Morrill Public Schools is one of 21 systems across Nebraska, representing only 9% of the 244 districts, which have obtained Cognia Systems Accreditation. You will also notice that Morrill Public Schools is the first district in Nebraska to obtain Cognia Systems Accreditation PK – 12th grades. This accomplishment has been 10 years in the making, thanks to the groundwork laid by Principals Swearingen and Peacock. A special thanks needs to be given to Principal Sunny Edwards of our Early Childhood building, Principal Jessica Stec of our Secondary building, and interim Principal Eldon Hubbard of our Elementary Building. These principals and their staff did a ton of work this year to prepare for, gather documentation and meet with and facilitate the work of the review team when they were here in early February for a 3 ½ day review process.



This table shows the number of Public School buildings and districts in Nebraska and how many of them have accreditation through Cognia. Morrill’s Secondary, Elementary and Early Childhood buildings are now among the 23% of Nebraska’s school buildings, which are accredited through Cognia.

Cognia (formerly known as AdvancEd) as the oldest and largest global non-profit improvement organization, is known for their focus on rigor and quality. Through their accreditation and certification, assessment, professional services, and digital platform of tools and resources they offer a comprehensive framework of continuous improvement. A former High School Principal, Kent Swearingen made application to AdvancEd for Accreditation, which was obtained in 2013 for 9th – 12th grades. Under Principal, Tom Peacock, the 5-year Accreditation Review was held in 2018 and the high school retained its accreditation status. At that point, the board and district administration contemplated seeking Cognia Accreditation as a system for all of the grade levels rather than only for the High School. We made application and began the labor-intensive, on-boarding process. We were scheduled for an on-site Accreditation review in the spring of 2020. However due to COVID, all Cognia reivews were cancelled for that spring and the next fall. We could have done a review in the spring of 2021 but it would have been a virtual visit. Since this would be our initial accreditation visit for all grade levels early childhood through eighth grades we determined we would wait for an on-site review. The Cognia Accreditation review team came to Morrill in February 2022.

**Cognia Systems Standards Diagnostic Results:**

Morrill Schools had sufficient evidence on 77% of 31 indicators that the Cognia Systems Review team observed and evaluated and over which they reviewed documentation. The seven (7) indicators that were marked as insufficient are listed below. Over the next five (5) years, it is essential to focus on these areas in order to demonstrate significant progress in the next Cognia systems review in 2027.

1. The system commits to a purpose statement that defines beliefs about teaching and learning, including the expectations for learners.
2. The system provides experiences that cultivate and improve leadership effectiveness.
3. Leaders implement a quality assurance process for their institutions to ensure system effectiveness and consistency.
4. Educators implement a curriculum that is based on high expectations and prepares learners for their next levels.
5. The system implements a process to ensue the curriculum is clearly aligned to standards and best practices.
6. The system implements a process to continuously assess its programs and organizational conditions to improve student learning.
7. The system provides induction, mentoring, and coaching progams to ensure all staff members have the knowledge and skills to improve student performance and organizational effectiveness.

15 of the indicators (48%) were rated in the Initiating Level. Standards identified within this level should become the focus of the continuous school improvement journey improving the collection, analysis, and use of data to measure the results of engagement and implementation.

8 of the indicators (26%) were rated in the Improving Level. These elements were within the levels of Impact of Results and Sustainability.

One (1) indicator rated at the Impacting Level showed that the desired practices are deeply entrenched.

**Insights from the Cognia Systems Review Process:**

**Powerful Practices identified by Cognia in Morrill’s Systems Review:**

1. Leaders and the board have successfully implemented long-range plans to strategically utilize resources to expand opportunities for learners.
2. The Morrill School System works to inform parents and engage the entire community in supporting its learners.

**Improvement Priorities identified by Cognia in Morrill’s Systems Review:**

1. The board, administrators, and staff have not developed and formalized a process to monitor the system’s schools to ensure organizational and program effectiveness.
2. The system lacks formal policies, procedures, and cycles that ensure curricula are aligned to rigorous standards, based on high expectations, and successfully implemented with ongoing staff development to prepare students for their next learning level.
3. The absence of an accountability process inclusive of mentoring, cross-system collaboration, and effective professional learning is preventing stakeholders from collectively leading efforts to improve student achievement and relationships.
4. There is inconsistency across the system when monitoring and adjusting instruction to ensure improved learning for all students and addressing learning expectations contained in the system’s mission.

**Cognia’s Early Learning Accreditation Engagement Review:**

While Morrill Public Schools sought and obtained Cognia Systems Accreditation, during the same visitation period in February 2022, a separate review also took place of the PRIDE CUB CARE for early childhood accreditation.

To ensure that we met the early learning requirements for accreditation, the Engagement Review Team was tasked to confirm that a minimum of 80% of the criteria were rated as Met. Our Early Childhood Met 356 of the 378 Criteria representing 94.18%. The principal and her staff clearly did a wonderful job preparing for the review and embedding best practices into their daily operations over the past three years. This review took place over the same 3 ½ day time frame. While Morrill’s PRIDE CUB CARE is now one of six-standalone public school early childhood buildings in Nebraska with Cognia Accreditation, we are the only public school district in Nebraska to have early childhood accreditation for infants and toddlers.

**Powerful Practices identified by Cognia in Morrill’s PRIDE CUB CARE:**

1. Fidelity to the adopted programs and social development structures ensures every student and opportunity to grow, both socially and intellectually.
2. School culture is on of camaraderie and teamwork that results in a cohesive and unified staff that benefits the school, the children, and the parents.
3. Stress on education and personal growth of staff has resulted in a high level of certified teachers and support staff in classrooms.

**Improvement Priorities identified by Cognia for Morrill’s PRIDE CUB CARE:**

1. Address safety concerns that exist in preschool rooms.
2. Implement a process to analyze data and develop a system to train teachers and staff in using data to impact instruction, professional development choices, and using professional learning communities (PLCs).
3. Develop effective processes and data collection to enable targeted discussions with parents and elementary school teachers to ensure the success of preschool students in Kindergarten.

**Why Cognia Systems Accreditation?**

There are two accreditation alternatives in Nebraska for public schools. Nebraska Department of Education Frameworks Accreditation and Cognia Accreditation (formerly AdvancEd – formerly North Central).

All public school districts in Nebraska are ‘automatically’ accredited through NDE Frameworks. This is mandated by state statute. Now, public schools could lose their Frameworks accreditation – but before that would occur NDE would identify the district or the individual building as Needing Improvement. When that occurs, a team from NDE would assist the district or building in writing a School Improvement Grant, and then assist and guide for a minimum of three years and hold the district or building accountable to the necessary changes.

The other accreditation alternative is Cognia. When a building or district becomes Cognia accredited, that accreditation supersedes the NDE Frameworks accreditation and therefore satisfies NDE’s requirements because Cognia is more rigorous and demonstrates a higher level of quality. In Cognia accreditation, the district can choose building level or district ‘systems’ accreditation. As mentioned earlier, in 2012, Morrill High (9th – 12th) grades became accredited with AdvancEd (Cognia). In 2017 the High School was reviewed (3-day review) for Cognia Accreditation and it was renewed. However, the preschool – 8th grades had a half-day review team visit for NDE frameworks and had a satisfactory review. After that 2017 accreditation visit, the superintendent and school board discussed and agreed to seek ‘systems’ accreditation for Early Childhood through 12th Grades.

Cognia’s signature “systems thinking” approach to improvement helps institutions across a district share a common language, focus on current and relevant standards of best practice, and strategically align and invest in fiscal and human resources that will drive positive student outcomes.

Cognia’s protocol engages systems in research-based processes, performance standards, and reflection to identify areas of strength and areas for improvement. They leverage the collective experience of educators from across the world to bring meaningful feedback to our institutions while providing a globally recognized accreditation, impacting college acceptance, scholarship opportunities, and transfer of credits for students. Their lead evaluators and team members are certified and assigned to bring contextual relevance, as well as unbiased evaluation to offer the institution a deeper understanding of their school environment and systems effectiveness. Cognia, with over 125 years of experience, goes well above the baseline of “required” actions for Nebraska schools accreditation.

Cognia assists schools in a dynamic strategic planning process which captures, monitors and evaluates our continuous improvement actions. The ‘weaknesses’ identified in their findings should be the focus of our improvement actions over the next 5-year cycle.

**What are the next steps for consideration?**

Upon receiving the Accreditation Engagement Review Report, the institution is encouraged to implement the following steps: 1) Review and share the findings with stakeholders. 2) Develop plans to address the areas for improvement identified by the Engagement Review Team. 3) Use the findings and data from the report to guide and strengthen the institution’s continuous improvement efforts. 4) Celebrate the successes noted in the report. 5) Continue the improvement journey.

It is a timely report to receive with the transition of leadership to a new superintendent and new elementary principal. The areas for improvement should inform the School Board and new district leadership as they format the best course for the future of our Morrill Public School’s System.