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CA Multi-Tiered System of Support Implementation Pilot Program

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Lessons From the Pilot of MTSS School-Site Implementation

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SUMMARY

This policy brief distills key lessons on policy implementation, content, and rollout from the pilot phase of the Scaling Up MTSS Statewide Initiative that supported school-site implementation of the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS). We find educators' experiences with other tiered intervention programs fundamentally shaped how MTSS implementation unfolded at school sites. This was due in large part to the MTSS framework being too broad in scope to provide schools with clarity and guidance; too narrow in how student behaviors are assessed and addressed to facilitate innovation; and silent on issues of race and culture. Troublingly, the rollout of the pilot in terms of funding model, site selection processes, and support structures likely aggravated existing resource inequalities between schools. Recommendations for future MTSS-related initiatives build on these insights.

POLICY OVERVIEW

California Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) is a state framework that uses a whole-child approach to create comprehensive and integrated support systems that attend to the academic, behavioral, and social-emotional dimensions of student learning. To meet the needs of all children, MTSS must include four essential domains:¹ 1) administrative leadership; 2) integrated supports such as organizational structures and positive school culture; 3) family and community engagement; 4) inclusive policy structure and practice at the local educational agency (LEA) level.

Since 2015, beginning with AB 2015, California has made significant investments in MTSS through the Scaling Up

MTSS Statewide (SUMS) initiative. The Orange County Department of Education and Butte County Office of Education are the state's lead agencies for SUMS. In 2018, they, partnering with UCLA's Center for Transformation of Schools, received \$15 million to pilot school-site implementation of MTSS, focused on school climate. This brief highlights lessons learned from the pilot phase through a comparative case study.²

The case studies include four sites that participated in the range of pilot models. The models, along with participating schools, are briefly introduced here and explored in detail throughout. The first model, which we call the **full pilot**, included Golden State Middle School³ and one of its feeder schools, Poppies Elementary School. They are in a suburban district sandwiched between sprawling urban metropolises. Pacific Middle School is in a coastal farming community and was awarded a grant to participate in what we call the **partial pilot**. The Student Success department in Rolling Hills Unified District, a suburban district of a major metropolis, is a grant awardee of the **open pilot**.

Section 1 reviews insights from site implementation of MTSS. Sections 2 and 3 highlight problems with policy content and challenges with policy rollout. Section 4 concludes with recommendations for future MTSS-related initiatives.

¹ <https://ocde.us/MTSS/Pages/CA-MTSS.aspx>

² While traditional models of implementation assessed fidelity by how closely sites aligned to a set of externally defined program standards, research shows the interaction between the unique conditions of any one school site and program adoption can result in innovation. Qualitative case study methodology deftly highlights conditions and lessons of implementation as revealed through the day-to-day of school life that should be considered as policies are designed, funded, and implemented.

³ Pseudonyms are used for site names.

LESSONS FROM PILOT IMPLEMENTATION

MTSS Proliferated Interventions

For schools, “doing” MTSS meant increasing the available number of academic and social-emotional resources available for students in need or distress. MTSS leadership team members from Poppies Elementary School described their first full year of MTSS implementation in terms of community mentoring programs, pull-out academic interventions, and increased counseling availability, among others. The idea that MTSS meant increasing the number of intervention programs was prevalent irrespective of school or pilot models.

While coordinated services is a part of MTSS, understanding MTSS as solely about interventions encourages a student-support approach that assesses

need primarily as a deficit expressed in the classroom and addressed with an out-of-classroom resource. A Golden State Middle School teacher describes her experience on a student support team created to facilitate MTSS implementation:

“We look at students that are identified, ask staff to nominate students who they think need more support. And we look through the nomination forms and add them on a sheet. And then we meet, we talk about them, we look at their grades, we try to figure out what supports they need.... Do they need [Program A]? Do they need [Intervention X]?”

In this way, increasing the number of interventions becomes equated with successful MTSS implementation rather than a more holistic response to student needs that includes but is not limited to changes in instruction or cultivating student culture and leadership opportunities.



Conflation with PBIS and RtI

Across all schools, teachers not actively involved with implementation largely associated MTSS with Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), a behavioral intervention program and to a lesser extent, with Response to Intervention (RtI), an academic intervention that uses a tiered model to support students struggling academically. This teacher's comment echoed a common refrain among teachers across all four schools: "I thought [PBIS and MTSS] were one and the same, to be perfectly honest with you. I didn't know they were different."

The association of PBIS and RtI with MTSS increased awareness but also erased any distinct contributions that MTSS may have had as a novel approach. It was not clear to teachers what MTSS was asking them to do differently as they saw little distinction between MTSS and previous programs like PBIS. What is often characterized as teacher resistance to MTSS may actually be due to the inability of MTSS to be distinguished from PBIS and RtI.

Race-Blind Implementation Led to Missed Opportunities

Teachers and administrators were overwhelmingly silent on issues of race and culture when discussing MTSS. In contrast, students in focus groups described incidents where anti-Black epithets showed up as school graffiti and shared feelings of being targeted for discipline by teachers because they were Latinx. Issues of race were salient to students' experiences, even if teachers and administrators characterized it as otherwise. Yet, there was no mention of using MTSS to increase supports and leadership opportunities for students of color or to track racial or ethnic disproportionality in state-monitored areas such as disciplinary action or special education referrals or for MTSS-related practices such as student referrals to tiers.

Secondary School Implementation Is Distinct and Requires Considerably More Resources

The size and organizational complexity of secondary schools require more resources, time, and coaching to implement MTSS for whole-school impact.

On paper, Poppies Elementary School and Golden State Middle School had similar foundations for MTSS, receiving



comparable support from their district and through participating in the full pilot. However, programming at the secondary level required juggling a complex schedule of classes and teacher preparation periods within contractual obligations. Most secondary schools have subject-matter-specific classes; schoolwide interventions can significantly impact a student's learning time in any one academic subject. Golden State Middle School solved this by creating 1) a study skills elective; and 2) a whole-school curriculum for Tier 1 intervention.⁴ The study skills elective was taught by a teacher on the site's MTSS leadership team, indicating significant site investment into MTSS. At the same time, this MTSS intervention was isolated to an elective course; other teachers were unaware of course content or whether any of their students were enrolled. The Tier 1 curriculum

⁴ Tier 1 refers to academic, behavioral, and social-emotional supports offered to all children.

was relegated to an advisory period that was considered non-contractual time; teachers were not obligated to teach the Tier 1 curriculum, inevitably reducing schoolwide impact.

Family Engagement Conspicuously Missing

Despite family and community engagement being an essential MTSS domain, neither administrators nor teachers discussed family engagement as a part of MTSS implementation. Even as they noted how the Covid-19 pandemic devastated family and community engagement, MTSS implementation did not spark an evaluation of their family engagement efforts.

PROBLEMS WITH POLICY CONTENT

The case studies of MTSS implementation revealed issues with the policy content rather than a lack of fidelity on the part of schools.

Breadth, Not Depth

In terms of comprehensiveness, the MTSS framework captures the breadth of domains important to a child's

educational experience and school operations but lacks the nuances, insights, tools, recommendations, and resources to support significant change in practice. As this teacher notes, the framework allowed for a latitude of interpretation that could lead to potential conflict:

"Sometimes lack of clarity or people's understanding of it can be a different perspective; it can be very difficult to have a similar vision. So, I know the district's idea of MTSS doesn't always align with how [our school] has done it."

Researchers note that in light of policy ambiguity, educators conform new policy to preexisting beliefs and practices.⁵ Accordingly, school sites recognized PBIS and RtI in MTSS and expanded those programs as their MTSS implementation, ignoring other components.

Narrow Understandings of Student Disengagement

In MTSS, student disengagement and its expression as negative classroom behavior is understood as being caused by social-emotional challenges, academic skill deficiency, or behavioral issues. Any relationship between student engagement, pedagogy, and curriculum is obscured, despite well-established research that negative student behavior often results from disengagement from learning.⁶ Research also shows that culturally relevant teaching materials, student-centered pedagogies,



5 Coburn, C. E. (2004). Beyond decoupling: Rethinking the relationship between the institutional environment and the classroom. *Sociology of Education*, 77(3), 211-244.

6 Koon, D. S.-V. (2013). *Exclusionary school discipline: An issue brief and review of the literature*. Chief Justice Earl Warren Institute on Law and Social Policy, Berkeley Law.

intentionally designed group work, and caring teacher-student relations can significantly improve student engagement in the classroom.⁷ Notably, in interviews across all four schools, teachers longed for more opportunities for students to explore their interests through clubs, sports, art, music, and vocational electives. Not one person referenced using MTSS to foster student culture as a means to improve student engagement. MTSS as a framework did not lend itself to an asset-based approach that saw student strengths as the foundation for a multi-tiered support system.

Tiers at the Expense of Race

A key limitation of MTSS is the absence of race/ethnic identity and culture in students' educational experiences. Teachers and administrators rightly understood MTSS as a continuum of support in which each individual student and

their unique set of needs is placed into tiers of increasing levels of support—but at the expense of understanding the role of race and culture for students. While California's students are unique individuals, they are also members of racial and ethnic groups that receive differential treatment and opportunities as evidenced by persistent equity gaps across race/ethnicity. Matching educators' assessments of students' needs to tiers in the MTSS framework minimizes race and cultural backgrounds as key factors of students' educational experiences. Differential experiences across racial groups require shifts in institutional practice.

Save for a module on culturally and linguistically relevant pedagogy in the online pathway certification program, neither the MTSS framework nor training explored how social categories, like race and gender, create differential access to opportunities that shape how students experience and express need. Thus, under MTSS, solutions are individualized rather than systematized. For example, a student who sees little of himself/herself/themselves in school may be offered an individual counseling session with a school counselor, but not an opportunity to build an affinity group, participate in projects, or plan assemblies that reflect their cultural and life experiences.

CHALLENGES WITH POLICY ROLLOUT

Policy Model Aggravates Inequality Among Schools

The funding model, site selection processes, and support structures of the SUMS pilot initiative worked together to aggravate existing inequalities between schools. These are described in brief, followed by case study vignettes illustrating this dynamic.

Top-Heavy Funding Model. The top-down policy model of distributing funds and information siphons away resources available to school sites. While MTSS information and funding were robust at the county levels for technical support, only a trickle of this reached schools for implementation work. Districts received \$100,000 over two years in the full pilot and partial pilot sites up to \$150,000 over 18 months to subsidize teacher training at hourly rates below teachers' current salary. Stable,



7 Darling-Hammond, L., Flook, L., Cook-Harvey, C., Barron, B., & Osher, D. (2020) Implications for educational practice of the science of learning and development. *Applied Developmental Science, 24*(2), 97-140.

well-resourced schools capitalized on the limited funding by leveraging existing resources. In schools parched for resources, this trickle of funds was a drop in the bucket, not enough to meaningfully impact even just one of many areas of great need.

High-Needs Schools Lost Out in Site Selection

Processes. Site selection for participation in the pilots occurred in two ways: 1) districts selecting sites; and 2) an open competitive grants process. Thus, MTSS resources went to schools that already had capacity to solicit and gain grant funding, irrespective of high student need.

In the full pilot, a statewide MTSS team selected districts demonstrating a need to improve school climate indicated by high rates of suspension for willful defiance and disruption, racial disproportionality in suspension, and socioeconomic disadvantage. These districts then selected schools to participate. While our full pilot schools were in a district that met conditions of high need, the selected schools themselves did not meet all the criteria.

In the partial and open pilot, school sites directly applied for grants through an open call for applications. This open competitive grants model privileged and rewarded schools with the capacity to search and apply for grants. For example, eight of the 21 partial pilot schools had student populations with rates of socioeconomically disadvantaged students lower than 55%, the threshold set for the full pilot districts.

Reduced Investments in Coaching and Planning Were Detrimental.

While site leadership teams from full pilot schools worked closely with a research scientist to learn about MTSS as well as plan implementation for a year prior to whole-school rollout, principal orientation in the partial pilot schools occurred through the CA MTSS Pathway Certification, the online learning platform. Whole-school rollout of MTSS was expected to occur simultaneously. Open pilot schools received funds and participated in a voluntary learning community with other open pilot grant awardees with no additional training.



The schools selected by their district to participate in the full pilot, Golden State Middle School and Poppies Elementary School, had key indicators of stability such as long-term leadership, a core group of veteran teachers, minimal turnover, and previous success in institutionalizing schoolwide programs. Additionally, these schools were located in a wealthier suburban district of an urban center rich with community organizations and social services available for school-site partnerships. In this context, intensive and targeted coaching and planning for both principal and site leadership team on their respective implementation tasks distributed leadership and responsibility for MTSS across multiple individuals, increasing the likelihood of implementation success.

In contrast, our partial pilot site, Pacific Middle School, located in a smaller rural district serving a low-income community, struggled to get teachers to start the online certification program. Administrators and teachers were often substituting for long-term, open teaching positions and teacher absences while also managing reductions of key support positions in counseling and administration. The principal received far less than the maximum amount of \$150,000 because awarded grants were proportional to the number of certificated and paraprofessional staff. The principal received a coach while he was taking the certification course. He had little time to plan and design the school rollout of MTSS, much less gather a team of teachers willing to serve as site leads. The reduction of MTSS coaching and planning resources in this context added to the mountain of challenges already facing the school. Furthermore, Pacific Middle School's rural community had far less infrastructure in terms of social services and community-based organizations.

Stability and existing resources positioned the full pilot and open pilot sites to take advantage of the resources offered through the SUMS initiative. Resource-challenged schools like the partial pilot school, despite herculean efforts by individual educators and leaders, faltered at implementation.

Online Professional Learning Modules Are Ineffective

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the CA MTSS Pathway Certification, the online learning platform, was designed and launched in partial pilot schools. While this platform may have been cost-efficient and necessary during the height of the pandemic, we found it to be



ineffective in institutionalizing new ideas or practices. Teachers reported the modules as being isolating with an overwhelming amount of information. One teacher describes her experience:

“Well, you do all the modules and then the one thing is if they don't like it, they just send it back to you and they don't give you feedback. You have to try to figure out what you did wrong and you just keep resubmitting it but there's no human back there [who tells you how to improve].... You feel like a number.”

Veteran teachers complained to us that the modules were literally redundant; they had encountered much of the content, including the videos used in the platform, in other professional development opportunities.

Research finds that school change is facilitated by collective capacity; that is, when adults come together around common goals and share responsibility for

enacting reforms.⁸ An online platform is not conducive to building collective capacity and may harm policy implementation efforts more than help.

County Offices of Education Versus Local Education Agencies

The MTSS implementation model of county offices as the primary contact sidesteps the substantive role of districts in providing resources critical for successful site-level implementation. In the partial pilot, school sites were assigned a coach from the county office. The coach for Pacific Middle School possessed a wealth of professional development expertise. However, many of the resource issues frustrating implementation were outside the control of the administrators or teachers, much less a coach from the county. It was the district central office that was responsible for cutting an administrative and counseling position as well as whether to place long-term substitutes for open teaching positions at Pacific Middle

School. Excluding the district as a formal partner bypasses a crucial decision-maker in factors that determine site-implementation success.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Research-based and Detailed Roadmap as a Universal Approach and Guidepost

A roadmap with clear guidelines to foreground policy priorities for schools is crucial to future MTSS implementation. To take up complex approaches like culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy and family engagement that tackle the deep-rooted issues of educational inequity, school personnel need clarity on HOW to use the framework and opportunities to practice. The California English Learner Roadmap is an example of a more substantive framework with tools that build school-site capacity for ensuring robust learning opportunities for multilingual learners.



8 Ishimaru, A. M. (2019). *Just schools: Building equitable collaborations with families and communities*. Teachers College Press.

Targeted Universalism⁹ for Funding

Shift funding strategy from a competitive grants process to one that targets significant funding to schools with demonstrated high need for MTSS. Need should be determined in terms of student needs and school-site resource needs. While school-site stability is not often accounted for, our case studies suggest its criticality in the success of any new initiative. Targeted funding ensures that more funds are available to the schools where MTSS can make the most impact.

An Assets-Based, Whole-Child Approach

A meaningful whole-child approach needs to amplify the many strengths that students bring to school amid the needs they also present. The MTSS framework must differentiate itself from PBIS or RTI, which narrowly define behavior in terms of student problems and not capabilities.

Fund Ongoing Coaching for School-Site Leaders

Ongoing, high-quality support is necessary to implement the systems change aspirations of the MTSS framework. For example, as noted above, MTSS implementation in secondary schools will likely necessitate a change in existing school structures to facilitate institutionalization. Coaching and support commensurate to the task of designing and implementing systems change while building teacher and staff buy-in should be available.

Explicit Connections to Race and Culture in MTSS

Race and culturally conscious lenses in coaching and training are necessary to address educational inequity using the MTSS framework. Scholars note that education as a field has rudimentary understandings of the fundamental role of race and culture in teaching and learning.¹⁰ Learning how to design comprehensive support systems that substantively accounts for race and culture would go far in ensuring that the scaling of MTSS also advances educational equity.



9 Powell, J. A., Menendian, S., & Ake, W. (2019). *Targeted universalism: Policy and practice*. Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society. University of California, Berkeley. <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/targeted-universalism>.

10 Howard, T. C. (2019). *Why race and culture matter in schools: Closing the achievement gap in America's classrooms*. Teachers College Press.

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