



# Retaining School Mental Health Professionals:

## A Framework for Best Practice Implementation

School Mental Health  
 COLLABORATIVE

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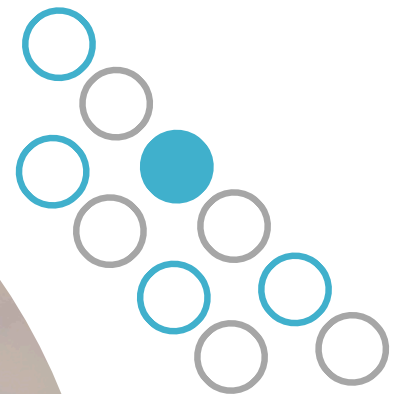
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## Introduction

For more than a decade, national leaders, practitioners, and researchers have noted the urgent need to address youth mental health (U.S. Surgeon General, 2021), specifically pointing to schools as one of the most important settings for youth mental health services (Mire & Dunsmore, 2024). School mental health professionals (SMHPs)—school psychologists, school counselors, and school social workers—have an important role in promoting youth mental health in schools (Kern et al., 2021; Mellin et al., 2011; Zabek et al., 2023). Despite their important roles in supporting student mental health, SMHPs face several challenges that contribute to them leaving their position. For example, many SMHPs report a lack of support in their school, unclear roles, unsustainable workloads, minimal access to professional development, degrading well-being and increasing burnout, and few options for growth and leadership (Will, 2023). Although there are resources that describe retention strategies, they are not aligned with the challenges SMHPs experience, nor are they aligned with an implementation plan that connects those retention strategies to school systems and practices to promote implementation.





# Framework for SMHP Best Practice Retention Implementation

The purpose of this practice brief is to describe a framework school district and school leaders can use to retain SMHPs with two dimensions. One, best practice components that address challenges SMHPs are experiencing that are leading them to leave their positions. Two, an implementation plan.

## Best Practice Components for SMHP Retention

The following five components address challenges SMHPs experience that increase the risk of them leaving their positions: (a) create a supportive work environment, (b) clearly define their role and assign an appropriate workload, (c) provide access to ongoing professional development, (d) promote their well-being and address burnout, and (e) provide pathways for growth and leadership in their school district (Lever et al., 2017; Will, 2023; Zabek et al., 2023).

**Create a Supportive Work Environment.** To foster a supportive work environment, it is important for district and school leaders to understand SMHP roles and the value they contribute to student learning and development (Zabek et al., 2023). District and school leaders integrate SMHPs into school teams, communicate that their ideas are valued, and recognize their contributions. For example, leaders can publicly acknowledge SMHPs' contributions during school board meetings or in district communications. Additionally, having SMHPs lead school-wide training in their areas of expertise, such as conducting workshops on behavioral intervention strategies, recognizes their professional knowledge and demonstrates their value to the broader school community. In addition, district and school leaders provide opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration so that SMHPs can innovate and improve services for students (Kelly et al., 2014). For example, leaders can include SMHPs as active members of weekly administrative team meetings and crisis response planning committees. These collaborative structures encourage SMHPs to contribute their expertise and provide opportunities for collaboration with teachers, nurses, and administrators to coordinate student supports.

**Clearly Define SMHPs Role and Assign an Appropriate Workload.** Role clarity and appropriate workloads reduce stress and increase retention (Young et al., 2020). When SMHPs are asked to perform duties outside their role, such as lunchroom supervision, their satisfaction decreases, and their primary school mental health responsibilities suffer. Professional organizations—National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), American School Counselor Association (ASCA), and School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA)—have professional standards district and school leaders can use to create job descriptions and performance evaluations. Within their standards, these professional organizations identify recommended staffing ratios that, if followed, increase the likelihood that SMHPs can fulfill their responsibilities and support student learning and development (Lyon et al., 2018). Specifically, the Professional Standards of NASP (2020) indicate a ratio of 1 school psychologist for every 500 students, and the ASCA and the SSWAA recommend a ratio of 1 school counselor or school social worker for every 250 students (ASCA, 2023; Tan & SSWAA, 2024).

**Provide Access to Ongoing Professional Development.** Retention is enhanced when SMHPs have meaningful opportunities to grow their knowledge and skills (Kaye et al., 2022). District leaders provide regular opportunities for high-quality professional development that are based on topics (e.g., home-school collaboration) and approaches (e.g., didactic instruction, didactic instruction with ongoing coaching) SMHPs identify as relevant (Kaye et al., 2022).

District leaders can invite SMHP feedback about topics and approaches through a two-stage survey. In the first stage, SMHPs are asked to rank-order their top five professional development topics and their top five professional development approaches. In the second stage, SMHPs are asked to vote on the top five topics nominated by all SMHPs and identify their preferred professional development approach with each topic. In addition to promoting relevant and effective professional development, inviting SMHPs to provide input and then using their input builds shared ownership and communicates that district leaders value SMHP ideas. District leaders can also provide time and funding for SMHPs to participate in state, regional, and national conferences to engage in professional development, expand and strengthen their professional network, and pursue advanced certification.



**Promote SMHPs Well-Being and Address Burnout.** The emotionally intense nature of school mental health activities places SMHPs at heightened risk for compromised well-being and burnout (Lever et al., 2017). This risk increases when support in the workplace is inadequate. Workplace support for SMHPs includes strategies to promote well-being and prevent burnout as well as address compromised well-being and burnout.

These strategies emphasize access to supervision, encouraging reasonable work hours, and wellness programming (Kelly, 2024; Lever et al., 2017). Access to supervision provides SMHPs with opportunities to enhance their knowledge and skills and address challenges, which promote self-efficacy (Schiele et al., 2014; Shernoff et al., 2017). Self-efficacy about roles and responsibilities reduces the risk of SMHPs experiencing burnout (Ross et al., 2011). When school leaders emphasize reasonable work hours, they support SMHPs in getting adequate rest and making time for other life priorities. School leaders can help SMHPs limit their work to set work hours by providing access to learning opportunities that help SMHPs develop efficient work habits, form a healthy relationship with time, and focus attention on what truly matters (Burkeman, 2021). School leaders can also recommend wellness programs that reduce stress and burnout. For example, mindfulness-based stress reduction (Flook et al., 2013) can reduce stress and burnout, improve well-being, and strengthen professional self-efficacy.





**Provide Pathways for Growth and Leadership.** For many SMHPs, long-term retention depends on clear and attainable pathways for career growth and advancement (Young et al., 2020). Because SMHPs have different goals, pathways for growth and leadership should include varied options. For example, mentoring early career SMHPs, supervising interns, leading professional learning, or taking on a district-level coordinator position are options that can fit within a range of potential SMHP goals. SMHPs may have goals focused on career growth and leadership, but do not perceive available options as attainable. Thus, school and district leaders can provide leadership development opportunities tailored for specific short- and long-term goals. For example, for a SMHP with aspirations of coordinating school mental health services district-wide, district leaders could create pathways for stepwise progression, such as by first coordinating support within a school or coordinating school mental health roles or activities.

## Best Practice Implementation Plan

Components to promote SMHP retention have limited value without an implementation plan that results in retention. A best practice implementation plan includes (a) implementation team members who collaborate to promote implementation and (b) implementation activities.

**Team Members to Promote Implementation.** Multiple individuals across contexts are needed on a team to promote SMHP retention (Hurlburt et al., 2014; Judkins et al., 2019). These individuals include SMHPs, district and school leaders, district human resources personnel, state education leaders, and state and regional technical assistance providers. Districts can create a retention implementation team that includes representatives from each of these partner groups. SMHPs, district and school leaders, and district human resources personnel are the core team that meets monthly with quarterly meetings that include state education leaders and state and regional technical assistance providers. When considering implementation of a new approach, several guiding questions can ground implementation team discussions:

- Do they understand what they are being asked to do?
- Do they have the prerequisite skills, knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs necessary to support effective and efficient change?
- Do they have a compelling “why” and ownership to want to change?
- Do they have the resources to make the change or develop the skills and knowledge to change?
- Do they have a plan to follow that sequences stages of change and highlights barriers and mistakes to avoid?

*School Mental Health Professionals.* SMHPs play a central role in shaping the conditions that support their own retention (Witte et al., 2023). They can advocate for role clarity by communicating their scope of practice, documenting workload demands, and collaborating with school and district leaders to align responsibilities with their expertise. SMHPs can also contribute to a supportive work environment by fostering positive relationships with colleagues, engaging in shared decision-making, and modeling self-care practices. Their participation in professional learning communities, mentorship, and peer consultation helps sustain individual growth and collective resilience (Masten et al., 2008).

*District and School Leaders.* District and school leaders are pivotal in creating the structural and district-wide conditions necessary for SMHP retention (Frey et al., 2022). They can align SMHP roles with national practice standards and create workloads that reflect recommended ratios. Leaders should integrate SMHPs into school-based teams, decision-making processes, and professional development initiatives. Leaders can provide access to consultation and supervision, support wellness initiatives, and integrate practices to recognize SMHPs. Leaders can develop transparent pathways for professional growth and leadership, such as roles in strategic planning of mental health initiatives with schools or across the district.

*District Human Resources Personnel.* In addition to SMHPs and district and school leaders, human resources personnel have a critical role on the core implementation team. Human resources personnel shape workforce policies and procedures, and bring expertise with hiring guides, job classification, performance management, and employee relations (Deadrick & Stone, 2014). On a core implementation team, human resources personnel can help integrate retention practices into district policies. They can also contribute data on recruitment and retention trends and make shared decisions with other team members to build a strong retention infrastructure.



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*State Education Leaders.* State education leaders have an important role in shaping policy, funding structures, and guidance that support local efforts to retain SMHPs (Belansky et al., 2024). They can advance workforce sustainability by establishing clear standards for SMHP roles and caseloads, incorporating retention goals into state-level school mental health frameworks, and incentivizing districts to adopt effective practices. State leaders can also support professional development by offering statewide training opportunities, certification programs, and communities of practice.

*State and Regional Technical Assistance Providers.* State and regional technical assistance (TA) providers support SMHP retention by offering targeted coaching, tools, and training to build district and school capacity (Evidence-based Prevention and Intervention Support, n.d.). TA providers can help districts take stock of workforce conditions, develop implementation plans, and monitor progress. They can offer expertise on effective retention strategies and facilitate peer learning networks across districts or regions. Additionally, TA providers serve as intermediaries between state leaders and local practitioners.

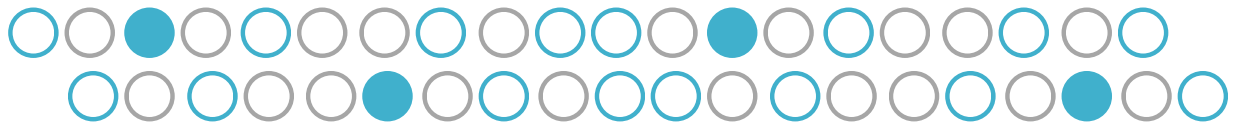


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**Implementation Activities.** The implementation activities follow the stages of implementation, but they are tailored for best practice components for SMHP retention (e.g., create a supportive work environment). Stages of implementation include: (a) exploration, (b) installation, (c) implementation, and (d) sustainment (National Implementation Research Network, 2021). The core implementation team is responsible for coordinating implementation within and across these stages. Implementation activities also include planning and problem-solving implementation by identifying implementation determinants and aligning those determinants with implementation strategies that lead to implementation outcomes.

*Exploration.* The implementation process begins with a comprehensive assessment to identify current strengths, gaps, and needs related to the retention of school mental health professionals (Connors et al., 2022). This includes collecting data through SMHP surveys, interviews, exit interview data, workload reviews, and collaboration with school and district leaders. The assessment should examine best practice components of SMHP retention and valued outcomes (e.g., role clarity, workload distribution, access to professional development, staff well-being, and opportunities for advancement). Based on these findings, the core implementation team develops an action plan. The action plan should include specific goals, strategies for reaching goals, action steps, timelines for completion, individuals responsible, resources needed, and status updates (Carvalho et al., 2022). The plan should be grounded in assessment findings and promote strategies that foster a supportive work environment, clarify roles, set manageable caseloads, and identify pathways to growth and leadership. The core team exits exploration and enters installation when they have reached consensus on an action plan that is based on assessment data and includes the best practice components for SMHP retention.



*Installation.* The installation stage involves establishing the necessary infrastructure to support the retention plan (Cook et al., 2019). During installation, the core implementation team continues to meet monthly, and more frequently as needed, with quarterly meetings with state education leaders and state and regional technical assistance providers. The core implementation team emphasizes installation of systems, policies, and practices needed to advance the best practice components for SMHP retention. The core team should establish clear communication channels and decision-making processes to promote transparency and shared ownership. Table 1 includes these and additional examples of installation activities aligned with best practice components and compared with example implementation activities.

*Implementation.* During implementation, school professionals implement the best practice components of SMHP retention (Powell et al., 2017). The core team continues with monthly meetings, engaging state education leaders and state and regional technical assistance providers quarterly. Examples of implementing best practice components of SMHP retention include: SMHPs regularly participating in team meetings and receive recognition for their contributions, leaders assign SMHPs tasks that match their credentials and job description, SMHPs participate in professional development that is based on their feedback, leaders monitor SMHP wellness and make adjustments where needed, and SMHPs are offered leadership roles or participate in discussions about their desires for growth in their position (see Table 1 for additional examples). During implementation, the core team monitors (a) implementation of retention components and (b) valued outcomes (e.g., SMHPs leaving the district, SMHP well-being; Lyon & Bruns, 2019). Using these data, the core team evaluates progress toward goals and adjusts when there is a lack of progress or when school professionals report problems. The core team can measure implementation and valued outcomes using quantitative data (e.g., SMHP report of their well-being on a rating scale), qualitative data (e.g., SMHP interviews), or through comprehensive evaluations that often include quantitative and qualitative data.



*Sustainment.* Sustainment refers to continued implementation over 3–5 years at a level of fidelity that continues to produce valued outcomes (Fixsen et al., 2005). During sustainment, the focus of the core implementation team shifts from promoting implementation of SMHP retention best practice components to supportive structures and practices that enable district and school leaders and SMHP to maintain implementation over time. Sustainment involves embedding practices such as a supportive work environment, clearly defined roles, and appropriate workload allocation into standard organizational policies, procedures, and culture (Stirman et al., 2012). During sustainment, the core team facilitates regular reviews and updates to retention targets (e.g., job descriptions, leadership development programs). Sustainment requires continuous leadership commitment, resource allocation, and feedback loops that support using data to monitor progress and respond to evolving needs (Aarons et al., 2011).

*Implementation Determinants, Strategies, and Outcomes.* Identifying implementation determinants and applying tailored implementation strategies promotes installation, implementation, and sustainment of SMHP retention practices. Determinants—such as leadership engagement, communication quality, and knowledge and beliefs—can hinder or facilitate implementation efforts (Damschroder et al., 2009). By systematically assessing these contextual factors, the core implementation team can select implementation strategies (e.g., leadership training, professional development) that address barriers and leverage strengths (Powell et al., 2015). Table 2 includes determinants the core implementation team may identify with associated implementation strategies to promote implementation.

## Conclusion

SMHPs have an important role in promoting youth mental health in schools. However, SMHPs encounter multiple challenges that contribute to them leaving their position. To reduce the risk that SMHP will leave their position and promote retention, school and district leaders, SMHPs, and human resources staff can collaborate to explore, install, and implement SMHP retention best practices.

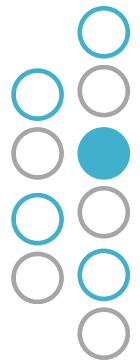


# Discussion Guide: Retaining School Mental Health Professionals

## Purpose

The purpose of this discussion guide is to support school mental health professionals (SMHPs), district and school leaders, district human resources personnel, and other key partners (e.g., state education leaders) in discussing and planning for improved retention of SMHPs by focusing on five key areas:

1. *Creating a supportive work environment*
2. *Clearly defining SMHP roles and workloads*
3. *Providing ongoing professional development*
4. *Promoting well-being and addressing burnout*
5. *Establishing pathways for growth and leadership*



## 1. Warm Up and Framing

**Goal:** Establish shared understanding of the importance of SMHP retention.

### Discussion Questions:

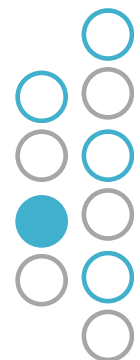
- Why is SMHP retention critical to our district/school/state?
- What trends or challenges have we observed in our school, district, or community that threaten SMHP retention?
- How does SMHPs leaving their positions impact student outcomes and service delivery?

## 2. Discussion

Divide the discussion into five sections that emphasize best practices for SMHP retention. Use the questions to guide discussion.

### a. Supportive Work Environment

- What does a supportive environment look like for SMHPs in our setting?
- How do school climate and leadership impact SMHP satisfaction?
- What actions could we take in the short and long term to improve workplace climate?



**b. Role Clarity and Workload**

- To what extent are SMHP roles clearly defined in our district/job descriptions?
- In what ways can role ambiguity undermine reasonable workloads and SMHP satisfaction?
- What changes could we make to role expectations or workloads?

**c. Professional Development**

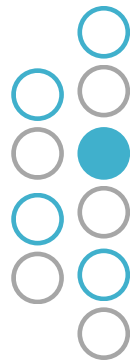
- What professional development opportunities currently exist for SMHPs?
- To what extent are professional development options relevant, accessible, and valued by SMHPs?
- How can we promote continuous learning and ongoing supervision for SMHPs?

**d. Well-Being and Burnout Prevention**

- What are the current risk factors for burnout among our SMHPs?
- What wellness supports do we offer? Are they being accessed?
- How can leaders actively support SMHP well-being?

**e. Leadership and Growth Pathways**

- Do SMHPs have opportunities to lead or mentor within our system?
- What structures (e.g., career ladders) are in place to support advancement?
- How might we formalize or expand leadership pathways?

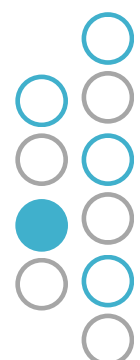


**3. Implementation Planning**

**Goal:** Prioritize actions and next steps.

**Discussion Questions:**

- Which of the five areas should we focus on first and why?
- What data do we still need to inform our decisions?
- Who should be part of our implementation team to move this forward?



**4. Closing and Commitments**

**Goal:** Capture momentum and assign follow-ups.

**Suggested Prompts:**

- What are 1–2 immediate actions we can take?
- Who is responsible for coordinating next steps?
- When will we reconvene to monitor progress?

# Resources

## Materials to Create Position Descriptions

### School Psychologist Roles and Domains of Practice

- <https://www.nasponline.org/about-school-psychology/who-are-school-psychologists>
- <https://www.nasponline.org/standards-and-certification/nasp-2020-professional-standards-adopted/nasp-2020-domains-of-practice>

### School Counselor Roles and Competencies

- <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/getmedia/ee8b2e1b-d021-4575-982c-c84402cb2cd2/Role-Statement.pdf>
- <https://schoolcounselor.org/getmedia/a8d59c2c-51de-4ec3-a565-a3235f3b93c3/SC-Competencies.pdf>

### School Social Worker Roles and Competencies

- <https://www.sswaa.org/reflections-national-model>

## Hiring Guide

### School Mental Health Professional Hiring Guide

- <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12310-022-09530-5#appendices>

## Exit Interviews

### Exit interview guidelines and example questions

- <https://ca.indeed.com/hire/c/info/exit-interview-form>

## Example Professional Development Topics

### School Crisis Prevention and Response

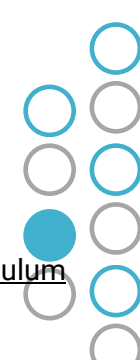
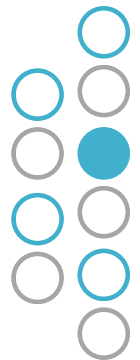
- <https://www.nasponline.org/professional-development/prepare-training-curriculum>

### Legal and Ethical Complication

- <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/Events-Professional-Development/Professional-Development/On-Site-Training/Legal-Ethical>

### Data Management and Decision-Making

- <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/Events-Professional-Development/Professional-Development/On-Site-Training/Legal-Ethical>



## Example Scales and Surveys

### Burnout Assessment Tool (Schaufeli et al., 2020)

- [https://burnoutassessmenttool.be/start\\_eng/](https://burnoutassessmenttool.be/start_eng/)

### Job-related Affective Well-being Scale (Van Katwyk et al., 2000)

- <https://paulspector.com/assessments/pauls-no-cost-assessments/turnover-intentions/>

### Job Satisfaction Survey (Spector, 2022)

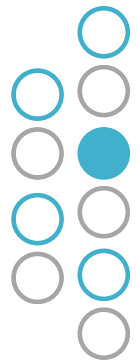
- <https://paulspector.com/assessments/pauls-no-cost-assessments/job-satisfaction-survey-jss/>

### Quantitative Workload Inventory (Spector & Jex, 1998)

- <https://paulspector.com/assessments/pauls-no-cost-assessments/quantitative-workload-inventory-qwi/>

### Turnover Intentions Scale (Michaels & Spector, 1982)

- <https://paulspector.com/assessments/pauls-no-cost-assessments/turnover-intentions/>



## Implementation Planning

### Implementation Plan Template

- <https://www.implementationpractice.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/NIRN-CIP-Implementation-Plan-Template-and-Examples-fillable-v1.pdf?utm>

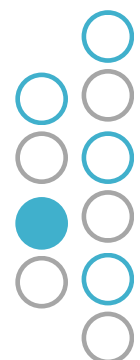
## Well-Being Promotion Activities

### Healthy Minds Program App

- <https://hminnovations.org/meditation-app>

### Book Study on Time Management

- <https://us.macmillan.com/books/9780374159122/fourthousandweeks/>



## Leadership Development Activities

### Book Study on Leadership: Dare to Lead

- <https://brenebrown.com/hubs/dare-to-lead/>



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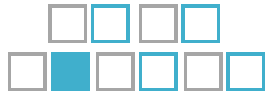
**Table 1.** Installation Activities Compared with Implementation Activities by Retention Component

Components of SMHP Retention	Installation Activities (Prepare for Action)	Implementation Activities (Put into Practice)
<p><b>Create a Supportive Work Environment</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop policies for collaboration and inclusion</li> <li>• Train leaders on SMHP workforce support</li> <li>• Set up communication and feedback systems</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leaders involve SMHPs in decisions</li> <li>• SMHPs participate in school teams</li> <li>• Regular use of feedback loops to improve climate</li> </ul>
<p><b>Clearly Define Roles and Assign Workload</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Revise job descriptions to reflect best practices</li> <li>• Develop caseload guidelines and staffing models</li> <li>• Train principals on role expectations and limits</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SMHPs assigned work aligned to credentials</li> <li>• Caseloads are monitored and adjusted</li> <li>• SMHPs report role clarity and alignment</li> </ul>
<p><b>Provide Ongoing Professional Development</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify professional development priorities</li> <li>• Allocate time and funding for professional development</li> <li>• Build professional development partnerships with external providers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SMHPs attend relevant, high-quality professional development</li> <li>• Professional development is followed by coaching or reflection</li> <li>• Professional development plans are updated based on feedback</li> </ul>
<p><b>Promote Well-Being and Address Burnout</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a wellness support structure (e.g., supervision, peer consult)</li> <li>• Protect time for wellness in schedules</li> <li>• Train leaders on burnout prevention.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SMHPs access supervision and wellness supports</li> <li>• Leaders respond to wellness needs</li> <li>• SMHPs report improved morale and reduced stress</li> </ul>
<p><b>Provide Pathways for Growth and Leadership</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Define advancement opportunities (e.g., mentor)</li> <li>• Set criteria and processes for leadership roles</li> <li>• Incorporate leadership in professional growth plans</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SMHPs take on leadership roles</li> <li>• Districts provide mentorship and coaching</li> <li>• SMHPs report stronger career investment and retention</li> </ul>



**Table 2.** Implementation Determinants, Strategies, Mechanisms, and Outcomes for SMHP Retention

Determinant	Implementation Strategy	Mechanism	Implementation Outcome
<b>Leadership engagement</b>	Conduct leadership training	Builds shared understanding and leader commitment to SMHP retention	Increased adoption and implementation
<b>Compatibility</b>	Align retention plan components with existing policies and structures	Minimizes disruption and increases feasibility	Improved feasibility and sustainment
<b>Available resources</b>	Secure dedicated funding and allocate protected time for implementation	Promotes tangible supports for implementation	Improved implementation
<b>Communication quality</b>	Establish regular communication loops	Enhances transparency and alignment	Increased engagement and implementation
<b>Self-efficacy</b>	Provide peer mentoring and supervision for SMHPs	Builds confidence in applying skills and navigating role demands	Increased implementation
<b>Knowledge and beliefs</b>	Deliver targeted professional development on retention best practices	Builds awareness and motivation to engage in change efforts	Improved appropriateness and adoption
<b>State and district policies</b>	Advocate for and co-develop policy with state education leaders	Aligns system incentives and reinforces accountability	Increased adoption and policy support
<b>Community partnerships</b>	Engage external partners in training and supervision	Enhances local capacity and shared ownership	Increased reach and resource availability
<b>Engagement of champions</b>	Identify and empower SMHP and leader champions	Builds momentum and influences peer behaviors	Increased adoption and leadership support
<b>Adaptability</b>	Customize plan based on context without losing fidelity	Enhances fit across varied school contexts	Improved appropriateness and spread
<b>Complexity</b>	Break plan into manageable phases with clear milestones	Reduces perceived burden and increases actionability	Improved feasibility and uptake



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