SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT GRANT (SIG) PRACTICE:
MAKING DATA-BASED DECISIONS

CHARLESTON COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT ♦ CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA

Charleston County School District (Charleston) reviewed its student achievement data and determined that a significant portion of students were advancing through the system without having the core literacy skills needed to succeed across content areas. In addition, benchmark assessment data indicated that many students were reading far below grade level upon entering high school. In response to this challenge, Charleston developed a comprehensive literacy initiative that centers on the ongoing use of data at the school and classroom levels. The district strategy provides educators with data about student progress on key literacy outcomes and helps them effectively use those data to support student learning.

THE STRATEGY: Supporting Practitioners in Making Data-Based Decisions for Literacy Improvement

Charleston worked to build a culture of data use at all levels of the system, spanning from the district's decisions about policies and initiatives to classroom-level decisions about interventions for individual students. Charleston's literacy focus[1] was itself a product of data use at the district level. The district's strategic plan[2] was designed to close achievement gaps, raise overall student achievement, and improve graduation rates. This plan has four focus areas—the first of which is "literacy-based education," grounded in the core belief that "literacy is the foundation for all learning." The district chose to advance its literacy goals through a comprehensive plan, which hinges in part on supporting practitioners in the ongoing use of data to make decisions about literacy programs, interventions, and instructional practices.

The strategy for supporting practitioners in using data to improve literacy includes two key components:

- Supporting literacy teams of practitioners in using collaborative data inquiry
- Implementing tiered intervention models

Charleston implemented this strategy in schools across the district, including SIG schools.

Supporting Literacy Teams of Practitioners in Using Collaborative Data Inquiry. Charleston facilitates practitioners in coming together on an ongoing basis to collectively examine data, identify issues, and solve literacy problems. The

Charleston County Schools at a Glance
Start of SIG implementation: 2010–11
Locale: City, Midsize
Enrollment: 44,058
Free or Reduced-Price Lunch: 52%
Racial/Ethnic Composition: 45% Black, 45% White, 7% Hispanic, 2% Other, 1% Asian, <1% American Indian
English Learners: 5%
Students With Disabilities: 10%

Cohorts 1 and 2 SIG Schools in Charleston			
SIG Model	**# of Schools**	**School Level**	**# of Schools**
Transformation	6	Elementary	0
Turnaround	0	Middle	1
Restart	0	High	5
Closure	0	Other	0

district authorizes the use of several literacy assessments, including state standardized assessments, benchmark assessments,[3] and teacher-developed assessments.

Collaborative data inquiry is evident in the following ongoing activities:

- Districtwide principal roundtables

- School-based data review

- Professional learning teams

The three highlighted practices reflect an effort to build staff capacity throughout the district and to foster a culture that embraces data use.

Districtwide Principal Roundtables. The district convenes monthly roundtable meetings of principals[4] to collaboratively examine data and work through current challenges. The superintendent instituted a process through which principals rotate responsibility for leading the roundtable discussions on various topics. For example, roundtable meetings held during the last school year focused primarily on improving literacy outcomes. Meetings begin with a presentation of a specific district challenge or problem of practice, such as achievement gaps in literacy, and move toward principals discussing the importance of the data for their own schools.

School-Based Data Review. The district encourages ongoing review of data at the school level. For example, the district data director ensures that principals and teacher receive timely data in a user-friendly format so that school staff can use these data to inform their decisions. The district data director generates a school-specific report for elementary and middle school principals with key indicators for a targeted cohort of students and then meets with school leaders to discuss the report. All the current SIG schools have "data rooms," which serve as designated location for the display and collaborative review of data. For SIG schools, a designated data coordinator maintains the data room and supports staff in analyzing student data.[5]

Professional Learning Teams. The district also requires that schools conduct regular, facilitated meetings of teams of teachers who teach the same subject area or grade level within each school. The primary purpose of these team meetings is to support data-based decision making. The meetings—which typically are led by an instructional coach, school administrator, or teacher leader—are structured around a discussion protocol. Whenever possible, participants are asked to use supporting data to back up their assertions about students or groups of students. Part of this planning involves discussing student progress and conducting item analysis of benchmark assessments. Some SIG schools extended the collaborative inquiry process to include high school students, who examine and reflect on benchmark assessment data and set their own personal growth goals.

Implementing Tiered Intervention Models. In addition to collaborative data use, Charleston implemented tiered intervention models to support practitioners in making data-based decisions about the kinds of supports that students need. Tiered intervention models involve a cycle of inquiry, beginning with a screening assessment to determine the level of intensity of supports that the student likely will require. Tiered supports range from universal instruction to targeted small-group interventions to intensive, highly individualized supports. Schools continuously monitor student progress using assessment data and make adjustments to services provided.

Charleston currently has two major tiered intervention models in place, both of which address literacy:[6]

- Response to intervention (RTI) initiative (grades PK–8)[7]

- SIG tiered intervention (grades 9–12)

RTI Initiative. In 2010, Charleston launched its RTI initiative, beginning with a focus on first grade and then expanding to all primary grades, middle grades, and students in the district's prekindergarten program. Students are screened and placed into one of three tiers, with Tier 1 receiving evidenced-based instruction in the classroom and Tiers 2 and 3 receiving more intensive interventions in addition to the general classroom instruction. (Schools must use a specific intervention program selected by the district.)

The literacy teams consider benchmark assessment data as well as a commercial, curriculum-based assessment to monitor student progress and adapt supports. The district also provides master reading teachers who support the literacy teams and classroom teachers in implementing RTI with fidelity. Some schools have a half-time master reading teacher; other schools have multiple, full-time dedicated reading teachers.

SIG Tiered Intervention. Another variation of the tiered intervention model is implemented within SIG high schools. These high schools assess the literacy skills of incoming freshmen using multiple data points, including students' benchmark assessment data from the preceding winter, and then place the students into one of three "English pathways." Each pathway includes specific sequences of coursework, with struggling students receiving specific, evidence-based reading interventions approved by the district. Ongoing benchmark assessment data are used to make further adjustments to the students' pathways.

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

The most prominent barriers to implementing these data-based decision-making initiatives are teacher turnover and teacher buy-in. Teacher turnover is an ongoing concern in the district, particularly in the lowest performing schools. When seasoned educators leave a school, their departure impacts the team dynamics; new teachers need time to develop collegial relationships and effective data-use skills. The district has tried to address these challenges by reinforcing the use of a consistent protocol for collaborative meetings that that helps new teachers feel comfortable discussing data.

Teacher buy-in is a challenge as well. The district's increasing emphasis on data transparency is a difficult adjustment for some teachers, especially in those cases where the data show that the teachers need to make substantial changes to their practice. Teacher buy-in has improved because the district focuses on hiring school leaders who support data-based decision making, particularly in the SIG schools, and because the literacy initiative is demonstrating tangible results. For example, the percentage of students who enter high school reading below grade level has decreased during the past four years. In addition, the percentage of first-grade students who require the most intensive literacy supports at the end of the school year has decreased from 16 percent in 2008–09 to 3 percent in 2012–13.[8]

CONCLUSION

Charleston County School District has a steadfast focus on providing students with the foundational literacy skills that they need to progress in learning across content areas. The district builds the capacity of practitioners at all levels of the system to use data to make decisions that improve students' literacy outcomes. To ensure that this data focus continues, Charleston has integrated this priority into its five-year strategic plan, *Vision 2016*. The plan includes school-based literacy teams and tiered intervention systems as key strategies for improving literacy outcomes. In addition, SIG funding has allowed the district to build its data-use capacity within the SIG schools. This approach will instill these schools with a culture that is centered on data-based decision making. As a result, the SIG schools will serve as models for spreading the strategies and processes for using data to make informed decisions in schools throughout the district.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Vision 2016: Charleston Achieving Excellence
http://vision2016.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Vision-2016-Plan.pdf

SOURCES

Data for the tables on page 1 are from the following sources: District at-a-glance data are from the NCES Common Core of Data (2011–12); and SIG school data are from an internal document within the U.S. Department of Education Office of State Support.

IMPLEMENTATION DETAILS

[1] Literacy is a central focus at Charleston because of its foundational nature in student learning as well as the district's historical challenges with students' literacy outcomes. Leveraging data use to support its focus on literacy, the district encourages data-driven decision making to support effective teaching and learning across content areas.

[2] In spring 2012, the district released *Vision 2016: Charleston Achieving Excellence*, which builds upon a prior version of the strategic plan (known as *Charleston Achieving Excellence*). The new plan was developed collaboratively by the superintendent and Board of Trustees with community input.

[3] Benchmark assessments in English language arts and mathematics are administered throughout the district at least twice a year, with some schools administering these assessments three times a year.

[4] The roundtable meetings include principals from elementary, middle, and high schools; from SIG and non-SIG schools; from Title I and non-Title I schools; and from schools of varying sizes.

[5] The data rooms serve as designated spaces for displaying and reviewing achievement and attendance data. Data are displayed on walls to show how students are progressing, which students are in need of the most support, and which interventions are in place.

[6] Tiered intervention models are frequently associated with literacy improvement but can be applied to other content areas. The basic approach includes (1) screening students, (2) providing customized interventions, (3) monitoring progress, and (4) making adjustments. Charleston currently uses tiered approaches to support literacy goals but also is investing in using tiered approaches in other areas. For example, the tiered intervention model used in Charleston's SIG schools also has a math component. In addition, the district's current strategic plan has a stated goal of implementing PBIS (Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports), a tiered intervention model for behavior, in all schools by 2016.

[7] The district's RTI initiative focuses on primary and middle grades but does not directly target SIG high schools. It is not supported with SIG funding. One of the current SIG schools serves students in grades 7–12, and one school in the past cohort of SIG schools served students in the middle grades.

[8] Although Charleston experienced a steady decrease in the percentage of students in need of the most support at the end of first grade, these differences are between unique cohorts of students and are not longitudinal.