

Advancing Excellence in Specialized Education: The WSOC Schools Model for Low Incidence Disabilities and Behavioral & Emotional Regulation Support Needs

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Abstract

The Woods System of Care (WSOC) Schools in Pennsylvania and New Jersey are transforming specialized education by delivering highly individualized, multidisciplinary, and lifespan-oriented supports for students with low-incidence disabilities, emotional support needs, and autism. Grounded in a whole-child philosophy and the principle “Nothing About Us Without Us,” WSOC integrates academic instruction, therapeutic services, functional skill-building, and transition preparation to ensure students thrive in school and adulthood. Through evidence-based practices, team-based learning environments, strong family partnerships, and expanded autism services across the lifespan, WSOC aims to become a regional and national leader in specialized education. Its model emphasizes personalized learning, communication supports, emotional and behavioral regulation, vocational readiness, and culturally responsive care, demonstrating that with the right environment, every student can achieve meaningful academic, social, and life outcomes.

Introduction

Across the United States, schools serving students with complex disabilities face growing expectations to demonstrate both strong academic outcomes and meaningful life transitions. In Pennsylvania and New Jersey, the Woods System of Care (WSOC) Schools are leading a transformation in how education is designed for students with **Low Incidence Disabilities**, those with **Emotional Support Needs**, and **Autistic Individuals**. WSOC recognizes the uniqueness of every person and is committed to advocating for and delivering best practice and high-quality integrated care that champions every individual’s potential for growth, well-being, dignity, and purpose. Within the education context, WSOC’s goal is to deliver innovative, evidence-based educational environments that prepare students not only to succeed in school, but to thrive in adulthood—in post-secondary education, employment, independent or supported living, and community life.

The vision guiding WSOC Schools is ambitious and clear: to become the **premier network of specialized schools** in the region, and ultimately the nation, recognized for leading-edge approaches that strengthen academic, social, emotional, and life skills development. This vision reflects national trends emphasizing whole-child, individualized learning environments supported by multidisciplinary teams (National Council on Disability, 2023). WSOC’s approach reflects best practice in special education by integrating therapeutic supports, functional skill-building, family engagement, and transition preparation into every stage of the student experience. WSOC believes in involving participants and their caregivers as contributors, advisors, and leaders to shape our services under the philosophy “Nothing About Us Without Us”.

The success of WSOC Schools is grounded in three core commitments:

1. **Producing meaningful academic, social, and emotional growth for each student;**
2. **Ensuring successful post-K–12 outcomes through transition planning and career preparation;**
3. **Expanding access to high-quality supports through strategic partnerships and system-level leadership.**

Context Low Incidence Schools: Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), “low incidence disabilities” include disabilities that occur infrequently and require highly specialized supports, such as multiple disabilities, intellectual developmental disabilities, and sensory and orthopedic impairments (IDEA, 2004). WSOC’s specialized school model is designed to meet the needs of students with low-incidence disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, and emotional support needs. These schools provide deeply personalized, flexible, and adaptive learning environments. Some of the key features of WSOC schools include:

- **Highly Individualized Instruction:** Learning is driven by student strengths, interests, and communication needs.
- **Multidisciplinary Teams:** Special education, deaf and hard-of-hearing, and ELL educators; therapists; nurses; school psychologists; and paraprofessionals collaborate daily.
- **Assistive Technology:** Augmentative communication systems, adaptive tools, and sensory supports are embedded throughout the school day.
- **Functional and Transition Skills:** Curriculum emphasizes daily living, community-based learning, and vocational preparation.
- **Behavioral and Emotional Supports:** Staff are trained in trauma-informed care and Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (Center on PBIS, 2022).
- **Family Partnership:** Caregivers are recognized as essential co-educators and decision-makers.

Research consistently affirms that students with complex disabilities achieve stronger outcomes when learning environments are individualized, predictable, relational, and structured around communication and functional skill-building (National Center on Educational Outcomes, 2022). WSOC Schools operationalize this research into daily practice.

Context Emotional Support Needs Schools: A second specialization of WSOC is the education of students experiencing **serious emotional or behavioral challenges**. These students often require therapeutic environments designed to help them develop self-regulation, coping strategies, and social-emotional skills essential for success in academic and social settings.

Some of the key features of WSOC Behavioral and Emotional Regulation Schools include:

- **Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)** tailored to both learning and behavioral needs.
- **Integrated Therapeutic Services**, including counseling, behavioral therapy, and psychiatric supports when needed.
- **Highly Structured Classrooms** that establish consistency, predictability, and emotional safety.
- **Family and Community Engagement** to promote continuity of support across home and school environments.

Research shows that students with emotional and behavioral challenges benefit most from environments that blend academic instruction with therapeutic supports delivered by multidisciplinary teams (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2023). WSOC Schools are structured precisely around this integrated model.

Context Autism Spectrum Support Across the Lifespan and WSOC Schools: WSOC is expanding its capacity to support **autistic individuals across the lifespan**, ensuring continuity through school, transition, adulthood, employment, and community living. This approach aligns with emerging best practices that emphasize person-centered planning, autonomy, and community integration (Autistic Self Advocacy Network, 2023).

WSOC aims to become a **regional, national, and global hub of autism excellence by:**

- Enhancing school programs and communication supports
- Expanding residential and group home opportunities
- Creating a model for integrated healthcare
- Growing vocational and supported employment initiatives
- Increasing outpatient and behavioral health services

This commitment reflects growing recognition that autism support must be **continuous, personalized, and integrated across life domains** (CDC, 2023).

WSOC Autism Spectrum Support Across the Lifespan Strategy

Vision and Imperative for Action: The Woods System of Care (WSOC) is leading a transformative initiative to enhance access, quality, and integration of autism services across the

lifespan. With autism prevalence now estimated at 1 in 31 children (CDC, 2025), the need for comprehensive, coordinated, and high-quality care has never been greater. WSOC's goal is to establish itself as a regional, national, and global hub of autism excellence, delivering compassionate, person-centered supports that foster skill development, independence, and improved quality of life. This initiative is grounded in a lifespan approach that ensures continuous, seamless services—from early intervention and education through adulthood, employment, and aging—supported by WSOC's robust affiliate network and multidisciplinary expertise.

Strategic Framework and Core Initiatives: WSOC's "Autism Services Across the Lifespan" strategy focuses on building the capacity of its affiliates to deliver integrated behavioral, medical, and educational care. The approach emphasizes timely access to individualized diagnostic and treatment services, evidence-based interventions, and continuous family engagement. Key initiatives include expanding autism-focused school programs, growing residential and outpatient services, and forming new mission-aligned partnerships and acquisitions to strengthen the continuum of care. WSOC also aims to become a regional hub for clinician training, consultation, and research through partnerships with leading institutions. These efforts are designed to ensure that every individual with autism receives consistent, high-quality care that evolves with their needs.

Building Expertise, Capacity, and Market Reach: Central to WSOC's growth is a system-wide commitment to professional training, program development, and quality improvement. By creating specialized training modules for educators, clinicians, and caregivers, WSOC will cultivate a workforce skilled in evidence-based approaches such as Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA), Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), modified cognitive behavioral therapies, and trauma-informed care frameworks. Concurrently, WSOC will expand consultation services to schools and communities, providing technical assistance, diagnostic support, and family coaching. The organization also plans to grow its educational footprint through new autism-specific schools, early intervention centers, and vocational programs in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. These initiatives will position WSOC affiliates to broaden access to high-quality care while advancing the standard of autism care regionally and nationally.

WSOC Education Model: Student-Centered, Holistic, and Team-Based

WSOC Schools cultivate environments where students feel **safe, known, supported, and valued**. WSOC schools are part of a continuum, with a goal of maximizing inclusion and choice for each individual and family. Small class sizes and personalized instruction allow teachers to adapt the curriculum to each student's learning style and pace. The presence of **integrated on-site teams** ensures that academic and therapeutic supports are connected, consistent, and responsive.

The WSOC Core Instructional Principles include:

- Individualized and Self-Paced Learning

- Curriculum Linked to Real-Life Purpose
- High Expectations Paired with High Support
- Social and Emotional Learning as Foundational to Academic Success
- Learning that Builds Agency and Independence

The WSOC model aligns with contemporary research demonstrating that emotional regulation, communication supports, and positive behavioral systems are critical to academic achievement for students with complex needs (Briesch, Chafouleas, & Riley-Tillman, 2024).

Student Impact: Academic, Social and Emotional, and Student and Family Satisfaction

WSOC measures student success through three aligned outcomes. **Academic Success** is measured through a student's progress on IEP goals; growth in literacy and math; and critical thinking, creativity, and applied learning. **Social and Emotional Growth** is measured through reduced behavioral incidents; increased time-on-task and engagement, and improved communication and coping strategies. **Student and Family Satisfaction** is measured through surveys and conversations with families and caregivers. Students and Families consistently report **high satisfaction** with student progress, communication, and emotional well-being, which is a key indicator of program quality (Harvard Family Engagement Project, 2022).

Staffing and Professional Development

WSOC Schools are staffed by **highly trained multidisciplinary teams**, including:

- Certified Special Education Teachers
- Paraprofessionals/Personal Care Assistants
- Occupational, Physical, and Speech Therapists
- Social Workers and Behavioral Specialists
- School Psychologists and Nurses

Professional development is delivered through a robust learning institute across WSOC's nine schools, with modules focused on:

- IEP development and goals
- Trauma-informed care and de-escalation strategies
- Behavior and classroom management
- Technology-enhanced individualized instruction
- Diagnostic assessment and progress monitoring

This staffing and training structure ensures **continuity, consistency, and quality** across all WSOC programs.

Conclusion

Woods Services, Legacy, and Archway Schools have been leading specialized school models for over 100 years. WSOC Schools are not simply educational settings—they are **communities of learning, support, and possibility**. By centering individualized instruction, therapeutic integration, vocational readiness, and strong family partnership, WSOC is shaping a future in which students with complex disabilities are empowered to learn, grow, and thrive.

WSOC's model demonstrates that with the right environment, structure, relationships, and opportunities, every student—regardless of disability or behavioral challenge—can achieve meaningful academic, social, and life success.

WSOC is committed to ensuring access to diagnosis, education, and lifelong support. We recognize that racial, cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic disparities shape the experiences of autistic individuals and their families. To address these access challenges, WSOC's strategy is to partner with families, community organizations, and autistic self-advocates to design supports that are culturally responsive, inclusive, and grounded in lived experience.