

# RIPPLE

**RIPPLE: Reducing disparities and Implementation strategies to Promote Proactive Learning Environments**



## Replication Guide



Through RIPPLE, our vision is to transform Iredell-Statesville Schools into a model district for trauma-informed education using a comprehensive Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework that integrates trauma-informed care practices to improve academic and behavioral outcomes for high-need K-12 students.

<https://www.issnc.org/about/awards-and-achievements/education-innovation-research-grant>

**Education, Innovation  
and Research (EIR)**



# RIPPLE Replication Guide

The RIPPLE project successfully transformed Iredell-Statesville Schools into a model district for trauma-informed education. Funded by the U.S. Department of Education through the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education's Education Innovation and Research (EIR) Early-Phase Grants from 2019 to 2025, the project implemented a comprehensive Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework that integrated trauma-informed care practices. This replication guide outlines how RIPPLE improved outcomes for high-need K-12 students. It provides a roadmap for other districts seeking to adopt similar trauma-informed approaches within MTSS frameworks. By sharing our strategies, and lessons learned, we aim to support educators and administrators in creating more responsive and effective learning environments for all students.



**RIPPLE's Theory of Change:**

Infusing trauma-informed practices embedded within our schools' existing MTSS framework, will reshape our schools' culture, staff, and systems impact student academic achievement and behavioral outcomes.

A Trauma-Informed Multi-Tiered System of Supports (TI-MTSS) framework is a powerful approach that combines trauma-informed practices with the widely-used MTSS model to address the needs of all students, especially those who have experienced trauma (Chafouleas et al., 2016). This framework is important because it provides a comprehensive, proactive, and preventative system that supports students' academic, social-emotional, and behavioral needs from a strengths-based perspective (Reinbergs & Fefer, 2018).

The TI-MTSS framework consists of three tiers of support, each becoming more intensive and personalized. Tier 1 offers universal support for all students, Tier 2 provides targeted interventions for groups of students showing signs of difficulties, and Tier 3 offers intensive, individualized support for those with the highest needs (Dorado et al., 2016). One of the key strengths of the TI-MTSS framework is its emphasis on early identification and intervention through universal screening tools, allowing educators to quickly identify and support students who may be struggling due to trauma or other factors (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014).

By implementing a TI-MTSS framework, schools can create a more supportive learning environment for all students, while also providing targeted assistance to those who need it most. This approach not only helps improve academic outcomes but also supports students' overall well-being and resilience in the face of trauma (Overstreet & Chafouleas, 2016).

# RIPPLE

## Overview

Iredell-Statesville Schools (NC) implemented **RIPPLE**: **R**educing disparities and **I**mplementing strategies to **P**romote **P**roactive **L**earning **E**nvironments, an Early-Phase EIR project addressing the needs of high-need K-12 students. The program served 10,729 students across 21 of the district's highest-poverty schools, where 62% were economically disadvantaged. These schools faced lower academic achievement and higher rates of aggressive and violent behaviors compared to district and state averages.

**RIPPLE** combined a trauma-informed systems approach with trauma-specific interventions, integrating these into the district's Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework to improve student academic and behavioral outcomes. **RIPPLE's** expected outcomes included fewer discipline referrals, improved school climate, and higher academic achievement. The program established a strong framework for identifying at-risk students and providing timely mental health services. While the model showed significant progress, even greater outcomes might have been achieved if not for the challenges posed by implementing it during several years of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**RIPPLE's** implementation was supported by a network of collaborative partners, including Children's Hope Alliance, Easterseals, Goodwill Industries of NW NC/Crosby Scholars, and Boys and Girls Club of the Piedmont, who contributed their expertise and resources to enhance the program's effectiveness.

## Theory of Change and Program Design

Our **RIPPLE** project theory of change suggested that combining socio-emotional and academic supports with trauma-informed interventions would yield a greater impact than either approach alone. This layered approach provided a comprehensive and responsive framework to address the negative impacts that toxic stress present to student achievement. Our project investigated whether our cohort students would perform better in math and English. We used a method called Comparative Short Interrupted Time Series (CSITS). This method compares schools using the TI-MTSS model to similar schools not using it, looking at how test scores change over time. We looked at 21 schools using **RIPPLE** and compared them to 80 similar schools in North Carolina. To ensure a fair comparison, we carefully selected similar schools based on factors like past test scores, student demographics, and school characteristics. We used North Carolina's standard math and English tests to measure student performance, comparing scores from before **RIPPLE** started (2016-2021) to those after three years of implementation (ending in 2024). Our goal was to determine if **RIPPLE** improved student academic achievement, reduced discipline issues, and enhanced the overall school climate, creating a more supportive learning environment for all students.

# RIPPLE

## Goals and Strategies

**Goal 1 - Use the MTSS structure to implement a trauma-informed interventional approach to improve educational outcomes for high-need K-12 students through:** Universal screening using grade-specific assessments (ACE, PNAS, CRS); Evidence-based Tier 1 programs including Second Step (K-5); Safe School Ambassadors (6-12); Capturing Kids Hearts; Restorative Justice; and Tiered interventions progressing from classroom-based support to small group sessions to intensive individual therapy.

**Goal 2 - Provide professional learning for educators to develop awareness and understanding of the impact trauma has on student achievement and behaviors building educators' capacity to recognize and implement a trauma-informed interventional approach for high-need students:** Training five staff members per school in Trauma-Informed Care using a train-the-trainer model, delivering culturally responsive instruction training to address underlying issues affecting teacher expectations, supporting social-emotional learning through embedded professional development, and using data-driven continuous improvement through monthly TI-MTSS team meetings.

## Objectives

- Decrease disciplinary referrals for all students, with a focus on reducing disparities
- Reduce out-of-school suspensions, particularly for minority students
- Minimize instructional days lost due to suspensions and expulsions
- Increase student satisfaction and engagement with group activities
- Improve student proficiency in math and English Language Arts
- Enhance students' social and emotional learning skills
- Provide professional development in responsive and trauma-informed practices
- Foster a positive school climate

# RIPPLE

## Elementary Schools

Celeste Henkel Elementary

Central Elementary

Cloverleaf Elementary

Cool Spring Elementary

East Iredell Elementary

Harmony Elementary

N.B. Mills Elementary

Scotts Elementary

Sharon Elementary

Third Creek Elementary

Troutman Elementary

Union Grove Elementary

## Middle Schools

East Iredell Middle

North Middle

Third Creek Middle

Troutman Middle

West Iredell Middle

\*Northview Academy

## High Schools

North Iredell High

Statesville High

West Iredell High

*\*Northview Academy received RIPPLE services but was not included in the EIR research study.*



# RIPPLE Key Components: MTSS

Building Upon our Existing Multi-Tiered System of Supports



## **Tier 1 Universal Support**

We introduced universal screening to identify at-risk students and implemented evidence-based programs across grade levels. For elementary students (K-5), we used Second Step to increase social-emotional competence and self-regulation. In middle and high schools (6-12), we implemented Safe School Ambassadors (SSA) to prevent bullying and Group Noticing Routines (GNRs) to promote supportive classrooms. We also expanded Capturing Kids Hearts (CKH) to strengthen student-teacher relationships and introduced Restorative Justice practices in secondary schools to transform disciplinary approaches.



## **Tier 2 Targeted Interventions**

For students needing more support, we facilitated small group sessions led by Student Assistance Program Coordinators (SAPs) and mental health specialists. At the secondary level, we implemented Support for Students Exposed to Trauma (SSET), a cognitive-behavioral approach designed to reduce post-traumatic and depressive symptoms. We also expanded our Student Assistance Program (SAP) to enhance students' social, emotional, and physical well-being.



## **Tier 3 Reliability**

For students requiring intensive individual support, we provided Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT) and partnered with local organizations to offer additional mental health services. We also implemented Functional Behavior Support Planning (F-BSP) to address specific behavioral needs.

# RIPPLE: Project Structure

## Personnel and Management Team

**Project Director:** Provides logistical and fiscal oversight for the project including supervising grant staff, submitting purchase requisitions, planning and overseeing professional development activities, convening and facilitating Leadership Team and Advisory Committee meetings, coordinating with partners and community arts organizations, and collaborating with external evaluators to collect and analyze data, submit required performance reports, and guide dissemination and sustainability activities. Time Commitment: 1.0 FTE

**Project Coordinator:** Provides day-to-day management of the program by planning professional development; collaborating with staff on school-level activities; providing input on curricula and instruction; and assisting with data collection for evaluation. Time Commitment: 1.0 FTE

**Behavioral Specialists:** Works with social workers, counselors, and teachers to assess student behavior, develop or identify existing functional behavior assessments, and create Behavior Intervention Plans for students identified at-risk. Time Commitment: 1.0 FTE

**Social Workers:** Provides students with wraparound coordination targeting out-of-school needs. Time Commitment: 2.0 FTE with a suggested social worker ratio of 1 per 4 target schools.

**Student Assistance Program (SAP) Coordinator:** Enhances school climate by providing professional learning on recognizing warning signs of student disengagement and planning appropriate interventions. SAP Coordinator(s) serve in a student advocacy role to ensure that each student's educational, social, emotional, and physical needs are met. They support the Group Noticing Routine roll-out and provide counseling sessions and student PDSA plans. Time Commitment: 5.0 FTE with a suggested SAP coordinator ratio of 1 per 3 target schools.

**Management Team:** A Management Team comprised of a Project Advisor, Project Director; Project Coordinator; and Deputy Superintendent meets monthly during the start-up, and quarterly thereafter to provide fiscal and programmatic oversight to guide implementation and the hiring of staff. The team conducts quarterly reviews of discipline data to promote fair and effective trauma-informed practices. The team also monitors progress through data and disciplinary reports to identify students needing services and assess intervention effectiveness. Quarterly Data Days assist with reviewing lessons learned and in sharing student indicator reports.

## Project Setup and Planning – Months 1-3

Project Setup and Planning for RIPPLE replication begins with a focused effort to establish critical foundations. This phase encompasses several key activities:

- Secure professional learning providers and technical assistance experts
- Develop comprehensive management and evaluation plans
- Establish monthly Management Team meetings
- Initiate Trauma-Informed Multi-Tiered System of Supports (TI-MTSS) Team meetings in the first cohort of schools.
- Recruit key personnel to provide targeted interventions, develop behavioral support plans, and address students' social-emotional needs:
  - Student Assistance Program staff
  - Social Workers
  - Behavior Specialists

These initial steps set the stage for integrating trauma-informed practices into school systems and ensure clear objectives, methods, and timelines for assessing progress and outcomes.

## Expansion and Implementation-Months 4-12

As the program progresses, the focus shifts to fostering positive relationships and improving classroom culture, providing essential support for students through:

- Coordinating professional learning activities
- Refining district disciplinary practices to align with restorative approaches
- Compiling baseline data for the first cohort
- Reviewing disproportionality data and creating an action plan to address inequities
- Training Crosby Scholar Advisors
- Implementing Capturing Kids' Hearts classroom strategies

## Support and Evaluation-Ongoing

Continuous support and evaluation includes several key activities:

- Implement MTSS interventions:
  - Introduce Restorative Justice training and practices
- Conduct monthly Management Team meetings to assess data and make adjustments
- Organize additional training:
  - Capturing Kids' Hearts Process Champions Training
  - Student Support Advisor Training
- Analyze student achievement data and intervention impacts
- Develop a long-term sustainability plan:
  - Identify successful strategies
  - Plan for potential expansion