

## Spartanburg 7 Streamlines Instructional Resources to Maximize Student Outcomes

[Spartanburg School District 7](#), comprising 13 schools with a total enrollment of more than 7,300 students, is an urban district located in the heart of Upstate South Carolina. Established in 1884, the district has a rich tradition of excellence in education. Their mission is to “inspire and equip our students for meaningful lives of leadership and service as world citizens,” a mission that’s clearly evident when speaking to educators across the district.

To deliver on this mission, district leaders seek to find tools that give educators deep insights into each student’s understanding of state content standards, enabling teachers to truly understand learners’ strengths as well as instructional needs. Ideally, with a cohesive district-level plan, these deep insights will span across multiple grade levels and various skills so teachers can appropriately and consistently plan for Tier 1 instruction.

Beginning in 2018–2019, Dr. Terry Pruitt, the district’s chief academic officer, sought a new tool to meet these needs for Spartanburg 7’s teachers and students. The district’s current assessment program was no longer a good fit and did not deliver the rich data necessary to enable teachers to adjust their instructional approach in real time.

“I was concerned that we only had assessment data that showed where we started and where we ended up, and so only at the end of the year could we ask, ‘Did we get student growth?’” says Pruitt. “Principals and teachers shared this concern. What we really needed was data we could use throughout the year as a blueprint, showing us what we’re doing from one assessment to the next and letting teachers know, ‘This is how I need to target my instruction.’ With the tools we had at the time, I just didn’t see that happening.”

Location:	<b>South Carolina</b>
Grades:	<b>K–12</b>
Average Enrollment:	<b>7,300</b>
Employees:	<b>1,300</b>
Families with Income Below the Poverty Level:	<b>31%</b>
Demographics:	<p>51% White</p> <p>39% Black</p> <p>5% Other</p> <p>5% Hispanic or Latino</p>



This lapse in both time and insights meant that educators were unable to meet the individual needs of all students. Pruitt knew it was essential to ensure assessments were balanced, interconnected, and delivered actionable data to teachers, students, and families so they'd lead directly into improved outcomes for students.

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Chief Academic Officer



## Integrating Assessment and Instruction

In addition to the lack of a unified approach, the assessment tools previously relied upon in Spartanburg 7 required a great deal of time to drill down and find actionable data. This didn't translate quickly or consistently enough into the kind of data-informed teaching necessary to ensure that not a single student would fall through the cracks. District leaders, ever focused on student growth, knew they needed a new approach to enable individualized support for all learners.

Pruitt had evaluated a number of different tools already in use in the district, as well as other assessment solutions used across South Carolina, and *i-Ready* captured his interest as a potential solution to the district's challenges. He had become familiar with *i-Ready* because it was already in use for some student groups in the district, and after asking teachers to show him how they were using it, he came away impressed.

*"i-Ready is explicit,"* he says. *"It's user friendly for teachers with very positive feedback."*

*"i-Ready is two things: It's an assessment and it's also an instructional piece,"* adds Dr. Glen Carson, the district's director of assessment and accountability. *"The connection between the assessment results and the instructional pieces is the true strength of it because it allows for individualized instruction for all students in a classroom."*

Pruitt asked some of his principals to pilot *i-Ready* schoolwide in 2019–2020, choosing one of the district's most challenged, high-poverty elementary schools as a starting point, along with three middle schools. Dr. Edwina Perrin, district math coach/coordinator, was already experienced with *i-Ready* after using the tool while working in Spartanburg 5, so she was tapped as the pilot's leader. She worked closely with teachers at each pilot school to ease them into the process and overcome any discomfort associated with a new initiative.

*"Change is hard for everyone, and especially for adults who are used to doing things in a certain way,"* says Perrin. *"But the pilot year showed us how it worked. If you get 10 teachers to buy in, it will spread like wildfire."*

She saw buy-in among teachers accelerate, and by the time COVID-19 forced a transition to remote learning in the spring of that year, they were already demonstrating strong results.



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—Dr. Glen Carson,  
Director of Assessment  
and Accountability

## Setting a Strong Foundation with Professional Development

By 2020–2021, districtwide implementation commenced. Because everything was happening in a still-unfamiliar remote environment, embedded support became even more critical. The district was strategic and purposeful in its professional development for the year. It wanted to continue to develop educators' capacity to meet the instructional needs of students, while saving time on instructional planning and improving alignment to standards.

District leaders explained that all *i-Ready* resources were aligned to South Carolina standards, which gave teachers confidence to proceed. Teachers then participated in professional development sessions led by curriculum specialists, who explained the cross-curricular benefits of using *i-Ready* to support reading in science and social studies. This reinforced the commitment to teamwork and enhanced all teachers' understanding of the impact they could have on student learning. Because teachers were working from the school buildings while teaching students remotely, they were able to help one another improve their effectiveness throughout the year.

The successful implementation was supported by Pruitt's creation of "*i-Ready* Champions," a designated group of educators across each building who were available to answer teachers' questions as they began using the tool. Several members of the district team also attended a Curriculum Associates regional summit in Columbia, SC, which supplied them with useful new ideas.

According to Perrin, bringing together all the required teacher materials into one location via Teacher Toolbox was helpful in getting teachers onboarded and comfortable with the available resources. Teachers now had a single location where they could go to get whatever they'd need. Further, intervention was also supported:

"With South Carolina implementing the Multi-Tiered System of Supports laws, we are able to use *i-Ready* as both a dyslexia screener and a Gifted and Talented evaluator," says Perrin. "It applies these laws into their format."

In response to some of the questions that arose from teachers during the 2020–2021 implementation, the district instituted additional training for novice teachers (those who were brand new to *i-Ready*) heading into 2021–2022, provided by the lead professional development specialist from Curriculum Associates.

"Teachers wanted to know, 'How is this going to drive my instruction? How can I use all the resources?'" says Perrin. "Those novice training sessions received rave reviews. They allowed teachers to ask targeted questions in a supportive environment. I'm going to make sure Dr. Pruitt keeps that in the budget going forward."

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## Maximize Educator Effectiveness

"Strategic abandonment" is now the name of the game, according to Pruitt, when it comes to deciding which programs to use. Instead of adding more, leadership is simplifying and streamlining to eliminate standalone programs whose functions can be covered by *i-Ready* and other key tools. The benefits of this approach aren't lost on teachers, who appreciate the consolidation of resources.

"Teachers want to be good at what they are doing," says Pruitt. "They want to be the best for our students. If a teacher is asked to use too many different tools, it's difficult to be great with all of them. But if the teacher only works with *i-Ready*, and *i-Ready* is a tool that meets each of our needs, the teachers can become really good at it."

The strategic abandonment process also provides an opportunity to clearly communicate why certain tools are the ones being retained and emphasized.

"We're defining the 'why,'" adds Pruitt. "We're making it clear why these tools were chosen to support our students. Everyone can get on board when you do that."

The district has also selected other strategic resources to help it support all students. Mike Schmoker's book *Focus*, along with John Hollingsworth and Silvia Ybarra's *Explicit Direct Instruction*, are two resources Pruitt has emphasized in collective professional development to improve lesson planning and instructional techniques. Teachers have also received professional development on the Responsive Classroom Approach to Student and Staff Well-Being, a need that has acquired new resonance in the wake of COVID-19.

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## Empowerment Spans from Teachers to Students and Families

Getting all teachers centered around the “why” of the district’s tools and approach has empowered each educator as a stakeholder in the district’s larger goals. Additionally, Spartanburg 7 is implementing a new instructional framework developed by a group of the best teachers from across the district. Beginning in the 2019–2020 school year, up until the point when the pandemic disrupted the calendar, the district had a team of 50 teachers developing a research-based instructional model. The teachers gathered each month to develop and refine the framework, with substitutes taking their place in the classroom. In the 2021–2022 year, they are resuming these efforts and expanding them with the addition of three instructional framework coaches who will support implementation.

Spartanburg 7 has also experienced increased student empowerment. Educators have been intentional about sharing detailed *i-Ready Diagnostic* data with each student, which creates transparency around students’ strengths and struggles. When students directly review their own data and have a chance to discuss it with their teacher, they gain a deeper understanding of where they need to improve, along with increased confidence and motivation to do so.

Perrin also notes how these “data chats” have enabled more productive parent communication. Students take their Diagnostic reports home after discussing with their teacher and have a chance to share with their parents and work on collaborative goal setting. Giving parents transparency into the *i-Ready* data then leads to much more productive parent–teacher conferences. When each party is empowered with accurate, personalized information, they all feel a sense of ownership in the learning journey.

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## A Student-Centered Approach Leads to Success

When it comes to student achievement, Spartanburg 7 has a clear goal: to meet or exceed the state average in all tested areas. Because working toward such a goal requires consistent evaluation, and due to recently enacted South Carolina laws that mandate formative assessments for all students Grades K–9, Carson conducted “Diagnostic dailies” and would let the principals and other administrators know where they stood.

“The goal is to get everyone tested,” he says. “At the end of each school day, I would go to the *i-Ready Diagnostic* Status reports, pull those, and send them out like a scoreboard showing the percentage complete at each school in reading and math.”

While teachers were busy delivering remote instruction, this process reminded them that they were “all in this together” with respect to helping students exceed their goals. This rigorous approach helped the district achieve nearly 100 percent participation in 2020–2021 assessments.

The district is also focused on improving student performance by mastering state content standards as evidenced by state assessments.

“We count on *i-Ready* to help us prepare our students to do well on the state tests,” says Carson. “We want the transfer of learning to go outside of *i-Ready* for the student, and one of the ways to demonstrate that is through success on the SC Ready tests.”

At the end of the 2020–2021 school year, 25 percent of Spartanburg 7’s fourth graders exceeded expectations on SC Ready in English Language Arts, with 43 percent meeting or exceeding expectations overall. In Mathematics, 48 percent of third graders met or exceeded expectations for SC Ready.

The consistent through line in each of Spartanburg 7’s efforts and successes is a focus on students at the center. When district leaders are evaluating new instructional tools and resources, educators are developing a new teaching framework, teachers are sharing Diagnostic results with families, and in countless other ways, the district demonstrates clear evidence that a student-centered approach leads to success.

“All of our programs and initiatives are structured to intersect with the students at the heart of everything,” says Pruitt. “If we make sure to keep that in place, we know we’ll get the results we desire.”

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Results for Spartanburg 7	
Math	Reading
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students met or exceeded Typical Growth in all grades.</li> <li>Student placement levels grew 26% from fall 2021 (16%) to spring 2021 (42%).</li> <li>Students met or exceeded their Typical Growth by 122% when students used <i>i-Ready</i> for 30 minutes and passed lessons with 70% or higher.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Students met or exceeded Typical Growth in most grades.</li> <li>Student placement levels grew 19% from fall 2021 (30%) to spring 2021 (49%).</li> <li>Students met or exceeded their Typical Growth by 142% when students used <i>i-Ready</i> for 30 minutes and passed lessons with 70% or higher.</li> </ul>

# Want to build a data-driven culture?

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