



## Transforming teacher work-life balance with Thoughtexchange



[Spartanburg County School District Two](#) (SCSD2) is a high-performing South Carolina district with 15 schools serving over 10,000 students. As a district that also takes pride in supporting its staff, SCSD2 Superintendent Dr. Scott Mercer was surprised to learn in 2016 that his educators were feeling extremely overworked.

“We had heard that we were working them pretty hard, so we made a few changes and I thought those would make a difference,” Dr. Mercer explains.

Having partnered with Thoughtexchange [several times in the past](#)—including on a \$120 million [bond campaign](#) that passed with 80 percent support—the SCSD2 team decided to run an exchange that asked staff about their work-life balance.

“I was frankly expecting to get some ‘attaboys’ and pats on the back,” Dr. Mercer notes. “But, not only did I get very few pats on the back, I got a lot more of: ‘You better do something because I am working like crazy, my family hardly knows me during the school year, and I think we can do this better.’”

“That exchange opened our eyes and we knew we had to do something substantial. Sometimes from a district office level, we forget what we’re asking of our people. Thoughtexchange gave us insight into exactly what it is the individual teacher may face in a week’s time.”

### Focusing on things that make a real difference

The SCSD2 team took away several key insights from their first exchange and used them to improve work-life balance.

“We were able to see exactly where our people were feeling the pressure,” Dr. Mercer explains. “Thoughtexchange gave us a lot of insight into how some things we were doing maybe weren’t giving us quite the return on investment we thought.”

“We decided to do whatever we could to let off steam and make substantive



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**Dr. Scott Mercer -  
Superintendent,  
Spartanburg County  
School District Two**



changes they could appreciate. We have collapsed initiatives, focused on what will make a real difference, and taken great pains to protect instructional planning time.”

He adds that the Thoughtexchange Star Step was the key because it lets staff collectively prioritize what’s important, so leadership can learn whether a thought is only important to one person or supported by many.

“The Star Step made the difference for us in figuring out exactly what we needed to do to help facilitate our employees’ work-life balance,” Dr. Mercer says.

A year after SCSD2 made changes based on their first exchange, they launched a follow-up using the same questions to again ask staff how they felt about work-life balance, and test the effectiveness of their changes. That exchange showed the changes were working.

## CHALLENGE

- Improve the work-life balance and energize staff who felt overworked
- Test the effectiveness of change initiatives on a year-over-year basis

## SOLUTION

- Two Advanced Exchanges that let staff confidentially share and rate their thoughts
- Data analysis that revealed staff experience and recommended clear action steps

## RESULTS

- Happier staff who appreciate having their thoughts heard and acted upon
- Enthusiastic teachers providing engaged students with rigorous content in positive classroom environments
- More applications for teaching positions in the district

## A truly transformational experience

“I’ve heard from many teachers, ‘thank you for not only listening to us, but for actually doing something about it,’” says SCSD2 Assistant Superintendent of Instructional Services, Dr. Angela Hinton.

“We have a staff right now that’s firing on all eight cylinders,” Dr. Mercer adds. “The level of student engagement and teacher enthusiasm is like I’ve never seen it before. Classroom environments are so positive and the content is so rigorous. I think that’s partly because we’re taking care of our people’s needs.”

Keri Belue, a Grade 8 ELA teacher at Rainbow Lake Middle School, says both the changes and the Thoughtexchange process improved staff and student experience at her school.

“The district’s focusing on our lives outside school definitely helped me focus more in the classroom,” Belue says. “When we have the district office asking our opinions and following up with changes, it definitely has a trickle-down effect from leadership to students. Teacher morale has definitely been at an all-time high in my school.”

Dr. Mercer adds he’s confident his staff are now positive community ambassadors for the district. And that has helped increase job applications during a time when districts everywhere are finding it harder to fill teaching positions.

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