

Leading by Way of Alignment: Building a Comprehensive and Unified System of Supports

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Background and Spark

Sumter School District (SSD) was formed on July 1, 2011, by consolidating two former school districts. Through a legislative mandate, the consolidation combined an urban district, the city of Sumter, and one suburban and rural district from the surrounding county. SSD currently consists of 16 elementary schools, seven middle schools, three high schools, one alternative learning program, an adult education program, a career and technology center, and an early childhood education center. SSD's total combined enrollment is over 17,000 students and over 3,000 staff members.

Consolidation brings with it a myriad of complex challenges. Looking back and reflecting on SSD's genesis during consolidation, our alignment was initially fragmented. SSD attempted to align processes, procedures, and policies to the district's newly created vision, mission, goals, and strategic plan but, we knew there was much more work to be done.

In the Spring of 2015, due to an AdvancED accreditation visit, SSD formally realized what our systemic weaknesses were, as the visit allowed us to ask the critical questions necessary to serve as a catalyst for change. The results of the accreditation visit, along with other qualitative and quantitative data, brought the need to build a comprehensive and unified system of supports to the forefront of our systemic practices.

SSD recognized the voids we created as we moved through the consolidation process. Our AdvancED accreditation visit further solidified our need for a comprehensive and unified system and hence, allowed us to *Take the Lead*. We began to build a strategic framework in small increments. We invited seven pilot schools to participate in an endeavor, with a comprehensive focus on a unified Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS). What we found when implementing our interpretation of MTSS was something both extraordinary and unique as it relates to building a comprehensive and unified system of supports.

Leading the Nation:

Many districts around the state and nation have begun or established a MTSS framework of practice. We realized very early in our planning stage the common practice of MTSS did not provide enough for us to confidently fill the

remnant voids of consolidation and traditional practices. Therefore, we established a MTSS framework of practice and proud to state, SSD is the only district in the nation who has merged MTSS and Integrated Learning Supports (ILS). We clearly saw the need and took the lead to build a comprehensive and unified system of supports designed to create positive and equal opportunities for students to succeed in school and beyond.

Unknowingly, our progressive practices began to ripple across the nation as we received calls and emails from various individuals deep into the ILS work. These individuals were curious as to how SSD was merging both MTSS and ILS successfully and systemically. Two renowned individuals who took an interest in our system of supports were Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor of the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Both Adelman and Taylor are long standing professors at UCLA's Center for Mental Health in Schools and the founders of Learning Supports. ILS can be defined as the, "resources, strategies, and practices that support intellectual, physical, social and emotional development to ensure student success.....deployed in classrooms and schoolwide to address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students with instruction and management." (ILS Participant Guide, 2015).

In addition, we contacted Scholastic's Community Affairs division. This division of Scholastic was working closely with Adelman and Taylor not to promote sales, but rather promote the research and ILS practices around the nation to improved systems of learning. Quickly, we were involved in several conference calls with the "original" practitioners of ILS such as Dr. Merrienne Dyer, former Superintendent of Gainesville City Schools and Dr. Rhonda Neal Waltman, Senior Director of Consultancy Services and former Assistant Superintendent of Student Supports in Mobile, Alabama.

Both Drs. Dyer and Neal Waltman were integral parts of Drs. Adelman and Taylor's work through the groundbreaking Gainesville Case Study surrounding ILS. Additionally, their involvement in a Lead District Collaborative entitled the *Rebuilding for Learning* initiative between Scholastic, American Association of School Administrators (ASSA), and UCLA was created and "aimed at expanding leaders' knowledge, capacity,

and implementation of a comprehensive system of supports.”(Case Study, Gainesville City Schools, 2015).

SSD’s continued momentum in our MTSS/ILS framework has led us to unifying 16 of our 28 schools within the district. In January of 2017, our last Cohort will begin to create readiness for implementation and our district will truly be a unified district. Our original seven pilot schools that took the lead and truly forged MTSS and ILS have tirelessly collaborated and although we can speak for days on their leadership and student results, we would like to showcase a particular school and its positive results through MTSS/ILS.

Crestwood High School

Crestwood High School (CHS) opened in 1996 and serves 13 rural communities. There are approximately 1200 students enrolled with the following student demographics: 69% African American, 25% White, 4% Hispanic, and 2% Other. At CHS, every school day begins by reciting the mission statement, “*Keeping Academics and Citizenship First and Foremost.*”

During the 2014-2015 school year, MTSS/ILS was introduced to seven pilot principals who desired an innovative approach to address issues at their respective schools. Through this process, we quickly began to understand the remnants of consolidation as many schools were doing great things but were in their own silos and fragmented from one another. It was our responsibility to unify our seven pilot schools as we became the original architects of building a comprehensive and unified system of supports.

Each pilot school understood the power of collective unification and began determining priorities as we reviewed the data, uncovered root causes, mapped current resources, and collectively developed a structure designed to unify endeavors to address priorities. As CHS’s leadership team collectively analyzed multiple data sources, the group discovered student attendance was one of the top priorities. Through the initial stages of the MTSS/ILS process, we understood the systemic and collective importance of student attendance as it was an issue across the seven pilot schools. Based on this priority, a decision was made to collectively address student attendance and target chronic absenteeism and tardies. Our simple justification to address this collective priority first and foremost derived from one common understanding; if the kids are not there, then they are not learning.

At CHS the data indicated 13,342 student absences for the 2014-2015 school year which equated to approximately 95,000 hours of missed instructional time

for our students. Based on the data we developed a CHS Leadership Team consisting of administrators, teachers, and paraprofessionals. Specifically, the team analyzed the data and decided to address the root causes to our school attendance crisis. Those reasons centered around barriers such as, poverty and the challenges of a rural district as well as our gaps in the areas of family engagement, classroom enrichment, and transitions.

During the 2014-2015 school year, the leadership team participated in multiple planning sessions for the development and implementation of MTSS/ILS with a goal to customize a comprehensive plan for CHS students. During the planning process, all school personnel, students, parents, community leaders, and district office representatives were involved. Students were granted the autonomy to determine the theme and logo of our project and the result was, *Knight Vision: Bringing the Importance of Attendance to Light*. CHS’s mascot is a knight and so, students created hallway signs and t-shirts to promote the new attendance logo and initiative.

When the 2015-2016 academic year commenced, our attendance initiative was launched under the framework of MTSS/ILS. From the onset, everyone at CHS and for that matter among the seven pilot schools, spoke a common language and understood the expectations for school attendance. Below is a showcase of CHS’s current practices as it relates to student attendance.



CHS’s Attendance Protocol

As CHS embarks upon its second consecutive year of implementing MTSS/ILS, we recognized early in the planning phase, family involvement and engagement was an essential variable of our initiative. The protocol included in this section is utilized to ensure that both student and legal parents/guardians are actively involved in the attendance process.

PROTOCOL	SCHOOL ACTION
1-3 days	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mail a letter to parent/guardian
5-7 days (Tier II)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Request a parental conference to complete and develop an Attendance Intervention Plan with the assistance of the parent/legal guardian, school counselor, attendance clerk, MTSS/ILS facilitator, and administrator • Access to Parent Portal in PowerSchool • Weekly student check-ins with the MTSS/ILS facilitator to discuss progress • Parental phone conferences
8 or more days (Tier III)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weekly check-ins with the MTSS/ILS facilitator • Parental phone conferences • Assignment of a Teacher mentor • Face-to-face conferences with parent/legal guardian • Home visits for uncooperative parents • Information for community agency assistance • Mandatory participation in attendance recovery sessions for course credit

MTSS/ILS Results

As the CHS Leadership Team customized MTSS/ILS, the group strategically included resources, strategies, and practices that supported the academic, physical, social, and emotional development to foster successful student outcomes. Initially, 44 chronically absent students who had accumulated a total of 858 absences (approx. 6,000 instructional hours) during the 2014-2015 school year were identified for Tier II interventions.

After they missed three days during the 2015-2016 school year, targeted students were bumped to Tier III status. Quickly, thirty-two out of forty four students (73%) were moved to Tier III status. Thirty-six out of forty four (82%) of the students showed significant improvement in their attendance. The targeted forty four Tier II and III students reduced their absences to 517, which was a decrease of 40% from the previous year.

Overall, the number of total absences decreased from 13,342 days to 11,548 days during the 2015-2016 school year equating to a difference of 1,794 instructional days. Our attendance rate increased from 94.5% to 95.2% which approximately provided 13,500 additional instructional hours for our students. It is important to mention in our reflection, that although no interventions were established for discipline, MTSS/ILS may have indirectly affected

student behavior as CHS experienced a 17.4% decrease in disciplinary referrals for the 2015-16 school year. The remainder of the section includes strategies that CHS implemented for each major area of practice in an attempt to remove student and parent/guardian barriers to attendance.

Classroom-Based Enrichment

- Provided professional development for teachers prior to the first day of the 2015-2016 school year pertaining to MTSS/ILS (unification)
- Reiterated the importance of attendance to students, staff, parent and guardian through home school communication methods
- Enforced the attendance policy
- Redesigned classroom approaches for addressing attendance
- Submitted attendance referrals to the MTSS/ILS Facilitator
- MTSS/ILS Facilitator worked with classroom teachers and the attendance office personnel to begin an Attendance Intervention Process

Transitions

- Provided a welcome packet to all new students (map, list of clubs/athletics, school calendar, school counselor information, school-related items, etc.)
- Met with all students to discuss attendance expectations
- Implemented a Transition Camp for rising 9th graders who were designated as, “In Need of Support” on state assessment and informally through feeder middle schools
- Assigned positive “peer buddies” to new students

Family Engagement

- Improved home/school “two-way” communication
- Solicited parental input in the development of Attendance Intervention Forms
- Conducted parent-teacher conferences
- Hosted college awareness nights with local college representatives
- Worked closely with School Improvement Council to inform parents about the importance of attendance
- Shared attendance expectations (newsletter, telephonic notification system, etc.)

Community Collaboration

- Solicited community support to assist with student incentives
- Shared MTSS/ILS efforts with the faith-based community
- Invited community leaders to address student groups (Boeing, Caterpillar, Continental Tire, local universities, etc.)
- Provided services to community organizations

Crisis Prevention

- Maintained our focus to create a caring and safe learning environment
- Worked with local agencies to provide resources as needed
- Allowed students opportunities to retest if needed
- Trained all staff regarding the MTSS/ILS framework
- Student and Family Intervention
- Provided outside agency connections and interventions for students and families with identified concerns
- Provided a document that contained information regarding local agencies
- Attempted to eliminate barriers that prevented family engagement/involvement

MTSS/ILS Reflection

MTSS/ILS has provided a comprehensive and unified structure to support student needs at CHS. The school has hosted numerous activities, offered school incentives, and received state and media recognition for MTSS/ILS school improvement efforts. Below are our points of pride sponsored and developed by students, staff, and key community partners and stakeholders.

- “Knight Vision” t-shirts (logo designed by students and teachers)
- Monthly Perfect Attendance Celebrations that rewarded students with no tardies and no absences for the entire month

1. Pizza Celebration
2. Sub Sandwiches
3. Wings and Sing (Wings and Karaoke)
4. March Madness (Various Chips and Drinks)



5. Sweet Treats (Cupcakes and Candy)

6. Creamery Friday (Ice Cream Cones)



- “Dare to Be Present” for all student athletes sponsored by the athletic department
- Recognition via news media and state website.
- Student mentoring system available to students who requested their own campus mentor (e.g. Custodian and Student Mentor, Secretary and Student Mentor)
- Display of images throughout the school’s corridors promoting school attendance
- Sponsorship and community donations from local businesses (Belk Department Store, Global Tax and Services, Platinum Limousine, Outback Steakhouse of Sumter, etc.)



Moving Forward with MTSS/ILS at CHS

This year, CHS is well into the underpinnings of MTSS/ILS and has developed an additional theme, entitled, “*Count Me In*”. The new theme works in collaboration with “*Knight Vision: Bringing Attendance to Light*” and promotes engagement of our various key stakeholders to become further connected in some aspect to our students and school environment. Additionally, discipline and writing will be formally added to our priorities. For the upcoming school, CHS will focus on the following:

- Creation of the MTSS/ILS Response Team involving parent volunteers
- Knights’ PEARLS (Preparing Excellent Articulate Resilient Lady Scholars) Mentoring Program for Girls
- Implementation of Time to Teach to address student discipline
- Implementation of the literacy plan to address reading and writing
- Continuation of Monthly Perfect Attendance Celebrations
- Establishment of the CHS MTSS/ILS Blog
- Creation of the Attendance and Discipline Pledges and Challenges (Count Me In!)
- Celebration of Attendance Awareness Month (September)
- Continuation of Community Collaborators and Local Businesses for Support

Next Steps for MTSS/ILS

Throughout this three year process, SSD has purposefully and strategically planned each phase with replication-to-scale and sustainability in mind. We have further unified academics, operations and management, and learning supports in the district with the addition of comprehensive district-wide programs such as, Literacy Design Collaborative (LDC), Mathematics Design Collaborative (MDC), Leveled Literacy Intervention (LLI), as well as Time To Teach (TTT) to name a few. Additionally, we are currently providing on-site consultation with districts around the nation such as San Juan Unified School District (SJUSD) in San Juan, CA as well as districts across the state of Alabama.

In January 2017, the last piece to our comprehensive and unified puzzle (Cohort III) will be added. By the fall, we will reach our goal of systemic alignment towards a comprehensive and unified system in which all of our twenty eight schools will be implementing the initiative. We are proud to say, SSD is taking the lead and once again along with other outstanding South Carolina school districts putting South Carolina on the national map as implementing effective and progressive practices to meet the needs of our students.

References

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