

FROM PILOT TO DISTRICTWIDE TRANSFORMATION: HOW MEMPHIS-SHELBY COUNTY SCHOOLS IS GROWING GREATNESS WITH 7 MINDSETS



Overview

Memphis-Shelby County Schools (MSCS), Tennessee's largest urban school district, serves approximately 110,000 students across more than 200 schools. For district leaders, supporting those students means addressing more than academics alone. It means creating conditions where students and educators feel connected, supported, confident, and ready to succeed.

That commitment led MSCS to 7 Mindsets.

Beginning with 15 model schools in fall 2025, the district introduced 7 Mindsets as part of a broader strategy to strengthen student and staff well-being, school culture, and academic readiness. By spring 2026, the district had expanded 7 Mindsets across its schools, supported by a comprehensive implementation strategy that included professional learning, coaching, school-level ambassadors, common pacing, leadership support, ongoing pulse checks, and community engagement.

Within the first year, educators were already reporting encouraging signs: stronger student engagement, increased confidence, more meaningful classroom conversations, and participation from students who had previously been reluctant to speak up.

For MSCS, the work was never simply about adding another program. It was about beginning a culture transformation.

The Challenge: Moving Beyond a "Band-Aid"

MSCS's journey toward a comprehensive approach to student development began years before the district selected 7 Mindsets.

Beginning in 2017, the district embedded core student-development competencies into its school counseling curriculum. The COVID-19 pandemic intensified student needs, and the district continued evolving its approach through a districtwide curriculum, the establishment and later re-establishment of a dedicated department, and multiple cross-functional curriculum vetting processes.

By 2025, district leaders were looking for something deeper. MSCS was navigating the realities facing a large, complex urban school system while also working against persistent negative narratives surrounding Memphis itself. Dr. Lori Phillips, MSCS Director of Social-Emotional Learning, described the effect those narratives can have on students, teachers, school leaders, and the broader community. "How hard is it to keep pushing forth when you're always hearing the negative?" she asked.

District Snapshot

Students: Approximately 110,000

Schools: 222 total, including 156 district-managed schools

Employees: Approximately 14,000

Teachers: Approximately 6,500

7 Mindsets partnership began: 2025–26 school year

Initial implementation: 15 model schools in fall 2025

Expansion: Districtwide use by spring 2026

District priorities: Academics, Attendance, Attitude, Athletics, and the Arts



The district wanted an approach that could help change more than isolated behaviors or short-term outcomes. “We thought out what would be a key way, what would help us not just Band-Aid, but remedy the narrative, the feel, the approach, the mindset of our district,” Phillips explained. “Because we know when we have happier children, happier teachers, happier school leaders, then we have happier communities.”

The need connected directly to Superintendent Dr. Roderick Richmond’s district priorities, known as the 5 A’s: Academics, Attendance, Attitude, Athletics, and the Arts. For Phillips and her team, “Attitude” was not separate from those other priorities. It was foundational to them.

Why 7 Mindsets: Changing the Way a Community Thinks

In 2025, MSCS convened another cross-functional team to vet curriculum options. The district moved forward with 7 Mindsets for the 2025–26 school year, building on years of work to create a stronger foundation for students and staff.

What resonated with district leaders was the opportunity to address the underlying beliefs and perspectives that influence how people respond to challenges, relationships, goals, and setbacks. That distinction mattered.

MSCS was not seeking another initiative that lived only within a classroom lesson. Leaders wanted an approach capable of reaching adults and students, supporting academics and college and career readiness, and creating a common language that could connect an enormous district. “Students have to be well, staff have to be well in order to do this work,” Dr. Rhonda Hill, MSCS School Counseling Services Manager, explained.

The 7 Mindsets Transformation Framework aligned with that vision. Its full-immersion approach begins by building adult capacity, then extends mindset-based learning through classrooms, leadership practices, families, and the broader community. The goal is not simply lesson completion, but a culture in which shared language and beliefs reinforce connection, purpose, resilience, accountability, and growth.

For MSCS, that adults-first component became especially important. “You cannot talk about something and expect it if you can’t feel it yourself,” Phillips said.

Starting with Adults

Before expecting educators to bring the 7 Mindsets to students, MSCS wanted adults to experience the approach themselves. Professional learning reached multiple levels of the organization, from senior leadership and regional superintendents to counselors, social workers, school ambassadors, principals, and classroom teachers. The first-year rollout included onsite and virtual professional development, including a virtual training opportunity designed to reach more than 6,000 teachers.

For Phillips, the response to the adult learning was a pivotal moment. During training, she recalled seeing laptops close, phones get put away, and participants become deeply engaged in reflecting on their own lives. “If you can experience it, then you know what the students will experience and ultimately the parents,” she said.

The district began describing this adult layer as Tier 0, the foundation beneath the work with students. “We can’t pour in empty,” Phillips said. “If we’re talking about let’s look at the glass half full, then we want to make sure that we’re modeling that as well.”

That adults-first philosophy closely reflects the 7 Mindsets Transformation Framework, which emphasizes developing the capacity and mindset of the adults responsible for shaping school culture before expecting transformation to take root with students.



An Intentional Pilot: 15 Model Schools

Implementing a new districtwide approach across a system the size of MSCS required deliberate planning, and the district began in September 2025 with 15 model schools. The district's five regions each identified three schools to participate. According to Phillips, some of those campuses were serving particularly challenging communities or working through school-culture concerns. The district wanted to learn from those schools first. "We wanted to iron out the kinks and to see, hey, will this really, really work?" Phillips explained.

The model schools became a first semester proving ground for implementation. MSCS and 7 Mindsets worked together through onsite support, school visits, surveys, professional learning, planning, and coaching. Insights measurement tools were also incorporated to give the district a way to understand student needs and begin monitoring impact.

Schools retained flexibility in how they brought the mindsets to life.

- ✓ At Hanley Elementary, staff were introduced to the content in weekly meetings before incorporating student instruction into "Magnificent Mindset Fridays."
- ✓ Craigmont Middle School also implemented lessons each Friday.
- ✓ Raleigh-Egypt High School built 7 Mindsets into structures already in place, with Vice Principal Kevin S. Conley providing teachers weekly topics, tutorial resources, classroom support, and accountability.

That combination of consistency and flexibility helped each school make the work relevant to its own community.



Scaling with Support, Not Mandates Alone

MSCS leaders understood that expanding the work would require more than access to curriculum. The district created a layered implementation infrastructure designed to keep schools connected and supported.

At the school level, administrators and counselors were joined by designated ambassadors who served as a bridge between individual campuses and the district team. At the central-office level, the work brought together student-support leaders across multiple functions.

The district and 7 Mindsets also established:

- Weekly leadership strategy meetings
- Weekly coaching
- Monthly open labs for school counselors
- Frequent support labs for schools
- Weekly Superintendent communications
- Site visits
- A dedicated 7 Mindsets landing page
- Leadership collaboration and planning
- Regular school pulse checks designed to identify challenges in real time
- A common scope and sequence for teachers and school counselors

Phillips described the philosophy behind that support in distinctly Memphis terms. "We don't want this to be just one more thing," she said. "We want them to know that we're riding with them. What we call here in Memphis, we're riding shotgun with them every step of the way."



From 15 Schools to Districtwide Implementation

The model-school approach gave MSCS the confidence to move quickly. After beginning with 15 campuses in September 2025, the district expanded 7 Mindsets across its schools during the second semester. By spring 2026, MSCS reported districtwide use of 7 Mindsets, with school counselors also using targeted Wellness resources to support students with additional needs.

For Phillips, one of the most powerful outcomes of districtwide expansion was the opportunity to create a common language across grade levels. “Regardless of if a baby is in 11th grade or first grade, when they’re at home and at the table, they still can talk about how *We are Connected*, how *Everything is Possible*,” she said.

That shared language is central to the district’s vision. In a system of MSCS’s size, students may encounter many teachers, counselors, schools, and support systems throughout their educational journey. A common framework gives those different experiences a connecting thread.



First-Year Success: Student Voice, Confidence & Engagement

Within months, educators in the model schools were seeing early signs that the approach was resonating with students. Across elementary, middle, and high school settings, those reflections point to a common early result: more students feeling comfortable contributing, reflecting, and connecting.

At Hanley Elementary, counselor Leatryce J. Edwards-Stanley reported that students actively participated in lessons and looked forward to the activities. At Craigmont Middle School, teacher Cassandra Broome saw a similar response. And at Raleigh-Egypt High School, Conley reported that participation increased as implementation became more consistent.

A Transformation That Extends Beyond Students

MSCS also began intentionally carrying the mindsets beyond student lessons. During Teacher Appreciation Week, the district incorporated an adult-focused “Teacher’s Corner” into communications, reinforcing the idea that educator well-being must remain part of the work.

The district also brought families into the experience. At an April 2026 Parent and Student Summit, more than 500 parents and students attended a community celebration that included an introduction to 7 Mindsets, dedicated sessions for families, student performances, and engagement with district leaders, board members, central-office staff, and the 7 Mindsets team.

The district extended communications into the broader Memphis community as well, including interviews with local radio outlets and outreach designed to reach Spanish-speaking families.

For Dr. Phillips, this broader reach is essential to what makes the work meaningful. “7 Mindsets is equipping our students with more than academic tools,” she said. “It is shaping how they respond to challenges, believe in themselves, and persevere long after they leave our classrooms.” She continued: “Its impact is reciprocated across our schools, strengthening teachers, staff, administrators, families, and ultimately our communities.”

Implementation Was the First Goal. Fidelity Is Next.

MSCS leaders are candid that year one was about establishing the foundation. The district created implementation plans, scopes and sequences, support structures, communication rhythms, and accountability systems designed to help schools begin the work consistently. It also developed a Gold, Silver, and Bronze recognition model to celebrate schools demonstrating strong usage and participation.

The next phase will focus on deepening fidelity. “This year it was about making sure that we were implementing,” Phillips said, “but this next year is going to be about fidelity.”

MSCS is also exploring ways to connect 7 Mindsets more intentionally to its multi-tiered student-support structures, including targeted support through school counselors and social workers and possible use of mindset-based learning as part of re-entry supports for students returning from suspension.

Importantly, MSCS leaders describe improvements in discipline and attendance as future measures they intend to monitor, not as first-year outcomes already attributable to 7 Mindsets. The evidence available from the district's first year is strongest around implementation, participation, engagement, student voice, adult buy-in, and early culture-building momentum.

Growing Greatness Across Memphis

The first year of the MSCS and 7 Mindsets partnership demonstrates what can happen when a district treats mindset-based learning as culture-building work rather than another initiative to add to a crowded list. MSCS started intentionally: with adults, with 15 model schools, with infrastructure for implementation, and with constant communication between district leaders, campuses, and the 7 Mindsets team.

Then it scaled. By spring 2026, the district had moved from a 15-school pilot to districtwide use, while educators reported students becoming more confident, more engaged, and more willing to share their voices. Families and community members were beginning to experience the mindsets as well.

The work is still evolving. MSCS leaders are clear that the next chapter will require stronger fidelity, continued measurement, and accountability. But the foundation is in place.

As Superintendent Richmond put it, "Greatness is growing here in Memphis-Shelby County Schools."



About 7 Mindsets

Founded in 2009, 7 Mindsets provides a transformational framework for schools, districts, and organizations nationwide. The company offers mindset-based and mental health curricula, professional development, and data measurement tools that empower growth and drive measurable impact. Its highly effective programs, validated at ESSA Level 2 and ESSA Level 4, have been proven to improve student engagement, behavior, attendance, and academic achievement. 7 Mindsets has been used by over 5 million students and educators in all 50 states.