Wilson County Schools, North Carolina

Wilson County Schools is located outside Raleigh in central North Carolina. The district has 25 schools (13 elementary, 5 middle,3 high schools, 2 early colleges, 1 alternative, and 1 virtual). About half of its schools are categorized as being on the fringe of a town; the remainder are categorized as rural schools. In 2024-25 the district had a student population of 10,160, with 57.8% receiving free or reduced-price lunches through the National School Lunch Program.

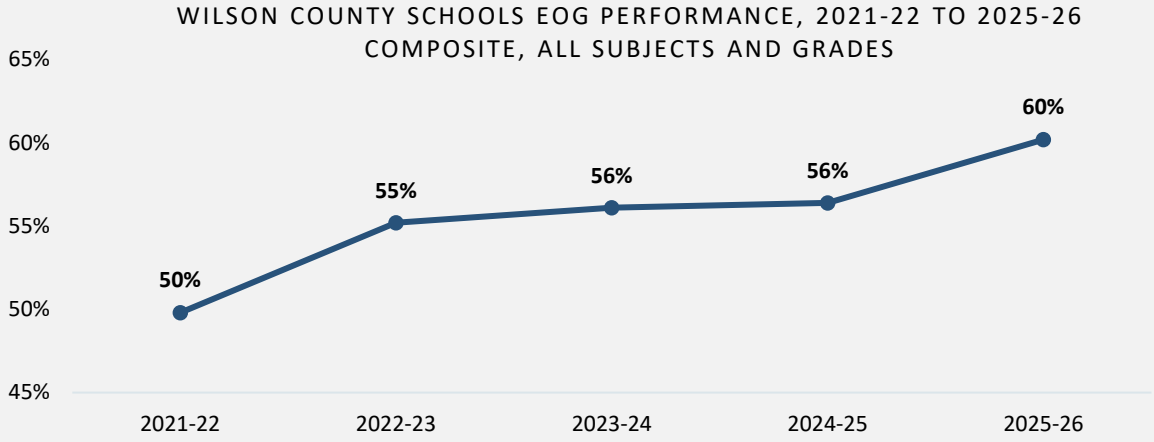
Sources: NCES data from CCD 2024-25 and EDGE 2024-25; NCES School District Demographic Dashboard; district data

Interview Date: July 2026

Background and Catalyst

Wilson County Schools began implementing a districtwide Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) in 2016 following the arrival of a new superintendent and recognition that significant changes were needed to improve student outcomes. At the time, district leaders described Wilson County as a low-performing district and sought a framework that would create a more systematic approach to meeting the academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs of all students. Over the past several years, the district has been continuously improving in overall academic proficiency rates. The majority of the district's schools are Title 1, which adds to Wilson County Schools' sense of pride in the consistent growth the district is fostering.

Figure1. Wilson County Schools Composite EOG Performance for 2021-2022SY to 2025-2026SY.



Source: NCDPI Test Proficiency Dashboard

The district's initial efforts focused on building awareness, establishing common language, and developing a shared understanding of the differences between Response to Intervention (RTI)—which was already in use across the district—and MTSS. They began by asking staff to complete a beliefs survey to get a feel for their existing mindsets about topics that relate to MTSS. Four district coaches worked closely with a small group of low-performing schools to begin laying the foundation for implementation. The district soon saw a need for a central MTSS support position, and 2017-18, Wilson County Schools hired a district MTSS coordinator and launched its first formal MTSS cohort, selecting seven schools across elementary, middle, and high school levels based on readiness and leadership capacity. This cohort included three elementary schools, three middle

schools, and one high school. The MTSS Coordinator laid out a year-long agenda to lead the seven schools through the MTSS modules created by NCDPI and other materials, such as a fidelity inventory. One of the first steps was working with school leaders in the cohort to "develop their compelling 'why'" for their schools' needs.

District leaders intentionally approached implementation in manageable phases. School teams from the first cohort completed the state-developed MTSS modules "in bite-sized pieces" and then met after each piece to discuss what they had learned. In each of the following two years, another cohort was launched. "We don't try to do everything with everybody all at one time," reflected one district leader. "We started with a cohort, learned lessons, and then expanded."

As schools in the early cohorts strengthened their implementation of MTSS, they began to see impacts on student growth. They then shared these impacts with other schools, which helped build buy-in for later cohorts. Schools also shared challenges and their efforts to overcome them with each other. During these early years of implementation, the district developed key foundational tools and processes, including intervention matrices, intervention documentation systems, and common templates for academic and behavioral supports.

The Present: What Does MTSS Look Like Now?

Leadership: Vision, Teams, Structures, and Processes

Today, Wilson County Schools operates MTSS through a collaborative district structure that includes instructional leaders, curriculum coordinators, Exceptional Children staff, MTSS personnel, and school administrators representing elementary, middle, and high schools. There is a district level "A-Team" that focuses on the academic component of MTSS and PBIS coaches who support schools with behavior. Several members of the district MTSS team have served together since the early implementation years, providing continuity and institutional knowledge.

> "Everything is tied together and it all is interwoven and we, as a district, do things to try to make sure that we're not doing things in isolation, that everything flows, everything's moving in the same direction. We're all speaking the same language."

The district framework establishes consistent expectations while allowing schools enough flexibility to adapt practices to their local contexts. Decision rules are made consistently across the district, but the exact cut points are based on each school's student performance. School leadership teams serve as the primary governing bodies for MTSS implementation, with grade-level or departmental representatives helping connect district expectations to classroom practices.

Communication occurs through multiple structures, including district MTSS meetings, administrator meetings, and "level-alike" meetings where elementary, middle, and high school leaders collaborate with peers facing similar challenges. In building a district-wide approach to MTSS, it was important to them to encourage a common vision and use the same language district-wide. They built on existing district meetings as a way of continually building an understanding and vision for MTSS. District leaders describe these meetings as essential opportunities for sharing successes, identifying barriers, and refining implementation efforts. They learned that when the school administrators start having success with improving student achievement and are able to communicate about their experiences with other school leaders, the understanding of the MTSS implementation process grows.

A defining feature of Wilson County's approach to MTSS is an emphasis on shared learning. School leaders regularly present successful practices to colleagues, creating opportunities for peer-to-peer learning and coaching. "People listen to people who do what they do," one interviewee explained. "If we can get teachers presenting to teachers and principals presenting to principals, we're going to have better follow-through and implementation." Interviewees noted that they have observed more cross-school sharing in the past few years.

Assessing and Supporting Implementation

Wilson County Schools uses multiple measures to assess MTSS implementation, including the Fidelity of Implementation Rubric for MTSS (FAM-S), the District Fidelity Assessment for MTSS (FAM- D), classroom walkthroughs, intervention observations and documentation reviews, and progress-monitoring data. District leaders emphasize that fidelity checks are designed to support implementation rather than evaluate staff performance. Schools receive differentiated coaching and technical assistance based on their implementation data and readiness levels. In Summer 2026, district staff led data-focused professional learning sessions during which they helped school administrators identify their schools' lowest indicators on the FAM-S, develop "if-then" statements and use root cause analysis to determine why these indicators were the lowest, and turn their findings into action steps.

> "We don't make decisions at the district level based on our perception… we ask for feedback from the school administrators because if it's not meaningful for the school leader, then we need to do something different."

The district also tiers its support for schools, providing additional professional development and coaching where data indicate greater needs. Leaders credit this differentiated approach with helping schools progress while maintaining ownership over their MTSS systems.

Connecting MTSS and School Improvement

Over the past decade, Wilson County Schools has worked intentionally to position MTSS as a framework that connects and strengthens other district initiatives rather than functioning as a separate framework. Both district and school leaders regularly crosswalk MTSS implementation goals from the FAM-D and FAM-S with school improvement goals, NCSTAR indicators, and Comprehensive Needs Assessment processes. Recent improvements include aligning school improvement planning, root-cause analyses, and MTSS implementation efforts through common systems and language.

The district has increasingly emphasized examining adult actions and systems rather than attributing challenges solely to student factors. School teams use data to identify root causes, develop action plans, and monitor the impact of instructional and intervention practices. "It's a framework, not a program," leaders emphasized. "Everything is connected and moving in the same direction."

Strengthening Tier 1 Instruction

One of the most significant shifts in Wilson County's MTSS journey has been an increasing emphasis on Tier 1 (core) instruction. District leaders noted that early perceptions often equated MTSS primarily with intervention services. Over time, however, schools have come to recognize that strong core instruction provides the foundation for successful MTSS implementation.

> "[E}very single thing the district has put out is aligned to our work—aligned to strengthening the capacity of the teachers, thus strengthening the core, thus improving student achievement… Everybody's working towards the same goal here."

Concurrently with MTSS implementation, the district conducted training on using a learning-focused lesson planning framework and established consistent expectations for lesson design and high-yield instructional practices. Current districtwide priorities include writing-to-learn strategies, collaborative learning structures, and distributed summarization techniques. Schools have implemented flexible intervention and enrichment periods, often referred to as "retooling time," which enable educators to provide targeted support or enrichment based on student needs throughout the school day. However, leaders regularly remind teachers that strong core instruction is the foundation. "You can't intervene students out of weak core instruction," one leader explained. "If 80 percent of students aren't getting the core, then it's time to examine adult actions and instructional practices."

Professional learning, coaching, classroom observations, and district initiatives are intentionally aligned around strengthening core instruction and improving student outcomes. The current district focus is on writing to learn, including the use of distributed summarization and collaboration. Staff received professional learning on these strategies in 2025-26, and in Summer 2026 all administrators and direct instructional staff received additional professional learning to help them "go deeper" into using the strategies. Professional learning is generally provided from the district to school administrators, and then to school instructional staff. School administrators are expected to continue support for initiatives at the school level and come to their monthly administrator meetings prepared to share their experiences, successes, and challenges.

Impacts of MTSS on the District

District leaders credit MTSS with contributing to significant improvements in student achievement and organizational culture. Since beginning its MTSS journey, Wilson County Schools has experienced substantial academic growth and improved district performance. Back in 2016, they were a low-performing district and ranked around 90 out of 115 districts across the state. Now they have moved up considerably in the rankings. Leaders pointed to continuous gains in student proficiency and growth outcomes as evidence that the district's focus on systematic supports is benefiting students.

In addition to student outcomes, interviewees described important cultural shifts throughout the district. They noted stronger collaboration among educators, increased job-embedded coaching, greater openness to feedback, and a culture where asking for help is encouraged. There was a sense that just the process over these 10 years or so of working on MTSS and figuring out how to implement it has impacted the school and district culture and brought staff closer together. According to one principal, "We're a tighter team because we're doing hard things and we know we can't do them alone."

Challenges

Secondary Implementation Requires Different Solutions

While district leaders describe MTSS implementation as an overall success, they acknowledge ongoing challenges, particularly at the secondary level. High school scheduling constraints and fewer available evidence-based intervention programs have required schools to think differently about how supports are delivered. Leaders continue to explore ways to strengthen screening, intervention, and progress-monitoring systems for secondary students. One high school recently piloted a program called Morpheme Magic as a support integrated into core instruction and has seen such success that the program will be implemented in all high schools in the future. The district's historical approach of first piloting potential solutions, gaining information, sharing success stories, and then implementing new initiatives more widely still serves it well.

Engaging Families as Partners

Wilson County Schools also continues to work on strengthening families' understanding of MTSS. While the district communicates regularly about supports and interventions, leaders noted that families may not always understand how MTSS operates or how interventions are selected. Schools have incorporated MTSS information into family events, Title I meetings, and parent communications, but leaders see opportunities to build stronger partnerships and ensure families understand their role in supporting student growth.

Managing Data

Data management is an ongoing challenge for many districts, including Wilson County Schools. In the past the district purchased a data management program but felt it didn't work well, so they moved to the ECATS student information system used across North Carolina. However, this system was recently replaced, so the district began using Google Sheets to document and analyze progress monitoring and other data. They reflect that it is

not a perfect solution, but it is the best they have found at this point. They are currently working to make the Google Sheets system more user-friendly.

Advice for Other Districts

Build the Right Team and Start Small

District leaders strongly recommended that other districts be intentional about who participates in district MTSS leadership teams. They emphasized the importance of including building-level administrators from the beginning and ensuring school leaders have meaningful input into decision making. “Do not try to do this work without principal voice at the table,” one leader advised. They also encouraged other districts to begin with manageable goals, pilot initiatives before scaling them, and build implementation in stages rather than attempting large-scale changes all at once. In addition to being a more manageable approach, this allows time for those who are the first to adopt new initiatives to address initial challenges and identify and share successes with their peers. This, in turn, makes a wider rollout easier.

The district MTSS coordinator noted that support from state-level MTSS resources and staff was critical to helping the district get started with MTSS, especially when she is a team of one. State-level meetings designed to support district-level MTSS leaders were helpful, as was having a “touchpoint” she could reach out to with questions or needs as they arose.

Establish a Culture of Trust and Continuous Improvement

Perhaps the most important lesson from Wilson County's experience is the importance of trust. Leaders described a district culture where feedback is viewed as support rather than evaluation, where challenges can be discussed openly, and where decisions are driven by data rather than perceptions. The monthly level-alike meetings for administrators provide a safe space among peers where school leaders can hear success stories, help each other with shared challenges, and continue building their toolkits for implementing district initiatives.

Interviewees emphasized that successful MTSS implementation requires both honesty and a commitment to continuous improvement. “You have to be willing to look at the data and say, ‘This is what it says.’ If you don't look at what's really there, you're not going to grow.” Completion of the state-facilitated FAM-D fidelity tool each year helps district staff think through their work and pushes them to continue.

Conclusion

After nearly a decade of implementation, Wilson County Schools continues refining the structures and resources that support MTSS. District leaders view the work as an ongoing journey centered on collaboration, strong instruction, and a shared commitment to ensuring every student receives the support needed to succeed. Starting small, learning from challenges, and building carefully upon initial successes has been key to the districts’ sustainable implementation of MTSS.

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