

## South Providence School, Waxhaw, NC

South Providence School is an alternative school serving students in grades 6-12 in suburban Union County Public Schools near Charlotte, North Carolina. In 2022-23 the school had a student population of 134, with 73% economically disadvantaged,<sup>1</sup> 15% English learners, and 33% students with a disability, on average (enrollment fluctuates throughout the year). The school's graduation rate was 24%.<sup>1</sup>

Interview Date: August 2023

<sup>1</sup> Enrollment, ED, and graduation rate data: <https://ncreports.ondemand.sas.com/src/school?school=900365&year=2023>

<sup>2</sup> LEP and SWD data: South Providence School

### Background and Catalyst

As an [alternative school](#), South Providence School provides a specialized environment designed to support students who demonstrate significant academic, social, or behavioral difficulties that put them at risk of school failure. Students who face extended suspensions or who are unable to attend their home school due to criminal offenses may also be assigned to an alternative school. The school is very small, with 90 to 130 students on campus at any one time for grades 6-12 and a staff of around 40. It may serve a total of nearly 300 students over the course of the year as students move in and out depending on the length of their assignment and their progress toward academic and behavioral goals. Thus, the student population is very transient.

The current principal has been at the school for 12 years, starting as a special education teacher before moving into assistant principal and then principal roles. South Providence began implementing PBIS to improve student behavior around 2006, which made the subsequent shift to a broader MTSS framework easier. Their MTSS implementation—part of a district-wide MTSS initiative—began in 2016-17 with district training for school MTSS leaders. In addition to the principal, who completed the district MTSS training, the school currently has a culture coach whose position is funded by a five-year [School Climate Transformation Grant](#). The culture coach has worked closely with the principal to strengthen the school's MTSS implementation over the past several years.

### The Present: What Does MTSS Look Like Now?

#### *Leadership: Vision, Teams, Structures, and Processes*

South Providence School's principal and culture coach have been very intentional about integrating MTSS into existing teaming structures and ensuring that they align their work with [exemplary practices in alternative education](#), the state's FAM-S self-assessment of MTSS; and [NCStar](#), the state's school improvement tool. They have also focused on establishing team agendas and pushed teams to be very purposeful about using their meeting time to collaboratively problem solve to address student needs.

Currently, the principal and culture coach lead an MTSS team that meets monthly and is composed of core teachers, a counselor, and the mental health therapist. This team reviews data on student behavior, academics, attendance, and social emotional learning (SEL) needs, with a focus on schoolwide core instruction and support. It also selects appropriate interventions for students who are identified by the other teams as being in need of support.

A Student Support Team (SST) meets weekly and focuses on data and interventions for SEL, behavior, and attendance. Its members include the principal, assistant principal, culture coach, behavior specialist, mental health therapist, student engagement coordinator, school nurse, social worker, and counselors.

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Two grade level teams (one middle, one high) of teachers, support staff, and an administrator, meet monthly and focus on core behavior and classroom management, while subject-specific professional learning communities (PLCs) focus on core academic achievement. Some members of the grade level teams and PLCs are also members of the core MTSS team, which allows them to facilitate cross-team communication.

Because the students assigned to South Providence School are already considered at risk of dropping out of school, and many experience truancy, academic failure, or behavior problems, the school reports that a traditional early warning system is not helpful for identifying students in need of support. About 90% of students entering the school score very low on state tests and perform two or more grade levels below their grade. The school uses iReady as a universal screener to better understand students' academic needs when they first arrive. Standard treatment protocols are used to structure supports for students.

### **Student Supports**

**Academic Supports.** South Providence's goal is to prepare students for success when they return to their home schools and ultimately graduate from high school. In grades 6-8, every student receives 60 minutes of small group math and ELA support every other day. A tutor works with grades 9-12 students who need help with math. Interventionists are also available for any student who needs one-on-one academic support.

**Behavior Supports.** The school has a Student Engagement Coordinator who monitors student attendance, maintains regular contact with parents, and works closely with the school social worker when a student is absent for extended periods of time. [CHAMPS](#) is used to explicitly teach students the school's behavioral expectations. When a student displays escalating negative behaviors during the school day, two behavior management technicians are available to meet with the student and attempt to deescalate the problematic behaviors so the student can return to class.

South Providence has worked to reframe In School Suspension (ISS), renaming it the Student Success Center and its two staff Student Success Facilitators. Rather than traditional ISS, which can operate more as a holding space in which students do "non-meaningful work," at South Providence, the Student Success Facilitators help the students referred to ISS understand and process the events that resulted in their placement. They use positive strategies with students to help them focus on the future, such as personal goal setting and the creation of vision boards—collages that represent motivational goals and dreams.

**Well-being Supports.** South Providence aims to encourage and understand students in a positive way on a daily basis. For example, the school's mental health therapist greets students as they arrive at school and exit their buses. The counseling staff interact with students as they collect phones and bags. The principal, culture coach, and behavior specialist observe students carefully, looking for any who exhibit concerning behaviors or appear emotionally dysregulated or in need of support. These students are pulled aside by counseling staff for a check-in. Tier 2 interventions include [Check-In/Check-Out](#) and small group skills-based instruction. In addition, self-monitoring checklists are regularly used with students. If a student needs more individualized Tier 3 support, the behavior management technician can collaborate with the counselor, student success facilitator, mental health therapist, and/or administration to identify and address the student's needs.

To help students develop their social emotional skills, particularly for conflict management, the school uses [restorative practices](#), including [community circles](#), during the homeroom advisory period. These approaches contribute to a positive classroom and school culture and support students in working through challenging situations they may face, both in school and outside of it. Social skills support is integrated into an anti-drug program. At Tier 2, students may be included in a social skills group that focuses on teaching specific skills. Students who need more intensive support have access to individual counseling and therapy.

"MTSS is...a foundational part of how we do business...we are constantly looking at students to make sure they're progressing academically, and behaviorally, and also social, emotionally, all of those other pieces."

School Team Member

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## ***Impacts of MTSS on the School***

South Providence reports that behavior referrals in the school have decreased since it began strengthening MTSS implementation. Interviewees also report that academic achievement has improved and in general, students are making more progress toward earning their way back to their home schools. Because parent conferences are included in the school's standard protocols for intervention, families are more involved and in better communication with the school about their students' progress.

## **What Challenges Did the School Encounter with MTSS Implementation?**

### ***MTSS is Not One Size Fits All***

The biggest challenge South Providence reports facing has been figuring out how the traditional MTSS framework can be adapted to an alternative school context with a transient population. The standard MTSS pyramid that assumes 80% of students can be adequately served through the school's core instructional program is far from the reality of alternative schools, where almost all students are behind academically and require more support for improving behavior and building their social and emotional skills than is provided in a typical middle or high school. South Providence has had to be creative in thinking about MTSS implementation given the school's unique context.

### ***Supporting Students Through Transitions Between Schools***

Since the school has no history with most students who are placed there, and there is not a strong inter-school communication system, the staff at South Providence have little access to anecdotal data about students and have only the quantitative data available in the district platform. When students return to their home schools, documentation accompanies them to describe what helped them be successful at South Providence and what might help them in their home school. However, some home schools struggle to continue the interventions that worked for a particular student at South Providence. Addressing the challenge of helping students who have successfully exited South Providence successfully re-integrate into their home school is a future goal.

## **Advice for Other Schools**

### ***Maximize Existing Teaming Structures***

School leaders advised that examining existing teaming structures and determining how those teaming structures fit within the MTSS framework is a critical step in implementation. From the initial review of the teams already in place, a school can begin to specify which teams are in charge of discussing different types of student data and needs for support (academic, behavior, well-being). The teaming review should lead to the development of specific processes and procedures for each team to use as they address student needs. South Providence believes that maximizing the use of existing teams and existing meetings has created more buy-in among staff for MTSS because staff are working toward goals and making decisions together.

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