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Case Study

Syracuse City School District, NY

Initiative Alignment Helps Everyone in the District Make Sense of How Everything Fits Together to Support Students

Located in upstate New York, the Syracuse City School District (SCSD) is an urban school district that serves over 20,000 students across 34 schools, making it one of New York State's "Big 5" districts. With one of the highest refugee intake rates in the country, the student population in Syracuse is extremely diverse - 76 different languages are spoken by 3500 students from 76 different countries. In 2014-15, the last year data are available, 15,500 SCSD students were classified by New York state as "economically disadvantaged" as the city struggled with high poverty rates among families.

The Challenge

After analyzing data in 2012-13 school year showing high suspension rates among certain student populations, SCSD began to work district-wide on an emphasis of restorative practices for discipline as well as training on culturally responsive pedagogy. By the 2015-16 school year, suspensions had been cut in half.

SCSD has also struggled with low proficiency levels in math and ELA, with teachers needing to account for a wide variation in background knowledge and essential skills among students.

To help focus on individual students' needs, SCSD worked at the district level to rethink social-emotional learning, how the district uses data, and how its curriculum and pedagogy was preparing students for college and career. However, many staff and school leaders felt the tension of a wide variety of initiatives as they worked to keep focus on a larger, cohesive vision.

How We Helped

At the district level, Education Elements first set out to help create a visual roadmap of SCSD's key priorities and the role that personalized learning would play in supporting them. By working to align initiatives at the district level, EE was able to gain a sound understanding of the key priorities of the district, such as restorative justice and culturally responsive teaching, and how blended, personalized instructional models could enhance these practices.

Ed Elements then worked with teams of school leaders and teachers to set their own visions for PL and connect aspirational goals with key problems of practice. Each school created a design plan with PL models that has served as a guiding document for reflection during the school year.

Ed Elements has helped facilitate improved collaboration between district staff and school staff through learning walks that occur throughout the district. Schools have begun to host their peers and open their doors for critical feedback and reflection, creating a more open and responsive culture as reflections and data collected during the walks have helped the district continue to set priorities for support.