Pathways to Prosperity

Pillar 2: Professional Learning Communities for Student-Centered Success

A Pathways to Prosperity Brief

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The Pathways to Prosperity project is built on the central premise that career preparation should not sit as an add-on apart from academics—it should be woven into general education from elementary school through high school. This brief is one of three companion documents to the *Pathways to Prosperity Model Blueprint*, which distills lessons from the Career Academy Network of Public Schools (CANOPS) model, an Indiana-based charter school network, into a framework that other schools and districts can adapt. The Blueprint organizes this integration around three interdependent pillars: College and Career Readiness, Professional Learning Communities for Student-Centered Success, and Experiential Learning. Each pillar shapes how students build career awareness, identity, and skill across their K–12 experience.

This brief provides an in-depth exploration of Pillar 2: Professional Learning Communities for Student-Centered Success, showing how CANOPS puts it into practice in real schools. The brief is intended for education leaders, program designers, and practitioners who want concrete guidance for implementing this pillar in their own contexts, whether they are building new pathways programs or strengthening existing ones.

The Challenge This Pillar Addresses

High-quality career academy models depend on consistent attendance, engagement, and academic readiness. Yet many schools attempt to address student needs through fragmented or optional support services that operate separately from core instruction. When supports are uncoordinated or peripheral, they often fail to reach the students who need them most or to meaningfully influence learning and persistence. Coordinated supports for students start by coordinating the time for teachers and staff to come together to make a plan for ensuring that every CANOPS student has the supports they need to succeed.

CANOPS has learned that comprehensive wraparound support is most effective when it is intentionally integrated into the school's design rather than layered on as a separate system. Accordingly, professional learning communities (PLCs) provide a robust collaborative structure for staff. PLCs give them dedicated time to review data for every student and create tiered supports for student needs, including academic, behavioral, and social needs. CANOPS provides dedicated time for teachers to collaborate within grade levels and across departments. PLCs are the mechanism for collaboratively creating a comprehensive system to address student needs so all students can thrive.

Pillar Overview

In the CANOPS model, wraparound support is treated as a core condition for student success, not a supplemental offering. This pillar focuses on embedding academic, social–emotional, and enrichment supports into the daily life of the school through a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS). PLCs provide staff with a coherent, dedicated structure through which to collaboratively discuss and design an MTSS approach that ensures all students receive the support they need to succeed.

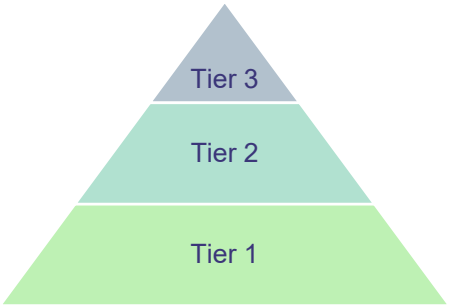
Rather than relying on referral-based or opt-in services, CANOPS designs supports to be broadly accessible and closely aligned with instructional and pathway goals. These supports are focused on meeting the academic, behavioral, and emotional needs of all students. CANOPS schools partner with families to ensure that these efforts pay off. These supports ensure that students can fully participate in career pathways and experiential learning without barriers created by unmet academic or developmental needs.

CANOPS's MTSS framework is owned by all staff. It is a proactive and preventive framework that uses data to identify and support students' social, emotional, and behavioral needs from a strengths-based perspective. The core components of CANOPS's MTSS framework include the following:

- **Screening:** Three times a year, CANOPS students are given diagnostics to assess what level of intervention a student might need and whether that is an academic, social, or emotional need. For academic screening, assessments like iReady are used to gather data related to students' core instruction in English language arts, mathematics, and science. CANOPS also screens for social–emotional learning, behavioral health, and attendance through a detailed look at behavior referrals and attendance records.
- **Multi-Level Prevention System:** Three tiers of integrated academic, social–emotional, and behavioral supports are created. These supports are evidence-based and culturally appropriate.
- **Progress Monitoring:** An online system that is accessible to all school staff is set up to monitor the progress of all students across the three tiers using valid and reliable tools to track data and assess the intervention.
- **Data-Based Decision-Making:** Through this entire MTSS process, decisions are based on data. Screening, deciding which students need specific interventions, and assessing progress are done in teams with real-time data from student assessments, behavior data, and attendance data.

The multi-level MTSS framework is composed of three tiers.

- **Tier 1:** differentiated core support; all students receive; data driven
- **Tier 2:** strategic support; small group interventions
- **Tier 3:** intensive support



What sets the work that CANOPS is doing apart from many other MTSS systems is that this system is not just focused on academic interventions. It also encompasses academics, social–emotional learning, behavioral health, and attendance. Progress-monitoring assessments are used to place students in correct tiers, and the student's intervention plan is adjusted accordingly using data-based decision-making. A student is only moved to Tier 2 when they demonstrate a need that differentiated core instruction, or social–emotional supports, cannot meet. A student is only moved to Tier 3 if sufficient progress is not met in Tier 2 and they are in need of intensive support.

Research and Policy Alignment

This pillar aligns with national frameworks such as the Community Schools Model and the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child framework. Both of those emphasize coordinated systems of support that address students' academic, social, emotional, and developmental needs (Lewallen et al., 2015; Maier et al., 2017; Swain et al., 2025). MTSS is commonly understood as an integrated, tiered framework for organizing academic, behavioral, social–emotional, and mental health supports, including approaches associated with response to intervention and positive behavioral interventions and supports (American Institutes for Research, n.d.; Center on PBIS, 2021).

Research from the Learning Policy Institute and the Brookings Institution indicates that integrated wraparound supports, particularly when embedded into schoolwide structures and strengthened through family and community partnerships, are associated with improved attendance, academic gains, and reductions in opportunity gaps (Bowden & Wasser Gish, 2021; Gish et al., 2016; Swain et al., 2025).

How CANOPS Implements This Pillar

CANOPS's MTSS framework is part of the school's core functioning; it is not a process owned by building leadership or the network staff but is embedded into how all staff do their job. A key aspect of their success is related to this collective responsibility. Staff must be willing to work together to identify which students are in need of support academically, emotionally, or behaviorally.

Wraparound Support Through Community Partnerships

At one CANOPS campus, the Success Academy at Boys and Girls Club works in partnership with the Boys and Girls Club of the Northern Indiana Corridor to provide trained Youth Development Instructors (YDIs) in the classrooms with certified teachers. The YDIs provide intervention support in the classroom during the school day. They also run the after-school Boys and Girls Club programming, creating cohesion in supports for students across the CANOPS campus and the Boys and Girls Club of the Northern Indiana Corridor.

To do this, CANOPS implements high-functioning PLCs that have three types of regular meetings focused on MTSS embedded in the school calendar:

- **School-Level MTSS Meeting:** Aligned with the screening process, three times a year school leaders meet to assess the MTSS practice happening at their school site, basing their conversations on data. The school leadership team evaluates the quality of the interventions across all three tiers to guide school-level decision-making and improvement.
- **Grade or Content Team MTSS Meeting:** Grade-level or content-level teams meet monthly to discuss students receiving Tiers 2 and 3 interventions. During these meetings, the teams use data to drive discussions around whether student plans need to be adjusted.
- **Individual Problem-Solving MTSS Meeting:** As needed, grade-level or content-level teams dive deeper into problem-solving when students are not making progress after receiving Tiers 2 and 3 supports. These individual meetings are based on trends in data identified during grade-level or content team monthly meetings.

These PLCs focus on problem-solving by examining four essential questions:

- What do we want students to know and be able to do?
- Why are they not learning or demonstrating the behavior?
- What will we do when they do not learn it?
- How will we know if they have learned it?

These essential questions guide teams through identifying which barriers are keeping students from succeeding, analyzing the cause of these barriers, designing and implementing a plan to address them, and monitoring and adjusting the plan as needed. This work and these conversations do not happen in silos but are owned by the school staff and driven by grade level or content level teams through the PLCs. These are not one-time meetings; rather, they are ongoing and aligned with the evolving needs of students in their classrooms.

Family engagement is another cornerstone of the framework. CANOPS recognizes that building trust with families, particularly those who have experienced barriers in the past, is essential for authentic collaboration. Dedicated family engagement specialists work across schools to connect with families, organize after-school events, and jointly problem-solve attendance or social–emotional concerns. Parental notification is required when interventions are initiated or changed, and ongoing communication is prioritized in accessible, jargon-free language.

> CANOPS's approach emphasizes that "all means all"—every student is supported, and every staff member is involved.

The network's MTSS implementation is intentionally adaptive, allowing each school to develop interventions and enrichment opportunities that are responsive to their own student population. At the same time, nonnegotiables such as strong Tier 1 foundations and embedded cycles of data-driven problem-solving anchor the work. This means all students are receiving the supports offered in Tier 1, including evidence-based instruction, a focus on student engagement to drive attendance, and a social–emotional curriculum to support every student in every grade.

MTSS at CANOPS is not a static model but rather a continuously refined system rooted in clarity, collective ownership, and a commitment to removing barriers for all students as they progress toward academic and social success. All CANOPS staff are part of a team that supports all students; no one teacher is solely responsible for their classroom or set of students. This collective ownership is embedded across staff schoolwide. The PLC system enables teachers to come together as a team to discuss data on a monthly basis and determine what students need to succeed.

Using PLCs to identify and implement MTSS supports has been refined through experience. Early efforts revealed that loosely connected services had limited impact. In response, CANOPS clarified roles, strengthened communication between educators and partners, and aligned supports more directly with instructional priorities. This resulted in measurable gains, including a 36 percent increase in English language arts proficiency at one campus from the 2023–24 school year to 2024–25, as measured by iReady assessment data.

What to Do at Each Implementation Stage

Schools can use this framework to sequence implementation, substituting their own planning, launch, and growth timelines as needed.

Stage 1. Design and Planning / Preparation for Opening

- Develop the MTSS system as part of school culture. Identify the systems used for screening, including assessments used as diagnostics and progress monitoring; attendance systems; and social–emotional supports, curricula, and screening processes.
- Create an ongoing professional learning sequence for all staff to train on the MTSS system and PLCs.
- Decide which research-based curriculum will support student learning, and define what the essential standards are before adding more academic programming.

Stage 2. Enrollment and Operations

- Put screeners in place as part of the enrollment process to identify student needs and develop tiered intervention supports.
- Implement staffing structures like peer learning communities and school schedules and calendars.

- Hold team meetings through PLCs to discuss student needs and progress.

Stage 3. Sustaining and Scaling

- Continue to adjust and add interventions that meet evolving student needs (as the student body grows and new students enroll, the needs of students change).
- Remove interventions that may not be working.
- Provide flexibility for school sites or grade-level teams to design interventions that meet students where they are.
- Continue support for staff by dedicating time for PLCs.

Fidelity Indicators (Nonnegotiables)

Regardless of school context, size, or grade configuration, the following elements must be in place for this pillar to be implemented successfully. These are not areas for local adaptation—see the Adaptation Guidance section below for areas that have some flexibility.

- Intervention cannot make up for a weak foundation of Tier 1 supports. The academic program of a school must be defined and behavior supports for all students must be in place to create this strong foundation.
- All staff are part owners of this work. This means that staffing structures must exist to support the work, such as hiring different types of positions based on student need or adjusting schedules on a school campus. This practice of assessing student needs and proactively solving problems must be part of school culture and be seen as a collective responsibility.

- Leaders must provide oversight and guidance to staff and ensure that all staff feel ownership for all students. This begins in the hiring process, asking questions to ensure teachers and staff have the mindset for collective ownership, designing and delivering professional development to staff around data collection and analysis, and creating time in staff schedules to do this work through PLCs.
- Data analysis and problem-solving must be embedded practices. Leaders must carve out time for staff to do the work and dedicate time for ongoing training.
- Define the expectations for learning as a school, for grade levels and content teams, and for students.

Adaptation Guidance

Elementary Versus Secondary Interventions

The academic, social, and emotional issues that students face at the secondary level are different from those at the elementary level, and therefore the interventions offered are different. For schools serving older students, CANOPS adapts this pillar by emphasizing mentoring, mental health supports, academic coaching, and workforce-readiness resources. Academically, the core components of the academic intervention model remain the same: remediation and acceleration classes, basic skill courses, and supports for executive functioning. While specific services may differ by grade level and context, the core principle remains the same: Supports are integrated, accessible, and aligned with learning and career pathways.

Context-Specific Design

Like any MTSS system, a key part of the success of the interventions used is ensuring that they meet the needs of the students that CANOPS is serving. The framework's basic principles are to understand who the students are and what

they need and then design interventions around that information. For CANOPS, this means that the MTSS system is used by all schools but that school sites have the flexibility and autonomy to tailor the interventions based on the needs of their students. An MTSS Guide exists to create a shared understanding of the core components of the MTSS system, and model templates and tools are provided to ensure fidelity. However, school teams are charged with implementing the system at their sites and have the autonomy to tailor the components.

The logistics around the PLC structure—such as timing of meetings, meeting frequency, who will facilitate—can be adapted to fit the needs of a school and staff. For CANOPS, identifying a team lead who can guide the conversations, dedicating weekly protected staff time to host these meetings, and ensuring these meetings happen weekly has led to the success of the PLCs. In turn, the PLCs have helped CANOPS staff improve academic, social, and emotional support for students.

Common Pitfalls and Design Risks

- **MTSS system design:** The overall framework must go beyond focusing on the academic progress of students to truly be a wraparound support.
- **Overreliance on referrals rather than universal access:** The framework is successful because school staff understand their students and what they need, and they design interventions around that. All students are receiving Tier 1 interventions, and regular meetings are held to dig into data to understand which students may need additional support.
- **Lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities:** For the system to work, all staff must be owners of this work. Staff need to be provided with strategic and ongoing professional development and dedicated time for PLCs.

- **Lack of focus on students in PLC meetings:** PLC meetings should be focused on reviewing student data and making action plans. PLCs may need to be recalibrated when meetings become dominated by logistics, student work is rarely examined, action steps are vague, or instruction plans do not change.
- **Inconsistent student experience:** PLCs may not be effective if quality varies across grade levels or classrooms. The intervention conversations should happen within the PLC structure, and teachers should work together across content areas to support the student experience.

Connections to Other CANOPS Pillars

Having PLCs that promote integrated wraparound support enables all other CANOPS pillars by stabilizing attendance, engagement, and readiness. It ensures that students can fully access career pathway development, experiential learning opportunities, and community-aligned pathways, creating the conditions necessary for sustained success.

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