

Driving impact through implementation science

How Charleston County School District beat the “implementation dip” and increased grade 3 growth by 5.6% with Amplify CKLA



Background

South Carolina's Charleston County School District serves approximately 49,000 students across 48 elementary schools. The student population is 50.1% White, 28.9% Black, 14.7% Hispanic, 4.4% two or more races, 1.6% Asian, 0.2% Hawaiian, and 0.1% American Indian. 9.6% are multi-language learners. 40% are eligible for the federal free and reduced-price meal program.

Challenge

For Charleston County School District, the path to literacy excellence had been long and arduous. Schools across the district had been using multiple instructional resources for more than a decade, which led to inconsistency. As district instructional specialist Dana Sullivan describes it, "Twelve to fifteen years was a long time for everyone to do whatever they wanted."

The tipping point came when South Carolina's updated Read to Succeed legislation specified that, starting in the 2024–2025 school year, third graders not reading at grade level would face retention.

The district's core leadership team realized the urgent need to move from multiple instructional resources to a more consistent, cohesive approach across schools.

The team included Michelle Simmons, Chief Academic Officer; Lashawna Harris, Director of Instructional Programs; and Susan Rawlings, Director of Teaching and Learning.

They knew that previous efforts had not reliably translated district plans into classroom practice. Leading change across such a large district would require strategic vision, systematic execution, and strong communication to reach every classroom.

Solution

The team began the process of core literacy adoption when South Carolina approved five publishers for consideration. After extensive reviews, including teacher panels, parent panels, and public panels, the district's selection committee chose Amplify Core Knowledge Language Arts (CKLA).

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What appealed to the committee about Amplify CKLA was its grounding in the Science of Reading. They believed the high-quality instructional materials would bring consistency of content across all schools and ensure equitable access to knowledge for all students.

Simmons and Harris identified three main priorities for their first year of Amplify CKLA implementation:

1. Communicate about the curriculum to stakeholders.
2. Address the barriers that typically arise when onboarding a new program, by establishing buy-in, building the knowledge and skill of teachers and leaders, and ensuring the integrity of the implementation.
3. Establish systems and structures for alignment across all schools.

To better understand their starting point, the district leadership and Amplify personnel conducted learning walks and collected data on the implementation. The data revealed a significant gap between district vision and classroom practice across their vast system. This insight led them to focus their efforts on developing a coaching strategy with comprehensive support systems.

With Amplify's guidance, the district leadership created a structure for consistent monthly meetings and communication with their coaches. This structure increased the coaches' familiarity with Amplify CKLA, and their support made it possible to create resources that were shared across the district. The structure also served as an avenue to share issues and collaborate on problem-solving that would help inform district-wide learning.

The impact of this coaching strategy extended beyond implementation support. "This process was a true highlight of my professional growth this year," says Rachel Adams, literacy coach at Midland Park Primary School. "The district leadership team provided a space to collaborate, solve problems, align standards, analyze assessments, and deepen our understanding of Amplify CKLA. The guidance has been invaluable in strengthening my ability to support teachers."



Impact

Despite testing almost two months earlier than the previous year, the district avoided the implementation dip that often occurs in the first year of a new program.

From 2024 to 2025, Charleston students in grades 3 through 5 improved their SC Ready growth rates. Third graders led this progress with a 5.6% increase in the number of students meeting or exceeding expectations.

Charleston County School District: Literacy growth in the SC READY assessment



The transformation extended beyond test scores. After years of fragmented instruction, the district achieved something equally valuable: consistency. “There is more consistency. There’s more support. There’s a better understanding. We’re all speaking the same language now,” Sullivan says. The systems and structures put in place during the first year created the foundation for sustained growth.

Conclusion

Charleston County's implementation journey demonstrates that strong support structures and clear alignment can drive meaningful improvements in reading outcomes. The district's systematic approach to making standards connections visible helped teachers see that they weren't just teaching science and social studies content; they were teaching essential literacy skills through that content.

Looking ahead, the district faces leadership transitions, but its priority remains clear: building administrators' understanding. "Getting our administrators to understand CKLA, the Science of Reading, and how it all works will be a huge benefit to sustaining implementation across the district," Sullivan says.

"We think we have the right people and the right tools in place," says elementary district instructional specialist Mia Pace. "The story is just going to get better."



For more information about Amplify's complete early literacy suite based on the Science of Reading, visit **amplify.com**.

This story reflects the experience of Charleston County School District, as told from the perspective of district leaders Dana Sullivan, Rachel Adams and Mia Pace, and includes SC READY data from 2024–25 as of January 30, 2026.

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