



CASE STUDY

Independent School District 728

Expanding capacity for highly effective mental health support – without implementation fatigue.

How one district's strong MTSS framework delivered mental health support effectively to Tier 2 students

Situation

School counselors at Independent School District 728 (MN) were struggling to reach the rapidly rising levels of students with subclinical levels of anxiety, depression, ADHD and motivation. The data showed these students were falling behind because of these non-academic barriers to success – but their existing student support teams were at capacity and did not have the bandwidth to provide the skills and support students needed to make transformational change.

The district was facing teacher exhaustion and implementation fatigue, and they were searching for a program that could help existing staff deliver vital support to more students at Tier 2 – with the hope that if they could produce outcomes that would avoid higher and more costly intervention for students – all without a heavy lift.

In a district encompassing a large geographic footprint of rural and suburban areas, including four unique high schools with a wide range of diversity, the program's success depended on staff buy-in. That meant conducting a pilot, measuring results, and demonstrating impact before asking more staff to jump on board.

ISD 728 piloted a program for at-risk seniors in May 2019. Following its success – seeing some very at-risk students make it to graduation – the pilot was expanded. When the pandemic hit, the district was prepared to scale.

Partnership

In ISD 728, staff saw a connection between mental health, self-regulation and positive behavior choices throughout their high school classrooms. While the district had a strong multi-tier system of support, district Director of Prevention and Safety, Rachel Hilyar, MEd, recognized, with the encouragement from school counseling teams, that another layer of intervention support, would benefit extremely disengaged students at their four high schools and six middle schools to help them get back on track. The district partnered with EmpowerU to deliver daily digestible bites of skill building instruction to disengaged students supported by daily motivational coaching and accountability by EmpowerU online credentialed instructors that fueled the positive outcomes the district was hoping to see. Seeing previously disengaged students graduate provided compelling data to continue the partnership.

At ISD 728, addressing mental health and whole child well-being has been a school board goal since 2019. Since its initial pilot program, the district has continued to fold more EmpowerU resources into its existing multi-tier system of supports each subsequent year.

In the summer of 2021, at-risk K-8 students participated in EmpowerU's Tier 1 classroom lessons. Teachers experienced first-hand the turnkey curriculum that required minimal training and almost no teacher prep time. Students enjoyed learning to "take charge" of their thoughts and feelings and practiced calming exercises when big feelings were racing through their bodies. Today, ISD 728 uses the EmpowerU classroom modules for their K-8 students and in summer programming.

EmpowerU is part of the MTSS Tier 2 Level of Support for both high school and middle school students. With EmpowerU doing most of the heavy lifting, 728 staff sees the benefits of the targeted services. Once students with non-academic needs (anxiety, AdHD, depression, avoidance, behavior challenges) are identified, 1:1 EmpowerU coaches begin to build relationships with students, asynchronously through the EmpowerU portal. Through a combination of skill-building lessons and 1:1 coaching, students increase motivation, confidence and self-regulation leading to improved behaviors, academic outcomes and wellbeing.

ISD 728 has also taken advantage of EmpowerU's Educator PD, covering the cost of the course and the teachers' time, to improve staff wellbeing and effectiveness in social-emotional learning. The educator course reconnects teachers with their why, reteaches self-regulation and provides stress-coping and calming exercises that support wellbeing.

Results & Outcomes

Through the multi-touchpoints to deliver support to students with Tier 2 needs, teachers and school counselors saw changes in classroom habits and behaviors. Students reported increased personal well-being and academic success followed.

Students and teachers share positive feedback and data from EmpowerU. 95% of students made goal progress and 91% of teachers noticed student improvement in grades, wellbeing, attendance.

Results from Tier 2 Secondary (Middle and High School)



95% of participants found the EmpowerU course helpful



100% of participants rated the EmpowerU coach as crucial to their success



91% of participants would recommend EmpowerU to a friend



95% of participants made goal progress

Results From Staff Survey

91%

Noticed student improvement in grades, wellbeing, and attendance.

100%

Rated EmpowerU as easy to use

Quotes

"Before EmpowerU, I was such an anxious person that I wouldn't even try to help myself in situations. Now, I know how to process and accept my thoughts and emotions and I am so grateful for that!"

HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT

"My students have been struggling with mental health which has put them behind academically. EmpowerU helped them learn skills to support their wellbeing, which helped improve their grades too. It really is a win-win."

SCHOOL COUNSELOR