

## Georgetown County Schools Achieve Remarkable Gains by Addressing Skills Development

[Georgetown County School District](#) (GCSD), comprising 19 schools with a total enrollment of more than 8,000 students—more than 71 percent of whom are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch—is located along the South Carolina coast. The district’s mission is to provide all students with world-class knowledge and skills that prepare them for citizenship in a diverse society. To fulfill this mission, the district consistently aims to equip all teachers with effective tools to help their students succeed.

### Administrators Seek a Solution to Address Skills before Content

In 2017–2018 and 2018–2019, the district’s percentage of students meeting or exceeding expectations in reading and math lagged behind state averages. Heading into the 2019–2020 year, Fedrick Cohens, executive director of elementary schools, and Stephanie Stuckey, director of student interventions and support services, were charged with turning the tide.

Ensuring all GCSD students reach state-level proficiency would require bold thinking and an openness at all levels of the district to break away from traditional practices and resources and implement more effective solutions. Knowing that habits can sometimes be hard to break, Cohens, along with the instructional team, exercised caution in anticipating and projecting student progress across the district. But he was energized by the commitment of district leadership, led by Superintendent Keith Price, to take the necessary steps to make positive change.



**Fedrick Cohens**



**Stephanie Stuckey**

**GCSD** GEORGETOWN COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT

Grades:  
**K–12**

Location:  
**South Carolina**

Average Enrollment:  
**More than 8,000**

Employees:  
**1,205**

Free and Reduced-Price Lunch Eligibility  
**71%**

Demographics:

Demographic	Percentage
White	64%
Black	31%
Other	2%
Hispanic or Latino	3%

The district was struggling with making impactful instructional decisions because it didn't have domain-level data that provided a full picture of students' targeted needs and the instructional opportunities to address them, Cohens said. The assessment program they were using at the time provided data on content weaknesses but not the underlying skills—a significant challenge for teachers looking to ensure students received necessary individual skills instruction.

With all this in mind, it was clear to GCSD leaders that the district could benefit from investigating other assessment resources, along with teacher-friendly resources and tools that were accessible and easy to use to address students' skills and content-area gaps.

"We realized that our students can't master content unless they master skills first," Cohens said. "That's how we basically started exploring all of the possibilities with *i-Ready*."

In *i-Ready*, he felt GCSD may have identified a solution that could address the district's pain points in both assessment and instruction.

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—**Fedrick Cohens**,  
Executive Director of  
Elementary Schools



## Teachers Look for Data to Support Personalization

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Scanning the district, Cohens and the instructional team found that a few schools had been using *i-Ready* for a few years with select student groups and were generating positive results. To see if this success could be translated districtwide, GCSD began piloting *i-Ready* with all third graders for the 2019–2020 school year.

“We lived and breathed something else because that’s what we knew,” Cohens said. “I knew we weren’t getting what we needed from the previous assessment tool, and I didn’t expect *i-Ready* results to happen so quickly because change typically takes time. Many people who have been using other things for years could have been resistant to change. But it quickly spread to other grades because I think everyone just got invested and it was so user friendly.”

Stuckey noted that early on, teachers and leaders were able to see the third graders’ skills deficits and appreciated the streamlined approach of using *i-Ready* tools to address them. Getting assessment data at the appropriate time gave teachers confidence in their interventions and personalized learning strategies. Not only would they be able to personalize instruction for students and ensure they’d target the most important skills, but they’d also be able to support student growth in time before year-end exams. The ability to make a difference for their learners is what energizes GCSD’s teachers more than anything.

“Teachers really got excited about it and felt comfortable using the *i-Ready* platform,” Stuckey said. “And when they started to see the growth of their students, they got even more excited. And you know what happens when teachers are excited about something—they don’t keep anything in.”

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—**Stephanie Stuckey**,  
Director of Student Interventions  
and Support Services

## Educators and Students Take Data-Informed Action

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When *i-Ready* was first implemented in the third grade, teachers received professional development from Curriculum Associates that provided a general overview of and grounding in the platform and its tools. But Stuckey noted that it was after the first Diagnostic assessment and its delivery of actionable data when district and school leaders became confident in the process. Educators at all levels across the district were firm in their commitment to their students’ growth goals, so it was important for them to see the real evidence that this tool was going to support those goals.

“It got very specific for teachers and very specific for their students,” Stuckey said. “*i-Ready* was able to show them the areas of deficit and exactly what students needed. It tells you where the gaps are and leads you to solutions to close them.”



For example, using *i-Ready* for the first time in one middle school, teachers saw “huge phonics gaps.” They decided to use the *PHONICS for Reading*™ textbooks schoolwide to address this issue head on. The textbook is typically used as an intervention for struggling readers, but the school’s educators felt confident in their interpretation of the data and made the decision that all learners would benefit.

GCSD teachers also emphasize small group instruction as an effective way to differentiate for diverse student needs. Teachers make it a priority to work with student groups who require additional instruction in specific skill areas, ensuring students’ learning time is well spent. Teachers have used *i-Ready* data to identify how students should be grouped in reading and math. For example, the data gives insights on which students require more targeted instruction on phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, numbers, or operations. Once the groups are defined, teachers know the most important focus areas for those students, and their instructional expertise takes over—working closely with small groups and personalizing instruction for individual learners.

The benefit of having data also extends to the students themselves. “The more they know about their own areas of growth, the more engaged they are to improve their learning,” Cohens said.

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Teachers hold regular data conferences with students, enabling deeper discussion and transparency around each individual student's areas for improvement and next steps. Through this process, teachers help students gain a true understanding of their own progress, which leads students to take ownership of their learning. *i-Ready* data supports this process by giving teachers and students a clear reference point to review together.

"The visual graphic of *i-Ready* progress gives our students the motivation to actually be more engaged in their lessons because they want to see themselves move forward," Cohens said. "It gives them a renewed sense of, 'Okay, I know what to expect and what is expected of me.'"

## Schools Emphasize Consistency and Fidelity to Support Progress

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Another driver of student growth is the consistency and fidelity of solutions. Because the needs of students can vary, teachers have access to a variety of tools that can be implemented consistently, eliminating any student fears that they will fall behind or be forgotten.

"Teachers are embracing the platform to not only strengthen student learning, but their teaching as well," Cohens said.

He added that the frequency of the Diagnostics provides both teachers and students fresh data that can be acted upon immediately. Before *i-Ready*, the district administered quarterly assessments with no targeted actions toward improvement. By contrast, *i-Ready* tests are given every 21 days with specific improvement action plans, leading up to Diagnostics every 12–18 weeks.

"After the first Diagnostic, you're building up to the next Diagnostic, and the students already know that in between there are things they're going to have to do in order to see growth at the next Diagnostic," Cohens said. "And the teachers know there are things that they're going to have to do in order to see growth in their class or individual students at the next Diagnostic."

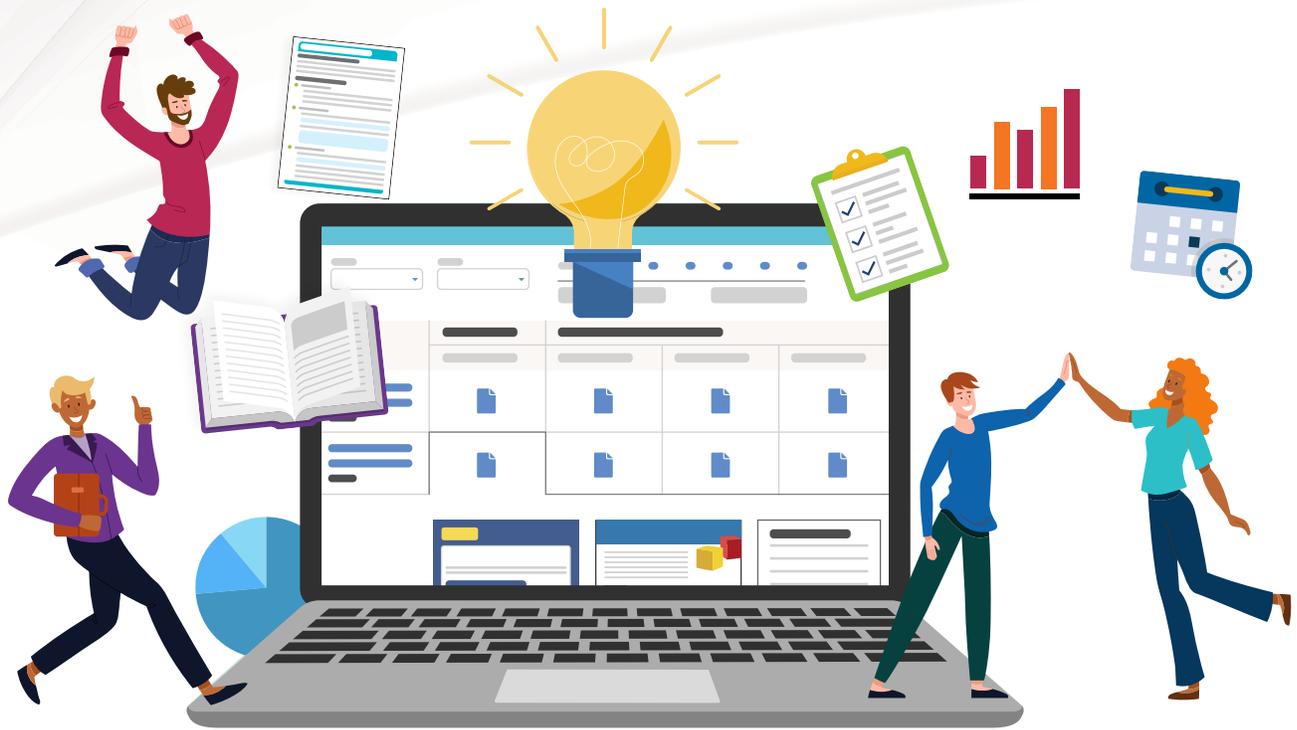
In addition, GCSD emphasizes the use of consistent pedagogy and language across grades to enable seamless learning as students progress. Stuckey said *i-Ready* supports this continuity, noting that a third grader struggling with phonics will encounter the same phonics terminology and coding in fourth and fifth grade.

Stuckey added that at a recent instructional meeting, the team was trying to figure out a way to review student progress districtwide month to month. A few days later, they realized *i-Ready* provided a solution. Its growth monitoring tool used to track individual student progress could be extrapolated to provide a district-level view to monitor progress.

"It was something that the schools have used in the past, but we've never used it at the district level," Stuckey said. "We were like, 'Oh my gosh, we can use this.'"

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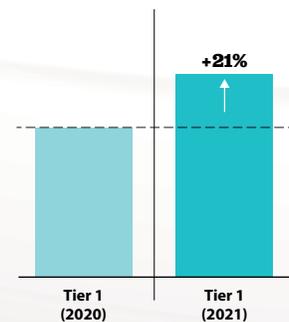
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## District Leaders Observe Success and Look to Build on It

In the last year, despite the challenges of the pandemic, students have made remarkable gains in reading: 21 percent of students went from being a grade level behind to being above grade level—from Tier 2 to Tier 1.

District leaders realized they had the right solution with *i-Ready* when they saw it enabled teachers to address skills first and then content using *i-Ready Diagnostics*, combined with its Teacher Toolbox of lesson plans, resources, and other instructional tools. Based on the progress of students in the third grade pilot, *i-Ready* is now used in third through eighth grade.

Cohens noted that *i-Ready* aligns with the district's vision of instruction, and the continual support from Curriculum Associates of district and school leaders and teachers has enabled them to see positive results in all elementary and middle schools. The district and schools have the ability to gather and analyze data and formulate actionable solutions collaboratively.



"*i-Ready* is interconnected with everything that we're doing," Cohens said. "The entire platform is tied into where we are wanting to go as a district. It just complements everything that we're trying to do in moving students forward with the tiers with our curriculum and instruction team and our academic and support services team. Our goal is to 'grow the green.'"

Cohens commends district and school leaders and teachers for their openness to try something different to improve student achievement. Everyone at all levels of the district and schools were focused on getting to the core of the student achievement challenge and finding the best solutions to serve all Georgetown students. The combination of vision, creative thinking, and collaboration of district and school leaders and teachers led to the districtwide implementation of *i-Ready* that provided an important foundation for the remarkable student progress in the last year. Regardless of the tools they landed on, this success story all began with a team of educators dedicated to student achievement above all.

"I think the biggest achievement coming into this year is that we have a consistent program in all of our schools' Grades 3–8," Cohens said. "The fact that it's districtwide is a success in itself because traditionally, when things were done at the individual school level, we've had schools whose budget didn't allow for certain programs. Having a consistent program across the district where we really can actually utilize data to see where weaknesses and strengths are across the district—across grade levels, across skill areas—is a blessing."



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## Results for Georgetown County School District

GCSD saw the following improvements in its students, according to the *i-Ready Diagnostic* reports:

- During the 2020–2021 school year, students met or exceeded their Typical Growth in Mathematics by 115 percent and in Reading by 136 percent when students used *i-Ready* for 30 minutes and passed lessons with 70 percent or higher.
- In Mathematics, student placement levels grew 21 percent from fall 2020 (15 percent) to spring 2021 (36 percent). In Reading, student placement levels grew 10 percent from fall 2020 (25 percent) to spring 2021 (35 percent).
- In Mathematics, third and fourth grade students who were Three or More Grade Levels Below exceeded their Typical Growth by 136 percent.



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