

SandHoke Early College High School, Raeford, NC

[SandHoke Early College High School](#) is one of two high schools in [Hoke County](#), North Carolina. In 2021-22, it served 458 students in grades 9-13, with 99% eligible for free lunch, 1% Limited English Proficiency, and 2% students with a disability.

Interview Date: March 2023

¹ Enrollment and free/reduced-price lunch data: <https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/schoolsearch/index.asp>

² LEP and SWD data: SandHoke Early College High School

Background and Catalyst

As an Early College High School, SandHoke is a public high school on a community college campus. There is a student application and selection process. Students can graduate with a high school diploma and an associate degree in four to five years. College courses and textbooks are free. The school's mission statement is clear about the importance of supporting every student: *The Mission of SandHoke Early College High School is to be a school of excellence, providing every student with high expectations and an innovative and personalized learning environment, supporting every student with a rigorous and relevant program of study, and preparing every student to graduate college and career ready* (SandHoke Early College High School, n.d.).

The current principal is in her 13th year at the school and has led the implementation of MTSS since 2017-18, when the district began implementing a district-wide MTSS initiative. The philosophy of developing a personalized learning environment for students, which aligns well with the multi-tiered support aspect of MTSS, was already part of the school's mission and vision as an Early College High School. (Visit the [Early College Research Center](#) for information and research on Early College High Schools). The interviewee reported that the district's focus on MTSS pushed the high school to increase its efforts to document the supports planned for and provided to students. MTSS now looks "more effective, efficient, and documented." She described the district focus on MTSS as being a catalyst in helping the school articulate more clearly how they are providing supports to every student. As a result, the school is more purposeful in making sure that student supports are "sustainable, equitable, and equal...every student getting that opportunity for us to make sure they are doing okay."

The Present: What Does MTSS Look Like Now?

Leadership: Vision, Teams, Structures, and Processes

The Early College High School model is one that encourages buy-in from all staff to the mission of the school. Thus, rather than having a designated school MTSS leader, the principal described a "whole team concept" that includes all staff: "everybody leads, everybody has input, everybody shares ideas." This approach is aided by the small faculty size, with just 20 teachers and half a dozen other staff members. Teachers in the school are organized by grade cohorts and meet monthly to talk about student progress, reflect on their approaches with struggling students and develop support strategies for those students. Teacher collaboration is an ongoing expectation. The principal and teacher teams review every transcript to match students to appropriate classes.

"When you put somebody in the lead [they are responsible and everyone else just goes along with it]. But when you say, 'You all are leaders,' you all are equally responsible. And I guess in a smaller school, you can do that."

They begin in January reviewing transcripts to begin planning student schedules for the upcoming year, which helps students remain on track for their pathway.

The principal described her vision for MTSS as one that focuses primarily on prevention. For example, she encourages the use of a problem-solving approach to identify and address the root cause when students are observed to struggle with a particular class. She also stressed the importance of regular communication between staff, students, and their families using tools like Canvas and Blackboard.

Student Supports

As an Early College High School, SandHoke has embedded the mission of preparing students for college and work into a well-rounded approach to student support that focuses not just on academic behaviors, but also on behavioral and other life skills that build readiness for adulthood. For example, because attendance is so critical to academic success, the school has a policy of making a phone call to the student to check on them if they are absent for several days. This checking-in with students is part of the school commitment to personalization (“getting to know your students and what obstacles they may face in being successful”).

Regular 100-minute academic classes are structured such that students can practice learning concepts independently with feedback and support from the teacher as needed. Students are held accountable for submitting all of their assignments by the end of each week. Failure to turn in work results in a phone call home. Additional student support is offered in tutorials, weekly advisory periods, and student-led study hall.

Teachers offer **tutorials** before and after school and during lunch, and students are allowed to go to a tutorial offered by any teacher, not just their teacher of record. The opportunity to attend tutorials is messaged as a positive experience and a chance to better understand the content of a particular class, not a form of punishment. In addition to opportunities during the school day, virtual tutoring is also offered in the evening.

Every Friday morning the school has a one-hour **advisory period** for 9th through 11th graders that centers on providing social-emotional learning activities for grade-blended groups of about 16 students. This is also a time when the school checks in with students (“takes the pulse”), shares announcements, features stories of successful alumni via videos, and recognizes students and teachers for their accomplishments. The Friday advisory period is followed by 45-minute classes that provide students with an opportunity to wrap up their learning for the week. Once per month on Friday, students report to a **student-led study hall**, while teachers participate in professional development. The school also offers student- and teacher-driven clubs for students who have earned their way out of Friday study hall by completing all of their work.

For disengaged students or those with behavioral needs, the principal feels strongly that suspensions are not the answer to problematic student behavior. Rather, the school strives to help students who are experiencing anger or other challenges to problem-solve about the causes of their behavior in a way that emphasizes the prevention of problems on the front end. The principal tries to educate students on making good decisions such that good consequences follow, and on developing a learner’s mindset which involves doing the work, submitting quality work, being on time, managing time and being open to learning.

Impacts of MTSS on the School

The school reported that it does a better job of tracking growth thanks to strengthened MTSS practices. Its overall performance score growth in 2021-22 was 8.99, which placed it within the top 10% of schools statewide. The principal also described anecdotal student success stories that she believed reflected the impact of the school mission and MTSS vision and framework for dealing with struggling students. As she explained, MTSS is a supporting framework for ensuring that every student “has an equal and equitable opportunity to be successful.” The idea is to reach every student, even—and especially—those who seem disengaged or need the most help and identify the support they need to get on track for success.

What Challenges Did the School Encounter with MTSS Implementation?

Establishing a Prevention-Oriented Mindset

A central challenge mentioned by this school is that suspension and punitive consequences are commonly used practices for addressing students' behavioral challenges in schools. As a small Early College High School with a strong focus on ensuring that every student receives the support needed to achieve their educational goals, SandHoke articulates a different approach to behavior management that is more prevention and student-focused than that found in traditional high schools. The principal noted that it takes time to gain teachers' trust and buy-in to this approach, which requires that teachers engage in problem-solving with students rather than referring them to school administrators for misbehavior.

“We have to think differently about how we approach our young people. MTSS is one of the frameworks that allow us to start thinking differently. But if we only think about MTSS as intervention, we won't change our school cultures. But if we think about MTSS as prevention, we can think out of the box.”

Advice for Other Schools

Include All Staff in Making the Prevention-Oriented Vision a Reality

The principal described the importance of including all school staff in the implementation of MTSS, saying “they need to see it, feel it and own it,” because every staff member has a role to play. She also encouraged schools to have honest discussions about staff perceptions of MTSS at the beginning of implementation so that the school can work through any potential problems as a team. Articulating a mindset that the school and its teachers function as a unit can help promote buy-in.

“The bottom line is we are here for students. If it's not about students, you shouldn't be wasting your energy on it.”

In its school improvement plan, SandHoke calls itself a “School of Hope” meaning, according to the principal, that “no matter what's going on in a child's life, when [they] come into this school, it's safe, secure, and everybody believes that [they] can be whatever [they're] dreaming to be.” The principal advises that the MTSS umbrella of practices should help schools build positive and personalized relationships with students and look for ways to help students grow instead of just punishing them for mistakes. Instead of ISS and suspension as go-to answers for bad behavior, their approach is to find out what's going on with the student and try to get to the core of it, for example, by helping them learn how to handle a particular conflict. MTSS is seen as a framework that allows the school to think purposefully about good decisions that support student success.

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