

## District leaders found a new solution to an old problem and watched their students with special needs flourish

**R**honda Cleeland was standing in her office, now about 10 minutes into her new job as a director for the Ontario-Montclair School District, when the assistant superintendent walked in and said, “Rhonda, improve the SST process.”

To those who don’t know what an SST process is, such a casual request would appear to have a quick fix. Just unplug it and plug it back in, right?

Not quite.

SST stands for Student Study Team and is a pre-Special Education referral process. This pre-referral team goes by different names in different districts but the intent is the same: it’s a positive, team-oriented approach to assisting students with concerns related to their school performance and experience. The team works together to identify a student’s learning strengths and needs, put strategies into action, and evaluates their impact so students can succeed in the general education classroom.

Like most districts, this process was paper-driven, consisting of intervention logs and forms. As one can imagine, that process was time consuming, inconsistent and lacked district oversight.

So in 2013—just minutes after stepping into her new role—Cleeland and her team set forth to “improve the SST process” for their 21,000-student district.

Cleeland decided they needed to replace their paper system with a more efficient software management system. “I knew it would be difficult at first—change is always difficult, especially at a busy school site,” Cleeland said. “But our SST process was a time consuming paper process and we knew we needed to improve it.”

For the last five years, Cleeland and the rest of Ontario-Montclair’s teachers and administrators have relied on a program called Partnering4StudentSuccess (P4SS) to monitor and track student progress through the pre-referral process.



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The program makes more than 500 research-based interventions available to teachers that head up general education classrooms. The ultimate goal is to ensure that all students are able to receive the support they need in the general education classroom, rather than be placed in Special Education.

Cara Molina, principal of Sultana Elementary School in the Ontario-Montclair district, said there was widespread support of the idea behind the program from the start.

“There was a new way of thinking about the pre-referral process,” Molina said. “This was now a method to document interventions and support so that students could be successful through early intervention.”

Cleeland said that the transition from paper to P4SS didn’t happen overnight, but that dedication from school and district staff to undergo training and work to use the program to its fullest potential has greatly improved student outcomes.

In fact, she said, the vast majority of students are seeing success in the pre-referral process and are excelling in the general education classroom.

On average, 86.5 percent of Ontario-Montclair students who received early

intervention through the program saw their issues resolved in the general education classroom.

“Many students don’t even get to the SST process because teachers are given the tools to help students be successful in the classroom,” Cleeland said. “P4SS makes the pre-referral process consistent across every school in the district, and makes it more effective for teachers and students. We can see from the last five years of results that our decision is paying off.”

P4SS was developed by School Innovations & Achievement (SI&A), the company known for its early warning and intervention system Attention2Attendance, which tracks student absences and helps schools maintain communication with families about the importance of daily attendance.

In her nearly 15 years at SI&A, Christie Huus—the company’s director of product management—said she has seen how important strong leadership is in ensuring buy-in among each of the district’s stakeholders in order for students to make such gains.

“We know the importance of leadership when driving results, and I cannot say enough about the leadership at Ontario-Montclair,” Huus said. “At the site level and at the district level, they’ve really from day one had the vision of what could be. The entire Ontario-Montclair staff’s dedication to improving student outcomes is impressive.”

Huus noted that P4SS is meant to help new and experienced teachers address a spectrum of student concerns related to academic, physical, emotional, behavioral, social, attendance, speech and language challenges that can be better addressed in a general education setting.

Molina is now carrying that mission forward as the district’s newest director, ensuring her staff and students continue to get the support they need to thrive.