



Indicator: The School Community Council ensures that all volunteers understand cognitive competency and their roles relative to its enhancement in students. (C2)

Explanation: The evidence suggests that the Cognitive Competency involves the standards, curricula, and learning development processes that inform how and what students learn. The school must provide training and support for volunteers so that they fully understand the Cognitive Competency and can support students in more effective learning practices.

Questions: What methods are schools using to teach the content and skills in the Cognitive Competency to volunteers? What supports are being provided to volunteers throughout the school year as they work with students on the Cognitive Competency? How does the administration convey this priority to the school community at large?

What is the Cognitive Competency?

The Cognitive Competency refers to what teachers, families, and volunteers “need to know” to best help their students learn; this can include the standards, curricula, and the basics of both child and brain development that will help them encourage student mastery of the content that they are learning (Educator Competencies, 2015). This competency aims to connect what students are learning to their prior knowledge and previously mastered material to foster and assist in new learning. Vocabulary and writing tasks play a key role in the cognitive competency, as tools for connecting pieces of knowledge across content areas and domains (Redding, 2016).

In the era of the Common Core State Standards and comparable sets of state-level standards, expectations for what and how students will learn have risen. Focusing more on conceptual understanding than on rote learning and memorization, these sets of standards represent a different way of learning than many adults were exposed to during their own school experiences. This era of learning standards emphasizes interdisciplinary learning and demonstrating proficiency in context, across multiple content areas, such as teaching and assessing writing in a social studies course (Ryerse, Schneider, & Vander Ark, 2014). This shift in standards nicely fits into the Cognitive Competency, which emphasizes making connections between content, skills, and knowledge (Redding, 2016).

How Can Schools Ensure that Volunteers Understand and Help Promote the Cognitive Competency?

Teachers and parents are not the only adults involved in children’s educational experiences and therefore not the only ones who can help students take ownership of their learning. Between after-school and summer programs, as well as school day volunteers, there are many other adults who are influential in how and what students learn. Redding (2016) defines a school community as, “the people intimately associated with a school—students, their families, teachers, administrators, school staff, and volunteers—bound together by their common interest in the students served by the school” (p. 12). Bayerl (2014) writes:

By working together toward shared goals for the youth they serve, schools and community-based youth development organizations can ensure that their efforts are aligned and complementary and that every young person has

the opportunities and supports they need to develop the skills and mindsets that support success in school and beyond. (p. 18)

These adults can provide additional academic and emotional supports for students, but for them to be most effective, they need to be familiar with the goals, content, and strategies of the classroom (Bayerl, 2014). The onus is on the school to fully integrate volunteers and community partners into its work and values, treating them as equals and as meaningful contributors in the task of educating children (Bayerl, 2014). When advertising their needs or requests for volunteers, schools can incorporate these values and competencies into job descriptions, scopes of work, and onboarding conversations (Redding, 2016).

Schools should provide professional development opportunities for volunteers and partners in their building about the Cognitive Competency and how they can use it to support student achievement. These professional development sessions can be just for these stakeholders, or they can be shared training with school staff (Bayerl, 2014; Redding, 2016). Just like training in the Cognitive Competency for parents, making information about content, standards, and assessments as simple and actionable as possible is important for helping volunteers use it in their classroom or program; providing lists of proven strategies, activities, and instructional resources is a great way to help volunteers get started (Redding, 2014; Redding, 2016).

References and resources

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