially meeting policies, Standards and Assurances for accreditation.

"Accredited under conditions" is a status conferred to a school in poor standing. Schools classified as "accredited under conditions" may be recommended to be dropped from accreditation.

Investigation of Complaints

Cognia's policy states that complaints must be submitted in writing and must include the complainant's name, address, phone number and other pertinent contact information. Complaints must also include a description of the circumstances or events and any relevant documentation that supports the complaint; a statement of relationship with the individual involved, if the complainant is not the aggrieved individual; and the name, address and other

contact information for the individual at the school/school system that has been contacted by the complainant to resolve the problem or situation. The complainant must give permission for Cognia representatives to access records concerning the complainant if such records are not available to the public. A statement of first-hand knowledge of the substance of the complaint must also be included unless the complaint is supported by reliable documentation which is referenced in the complaint.

Isolated and individual grievances are not investigated by the accrediting body and are handled at the school level. Schools have thirty days to respond to complaints in writing to Cognia and may investigate if warranted. Complaints regarding child abuse, sexual harassment or discrimination will be forwarded immediately to the appropriate authorities. Unsigned complaints will be forwarded to the head of school. Findings by the appropriate agency may result in action by Cognia's Global Commission.

Background Clearances

Cognia's process is to verify that applicant institutions are in compliance with all governmental requirements as part of the Readiness Review process. The ability to operate and adhere to all state and governmental policies related to criminal background checks and child abuse clearances is required for an institution to be considered for accreditation.