

# “They Know Somebody’s Paying Attention”: A Profile of OnTrack Greenville’s School-Based Community Collaboration Model

By Joy Gitter

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## Introduction

When a 6th-grade student arrived at Greenville (South Carolina) Early College middle school with severe behavioral issues that affected his ability to engage in school, school staff were concerned. “He would just out of nowhere scream and yell and punch and could get violent at times,” recalled OnTrack Facilitator Laura Gibson. School staff met with his parents and referred the student to the school’s on-site health clinic, which diagnosed the student with anxiety and additional mental health challenges. Now in 8th grade, the student has had zero behavioral issues since identifying the root cause and connecting him with the appropriate treatment and support. Access to resources from [OnTrack Greenville](#), a nonprofit located in Greenville, SC dedicated to keeping students on-track for graduation through personalized interventions, meant that “instead of just labeling the student as a bad kid, we actually took the time to figure out the root cause,” according to Gibson.



*OnTrack Greenville and United Way of Greenville County staff at Berea Middle School resource fair.*

they work in four middle schools and two high schools and focus on eliminating barriers to student success to improve school engagement.

This story is just one example of OnTrack Greenville’s ongoing commitment to students’ academic, social-emotional, and behavioral success and wellbeing. The organization leverages cross-sector collaboration and school-based teams to implement individualized, community-based interventions and supports to help keep students on track for high school graduation and postsecondary success. Currently,

## A Whole-Child, Holistic Approach

OnTrack Greenville has expanded and adapted its model since its founding. Recognizing the critical importance of the middle grades for keeping students engaged, reducing drop-outs, and improving high school graduation, the United Way of Greenville County established Middle Grades Success Initiative with Greenville County Schools in 2013 to address these "make it or break it" years for Greenville's most marginalized students. Motivating this initiative was research by Johns Hopkins University and the University of Chicago which identified middle school attendance and course grades as the most significant indicators of high school graduation and postsecondary success, with even greater correlations to high school graduation than race, income, or family education.<sup>1</sup> Notably, research showed that improved attendance and course grades in the middle grades could significantly boost high school outcomes.<sup>2</sup>

*"We know that when we follow the collective impact model and bring all these unique folks to the table, that this is what's needed to handle the complexities of our schools."*

-Dr. Edward Anderson, OnTrack Greenville Executive Director

In 2015, key stakeholders and partners came together to codify the collective impact model and launch OnTrack Greenville in four of the county's highest-needs middle schools. Over time, the organization has built upon their original theory of change to "match the right students to the right interventions at the right time" to take a more systemic, proactive, and holistic approach to improving schools and student outcomes. Recognizing the need for continued support once students leave the middle schools, OnTrack Greenville recently expanded to two high schools that receive most students from the four OnTrack middle schools.

## Connecting a Community's Resources with its Needs

OnTrack Greenville serves a high-needs student population with highly concentrated poverty rates and low social mobility. Unlike the rest of Greenville County Schools (GCS), OnTrack schools serve high proportions of English learners, newcomer immigrant families, Black and Latinx students, and a student population experiencing the impacts of poverty, such as housing instability. Due to demographic shifts, student enrollment in OnTrack schools increased by 32 percent between school years 2016-17 and 2019-20, compared to a total 12 percent enrollment increase at non-OnTrack middle schools.<sup>3</sup> The percentage of

English learners in OnTrack schools rose 30 percent.<sup>4</sup> In school year 2019-20, 84 percent of OnTrack students were students of color compared to an average of 37 percent students of color across all other GCS middle schools.<sup>5</sup> Despite Greenville’s predominantly affluent and middle-class majority, gentrification and rising housing prices have displaced the most marginalized families. As GCS Trauma-Informed Specialist TJ Rumler explained, “Black and brown students and their families in Greenville are tremendously underserved [and] underrepresented in community leadership, all the way down to basic resources from housing to finance, employment, and access to public transportation. That definitely impacts the way they’re able to navigate systems, including educational systems.”

Greenville County Schools lack the infrastructure to provide the additional support and wraparound services that these students need to overcome systemic barriers to success. OnTrack schools have an “understanding [that] if you’re hungry, if you’re tired, if you don’t



*OnTrack Greenville receives grant award.*

feel safe, it’s really not fair for us to ask you to care about being present, being well behaved, and to care about your academics. So a big focus is making sure students’ primary needs are being met,” described Taylor Dockter, OnTrack’s assistant director. OnTrack Greenville is well-situated to address these schools’ complex concerns because they can identify schools’ and students’ needs and leverage Greenville’s strong

community-based organizations. As OnTrack Executive Director Dr. Edward Anderson explained, “We know that when we follow the collective impact model and bring all these unique folks to the table, that this is what’s needed to handle the complexities of our schools.” The organization has established trust and collaborative, working relationships between the school, partners, and parents that facilitate connecting students with resources and a whole-child, holistic approach.

## OnTrack Teams Work Together to Help Students Succeed

OnTrack Facilitators coordinate services within each of the organization’s partner schools. As part of their role, they identify students in need of support by reviewing student data from the Early Warning and Response System (EWRS) prior to the OnTrack meeting and noting those that flag on the ABC indicators (attendance, behavior, course performance).

They also identify students by speaking with teachers and other school staff about students who do not flag in the EWRS but who might display signs in the classroom indicating that they could benefit from support. As OnTrack Facilitator Tonia Davis explained, “Just because the student’s making straight A’s, has no behavior problems, and they come to school every day does not mean there’s not something going on with that child. So [I tell teachers], ‘If you notice something, say something.’... It’s not just the system that gives me information, it’s people in the building and those who are around the students most.”

The OnTrack Facilitator is also responsible for creating an agenda for and leading OnTrack meetings, which occur weekly or biweekly depending on the school. OnTrack teams typically comprise the OnTrack Facilitator, the school principal or grade-level lead, the school social worker, the school psychologist, a school counselor, grade- or subject-area teachers, the school attendance clerk, a mental health counselor, a nurse practitioner from Prisma Health, which operates school-based health centers, and representatives from the nonprofit partners Communities in Schools and BellXcel. Within each meeting, teams collaborate to discuss each student and conduct a root cause analysis to try to determine the cause of a student’s behavior or reason for flagging as off-track for academics, attendance, or behavior. They then determine what action, service, or evidence-based intervention is most appropriate to address this root cause and get the student back on track for graduation. For example, services might include connecting the student with a mental health evaluation and counseling, a parent-teacher conference, or financial support to the family for housing or utility stability. As Dockter emphasized, “We do root cause analysis: we see this behavior [and ask] what do we think might be actually causing this? ... Because if we don’t get those pieces stable that student is going to continue to flag because they’re just in survival mode.” The number of students discussed during each meeting varies; according to one OnTrack Facilitator, her team will discuss ten to 20 students per meeting each week.

*“Understanding [that] if you're hungry, if you're tired, if you don't feel safe, it's really not fair for us to ask you to care about being present, being well behaved, and to care about your academics. So a big focus is making sure students' primary needs are being met.”*

*-Taylor Dockter, OnTrack Greenville Assistant Director*

The team will also assign a student advocate, who may be the OnTrack Facilitator, teacher or other staff member. The student advocate is responsible for ensuring the intervention plan is implemented. The OnTrack Facilitator will coordinate with school-based

representatives from OnTrack’s partners, speak with the student to ensure the student is connected to the identified service or intervention, and meet with the student’s parents to explain the situation and gather additional information. They will also check in with the student over time to monitor progress. In addition to these team meetings, all OnTrack school principals and partners meet quarterly to examine data and discuss what is working and opportunities for improvement.

## Engaging Families

Recognizing the vital role families play in students’ success, OnTrack is continuously working to improve its “meaningful connection and collaboration” with families. OnTrack Family Support Specialist Gina Bridges serves as a resource to the six OnTrack schools, conducts family-level case management, develops trusting relationships with families, and problem-solves to connect families with support related to housing, food, job access, immigration, and other needs. As Bridges described, “I help family-facing staff at the schools connect our families with the best resources. For very difficult cases with multiple needs, we also have a fund that supports families with utility assistance and rent assistance. Helping them at that critical moment can prevent a really serious situation like eviction.” While families face barriers such as work schedules, transportation, trust, cultural differences, and language that can inhibit engagement opportunities, Bridges seeks to address these challenges, planning and hosting accessible, fun, and culturally relevant family events, in both English and Spanish, and offering financial incentives for attendance.

## Leadership and Funding

The United Way of Greenville County serves as the backbone organization for OnTrack Greenville and employs a handful of staff to lead the effort and serve in schools, including the executive director, assistant director, family support specialist, program assistant, a trauma-informed specialist (which is a shared role with the school district), and an OnTrack Facilitator in each of OnTrack’s six schools. Backbone staff determine its strategic direction, identify and address challenges, raise funds, manage evaluation efforts, facilitate partnerships and hold partners accountable, communicate with the community, and lead the initiative’s focus on improving student outcomes. The OnTrack Steering Committee, led by Executive Director Dr. Edward Anderson, comprises OnTrack leaders, United Way of Greenville County leaders, GCS administrators, and OnTrack’s top three funders. Currently, the steering committee is engaged in succession planning to secure the organization’s long-term sustainability and success. As Gibson emphasized, “United Way is our biggest partner

so they're our biggest resource and they are very conscientious about finding out what our needs are. And then, based on our needs, they then find the resources for us.”

OnTrack is supported by a variety of key funders, including a federal U.S. Department of Education grant, the United Way, Greenville Partnership for Philanthropy, Hollingsworth Funds, Community Foundation of Greenville, and the Jolley Foundation.

## Partners Form OnTrack’s Foundation

Greenville County Schools and OnTrack staff highlight the dedication of the organization’s partners and the community to supporting students. According to Rumler, “It takes a village to do this work, and we have been able to find and cultivate some amazing community partners who support us.”

OnTrack’s partners work closely with the organization, providing a range of services and programming. The organization’s main partners are Prisma Health, Communities in Schools, BellXcel, and Public Education Partners. Below is a description of each partner.



*OnTrack Greenville staff meet with school and community partners.*

- [Prisma Health](#), Greenville County’s local healthcare provider, operates school-based health centers in OnTrack schools that address students’ physical, behavioral, and mental health needs. The health centers also refer students to specialists, provide vaccinations, offer sports physicals, and connect students and families with medical support groups. The role of school-based health centers for students cannot be overstated. As Gibson shared, “Every school should have school-based health because it keeps kids in school so their mom doesn't have to pick them up and take them to the doctor and they're missing class to go do those

things when they can just be here at the school. [The school clinic] sees the student, figures out what's wrong, and gets them back to class." A challenge, however, is that school staff can struggle to obtain signed consent forms from parents, which allow students to receive school-based healthcare.

- [Communities in Schools](#) (CIS), a national nonprofit organization that provides integrated student supports to address academic and nonacademic needs, works directly in each OnTrack school to provide case management, mentoring, and school-based engagement. Each OnTrack school has two to three CIS site coordinators who case manage approximately 50 students each.
- [BellXcel](#), a national nonprofit providing evidence-based youth programming, provides curriculum for existing programming.
- [Public Education Partners](#), a local nonprofit organization that represents one of OnTrack's strategic partners, supports educator recruitment, retention, and morale, and "elevates teachers by providing meaningful opportunities to be recognized and celebrated."<sup>6</sup>

OnTrack Greenville plays a vital role in vetting potential partners, managing partners, and facilitating relationships between partners and Greenville County Schools. The organization's focus on developing relationships between community partners, the district, and stakeholders contribute to the initiative and partners' success, as "once you build that relationship there's a lot less red tape to get through," according to Rumler. Partners commit to a shared vision for success and a partnership agreement. OnTrack helps address challenges such as working with GCS students and establishing data-sharing agreements between the district and partner organizations. The collective impact approach of partners working together, rather than separately, is key to the OnTrack model. As Dockter emphasized, "We try to have the mindset and the value set that believes that everyone at the table is there for a reason and that to be successful, we have to work in unison, we have to have shared values, we have to have clear communication...Where OnTrack thrives is figuring out who's doing the good work in Greenville, who is siloed, and what can we do to break that down and make sure that they are brought into the fold?"

## Leveraging Data Systems

Student and partner data inform all OnTrack processes, decisions, and collaborative efforts. GCS and OnTrack Greenville leverage three data systems to identify students needing

support, connect them with appropriate services or interventions, and monitor student progress. GC Source is the school district's internally created student information system, which holds demographic and course information on all students district wide. The district's Early Warning and Response System (EWRS), key to OnTrack's process, pulls real-time data on student attendance, behavior, and course performance (i.e., the ABCs) from multiple databases within GC Source and flags students not meeting indicator benchmarks. The EWRS updates every 24 hours and clearly displays student data in an easy-to-read dashboard by student, classroom, grade, and school. The system color-codes students from an on-track to off-track continuum, from green, to yellow, to red and students can score on a scale of zero to three for each indicator. School administrators view a home dashboard displaying school-wide data and can easily switch to student data views. The EWRS is the critical tool that enables staff to connect struggling students with necessary supports and saves significant time by aggregating data in a single, easily accessible location. While the EWRS is district wide, only the six OnTrack schools use the OnTrack process and resources to respond to the data. "I use [GC Source] to track trends as well, because you pull data, and you can see 'what are the most referrals that are coming in from the school, which teachers have the most referrals, what populations are getting the most referrals?' So, I really like to use GC Source for trend information as well as for particular students who are flagging and who are the most severe," noted Gibson.

Finally, Intervention Connection contains reports and associated notes on supports and services students have received (e.g., mentoring, counseling, mental or physical health services) and tracks intervention progress and needs for follow-up. The OnTrack Facilitator also enters any reports from teachers about students struggling in class or social-emotionally as well as notes on students from OnTrack meetings into Intervention Connection. This enables school social workers and mental health staff to view what services a student has received in the past and any accompanying notes or reports on student progress. Rumler explained, "If a student transitions from fifth grade [to] sixth grade, the people working with them can look back and see what kind of services the family has used in the past, and maybe we have a conversation about what have you enjoyed, what has worked well for you, what has not, and we can make some adjustments."

## Evaluation Uncovers Challenges, Progress, and Hope

Evaluation represents an important priority for OnTrack Greenville, though they have had to be creative to overcome challenges posed by evaluating such a multifaceted initiative. The organization is dedicated to regularly assessing success, and evaluation data contribute to a culture of shared learning and accountability for continuous improvement. OnTrack



Greenville and Greenville County Schools initially partnered with the Riley Institute at Furman University to conduct an outcome evaluation of the model and is now working with the Human Services Research Institute. The community quickly realized that an objective evaluation would not be easy. As Anderson explained, “These schools are the only schools in the state of South Carolina like them. The only ones with this unique, complex, intersection of population of students.” Thus, the Riley Institute created a synthetic school of student data from across South Carolina for comparison. Effectively evaluating the organization’s impact is also challenging because these kinds of complex initiatives can take 10 to 15 years to show results. “We spent a lot of time this year just getting to know the data intimately and getting to know the people and trying to understand the stories of the ‘why,’” said Anderson.

*“I’ve noticed the impact [OnTrack Greenville] has on students and families when they know that you really genuinely care about them... when the student feels supported, they’re going to put a little bit more buy-in, try to do better, because they know somebody’s paying attention.”*

-Laura Gibson, OnTrack Facilitator

OnTrack schools have seen improvements in their English language arts (ELA), math, and chronic absenteeism outcomes. Between the 2016-17 and 2018-19 school years, math proficiency increased by 25 percent, ELA proficiency rose by 25 percent, and chronic absenteeism decreased by five percent in OnTrack middle schools.<sup>7</sup> However, during the same period, behavioral incidents increased by 17 percent.<sup>8</sup> While behavioral incidents increased, OnTrack students showed improved social-emotional outcomes in other measures, such as school engagement, school belonging, and relationships with teachers.<sup>9</sup> Partner evaluations also revealed that partner programs positively impacted student attendance and social-emotional outcomes.<sup>10</sup> Despite these gains, more work remains to be done in order to bolster student success. According to the outcome evaluation, while few students flagged red in all three EWRS domains, “only 18 percent of OnTrack Greenville students had green early warning indicators in all three domains, meaning they had few absences, few behavioral referrals, and passed their five core courses with a grade of C or better.”<sup>11</sup>



High school students at senior appreciation event.

Although early results are mixed, staff observe positive impacts of OnTrack on students, staff, and school culture and highlight how, regardless of evaluation results, managing to keep students in school or increasing school connectedness should not be overlooked. “I’ve noticed the impact [OnTrack Greenville] has on students and families when they know that you really genuinely care about them... when the student feels supported, they’re going to put a little bit more buy-in, try to do better, because they know somebody’s paying attention,” described Gibson. According to staff, OnTrack’s impact includes linking students with more resources to help them stay connected to school, ensuring students know there are adults at school and in their community who care

about them and want them to succeed, and providing students with pathways to success. GCS schools without OnTrack can access the EWRS system but lack the same partners and resources that OnTrack schools offer. Rumler described how he’s seen a “paradigm shift” over the past five years noting that now, rather than perceiving student misbehavior or missing school as a lack of effort, teachers and staff recognize that students may be dealing with serious issues and it’s important to have compassion and empathy. As Dockter added, “Those are the stories that sometimes don’t always show up in our quantitative data: a student may still be off track academically and probably with their behavior and maybe their attendance. But in terms of students feeling that the adults care about them—that’s been transformative. ... Maybe for that student, we get to see them return to be on track, or maybe it’s just that they stay connected to the school system, they get more supports. It’s those small wins along the way that remind us it can’t just be numbers; you have to balance our numbers with our stories because every story is a person, and every person matters to us.”

Evaluation challenges have spurred broader conversations about OnTrack Greenville’s impact. According to Anderson, “The conversation has been: is OnTrack Greenville itself an evidence-based system, or is it a collection, a system of, evidence-based interventions?” The organization’s leaders also distinguish between outputs and outcomes, noting that while both are important, outputs do not provide the full picture. Outputs (e.g., the number of students a program serves) include the short-term measures of a process or intervention, while outcomes (e.g., OnTrack’s impact on GCS’ graduation rates), represent OnTrack’s broader goals, to which outputs contribute. “It can be tricky because, with some

work it's really hard to see those outcomes and so you lean really heavily on outputs. There's value in the number of students, but outcomes are ultimately what needs to drive our work," said Dockter. Anderson also acknowledges the challenge of determining causation versus correlation for OnTrack's impacts, particularly given the multitude of factors beyond the model that may vary between schools and that inherently impact student outcomes, such as teacher experience levels.

## Next Steps and Lessons Learned

When reflecting on next steps for OnTrack Greenville, both Anderson and Dockter describe plans for expansion and the need to collect clear evidence. However, expansion brings up a fundamental tension: with limited resources, does the organization prioritize scaling to other schools, expand to serve more students at existing schools, or shift to a full-service community schools model? According to Anderson, "When we find that winning combination of those 4-5-6-7 interventions when brought together with this unique partnership between the community and the school district, then we can have our model and say 'let's replicate this thing somewhere else', because all this is magic."

OnTrack leaders and staff would love to expand into the elementary schools that feed into the OnTrack middle schools to provide students with an aligned set of services throughout their educational journey. As Dockter shared, "Long term success to me [means] keeping more students on track to graduate on time... to see sustained, positive SEL outcomes even if our school leadership changes, [and] three, four, five years, 10 years [in the future] to see this sustained attitude of being trauma-informed and culturally competent."

OnTrack staff offer key lessons for other districts and organizations working on or looking to start similar initiatives:

- **Engage in tough conversations up front:** Addressing complex challenges requires vulnerability, humility, and a willingness to have uncomfortable, open, and honest conversations. Implementing a structure for making decisions can facilitate difficult decisions and conversations. OnTrack staff and partners found that establishing data-sharing agreements requires open, difficult, and ongoing conversations combined with a willingness to be vulnerable. Starting these conversations with the district and partners at the beginning can help facilitate success.
- **Be patient:** Working in schools to address complex issues at the intersection of education, poverty, and health is challenging and requires patience with the

process. School-based staff emphasize that progress is not linear, and that patience is required when unexpected hurdles arise.

- **Prioritize consistency:** When considering starting or scaling personalized, student-centered, cross-sector programs, consider sustainability and consistency over good intentions. OnTrack staff focus on future sustainability when thinking about new programs, learning from experience that going into schools, developing trust with families, and leaving breaches families' trust and can cause more harm than good.
- **Being in schools is critical:** When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, OnTrack and partner staff transitioned to virtual services as much as possible. Staff learned that the human connection and in-person relationships from being in schools with students were essential, not only due to a lack of equitable technology access among students, but that being in schools enables OnTrack staff at all levels to connect to students and build stronger relationships.
- **Recognize that evaluation is both necessary and complex:** OnTrack leaders have prioritized evaluating impact despite challenges along the way. They emphasize the importance of evaluation planning, recognizing the differences between outcomes and outputs and correlation and causation, having patience as measuring collective impact outcomes can take 10 to 15 years, and celebrating student and school wins that may not show up in quantitative data.



Senior appreciation night at OnTrack partner school.

## Appendix

### Interview List

Participant Name	Interview Date	Role
Taylor Dockter	10/28/21	Assistant Director, OnTrack Greenville
Edward Anderson	11/5/21	Executive Director, OnTrack Greenville
Corey Collington	11/10/21	Principal, Berea Middle School, GCS
Tyler Adams	11/10/21	Intern, OnTrack Greenville
TJ Rumler	11/11/21	Social Worker, Trauma-Informed Specialist, GCS
Tonia Davis	11/15/21	OnTrack Facilitator/Mental Health Specialist, GCS
Gina Bridges	11/17/21	Family Support Specialist, OnTrack Greenville
Laura Gibson	11/23/21	OnTrack Facilitator/Mental Health Specialist, GCS

## About the Education Redesign Lab

Founded in 2014 by Paul Reville, former Massachusetts Secretary of Education and Professor of Practice of Educational Policy and Administration at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, the Education Redesign Lab (EdRedesign) is a university-based action research hub. In the pursuit of equity and social justice, we support the field in building cross-sector, community-wide systems of support and opportunity for children from birth to adulthood. EdRedesign also supports communities engaged in Success Planning, an individualized, comprehensive support framework for each child that includes an individual relationship with a caring adult Navigator, a personalized plan for action and a process for enacting it, a coordinated system of supports and opportunities, and a data platform to capture information over time.

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Photo credit: All photos courtesy of OnTrack Greenville.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> “Our Response,” OnTrack Greenville, accessed December 2021, <http://ontrackgreenville.org/our-response/>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Waters et al., *OnTrack Greenville Evaluation Executive Summary* (Greenville, SC: The Riley Institute at Furman University, 2021, provided by OnTrack Greenville).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> “Our Partners,” OnTrack Greenville, accessed December 2021, <http://ontrackgreenville.org/our-partners/>.

<sup>7</sup> Waters et al., *OnTrack Greenville Evaluation Executive Summary* (Greenville, SC: The Riley Institute at Furman University, 2021, provided by OnTrack Greenville).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.