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The Effects of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Students in the School Setting: The Adaptations Needed for Tiered Supports

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THE EFFECTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON STUDENTS IN THE SCHOOL
SETTING: THE ADAPTATIONS NEEDED FOR TIERED SUPPORTS

ELENI M. GAJEWSKI

Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

Submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements of

Doctor of Education

in the National College of Education at National Louis University

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Date Approved

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to evaluate the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on students in the school setting and identify necessary adaptations needed, particularly through a tiered system of support. The research aims for two primary objectives by employing a constructivist framework utilizing mixed methods for data collection. Firstly, it aims to provide districts with a foundation for understanding the social-emotional and academic consequences of the pandemic on students. Secondly, its purpose is to empower districts to leverage this comprehensive evaluation as a proactive approach to cater to the diverse needs of all students. This includes responding to the challenges posed by the pandemic and preparing for potential future uncertainties, such as another pandemic or natural disaster. The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted the amount of content students were exposed to and ripped them from access to mental health resources. As a result, mental health needs have been amplified, particularly in marginalized communities, which further widened the academic gap. The results of this study found a significant disconnect in staff understanding of the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) processes, coupled with a rise in social-emotional and behavioral challenges arising from the pandemic. These results underscore the necessity for a comprehensive and consistent MTSS framework accompanied by embedded professional learning, particularly through MTSS Directors and a Professional Learning Community (PLC) model. Through the implementation of an MTSS framework, districts can proactively implement screening tools and establish systematic and ongoing processes to address students' academic and social-emotional needs.

PREFACE

Leadership Lessons

Each stage of the dissertation journey brought about a fresh wave of excitement. Initially, I reflected on the underlying "why" behind my chosen topic of the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) and the impact of the pandemic on children. The rigorous process of obtaining approval from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) made me appreciate the intricacies and details required in the research process. As I progressed, I eagerly anticipated the opportunity to unearth my findings through qualitative and quantitative data.

Upon gathering the data, I was eager to delve into the in-depth analysis of the results. Connecting the dots between the quantitative and qualitative data was particularly thrilling. I was motivated to review the historical quantitative data and hear firsthand accounts from interviewees, as both sources could reveal trends to inform my recommendations. The qualitative interview process, in particular, ignited my eagerness to gain insights into participants' experiences during the pandemic. This eagerness stemmed from the fact that I experienced remote learning in a district that employed blended and service models differently than my research participants.

Reflecting on the entire experience and revisiting my original intentions for the research, I recognize the value of examining multiple districts across various states for quantitative and qualitative data collection and interviews. Students nationwide experienced the pandemic in diverse ways, with some districts having less engagement in remote learning or quarantine-related mandates than Illinois. I am curious about the data that would emerge from expanded research on this topic. Ideally, I would have expanded my research to include other

districts within Illinois and districts across the nation. However, I decided to narrow my focus due to the time constraints associated with the dissertation process.

Throughout this dissertation journey, I have experienced personal growth as a leader, gaining more confidence in working through and leading an MTSS framework. I am eager to implement this newfound knowledge and expertise in my current district. My understanding of the research supporting the many components contributing to an effective MTSS framework has significantly deepened. As I transition into the role of the curriculum coordinator who serves as the central point person for our evolving MTSS framework, I am equipped with a stronger understanding of best practices within an MTSS model and strategies to guide leaders and staff.

Background

In light of the pandemic, I felt a surge in the urgency for the social-emotional needs of students, their families and staff. I knew the domino effect would ultimately impact academic success and have pronounced long-term impacts on society. I knew from experience that a solid and transparent MTSS system could proactively address these needs. I expressed this sense of urgency with my district administration, who shared the same sentiments.

Throughout over two decades in education, I have consistently immersed myself in some form of intervention model and needs-evaluation process, whether it be Response to Intervention (RtI) or Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS). I have experience teaching PreK, 1st, 4th, and 6th grades and serving as Literacy Coach and Differentiation Specialist in K-5 buildings. For the past five years, I have worked as an assistant principal in two elementary schools, and in my current district, I am in a dual role as an assistant principal and a districtwide curriculum coordinator.

As a specialist and an administrator in varying districts, I have served on MTSS Committees to evaluate and refine the districtwide frameworks. Each district I have worked in has had varying practices and structures for RTI/MTSS. In one district, I collaborated with building coaches and administration to start a data-informed process of targeted instruction for all achievement levels. In my specialist roles, the districts had support resources but needed a specific model and framework in which to situate this work. Currently, in District X, we have a framework in place with various personnel and instructional resources. Academic screenings occur three times per year to guide the formulation of intervention groupings for math and reading.

I have consistently observed dedicated efforts to support struggling students in each district I have worked in. While this dissertation did not set out to focus on any particular subgroup, it is worth noting that MTSS or similar frameworks tend to place more emphasis on supporting struggling students than highest-achieving students. It is my hope that through updated MTSS models, with the refinement of MTSS models, there is a more equitable emphasis placed on addressing the academic challenges of struggling students while concurrently giving due attention to the continuums of gifted and high-achieving students, as well as the realm of social-emotional needs.

MTSS is a continuum of supports based on a systems approach for a schoolwide framework to meet the needs of students. MTSS typically includes three layers known as tiers. Tier 1 is the foundation of the framework encompassing core grade-level instruction. MTSS is designed to ensure the success of all students by strengthening and enhancing the core curriculum and social-emotional needs. Tier 2 and Tier 3 intervention services increase in intensity and frequency and reflect student needs based on data (Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009). Tier 1 represents

all students (approximately 85%), Tier 2 represents a small group of students (approximately 10%), and Tier 3 represents the most acute group of students with the most intensive needs (approximately 5%). The recommended maximum percentiles at each tier offer another data point to evaluate how well a school's core instruction and MTSS model work. As an example, if 20% or more of the students are not making adequate progress, there is an indication that the core resources or implementation have gaps. As such, the core instruction and resources need evaluation. Otherwise, tertiary tiered supports cannot adequately help students.

In 2022-2023, District X began the language shift from Response To Intervention (RtI) to MTSS. District X uses RtI/MTSS to identify at-risk and struggling students, provide research-based interventions, and monitor their progress. Staff uses quantitative data to monitor a student's rate of improvement and performance compared with peers across the country, district or school. Typically, this data comes from Aimsweb, but it also depends on the intervention program used. To explore alternate progress monitoring resources, the district is also piloting Fastbridge.

A key concept of MTSS is that educators must intervene early and identify needs through screening. All children in District X are screened a minimum of three times yearly. District X uses the following Northwest Evaluation Association Measures of Academic Progress (NWEA MAP) scores as criteria for each Tier; Tier 1: 0-15th%ile, Tier 2: 16th-40th%ile, Tier 3: above 40th%ile. When tiered supports are founded on an evidence-based systematic approach with solid Tier 1 instruction, the results are positive. In District X, most students perform at or above grade level and fall within Tier 1, meaning the core curriculum meets their needs. Students who fall within Tiers 2 and 3 are considered at-risk and are provided extra support, such as additional instruction presented in small groups or individually, if appropriate. Students identified as

needing Tier 2 and Tier 3 support receive interventions from a specialist or interventionist. Students in Tiers 2 and 3 also receive more frequent progress monitoring to determine the effectiveness of the interventions. Overall, District X uses a team-based problem-solving framework to structure decision-making. Intervention plans include details about the type of intervention used, the length of time for an intervention to have a positive effect before moving to the next tier of intervention, and how progress will be assessed.

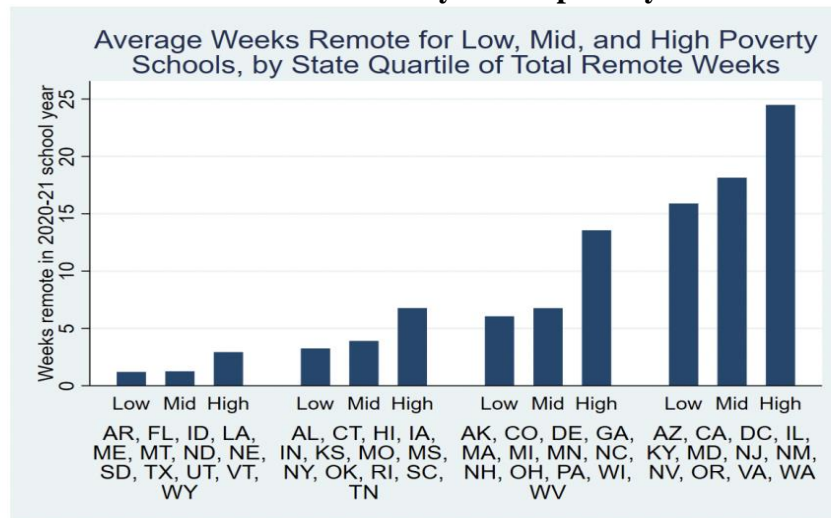
In addition to academic interventions, students who are identified as at-risk receive additional support through a variety of district resources, including but not limited to support from elementary school social workers or middle school guidance counselors. Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) education focuses on the whole child and is provided to all students through Tier 1 using the Second Step program. The not-for-profit Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines SEL as the process through which children and adults develop essential social and emotional skills, knowledge, and attitudes related to the core areas of social and emotional competency: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making. Ultimately, District X's mission is to create a learning environment where students are eager to learn; feel a sense of connectedness to their school and staff; feel safe; perform to their fullest potential; treat all others with respect, and contribute to the well-being of the community.

The 2019-2020 winter started with the spread of a new infectious disease, what the public now predominantly knows as Covid-19. In January 2020, the United States watched as China instituted a lockdown order in an attempt to prevent the spread of the virus. What followed two months later changed every citizen's life forever. While some states felt the reverberations more than others, Illinois was undoubtedly in the land of the former. Figure 1 displays the length of

time each state participated in remote learning. As illustrated in Figure 1 Goldhaber et al. (2022), Illinois has the highest remote learning rate, at almost 25 weeks. The mandated lockdown, which seemed to linger with no end in sight, continued to impact every facet of schools. Teaching and learning faced new norms and new challenges. Each time the "normal" seemed to be returning, a new mandate was thrust upon much of the state, impacting schools and families in pronounced ways. Schools intermittently closed and reopened, some in succession, adding to the disruption and created confusion. As much as the public would like to move on, the pandemic still holds much attention. While I, too, would like to continue the march forward, the reality is that the school system must use history to learn how to proceed and even plan proactively for the future to prevent increased gaps.

Figure 1

Differences in remote instruction by school poverty status and state



Note: Weeks of remote instruction are derived from American Enterprise Institute’s Return to Learn Tracker. Data on school poverty come from information on the percent of students eligible for Free or Reduced Price Lunch (FRPL) in the Common Core Data from 2019-20, or the percentage of students directly certified in the National School Lunch Program if a state did not provide a count of FRPL students. Low poverty schools had fewer than 25 percent of students receiving federal Free or Reduced Price Lunch while high poverty schools had more than 75 percent of students receiving the federal lunch programs.

Note: Goldhaber, D., Kane, T., McEachin, A., Morton E., Patterson, T., Staiger, D., (2022). *The consequences of remote and hybrid instruction during the pandemic*

The purpose of this program evaluation is to evaluate the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic had on students in the educational setting and evaluate adaptations needed to meet the needs of students. While the focus is primarily on elementary, the study and its outcomes can be applied to higher levels of education. The goal is to provide districts with a basis for understanding the pandemic's social-emotional and academic impacts on our students. This understanding will assist educators and leaders when supporting students in accessing learning. In order to meet the needs of all students, this paper advocates for districts to acknowledge the immense impacts that the Covid-19 pandemic has had on students physically, emotionally, and their abilities to engage in learning. Acknowledging and understanding the impact on the whole child and adaptations in how they access learning requires a robust system and structures for tiered supports. This study can significantly impact the knowledge and ability of schools to support students and monitor effectiveness. Educators and leaders continually face the challenge of meeting an array of student needs. Therefore, this comprehensive evaluation can be used to understand and meet those diverse needs in light of the pandemic and the event of a future pandemic or natural disaster.

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Chapter One: Introduction

District X's mission is rooted in a philosophy of making child-centered decisions through staff, parents, and community collaboration. Continued improvement is focused on developing innovative ways to foster students to be lifelong learners and contributing members of society. To better equip staff to meet their own emotional needs and the needs of students in light of the pandemic, District X trained all administrators and staff on positive psychology based on the research by Shawn Achor. District X administration continues to vet out aspects of positive psychology as a reminder that our attitudes are a choice and directly impact our school culture (Achor, 2011). Additionally, each building develops annual culture work based on the training in their School Improvement Plans led by a building committee and the administrator(s).

I have been an elementary assistant principal for five years and for three years in a dual role as an assistant principal and curriculum coordinator in District X. This dual role affords me the ability to support my home-building community and across all thirteen schools. District X is located in a western Chicago suburb. It is made of thirteen schools: eleven PreK-6th grade elementary schools and two middle schools. As of spring 2023, seven schools are rated exemplary, and six are rated commendable. Out of approximately 5,000 students, there is a 4% mobility rate. The population is less diverse than districts in nearby Chicago and some western suburbs. District X does reflect a similar population to a neighboring district, with 76% white, 10% Hispanic, 5% Asian, 5% two or more races, and 3.7% black. Additionally, 8.3% of students are from low-income households, 5% are English Language Learners, and 13% of enrolled students have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Out of 305 teachers, 62% hold a master's degree, and the district boasts an 87% teacher retention rate (<https://www.illinoisreportcard.com/>).

Despite the challenges educators encountered throughout the pandemic from spring 2020 to spring 2021, the 2021-2022 school year emerged predominantly as the most challenging year, following more than a full school year of disrupted learning. After the spring 2020 shift to remote learning, which ended the school year, the following 2020-2021 school year resumed fully remote, then transitioned halfway through the year to a blended model. In the blended model, students attended school remotely for half of their day and in-person the other half. Staff and students were required to wear masks and stay six feet away from adults and peers at all times. Large stickers displayed on walls and floors instructed students and staff to keep their distance, wear masks properly, wash their hands, cover their cough, and more health-related directives. The 2021-2022 school year was the first year since the start of the pandemic in which students were in school, in-person, for the full school day, albeit while wearing masks until spring.

Typically, primary grades require the most time to build foundational skills and establish behavior expectations. In 2021-2022, students of all grades required an unprecedented intensity of time and support on these skills. Educators found that social-emotional skills required significantly more attention and posed a barrier to accessing academic learning. Students struggled to navigate disagreements and exhibit primary care for others. The influence of social media affected the school day, impacting learning and consuming the time of administrators who had to investigate reports such as cyberbullying and suicidal ideations. The list of needs that bubbled up throughout the school year scrolls on and on. As a result, teaching and learning were impacted. Nevertheless, staff and students persisted and forged ahead. I witnessed this throughout my K-6 building, my role as a district curriculum coordinator in all schools, and as a member of seven District X committees.

As highlighted in *The Nature of Curriculum*, “[P]eople will support what they help create, so all stakeholders, especially teachers, share the commitment of curriculum leadership” (Richards, 2017, p. 10). District X provides intentional opportunities for all stakeholders to collaborate and positively impact the district’s vision and mission. Prior to the pandemic, in 2018, a District X Strategic Plan Committee engaged staff and community stakeholders in an effort to create updated goals and an action plan. The collaboratively created plan and its progress are updated annually and posted on the district website (www.xxxx.org Name omitted for confidentiality).

The Strategic Plan focuses on (3) Goals:

1. Focus on Learning
2. Connecting the Community
3. Securing the Future

The progress for each of the above three goals have a designated timeline overseen by the committee, which employs four levels to monitor progress: goal met, expected progress, not making progress, and goal not yet initiated.

The district culture values engagement by all stakeholders, including a robust collaborative effort between administration, staff, community, and student input. The district encourages stakeholder input through approximately twenty committees ranging in every content area, Gifted, Differentiation, Resource Review, SEL, Strategic Planning, Equity, content areas, and more. While recent feedback has been around the high number of committees, the district leadership is mindful of sunseting committees at appropriate times. Every committee has representation from various grade levels, specialists, and administrators. Voluntary staff

engagement on committees is strong and the impetus for progress as a district. They embrace these opportunities to enhance instruction in their passionate areas. Some committees, such as the Curriculum Council and most recently sunsetted Resources Review Council, include parents. District X also embraces student input, as Hattie's research (2009) emphasizes that feedback is most powerful when it comes from the student. Specific to this report, while a Response to Intervention (RtI) system has historically been used in District X, there was not a Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS) committee at the commencement of this report. However, since then, an MTSS committee, of which I have served since the fall of 2022, has been established.

The purpose of systems of support around interventions is to identify at-risk and struggling students, provide research-based interventions, and monitor student progress. The goal is for students to continue without additional layers of support, but when continuous need is essential, it is provided. Historically, intervention supports have been provided through the RtI model. More proactively and supporting the whole child is the framework of an MTSS model. MTSS is a framework made of a continuum of support founded on screening for needs and subsequent progress monitoring of the targeted interventions. Guardians are a welcome member of the process and frequently updated. The MTSS framework is made of three tiers of supports that vary in intensity. These tiers are both academic, social-emotional, and behavioral, therefore providing leveled supports in each area of need. As the foundation of the framework, Tier 1 is the core grade-level instruction and is expected to meet the needs of no less than 85% of the student population. Students who meet district criteria for Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions receive increased intensity and frequency based on individual needs and data. Tier 3 services are provided by a specialist. Approximately 10% of the student population meets the criteria for Tier

2. Whereas the most acute needs qualify for Tier 3 and represent approximately 5% of the student population that needs this intense level of support.

People support what they are invested in creating. Committees in District X are voluntary; therefore, staff on the committees are typically open to exploring improved instructional practices. The voluntary model provides a strong foundation for the district curriculum department's work, which I am a part of. The process of ongoing reflection and improvement process in District X further enhances instructional practices, and the result is cultivated efficacy.

District X has undergone a significant amount of growth and change in the realm of the curriculum over the last four years. Although the focus can be on curriculum resources, District X is well positioned as it navigates changes in the evaluation and prioritization of curriculum resources. This is precisely where the efforts invested in professional learning and the curriculum department's class visits districtwide are instrumental in shaping the mindset of staff and leadership. The curriculum department comprises of assistant superintendents, curriculum coordinators, including me, and instructional coaches, who meet weekly. As highlighted, District X provides ongoing support and leadership through professional learning and committee engagement. Although a Professional Learning Community (PLC) model in the common-known text is not currently used in District X, staff engages in districtwide Grade Level Meetings throughout the year, and the entire administrative team from every building and district level meets biweekly.

The curriculum department has led committees through pilots and implementation of new resources in math, reading, 6-8 social studies, and science. Table 1 offers an overview of the curriculum resources and resource pilots in District X. As a district curriculum coordinator, I led

the Social Studies K-5 committee through a resource pilot in the 2021-2022 school year and implementation in 2022-2023. Following this, I facilitated the districtwide social studies resource implementation and professional learning. I also led the Gifted Committee through a review cycle in the 2022-2023 school year and a subsequent program model update in the following three years. All elementary schools complete Aimsweb and the Northwest Evaluation Association Measures of Academic Progress (NWEA MAP) benchmark assessments every fall, winter, and spring. Only K-2 and 3rd through 5th-grade students who qualified in Tier 2 or Tier 3 per the most recent assessment are assessed with Aimsweb.

Table 1

District X Curriculum Resources

Content Area	Resource and Pedagogy	Resource Review Cycle
Reading K-5	Benchmark Advance Whole and small groups using complex texts, phonological awareness, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension.	2023-2024 ELA Committee pilot new resources.
Reading 6-8	Study Sync Uses a variety of texts to build language and comprehension skills.	2023-2024 ELA Committee pilot new resources.
Math K-5	Bridges Focus on developing skills through flexible strategies for building strong number sense and problem-solving skills.	2026-2027 Math Committee reconvene for a review cycle.
Math 6-8	Big Ideas Focus on developing skills through flexible strategies for building strong number sense and problem-solving skills.	
Writing K-5	Benchmark Advance and Study Sync 2023-2024 Schoolwide implementation. Why writers write and how writers effectively communicate ideas and information.	2021-2022 Writing Committee update on pedagogical values. 2022-2023 Writing Committee pilot Schoolwide.

Purpose

The purpose of the evaluation is to study the need for tiered academic and behavioral support as an impact of the Covid pandemic and determine the kind of adaptations needed for post-pandemic supports. Currently, much research exists about the Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS) model. However, there is little research on the current and long-term effects of the Covid-19 pandemic in the school setting. In evaluating a program or system, Patton highlights that it should center on “[S]ituational sensitivity, responsiveness, and adaptation, and is an approach...especially appropriate for situations of high uncertainty where what may and does emerge is relatively unpredictable and uncontrollable” (Patton, 2010, p. 7). I wish to shed light on how educators can adjust tiered supports to meet the needs of all students, which have changed as an impact of the pandemic. Student needs have increased in intensity for both academic and social-emotional needs. In 2004, The No Child Left Behind Act required all students to be screened to identify those academically at-risk to support for highest success (Salinger, 2016). Much goes into determining the most appropriate screener and potential subsequent interventions, including purpose, staffing, size of the student body being assessed, frequency and more.

MTSS is an evidence-based framework to support academic, behavioral, and social-emotional student needs. In every position I have held, from teacher to specialist to administrator, I found myself in roles facilitating data discussions and determining intervention support. I have served on building teams to facilitate the startup of or streamlining this work, as well as on district committees to create or enhance the processes and criteria of tiered interventions. Differentiated planning has always been at the forefront of my instructional philosophy, and MTSS teams and committees were natural leadership opportunities for me.

Through roles as a Literacy Coach, Differentiation Specialist, and administrator, I have had an aerial view of how a systematic framework can guide educators in reflecting on student needs, instruction, goal-setting, and data-informed decisions. I have seen students succeed academically and emotionally as a response to strong collaboration between staff and families. The system is not foolproof. However, it provides a strong foundation and a blueprint that guides the intertwined decision-making about resources, core instruction, differentiated instruction, social and behavioral sectors, and individualized support to foster student success.

As a result of the spring 2019 pandemic and shelter-in-place mandates, compared to a typical year, students across the nation are estimated to have only experienced reading learning gains between 63%-68% and 37%-50% in math (Kuhfield et al., 2020; Kearney, 2021). During the pandemic, substantial differences in learning platforms increased from remote to blended models to full-day in-person. MTSS can leverage as a support system that maximizes resources and focuses on learning targets. While MTSS provides a consistent framework, it also allows flexibility to tailor to individual districts and schools (Lloyd et al., 2021). As the pandemic impacted different areas of the nation and different subgroups at various levels, this flexibility can encourage districts to target how student needs are proactively met. While an MTSS framework provides a foundation, every child is unique, and their needs evolve. I endorse consistency across schools, districts, and even between elementary and secondary schools. However, I caution against an overreliance on this consistency if it means overlooking individual needs.

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a long-term impact on adults' and children's social and emotional well-being. Research has found that students who participated in foundational Tier 1 social-emotional learning (SEL) programs demonstrated more significant academic gains,

precisely an 11 percentile point in achievement (Mahoney et al., 2018). With the research emphasizing a robust MTSS framework and the impact of SEL programs on academics, this topic is worth studying. To evaluate how economic, cultural, and social capitals affected students during remote learning, Frohn (2021) based his study on Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) capital theory. Children's motivation and engagement dropped as they lacked resources, technology, and home support during the mandated shelter-in-place across Illinois. Students were at the mercy of their living situations without access to support at their fingertips. Teachers recognized what support families needed and did their best to increase this social capital by building relationships through the screen. Additionally, social interaction is a central need for learning success. During remote learning, the physical distance created more challenges in an "already problematic framework" (Frohn, 2021, p. 675). Administrators and teachers offered home deliveries of school materials, Wi-Fi resources, and meals.

Children eventually returned to in-person learning, and schools were subsequently hit with countless unexpected behaviors and mental health needs. Without social interaction and supportive expectations, students were "at the mercy of their emotions" (Frohn, 2021, p. 674) without appropriate coping strategies or support. At the start of my career as an inner-city teacher, a third grader explained to me how he got his little sister and himself ready for school every day. As his mother would still sleep, he and his sister left their home for school. When I inquired why he committed to this every day, he replied that school was the only safe place for him and the only meal they got. During remote learning, students like this were unable to leave their home environment and come to school to have their needs met. Unlike privileged environments where the teacher's impact is less critical because parents compensate with support (Kramer, 2010), the reality was quite the opposite for students in at-risk environments.

This evaluation aims to determine the impact of the pandemic on students in the school setting, academically and socially-emotionally. The evaluation will also determine the adaptations necessary to meet those needs. As a result of different levels of exposure to academic and SEL content than typical, student needs have emerged. Some core needs for stability, safety, care, and food took the forefront. At the same time, academic, executive functioning, and social impact needs were also apparent. As schools returned to a full-day in-person model, various needs emerged, significantly impacting daily instruction in the school setting. These evolving needs have highlighted the necessity for a comprehensive framework to address them.

Rationale

Multi-Tiered System of Supports is an umbrella term that refers to an evidence-based model providing a framework for academic, social-emotional, and behavioral support. MTSS serves to support both ends of the spectrum, from at-risk and struggling students to those needing enrichment. However, the former typically takes precedence. As such, this study does not discount the latter. The intensity of MTSS intervention support varies throughout the tiers and is based on student needs as defined by data and team problem-solving. Samuels (2016, p. 9) states that “schools implementing MTSS are usually trying to tackle both behavioral and academic concerns at the same time, recognizing that they often go hand in hand.” As evidenced throughout this report, the Covid-19 pandemic single-handedly affected students and families in a variety of ways, trickling into the school setting.

After 18 months of globally disrupted learning and home environments due to the Covid-19 pandemic, different needs in the school environment emerged. Students who were not previously identified as needing Tier 2 or Tier 3 supports subsequently qualified. In the aftermath of the

pandemic and remote learning, the need for emotional regulation, executive functioning, stamina, anxiety, and social skills were elevated. A heightened need for transformative and systematic supports emerged. No longer could districts work under the assumption that students reemerged from remote learning with common knowledge based on the standards. Districts had to assess the present levels of every student. Some districts adjusted to a *responsive curricula* (Acosta et al., 2008 as cited in Chang-Bacon, 2021). Responsive curricula are not watered-down curricula but prioritize Essential Standards where the majority of students demonstrated a lack of mastery. Going further, differentiated instruction and embedding content areas in an interdisciplinary fashion are wise pedagogical approaches, even more so due to the pandemic effects.

On Friday, March 13, 2020, all Illinois districts announced a sudden shift from in-person full-day learning to a full-remote learning platform as mandated by the governor. This abrupt shift was expected to last two weeks. In light of the Covid-19 cases the following week, the governor announced an extension on the Stay At Home Order. It was the beginning of what would never be a return to a typical school year. It was a historical shift in society. Teachers and students were thrust into learning technology platforms they had never used before. Simultaneously, parents were ordered to work from home and were thrust into the role of supporting teachers from their own homes. Still, many embraced the extra family time forced by the Stay-At-Home order, including daily walks and bicycle rides together.

While there were positive results, negative impacts were also evident. Alcohol purchases increased exponentially, and average grocery costs suddenly increased by 3f.4 percent, according to a 2022 USDA review. Many lost their jobs as restaurants and other “nonessential” businesses were forced to close. Children were without Wi-Fi to access school, and even more, went

without proper nutrition. District and school leaders delivered meals weekly and, at times, daily. The same service leaders delivered Wi-Fi Hot Spots and school materials. Staff and families began to cry out in despair. The stress began to take its toll.

The summer of 2020 led to the new school year, with high hopes to return to in-person learning and to get back to a sense of normalcy. However, for many Illinois districts, the school year started fully remote, making assessment and differentiation difficult. Only private schools and a small number of Illinois districts were in-person full-day or through a blended model. Half of the school day was remote, and the other half for core instruction was in-person, all in an effort to reduce class sizes and increase social distancing. Some districts pulled intervention and specials staff to teach as more classes were needed to accommodate distancing or full-remote options. As the year progressed, many districts shifted from fully remote to the blended model; students attended core classes in-person for half of the day, and specials and other classes were completed remotely or independently from home. After the 2021 spring break, almost all districts pivoted back to a full day in person. While this was generally welcomed by most families and educators, it was not without its challenges. The implementation of safety mitigation efforts mandated by the state presented a continuous need for problem-solving at each step toward achieving a full day.

Kearney (2021) was ahead of his time when he suggested that educators need to refocus their efforts on basic academic and behavior management skills. Students may have spent most of their schooling in a “normal” full-day setting in school; however, coming out of the pandemic brought mounds of angst. On the first full in-person school day, three students were brought to my administrative office as they had panic attacks. Students went from a blended model classroom with only half of their peers to a class full of added desks and peers. Masks were worn

at all times, even in buildings with no air conditioning and humid weather. Some districts did not incorporate recess back into the schedule; others did, albeit without using playgrounds or toys and maintained six feet of distancing between students and staff. Social distancing mandates also meant that classes were split between eating in classrooms, hallways, gym floors on mats, and the cafeteria. Art, music, and library classes were brought on a cart into classrooms. Some districts with intervention staffing were able to continue this service, often with a plastic divider between student(s) and staff. For the most part, children and staff welcomed being back together as a step toward what used to be. However, there were reminders everywhere that the pandemic hit hard and still existed.

Another impact of the pandemic on the educational system was the amount of exposure. Through remote learning and the blended models, teachers had less direct time with students. The result is what is referred to as “unfinished learning.” Benchmark data in many districts showed that while students grew academically, they had less growth, likely attributed to less exposure to content than in a typical year.

As districts continue to forge forward with academic growth goals, educators found themselves having to spend more time on reteaching and supporting social, emotional and functional skills. Fall 2021 saw a need to return to basics to teach routine and procedural expectations and motivate students to engage. As society forges on, educators and leaders across the nation continue to reflect on current, refined, and needed systematic supports. Amid the pandemic, educators engaged in a juggling act to address interconnected domains of adjustment, traumatic stress, academic needs, and health and safety (Sha, Mann, Singh, Banger & Kulkarni, 2020).

The needs of students and staff are evolutionary, and the Covid-19 pandemic exasperated this. Therefore, it is crucial to assess the current state of students, identify their needs, and develop strategies to address those needs effectively. Through collaborative data-based decision-making that informs instruction and intervention, educators can provide support that matches students' needs in order to help the student progress. Rather than waiting for weaknesses to present themselves through academic failure or behavioral difficulties, an MTSS systematic approach uses routine school-wide data analysis and problem-solving to identify students that are in need of assistance or enrichment (Duffy, 2007; Hughes & Dexter, 2011; Prewett et al., 2012).

Goals

The main goal of this study is to evaluate how students' academic and social-emotional needs evolved due to the pandemic and provide recommendations to meet the needs of all students. The challenge of meeting the needs of students comes with perpetual layers. In addition to planning and preparing multiple lessons a day, the tenets of teachers' responsibilities for students' academic success and social-emotional needs weigh heavily. It is not a job that can be done alone, nor is it a job that has a finish line. Instead, the process is constantly evolving, as are the needs of the students.

Research Questions

The premise of this study seeks to determine how the Covid-19 pandemic impacted students in the educational setting. Furthermore, the research aims to determine the adaptations needed to meet the needs of students' post-pandemic, particularly through a tiered system of support. My single most overarching research questions that drive this research are:

- How did the Covid-19 pandemic impact the need for tiered supports in elementary schools?
- What adaptations are needed post-pandemic for supports?
- What is the impact of the pandemic on students in the school setting; academically? Socially? Emotionally?

Conclusion

In March 2020, school districts were thrust into a fully remote learning model. After two years of mitigation and various learning models, districts in Illinois continue to take steps to get back to the normalcy we once knew. While the old normal is history, we continue to learn and evolve from the impacts of the pandemic. Professional learning, criteria, targeted learning experiences, progress monitoring, and collaboration among staff and families continue to be of utmost importance. The impact of the pandemic on students' access to and engagement in academics has underscored the critical importance of evaluating the effectiveness of the tiered system of supports. The core needs of students, which have been significantly affected, necessitate a thorough examination of how well the existing support framework is addressing their unique challenges during this pivotal time.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

This chapter serves as a review of the existing literature, which offers a detailed overview of the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic had on students. It aims to provide a thorough understanding of the various effects and challenges faced by students during this unwonted time. By examining the available research and studies, this review will shed light on the academic, social, and emotional consequences experienced by students as a result of the pandemic, specifically due to quarantine, social distancing, and remote learning. The information presented in this chapter will contribute to a broader understanding of the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic on the educational landscape. First, to respond to instructional support and provide a proactive framework for the future, I examine the pandemic's direct impact on students in the school setting. Second, I examine how a well-developed tiered system of support for interventions works as both a response and a proactive support model for growth and achievement. The literature that drives this research is grouped into the following categories: The pandemic's academic and social-emotional effects on students, Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) overview, and screening.

The Covid-19 pandemic, akin to past natural disasters, impacted social-emotional and academic needs. As a result of the pandemic, student learning was disrupted by school closings and remote learning models. Subsequently, students had limited access to the typical amount of learning opportunities. Chang-Bacon (2021) asserts that educational systems are founded on normativity. As a result, Chang-Bacon theorizes that schools are ill-equipped to adjust to wide-scale needs, such as the abrupt pivot to remote learning during the pandemic. Nevertheless,

schools boldly and successfully adapted to practices initially considered impossible throughout the pandemic.

There exists intense power in collective efficacy (Hattie, 2008) through hardships, such as the pandemic. At this juncture, in part of the pandemic, every child experienced school interruption, whether large or small scale. In response to this, educators worked even more collaboratively to respond to student and teaching needs. More than ever, the partnerships between educational professionals, communities, and political leaders carry significant weight. The success of the recommendations in this study relies on a collaborative effort through professional learning and a can-do mindset.

As reverberations of the pandemic lingered longer locally than in neighboring states, continued mandates weighed on local districts. Stressors that persisted in threatening districts were required mandates, quarantines, social distancing, weekly polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing, and threats of returning to remote learning. The pandemic continued to impact learning and increase the achievement gap between low and high-poverty schools locally and nationally. A thorough review of the literature on the effects of the pandemic found two common themes which increased gaps in learning access; 1. technology access and 2. home environment support. Many students in high-poverty environments could not access learning due to lacking either or both.

As Kuhfeld states (2022, p. 7), “[I]mportant gaps remain in our understanding of how Covid-19 has affected achievement”. Even after returning to in-person learning, other factors were an impediment to learning, including social-emotional needs, core needs such as food and safety, and attendance. Research continues to come out on the impact the pandemic had and continues to have on students. Research continues to highlight the widened achievement gaps due to the

pandemic. The achievement gap is a poignant trend that remained consistent across the findings in the sources reviewed for this study.

Screening and MTSS go hand-in-hand, with academic and social-emotional screening being essential to the MTSS framework. Universal screening measures, implemented as a proactive strategy, play a crucial role in identifying and addressing student needs. Screeners can be akin to a check-up at the doctor's office. They monitor for signs that a child might be at risk for academic or social-emotional difficulties. Results of screeners help inform schools to determine the next steps in helping a child. By strategically conducting screeners at the onset of the school year and twice more throughout the year, schools can effectively identify potential issues that may otherwise escalate later in the year. A variety of research shows early intervention impacts student progress, long-term dropout, and employment. More so, significant research exists that highlights the achievement gap for minority students. The pandemic multiplied the brevity of this gap. Not only do children lack academic exposure during interrupted learning, but their well-being is also impacted as they lack a sense of belonging (Newcomer et al., 2020 and Rosenbaum, 2020, as cited in Chang-Bacon, p. 188). Home and remote stressors can translate to difficulties with emotional regulation, developing negative contexts about self and the world, a lack of trust in adults, and inappropriate social interactions, all of which are incompatible with the teaching and learning environment (Kearney & Childs, 2021). Screeners have been shown to be a proactive practice to identify and support students with social, emotional, behavioral, and academic needs.

Emerging from a large-scale school interruption is an opportunity for educational and political leaders to “reimagine curriculum, schooling, and educational policies toward more inclusive and socially just ends” (Chang-Bacon, 2021, p. 1). Through continued research, I

anticipate most struggling students who also meet the criteria for at-risk will continue to meet such criteria. In general, these are the same students who battled difficult home environment support, adequate access to technology, and truancy, all referenced above.

Academic and social-emotional effects of the pandemic

Dorn et al. (2021) argue that remote learning during the Covid-19 pandemic negatively impacted student learning through a lack of access to in-person learning and less content covered in the 2019-2021 school years. While efforts to support academic and social-emotional rebounding are in process, student achievement is still lower and social-emotional needs are still higher than where we would expect to see students if the pandemic did not happen. The reality is the recovery timeline is years away. The Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA, 2022) reported that academic achievement was lower for students in spring 2022 than prior to the pandemic. Dorn et al. (2021) examined and successfully articulated how the Covid-19 pandemic impacted students academically. Through analysis of student test scores and evaluating subgroup results, the researchers emphasized how emerging from the pandemic is an opportunity to recoup any unfinished learning while addressing the inequalities that have long existed in education. Still, addressing the academic and social-emotional impacts remains.

In an analysis of the impact of remote learning, Goldhaber et al. (2022) found that students that spent the most time learning remotely were mainly in California, Illinois, Kentucky, and Virginia. The high-poverty schools in these states also spent an additional nine weeks in remote learning versus low-poverty schools. Academic results demonstrated that the schools that remained in-person throughout 2020-2021 did not show a widening math achievement gap between high and low-poverty schools (Goldhaber et al., 2022).

Despite lower achievement and growth, there is still evidence of student learning, albeit at a

lower rate. Still, overall student growth and achievement were negatively impacted. In particular, math achievement and students in at-risk environments and high-poverty schools were most significantly impacted. Achievement gaps between low and high-poverty students and schools widened in reading and math. Kuhfeld et al. examined when this gap began to increase and found it to be at the onset of the pandemic. Kuhfeld et al. (2022) analyzed math and reading achievement test scores from fall 2019 through spring 2022 to measure the impact of remote learning. Kuhfeld et al. set out to understand how reading and math achievement changed from the pandemic's beginning through spring 2022. The scores for third through eighth graders in the fall of 2019, fall of 2020, and fall of 2021 were compared to the corresponding-grade scores in the spring of 2022. Additionally, they analyzed the impact between low-poverty and high-poverty elementary schools. Whether these data are representative of the county or derived from one particular region is unclear. The results indicated that math scores dropped sharply in the first two years of the Covid-19 pandemic. The data also suggests that reading subsequently dropped between the fall of 2020 and 2021 (p. 6). What is important to note is that achievement was impacted, whether at the onset or later, throughout the pandemic. The data demonstrate that elementary gaps increased by 20% in math and 15% in reading (Kuhfeld et al., 2021, p.8). Thus, scores slowly declined over time during the pandemic. Looking at fall 2019 data to fall 2021 data demonstrates this. Scores had considerable drops in high-poverty scores compared to low-poverty schools as early as fall 2020 to fall 2021. In contrast, the low-poverty school also declined, but not as rapidly (p. 6). Goldhaber et al. (2022) also noted such disparities in remote and in-person learning for high versus low-poverty schools. The results in Figure 2 summarize the difference in achievement gains between high and low-poverty schools.

Figure 2

**Decomposing the Difference in Pandemic Achievement Gains
between High and Low Poverty Schools, Math**

	<i>Amount</i>	<i>% of total</i>
Total Difference Between High and Low Poverty Schools	0.168	100%
Due to Direct Effects of:		
Race	0.014	8%
Baseline Scores	0.016	9%
Conditional Learning Loss in High Poverty Schools That Were Fully in Person	0.002	1%
Due to Differing Incidence of Remote and Hybrid Learning	0.051	30%
Due to Differing Effects of Remote and Hybrid Learning	0.085	51%

Note: Granados, A. (2022, March 4). *The impact of lost instructional time on students during COVID-19*. EducationNC. Decomposition is based on regression estimates and based on mean characteristics of high and low-poverty schools in the analysis sample used. A larger share of the widening gap in reading achievement between high- and low-poverty schools was due to widening gaps in areas that remained in person (26 percent). Accordingly, the shares due to disparate incidence (19 percent vs. 30 percent) and disparate impacts of remote/hybrid instruction (35 percent vs. 51 percent) were lower in reading than math.

According to the findings by Dorn et al. (2021), the impact of “unfinished learning” was significant, with the average elementary student ending the 2020-2021 school year five months behind in mathematics and four months behind in reading in terms of average achievement. It is important to note that students across the nation engaged in various forms of learning, including in-person, fully remote, hybrid/blended, and even complete disengagement. These factors should be taken into consideration when interpreting the results of Dorn's study, as a considerable number of children in low-income households did not participate in the assessments used in the study. Nevertheless, despite these limitations, the stress caused by the pandemic has exacerbated existing achievement gaps. According to Dorn et al.’s study results, black students scored on the i-Ready assessment six months behind, while low-income students scored seven months behind

expectations. Particularly concerning is the report's observation that "more first and second graders have ended this year two or more grade levels below expectations than in any previous year" (para. 10). Given the crucial role that building foundational skills has on primary grades, this long-term impact raises significant concerns regarding the ongoing needs of students.

The study continued to report that at the beginning of the "shutdown," students learned little to nothing. This initially comes off as a harsh statement; however, there is an explanation. As educators abruptly shifted to mastering new learning platforms, the transition period relegated learning to the backdrop. As the data shows, there is evidence that students did learn during the pandemic after this initial transition period. In addition to a slower pace through content during remote learning, this transition period impacted the amount of content students were exposed to. The results of Dorn et al.'s study are not indicative of "learning loss" but evidence of "unfinished learning." According to Thomas Kane of the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University, on average, students missed 7 to 10 weeks of math learning opportunities during the pandemic. Schools that extended remote learning missed even more instruction, an average of 22 weeks of instruction. Unfortunately, the schools that opted to extend the remote setting were often high-poverty schools, which added to the growth in the achievement gap. Learning achievement gaps for most students and gaps in minority groups' achievement were anticipated effects of the pandemic. The abrupt shift to a novel remote learning platform meant educational staff and leaders were ill-equipped, and teachers were ill-prepared to teach. Teacher preparedness was compounded by a wide range of distractions and a lack of stable network connections (Zhang, 2020). In addition, this weak "infrastructure" (Yulianti, 2021) for teachers, combined with environmental factors in student homes, negatively impacted the ability to learn remotely. For students without access to the internet or computers, some schools provided paper learning

materials by offering delivery or pickup. Teachers faced the challenge of explaining in detail aspects of reading and supporting children to apply them through a screen. Teachers struggled to motivate students via video learning and even invited children to visit the school from afar. Parents, too, had varying experiences when it came to motivating their children during this period. Yulianti's work indicates that the abrupt shift to remote learning, unstable access to the internet by teachers and students, inconsistent access to technology, and varied parental support negatively impacted student learning. Most schools had little to no experience with remote instruction when the pandemic began; teachers were unprepared to teach in a model that lacked face-to-face interaction and struggled to accurately assess student progress and needs.

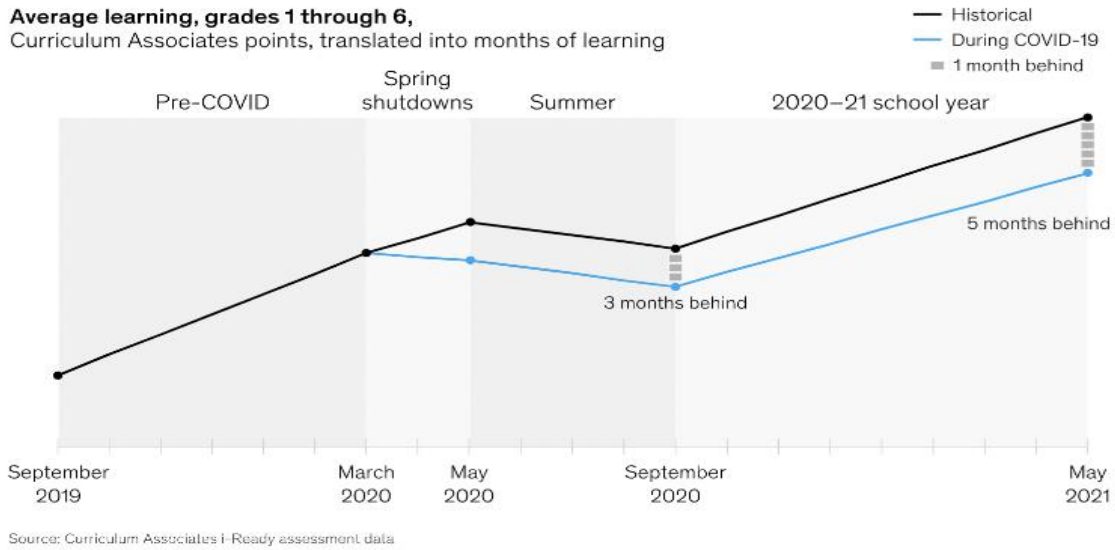
A startling amount of emerging data suggests that the most vulnerable were disadvantaged students who "learnt less during remote schooling" (Yulianti, 2021, p. 11). Although Yulianti's study was based in Indonesia, it is vital to evaluate how other areas responded to remote learning and the barriers they faced. It is little surprise that the teachers in this study encountered the same frustrations that United States teachers faced. The social-emotional impact of the pandemic on families, students, and educators is long-term. More than ever, it is the responsibility of educators to proactively identify and address their own needs and those of their students. Yulianti's study affirms the barriers educators and students faced during the Covid-19 pandemic, no matter where they were in the world.

In Figure 3 and Figure 4, the math and reading decline between the spring and summer of 2021 reflects what is often referred to as "summer slide" or "summer stagnation." Historically, students engage less in academic rigor over the summer for various reasons. Therefore, it is not unusual to witness a decline in scores. In typical years, students recoup after returning to school in the fall, albeit the amount of recoupment needed has been shown to be discrepant by social-

economic status. Despite districts offering summer 2021 programs, Dorn et al. anticipated it to be insufficient to reduce the ongoing pandemic's learning gaps. At this time, a follow-up to this hypothesis has yet to be conducted.

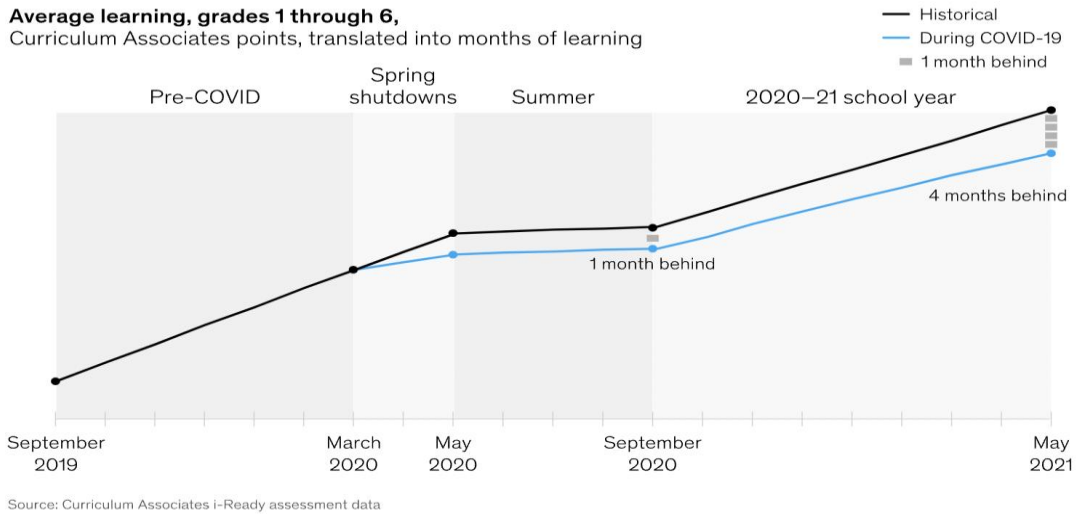
Figure 3

Math:



Note: Math scores before and after the Covid-19 pandemic started. From Dorn, E., Hancock, B., Sarakatsannis, J., & Viruleg, E. (2021). *Covid-19 and education: The lingering effects of unfinished learning*. McKinsey & Company.

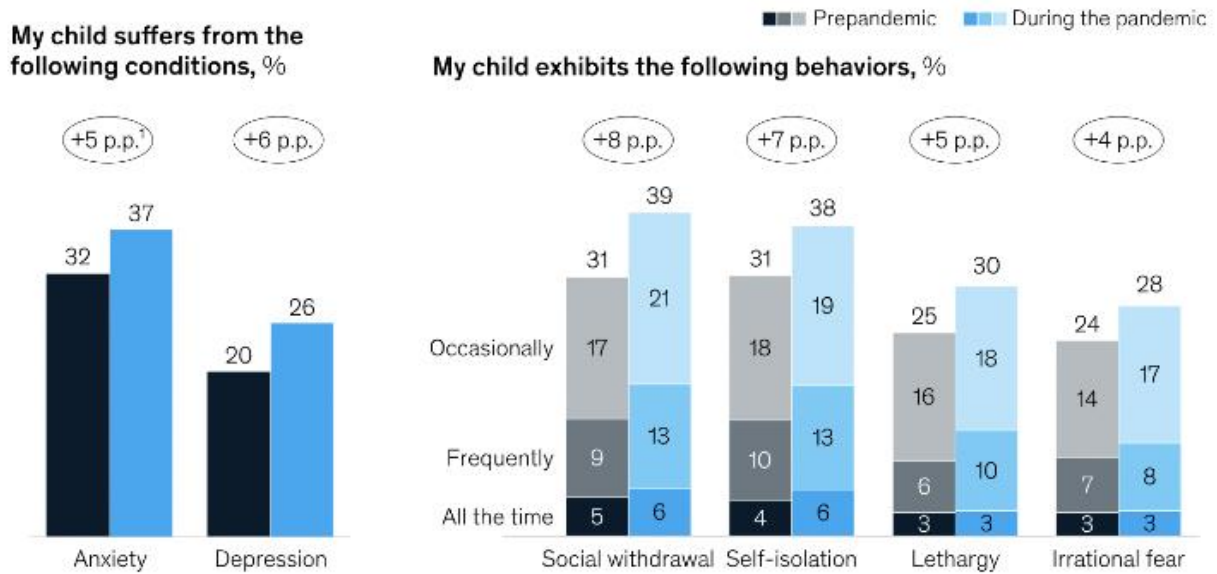
Figure 4
Reading:



Note: Reading scores before and after the Covid-19 pandemic started. From Dorn, E., Hancock, B., Sarakatsannis, J., & Viruleg, E. (2021). *Covid-19 and education: The lingering effects of unfinished learning*. McKinsey & Company.

Equally important to note is the impact of the pandemic on mental health and social-emotional learning. As shown in Figure 5, 35% of the parents surveyed reported an increase in their child's "withdrawal, self-isolation, lethargy and irrational fears" (para. 19). With barriers in these areas, students are less available to access academic learning. To address this, this literature review will discuss a strong tiered system of support in the area of social-emotional learning and screening.

Figure 5



Note: Figures may not sum to totals, because of rounding.
[†]Percentage points.
 Source: McKinsey survey of 16,370 parents across all 50 states.

Note: Parent survey results about their child’s mental health well-being after the Covid-19 pandemic started. From Dorn, E., Hancock, B., Sarakatsannis, J., & Viruleg, E. (2021). *Covid-19 and education: The lingering effects of unfinished learning*. McKinsey & Company.

As mentioned throughout this report, absenteeism and other aspects of the pandemic will continue to impact the nation on a greater scale. The cost of supporting districts' mitigation efforts and hiring additional staff to address academic and social-emotional needs are just a few of the added expenses hitting districts and the country. Dorn et al. (2021) offer suggestions to minimize long-term ramifications, such as interventions, quality remote learning for students requiring this option, and ongoing outreach to families to foster engagement in remote and in-person learning.

It is important to note that results during the pandemic are not indicative of the entire population. The data captured only reflects the students who took the assessments. For example,

in Dorn’s study, many students, particularly those from disadvantaged environments, did not take the i-Ready assessment remotely. Therefore, the results may not accurately reflect the discrepant minority gaps. While we know not all students took the assessments, we know less about why. For example, some districts may have opted out of testing. Alternatively, students may not have had access to the necessary technology to complete the assessments. Gathering information from i-Ready about which districts did not participate can be a starting point for this information for future inquiries. Otherwise, one is left to assume that the rest of the students did not test because of disengagement or technology needs. Nevertheless, the information is a benchmark of the learning experiences before and during the pandemic. As students return to more typical learning models, ongoing assessment results can be compared to benchmark data from this and other sources.

In a similar yet earlier study to Kuhfield, Lewis et al. (2021) identified achievement and growth gaps from pre-pandemic 2018 to spring 2021. The basis of this study was NWEA MAP quantitative comparative data from 5.5 million students, grades 3 through 8. The declines were more prominent in math than in reading and grades 3-5. Using NWEA comparative data, Lewis et al. (2021) identified how far behind students lagged compared to typical school years. Also identified were the subgroups most negatively impacted academically by the pandemic and remote learning. Specifically, Lewis sought clarity about how many months behind student achievement was due to the pandemic. Consideration was taken into account, mainly as trends in subgroups who do not take assessments and how completing assessments remotely affected the validity and outcome of results. Data benchmarks from the 2018-2019 MAP Growth data served as the pre-pandemic benchmark data for later comparison purposes. As not all students engaged in remote testing, particularly subgroups, the authors calculated the attrition rates, determining

the number of students who tested the first year but not the second year during the pandemic. With such information, districts can plan systematic supports that individualize and target student needs. According to Lewis, these students had a 20% attrition rate (p. 6). Due to this inconsistency of participation, long-term data collection will need to be prioritized to determine student needs accurately.

Until all students participate in the data collection assessments, "[T]he true impact of the pandemic on academic achievement...may be even more pronounced than what we report" (Lewis, 2021, p. 6). Historically marginalized students in at-risk environments have had a more significant decline in math and reading. School interruptions are an even more significant impediment for migrant students, whose dropout rates are "7 times higher than that of emergent bilinguals whose schooling was not interrupted" (Chang-Bacon, 2021, p. 188). This statistic illustrates the surmountable work needed specific to areas of income, race, geography, learning styles and abilities (Stean, 2021). The need for a tiered system of supports is evident in the staggering statistics coming out of the pandemic. Even with the attrition factor, the achievement gap is evident in the data, demonstrating that high-poverty schools had more than double the decline in percentile scores as low-poverty schools.

Just as with past natural disasters impacting schools, a decline in growth and achievement was expected from the pandemic. Due to remote learning, students were exposed to less content in that time frame. Less exposure to content, engagement, attendance, and technology access were factors playing into the decline. Robin Steans (2021), president of Advance Illinois, stated that chronic absenteeism grew by 3% in 2021, and that includes the wider definition of absenteeism adopted during remote learning. The increase in absenteeism, according to Steans, was especially impacted by primary-age students, warranting attention to long-term impacts.

The Covid-19 pandemic unevenly impacted instruction as schools pivoted abruptly to remote learning. Advance Illinois (2021) found that during 2020, Illinois' attendance data mirrored the nationwide trend, showing a decline in the enrollment of its youngest students, “The younger the child was, the more likely they were to disappear from a program...more deeply affected by our black children and Latinx children...and children from low-income households” (Steans, 2021, 6:03).

As students had less exposure to content, it is not surprising that their results had less output in academic test scores. Lewis et al. (2021) attempted to identify factors causing the decline in results. One factor is known as “pandemic fatigue” (p. 9). The pandemic continued far longer than expected and, in some areas, continues to reverberate throughout schools. Some districts extended the requirement for schools to report positive Covid cases, social distancing, optional masks, and mandated quarantines. It is no surprise that mental health also declined due to the stresses throughout the ongoing pandemic. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), on a national level, there was a 31% increase in the proportion of emergency visits for mental health issues among youth ages 12-17 during the pandemic preceding 2022. These ages displayed symptoms of suicidal ideations at almost double the rate of adults ages 40 and older (SMART Center, 2021, page 4). As a psychological response to trauma, “pandemic apathy” rose out of the fire. In a presentation available online, The Washington State Department of Health noted that traits of pandemic apathy behaviors that families and schools combat include “acting out (denial/ignoring consequences) and acting in (extreme hopelessness/not engaging)” (slide 6). On top of other factors described, social-emotional needs resulting from school and home factors ultimately impacted students’ ability to access learning.

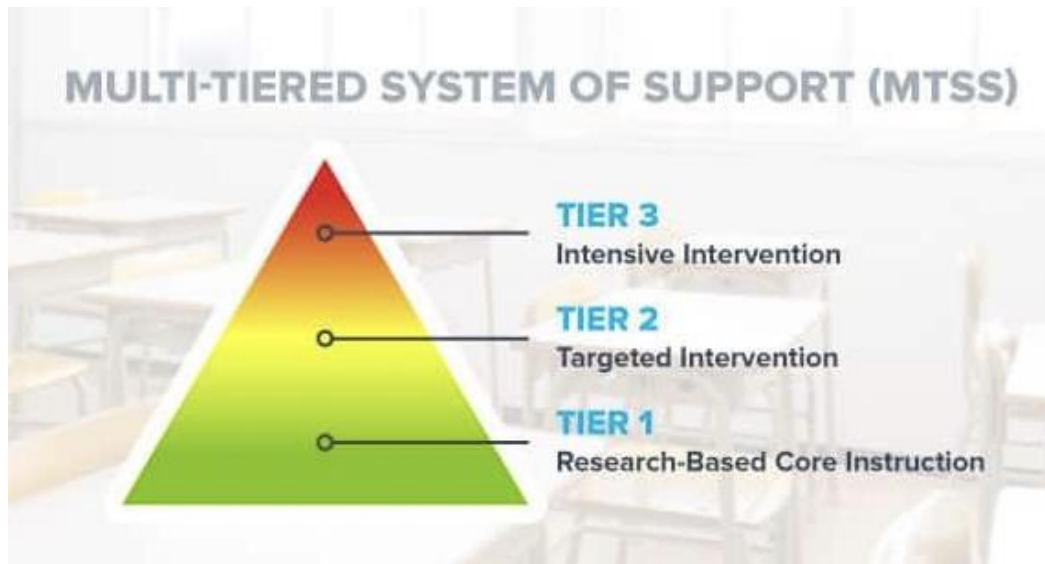
MTSS Overview as Tiered Systems of Support

This study focuses on tiered systems of support, most commonly referred to as MTSS, or Multi-Tiered Systems of Support. MTSS is an evidence-based framework used by schools to identify and implement various levels of intervention. Three levels of intervention in MTSS are referred to as tiers, as outlined in Figure 6. The interventions use screening and other data to address students' identified academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs. Tier 1 is core instruction that uses best practices and differentiation and is aligned with the standards. At an average of 80%-90%, the majority of students demonstrate expected growth in Tier 1. Tier 2 is a level of targeted support beyond the core instruction and serves approximately 10-15% of identified students. Interventions are delivered in small groups of students with similar needs. Tier 3 is the most intensive, with 1-5% of students needing this level of frequent and individualized support. To meet their unique needs, students typically receive daily Tier 3 interventions with a dedicated staff member, either in pairs or individually. To determine the next steps or whether the child moves back toward Tier 1, progress monitoring of specific goals for Tier 2 and Tier 3 is reviewed every 6-8 weeks, and families are updated.

In analyzing the work of VanDerHeyden and Witt (2005), a highly disproportionate number of at-risk students represented minority students. Specifically, 50% of at-risk students were identified by a Curriculum-Based Measurement (CBM) screener when the minority population of the entire student population was only 15% (p. 403). Intervention results for these students show rapid improvement results. After just 5-9 sessions, students meeting the criteria for at-risk dropped from 50% to 7%. When used with fidelity, the MTSS framework uses the process of universal screening to identify student risk, research-based interventions through tiered levels of support and intensity, and ongoing data-based decisions. A robust MTSS model is founded on

strong professional learning communities of educators who receive ongoing professional learning. Therefore, it incorporates frequent communication between staff, students and families.

Figure 6



Note: The three levels of tiered supports. From Foght, 2021. *What is Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS)?* Kickboard.

Schools adopt the MTSS framework for multiple reasons, with one compelling factor being the call to support staff in addressing student behaviors. A study conducted by Lloyd et al. (2021) revealed that the primary motivators for adopting MTSS were concerns about student behavior and the need for supporting staff. As students returned to full-day, in-person learning in 2022, schools nationwide saw a significant increase in behaviors, particularly due to the influence of social media challenges within the school setting.

In an effort to address student behavior problems, districts have increasingly turned to MTSS, hoping to effectively prevent and address behavior issues through a tiered system of interventions that cater to the diverse needs of students. One effective approach in implementing MTSS involves providing training focused on how staff members interact with students and respond to problem behaviors. Proper training on culturally responsive practices within MTSS

equips staff and emphasizes strategies for building positive relationships, effective communication, and proactive behavior management practices. Training in this key area enhances educators' capacity to address behaviors, fosters students' sense of safety, and prevents escalating behaviors, ultimately supporting overall student development.

However, the adoption and successful implementation of MTSS pose challenges for district and school stakeholders. Key challenges include gaining staff buy-in, maintaining processes over time, and allocating sufficient resources such as time and budget (Bradshaw, 2012, p. 8). While over 27,000 schools across the nation have implemented an MTSS framework, there are still more than 130,000 national public and private schools that have not yet adopted a framework (McIntosh et al., 2020).

Once the framework is adopted, its longevity depends on several factors. After the above pieces are established, a precise strategy is required to bring the model to life. After screening and identifying student needs, Wright (2021) recommends that intervention group sizes for Tier 2 be no more than seven students, and Tier 3 groups should have no more than three students. Tier 2 groups should meet three times weekly for 30 minutes, while Tier 3 groups should meet four to five times a week for 30 minutes. Throughout each tier of the MTSS framework, it is crucial to emphasize the importance of providing specific and timely feedback to students, as noted by Hattie (2011). Feedback plays a vital role in guiding student learning, growth and achievement. Similar to how a coach guides their players toward improvement and success, the feedback educators provide students impacts progress and success. Students require feedback through expectations, goal-setting, and reflection to foster engagement and motivation.

The goal of MTSS is not to move through all three tiers into an evaluation for services. A comprehensive special evaluation is necessary when data indicates this step is warranted. MTSS

aims to provide a foundation to build a student's confidence for success in multiple settings. Depending on the academic focus, a student may move in and out of the tiers. Every child and adult come equipped with varying skills, and the role of educators is to know a child holistically to tap into their skills. This knowledge aids educators in creating a strength-based intervention to support development in weak areas. The challenge is individualizing interventions while adhering to research-based resources and practices. The topic around interventions is where additional research is needed.

Screening: Clear Criteria and Identification

Understanding the MTSS framework overview allows one to delve into other important components. An MTSS framework for consistent identification processes and supports is recognized by research as a strong foundation for student success. A student's early school experiences can set the trajectory throughout their academic years. It is widely known that the dropout rate is impacted by learning difficulties early on. Screeners are a preventative step in capturing these students and their needs early on. Salinger (2016) suggests that a screener is a vital tool to identify students who qualify for Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions and provide appropriate learning support to help them succeed. Salinger stresses the value of identifying the most appropriate and effective screener. Universal screeners include rating scales, standardized assessments, and schoolwide data analysis.

As districts emerge from the pandemic, universal screening practices can identify and address trends in student needs, including social-emotional. Briesch et al. (2021) note that regarding referrals, children who internalize are overlooked over students who externalize their behaviors. Internalizing behaviors often present as being quiet and withholding feelings and emotions. Whereas children that externalize outwardly exhibit behaviors that are visible to others.

Therefore, a robust screening system and core "curriculum" for social-emotional learning (SEL) and behavior address the whole child's needs. Salinger (2016) recommends combining multiple measures to promote more accuracy.

Using multiple measures gives a thorough picture of a child's strengths and needs, rather than relying on teacher input or assessments to capture only a tiny moment in a child's day. Biases are natural in the screening process. However, going beyond the professionals' bias, Salinger addresses screener biases. Take linguistic variations into account, as illustrated by Salinger's mention of the Universal Nonverbal Intelligence Test-Gifted Screening Scale. This screener effectively reduced biases related to English proficiency and communication challenges among students. Assessments such as this have found ways to get the information needed to understand a child's needs and capabilities.

Screening assessments are a prerequisite for the effective implementation of quality interventions (VanDerHeyden, 2013). Briesch et al. (2021) reported that an overwhelming majority of schools in their study used universal academic screening assessments, with only 6% not using them. Although this study focused on elementary needs, Briesch's report found a significant difference between secondary-level schools and elementary; surprisingly, 94% of elementary utilized universal screeners versus 68% of secondary-level that use universal screeners.

School teams are encouraged to consider three influences in determining which screening tool to use: 1. School factors 2. Biases 3. Best Fit. Some screening assessments require more training to implement and analyze results adequately. Additionally, not all assessments yield the information needed, notably if one holds bias around language and communication considerations. As Salinger (2016, p. 6) explains, reliability considerations aid teams as they

determine whether a screener is dependable and "assesses the same skill in the same way," essentially whether the screener renders dependable results.

Validity distinguishes whether a screener assesses the intended information needed, essentially whether a screener measures what it was designed to measure. Validity is assured by maintaining a solid understanding of the screener's purpose. I defer back to the purpose of considering the best fit in choosing a screener. If the purpose is to screen one child to determine their needs, an example of a tool specific to 1:1 screening is the Behavior Rating Inventory of Executive Function (BRIEF). If the need is to screen the K-2 population for academics, a screener such as the Curriculum-Based Measurement (CBM) for K-2 students is an example of a better fit. As mentioned earlier, language considerations also play into whether a screener is the best fit or not. Bias can result in inaccurate results. Therefore, it is advisable to administer a screener that reflects a child's native language or mode of communication. I have engaged in and taken the lead on professional learning opportunities focused on evaluating student work and ensuring interrater reliability. An experience such as this evaluates the reliability of screening practices by exploring biases.

Many options for screeners and progress monitoring resources exist. According to Briesch (2021), 21% of the schools use Achievement Improvement Monitoring System (AIMSweb) or Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), 14% use diagnostic assessments such as running records or reading inventories, and 8% use global summative assessments, including statewide standardized assessments and end-of-unit assessments. Notably, 53% of schools in Briesch's study reported triangulating their data, using two or more measures as a best practice. Schools hold a wealth of expertise amongst their staff. As the saying goes, there is

power in numbers. In this study, elementary schools were more likely to report evaluating the data as a team rather than as individual teachers.

Screenings must be purposeful, intentional, and accurately reflected when making intervention decisions. As VanDerHeyden (2013) describes, after initial screeners, subsequent screeners are "reserved for only those students we truly do not know if they need an intervention" (p. 412). A screener should not only identify student strengths and needs but also give an opportunity to reflect on core instruction and core resources. Universal screening can be used for instructional purposes and to evaluate the effectiveness of core resources, instruction, and intervention systems (VanDerHeyden, 2013). Due to potential inaccuracies, there is a possibility of false positives or false negatives. Therefore, multiple data points are necessary. However, if the probability of failure is high, then a screener may not be appropriate. For example, VanDerHeyden found that 96% of students receiving special education services were likely to fail a pretest, thus being identified as at-risk. In this instance, a screener would not provide additional information to rule out the need for interventions. This example highlights the importance of paying attention to the overall results of subgroups. The case study titled *Race, Accountability, and the Achievement Gap* (Mapp et al., 2006) supports this notion in its narrative about how one district's leaders made profound changes stemming from a moment of comparing subgroup data. From one leader's subgroup examination, a snowball effect took place in the district's initiative to understand and close the minority gap through various measures of student and districtwide philosophical interventions.

Social-Emotional Screening

For some, the initial results of this section may be disheartening. Still, the results bring to light the need for improvement in a more comprehensive social-emotional screening. At a

staggering 61%, a large percentage of schools reportedly do not use social-emotional screening. Whereas 21% of schools only screen students already identified as at-risk (Briesch et al., 2021). However, the schools that reported not using a screener did report having an established system, whether referring students to a school team or outside resources. As unsettling as these numbers are, they were found to be consistent across the nation for both elementary and secondary schools. As previously reported, students' social-emotional and behavioral needs were compounded in light of the pandemic. The Covid-19 pandemic thwarted students' SEL competencies. As with all instructional areas, it is advantageous for schools to reassess the level of SEL needs, just as they would academic achievement. I anticipate that more districts will implement social-emotional screening as a preventative practice coming out of the pandemic. As a result, the percentages above will be tipped more favorably.

Commonly, student SEL needs can and do fluctuate. Nevertheless, Briesch (2021) found that 40% of the schools use universal social-emotional screening screenings once per year, 20% three times yearly, 16% twice yearly, and 24% conduct screeners on an as-needed basis or every other year. Additionally, screeners have been used to evaluate the following according to Briesch's study; 82% for social skills, 73% for behavioral risk, 67% for self-esteem, 58% for anxiety, 56% for aggression, 53% for depression, and 53% for misconduct (Briesch et al., 2021, p. 7).

During the pandemic, families lost jobs and experienced a lack of proper nutrition, increased home violence and addiction, and a lack of social interaction. Additional stress and anxiety from financial strain seized families, directly impacting students. During the shelter-in-place, direct access to coping strategies and support was out of reach for many students. Families seeking therapeutic support from the private sector were added to extensive waiting lists. According to a 2020 report by the CDC, "Beginning in April 2020, the proportion of children's mental health-

related emergency visits among all pediatric emergency visits increased and remained elevated through October. Compared with 2019, the proportion of mental health-related visits for children aged 5–11 and 12–17 years increased approximately 24% and 31%” (p. 1).

According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), suicide is a leading cause of death in the U.S. The World Health Organization (WHO) describes adolescence as a critical period where adolescents develop social-emotional skills. Although rates of suicide across all ages declined early in the pandemic, they are dishearteningly anticipated to spike again. The early decline is hypothesized to result from the “pulling together” phenomenon documented in other natural disasters. The pulling together phenomenon explains the sense of community that bands together to get through traumatic events. Eventually, these fade, and despair seeps in. As for social-emotional needs, the pandemic will leave a stark mark.

For students in vulnerable situations, the shelter-in-place mandate curtailed access to mental health staff, both in and out of school. In 2021, Matthew Richards from the Chicago Department of Public Health explained to the NY Times, “When we talk about Covid and the amount of trauma, grief and stress at the community level, we should not underestimate how significant a public health issue has the potential to be” (para. 25) Even as districts reach normalcy after the pandemic, the responsibility remains of adults to acknowledge the long-term mental health effects that cannot be pushed aside, even if they may appear to be functioning well on the surface. Significant research emphasizes the positive impact of SEL programs on academics; therefore, purposeful social-emotional screening is a preventative requisite.

Social-Emotional and Behavioral Intervention Practices

MTSS is a framework concentrated on student needs through proactive and reactive measures. Although there is a place for reactive supports, it is more lucrative for student success

when practices are preventative. In this framework, teams proactively monitor student progress. When needs arise, teams use data to identify strengths and weaknesses to plan the next steps. Only then can intervention support and progress monitoring be put in place.

Large and small-scale school interruptions are not new. Historically, natural disasters and children forced to migrate from political warfare have experienced school interruption firsthand. It is estimated that 10% to 20% of students have experienced interrupted schooling due to immigration (Potochnick, 2018, Faltis & Coulter, 2008).

School interruptions directly impact social-emotional well-being, which has a domino effect on academics. Hos (2020) and Darling-Hammond (2020) recommend prioritizing social-emotional support and acknowledging the pressure put on districts to focus on academic success. In response to the social-emotional needs of students due to the pandemic, District X, like other districts, committed to evaluating social-emotional screeners in an initiative to adopt one starting in the 2022-2023 school year. However, this initiative is still being considered for approval by other stakeholders. Therefore, it will be revisited for consideration in future years. Although a social-emotional screener is not yet implemented, District X has taken additional measures to address SEL. Tier I instruction is provided through *Second Step*, the core resource for grades K-8. District X uses a defined scope and sequence of *Second Step* lessons aligned to the Illinois Learning Standards. *Second Step* is a preventative social-emotional learning program that teaches skills such as recognizing various emotions and management, empathy, problem-solving, and bullying prevention. Ideally, a core Tier 1 resource is coupled with a social-emotional screener. While some schools implemented forms of Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) in 2022-2023, District X formed a committee to streamline resources and establish consistent processes for a districtwide rollout in the upcoming 2023-2024 school year. The initiative aims

to ensure a universal implementation across all schools within the district.

Using the screening results, Briesch (2021) found that 60% of schools use *Second Step*, *Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS)*, and *Responsive Classroom* programs. Forty percent of participating schools indicated using a non-identified resource or framework. For schools without a universal system or programs, most reported individualized interventions. While it is uncertain whether these programs were utilized for Tier 1 or as additional layers of support in Tier 2 or Tier 3, it is promising that proactive sources are in place.

The universal screening discrepancies between academic, health and social, emotional, and behavioral screeners are striking. Most schools in Briesch's study reported conducting academic and health screenings. The discrepancy in the use of universal social-emotional screening is disheartening, with only 9% of schools reporting implementing them. In light of local districts transitioning students from full remote to full-day in-person, districts saw a significant increase in behaviors and social-emotional needs. Educators nationwide reported a significant need for teaching back to basic expectations and social and executive functioning skills. Districts hired additional mental health support staff such as counselors, social workers, and MTSS Directors. In my current district at the time, I collaborated with the Director of Special Education to coordinate a team of district psychologists and administrators. Over the summer, we focused on building a mental health support bank for staff and families. Throughout the summer, we were available on an emergency basis, and I recall a particular incident when a parent sought me out. Her adopted elementary-age child was the target of racial harassment as the Me Too movement was gaining momentum. Our team wrapped the family in support and supplemental outside services throughout the summer and established a successful reentry plan for the fall.

Research has shown that students performed 13 percentile points higher on academic

achievement over three years when they received SEL reinforcement in the core instruction (Taylor et al., 2017). To evaluate the reason behind the discrepancy in academic and social-emotional screening, I inquired whether standards were a factor. While every state has academic standards, Eklund (2018) points out that only 11 of the 50 states have K-12 SEL standards (p. 8). When it comes to knowing which expectations are developmentally appropriate, SEL standards are more ambiguous than academic standards. During the pandemic and remote learning, students experienced significant trauma due to core needs, home despair or violence, lack of social interaction, and more. Remote learning increased the achievement gap through disproportionate access to technology, home support, and engagement, or lack thereof. I anticipate future studies to evaluate the need for social-emotional and behavioral support in schools. Already we have seen an increase in the need for support which will impact the budget, staffing, and coordination throughout schools.

Conclusion

In summary, recognizing the resilience of students, teachers, and parents is merited. Districts have access to comparative data on student statuses during the pandemic and at present levels. Therefore, targeted tiered supports can be implemented to bolster the core instruction, whether academic or social-emotional, or behavioral. Additionally, this is an opportunity for districts to evaluate how marginalized students are supported and commit to closing the achievement gap.

Results of recent and future studies shed light on the importance that a one-size-fits-all approach is not a realistic strategy to support the many differences and needs of students, their communities, and their schools. Most of the work around the effects of the pandemic on student needs is relatively new. Interrupted schooling has long-term impacts beyond the initial disruption, so a myopic focus will only drive the educational system so far. Some districts across

the nation experienced more success and a less disrupted reentry since ending remote learning. As long as the resumption to shift from the norm lingers, as in some areas more than others, the Covid-19 pandemic will continue to have lingering emotional effects on the public.

It is time to reflect and reevaluate the current support systems. As Chang-Bacon (2021) poignantly states, "students *can* in fact thrive after interrupted schooling-if given the proper support" (p. 192). Plenty of research exemplifies the academic impacts of interrupted schooling. Social-emotional skills are harder to measure but not entirely impossible. As discussed in this study, social-emotional needs directly impact behavior and academics. A proactive understanding of social-emotional needs can be achieved through intentional screening processes. Implementing purposeful screening and a robust tiered system of supports will improve how educators proactively identify and plan to meet students' needs holistically. When families are partners in this process, a united front is built on behalf of students. In turn, this will improve student performance behaviorally and academically. For students, long-term effects are a reality and will continue to "exacerbate academic, economic, and linguistic barriers" that students may face (Chang-Bacon, 2021, p. 188). Professional learning establishes a strong foundation of collaborative professional learning communities around MTSS. As a result, districts can implement a consistent tiered framework of supports where educators can intervene and monitor student progress appropriately. The recommendations throughout this study will profoundly impact student trajectories in the aftermath of the Covid-19 global pandemic or any future unexpected disaster.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Research Design Overview

This study aimed to evaluate the adaptations needed for a robust tiered system of support. To evaluate the repercussions of the pandemic and identify essential adjustments required for student support, I utilized a mixed-methods approach that incorporated a dual evaluation method in my research: interviews and analysis of data and articles. As highlighted in Patton's (2008) work, ongoing feedback is a critical piece of the improvement process through a program evaluation. Patton goes on to emphasize the importance of using a "[V]ariety of methods in order to be responsive to the nuances of particular evaluation questions and the idiosyncrasies of specific stakeholders' needs" (Patton, 2008, p. 422). In this regard, I ensured reliability using a mixed-methods approach to data collection.

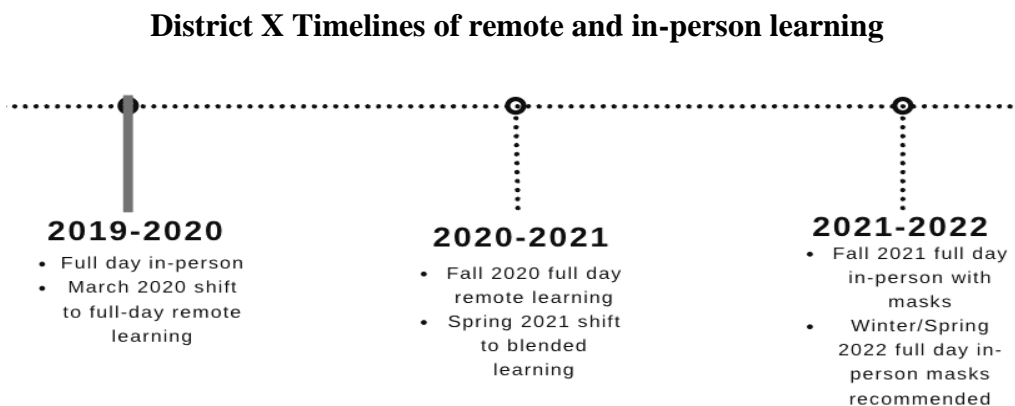
My purpose had two primary objectives: Firstly, to offer recommendations for enhancing the implementation of a tiered system of supports for students' needs within the context of the pandemic and remote learning. Secondly, to gain insights that highlight the beneficial outcomes of integrating a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) to cultivate students' progress across social-emotional, behavioral, and academic domains. The interviews, in particular, offered details that highlighted themes around the context, conditions and competencies (Wagner et al., 2006). Digging further into the impact of the pandemic on students socially, emotionally, and academically, both interviews and districtwide historical data reviews provided worthy sources. The districtwide data gave numerical information on the numbers of students who qualified for Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports from spring 2018 to spring 2022. Going deeper into these numbers, I was able to monitor trends of subgroups in each tier.

Data Gathering Techniques

For the purpose of evaluating the impact of the pandemic on students in the school setting, it was essential to gather data and various perspectives in District X. Collecting qualitative data involved arranging interviews through a semi-structured process. Everyone who participated in an interview received a note of appreciation and a gift card to their preferred coffee shop. They were also entered into a larger gift card raffle.

Quantitative data was gathered from the district in which I work. I analyzed historical data from 2018-2019, when the remote learning shift occurred through spring, through the 2021-2022 school year, which was the most recent accessible data. This approach provided an overview spanning from when students attended full-day in-person classes before the pandemic, transitioned to remote learning, then subsequently experienced blended learning models, and followed by the post-pandemic period where they ultimately returned to full-day in-person learning. This timeline is outlined in Figure 7 below.

Figure 7



Interviews

Qualitative data was collected through eight interviews in a semi-structured process.

Interviews lasted approximately sixty minutes and included fifteen questions. Interviews were conducted according to the participant's needs as some were out of town, and therefore those interviews were conducted virtually and by phone.

In soliciting a variety of interview participants, I emailed potential volunteers, including district administration, principals from four schools, reading specialists, interventionists, psychologists, EL teachers, and new and veteran classroom teachers. My invitation explained that research was being collected on the impact of the pandemic on students, academically and social-emotionally, and the needed adaptations for a tiered system of support. I invited volunteers to participate in one-on-one interviews to share their experiences of the pandemic, particularly the implementation of MTSS before, during and after the pandemic. Each interview session lasted sixty minutes and included a series of fifteen questions (see Appendix D). The interview questions were broken into three topics: remote learning, tiered systems of support, data and impact on student improvement. I interviewed eight staff from a total of four schools in District X. I chose buildings that reflected diverse demographics in their populations, and staff representing diverse roles. The following demographics are taken from the Illinois Report Card. School T is a Title 1 school with 56% white, 14% black, 17% Hispanic, 7% Asian, and 6% mixed races. Additionally, 30% of its population is low-income. Of the 348 students enrolled, 11% are English Learners. School U, in which I am an assistant principal has 68% white, 7% black, 14% Hispanic, 5% Asian and 6% two or more races. Additionally, 21% of the population is low-income. Of the 372 students, 9% are English Learners. The school housed the Dual Language program for 5th and 6th graders only until the school year 2022-2023 when the program was

relocated to bring all grades together in one building. A third school, School V has the following demographic makeup; 73% white, 4.8% black, 5.6% Hispanic, 8.9% Asian, 0% American Indian and 7% two or more races. Of the 270 students, 6% are English Learners. School W includes the following demographic makeup; 77% white, 3.5% black, 8.7% Hispanic, 4.5% Asian, 0% Asian and 5.8% two or more races. Of the 311 students, 5.5% are English Learners (Illinois Report Card, 2021).

Additionally, for quantifiable data, one district leader agreed to meet with me to provide the historical state benchmarking data from before my tenure with the district. This academic data represented fall, winter, and spring assessments for each of the academic years as follows: 2019-2020, 2020-2021, and 2021-2022. The historical data provided an aerial view of the entire district.

Research Participants

This study included a mix of male and female participants, ranging in their 30s to 40s, who were all English-speaking. Participants two school building administrators, one reading specialist/interventionist, one EL teacher, three veteran teachers, and two school psychologists. New and veteran interview participants represented a variety of perspectives. School administrators included a principal with four years in the district. In District X, school administrators facilitate the intervention processes with their building Instructional Resource Team, which comprises a psychologist, reading specialist, and interventionists. They are critical players in determining student needs, a support plan, and monitoring progress before determining the next steps. As a result, the interviews with the administrators contributed details for determining themes throughout the research.

In addition to formal interviews, this study also drew upon informal conversations with key stakeholders, including district leaders. While these interactions did not follow the structured interview format, they provided valuable insights that enriched the overall research. These informal conversations were considered in the comprehensive analysis of the research questions. Ethical considerations were upheld, and participants' confidentiality was maintained in the same manner as formal interview participants.

Table 2

Description of Participants

Participants	Experience/Tenure	Role in the district's MTSS framework
Building Administrator	17 years in education	Building leadership of intervention team.
School Psychologist	15 years in education	Intervention team member. Provide SEL and behavioral support at all tiers.
School Psychologist	10 years in education	Intervention team member. Provide SEL and behavioral support at all tiers.
Reading Specialist	19 years in education	Intervention team member. Provide reading support at Tier 2 and Tier 3.
General Education Elementary Teacher	13 years in education	Consults the intervention team for implementing Tier 1 and at times Tier 2 academic, SEL, and behavioral support. Attends three data day meetings per school year with the intervention team.
General Education Elementary Teacher	6 years in education	Consults the intervention team for implementing Tier 1 and at times Tier 2 academic,

Participants	Experience/Tenure	Role in the district's MTSS framework
		SEL, and behavioral support. Attends three data day meetings per school year with the intervention team.
English Language Teacher	33 years in education	Available for consult by the intervention team.

The priority of this utilization-focused evaluation is identifying the tiered framework needs for stakeholders implementing and receiving tiered intervention supports. Greene (2006) "groups stakeholders into four groups: 1. People who have decision authority over the program; 2. People who have direct responsibility for the program, including program development, and administrators in the organization implementing the program; 3. People who are the intended beneficiaries of the program; and 4. People disadvantaged by the program" (as cited in Patton 2008, p. 61). Each participant in this study was intentionally selected because they embody the characteristics of direct responsibility for student beneficiaries. While the qualitative portion of this study includes a small handful of district staff, it remains purposeful as defined by Patton (2008), "qualitative inquiry involving a small purposeful sampling of information-rich cases" (p. 458). The interview participants were thoughtfully and intentionally included in this study.

In the district where I work, reading specialists and interventionists conduct student benchmark assessments, use data to group Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports, and implement and monitor interventions. School psychologists support students social-emotionally and academically. Of the participating psychologists, one has been in the district for approximately ten years, and the other for three years. School psychologists work closely with administration

and staff on problem-solving and whether enough evidence supports moving into an evaluation recommendation.

Data Collection and Analysis Techniques

I used a mixed-methods approach to evaluate the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on students in school and the need for adaptations through a tiered system of support. Patton (2008) states, "using both quantitative and qualitative approaches can permit the evaluator to address questions about quantitative differences on standardized variables and qualitative differences reflecting individuals and program uniqueness" (p. 459). Through academic analysis and interviews, a basis for understanding students' past and present levels to address the impact of the pandemic was established. Data was triangulated for this study to offer a reliable representation of the results and recommendations.

Qualitative

The process of understanding the impact of the pandemic and the need for adaptations to support students was based on Robert Kegan's constructivist-developmental theory (Drago-Severson, 2016, p. 57). The interviews included varying types of questions, as identified by Patton (2002). As part of the warm-up, each interview started with experiential questions about their professional history and current role. Opinion and values questions were designed throughout the interview to understand the participants' beliefs and perspectives on the pandemic, remote learning, and a tiered system of supports. Naturally, such questions elicited emotional responses about their experiences. Finally, knowledge questions clarified the participants' understanding of the district's tiered system of supports.

To assist in analyzing the interview transcripts, participants agreed to an audio recording with the understanding that they would remain anonymous by replacing identifier names. At the start

of each interview, the purpose of the study was restated. I also provided an overview of the data-gathering process by conducting interviews and analyzing district academic data. Participants were also informed that the goal was to generate recommendations for implementing a districtwide system of tiered supports (RtI/MTSS) that effectively address the needs of all students affected by the challenges of learning during the Covid-19 pandemic.

A Google spreadsheet was used to house the interview questions, interview transcripts, and coding as a data collection tool. Based on the work of James et al. (2008), this literature review provided the themes that were subsequently coded for the interviews. James et al. describe the process as “coding with specific themes or ideas in mind then sorting the data according to these pre-selected categories (James, Milenkiewicz, & Bucknam, 2008, p. 89). The qualitative data was analyzed by coding the transcribed text from the interviews to identify emerging themes. Interview responses were coded using identified categories and themes listed in another spreadsheet tab. Each response was tagged through these themes and commonalities. Based on the themes that emerged, I was able to make recommendations for adaptations districts can apply to better support student needs.

Quantitative

Through a quantitative approach, I analyzed the data by comparing students' academic data before, during and toward the end of the pandemic. Regarding the quantitative data, I made the same comparison for themes as I did with the interviews. The district's historical academic data provided quantitative data. Through the historical data analysis, defined trends emerged unearthing evolved needs due to the pandemic.

The mixed-methods approach of interviews and academic data analysis provided a layered approach to analyzing students' levels and needs during and after the pandemic. From this,

recommendations for the systems of support framework could be provided. My single most overarching research questions that drove this research were:

- How did the Covid-19 pandemic impact the need for tiered supports in elementary schools?
- What adaptations are needed post-pandemic for supports?
- What is the impact of the pandemic on students in the school setting; academically? Socially? Emotionally?

Ethical Considerations

The ethical considerations of the study were based on the principles of informed consent. The process began with completing the requirements to gain consent from the Institutional Research Board (IRB). Multiple layers were described and put into place to ensure that no harm would be done to any participants in the study. A written narrative described details, including the research purpose, data collection methodology, and consent forms. Consequently, an approval letter was provided to move forward with the research study as described. A chair reviewed the research throughout the process to monitor its reliability, credibility and validity of the research (James, Milenkiewicz, & Bucknam, 2008). This ongoing review ensured that the process adhered to the purpose, detailed process and ethical considerations.

Participants were provided an informed consent form prior to starting each interview. Milenkiewicz et al. (2008) describe informed consent as an agreement between both parties that outlines the purpose, data collection process, and subsequent reporting. The consent form clearly stated the purpose of the research, confidentiality assurance and the risks and benefits. I articulated in the form and again verbally before conducting each interview that participation

was voluntary, could be ended at any time, and was non-valuative. I explained how the data and identities would remain confidential through a password-protected device and a password-protected network. Through these assurances, each participant expressed their willingness to participate and provided honest responses about their experiences throughout the pandemic and their understanding of how it impacted the students they supported.

Conclusion

This research aimed to study the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on students in the educational setting and determine adaptations to meet all student needs through a tiered system of support. Data collection was possible through a mixed methodology approach of interviewing district staff and leaders. This approach provided data to include a wider lens of perspectives around the pandemic's impact on students in the research area.

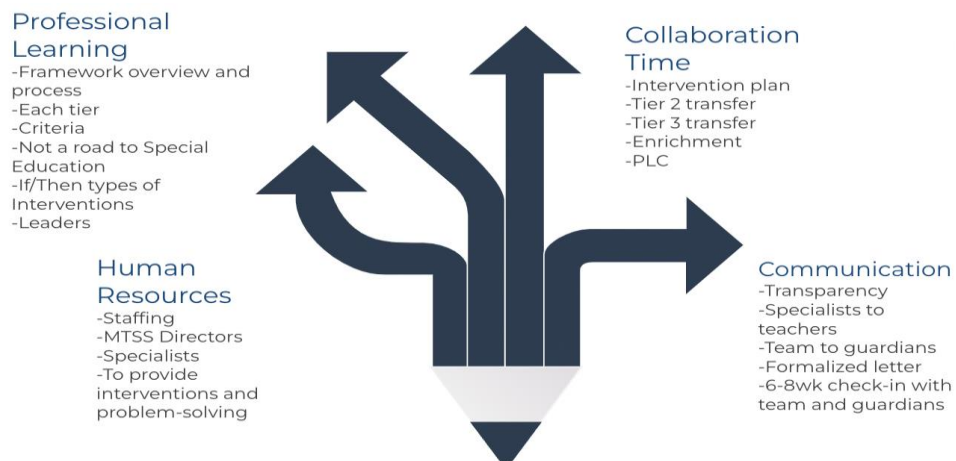
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

Introduction

This study aimed to determine the impact of the pandemic and the adaptations needed in a tiered system of supports as a response. The research question outcomes were determined by analyzing interview and quantitative data from Spring 2019 to Spring 2022. Amid interviews with twelve district staff members, several recurring themes emerged through examining and analyzing the qualitative data; professional learning, collaboration, resources, and communication. The emerging themes discussed throughout Wagner’s 4 C’s are summarized in Figure 8. Additionally, interviews from various staff roles were conducted to gather information about the research questions from various perspectives. The interviews tell the story of the strengths and needs of the core resources and tiered systems of support in District X for the last four years. These narratives give a glimpse into solid instructional practices in a fairly diverse district.

Figure 8

Emerging themes from interviews about MTSS in District X



Findings: As-Is

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the pandemic’s impact on students and identify the needs for adaptations in the tiered system of supports. A natural outcome of the interview process was to evaluate the MTSS framework, the staff’s understanding of it, and its effectiveness. It is important to acknowledge that apart from the pandemic, several factors attribute to fluctuating needs and achievement outcomes in a district. Such factors for District X include changes in building administration, increased numbers of qualifying students in specialized programs, and student behaviors, to name a few.

It is worth emphasizing that District X has been consistently evolving its curricular updates between 2018-2022, as depicted in Figure 9. After a thorough review and pilot process, implementation for each content area was annually completed starting with ELA in 2018, Science in 2019, Math in 2020, 6th-8th grades Social Studies in 2021, K-5 Social Studies in 2022, Writing in 2023, and transition to a digital-only platform for SEL in 2022. Understanding the impact of the pandemic means acknowledging that other, more typical changes occurred concurrently.

Figure 9

District X curriculum review timeline

Grades K-6

English/Language Arts

Adoption	2018-19 school year
5-year Review	2022-23 school year
<i>Potential Renewal or Adoption</i>	<i>2024-25 school year</i>
<i>Next 5-year review</i>	<i>2030-31 school year</i>

Science

Adoption	2019-20 school year*
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5-year Review	2024-25 school year
<i>Potential Renewal or Adoption</i>	<i>2026-27 school year</i>

Math

Adoption	2020-21 school year*
5-year review	2026-27 school year
<i>Potential Renewal or Adoption</i>	<i>2028-29 school year</i>

Social Studies

Adoption	2021-22 school year (6-8)/ 2022-23
school year (K-5)*	
5-year review	2028-29 school year
<i>Potential Renewal or Adoption</i>	<i>2030-31 school year</i>

Social-Emotional Learning

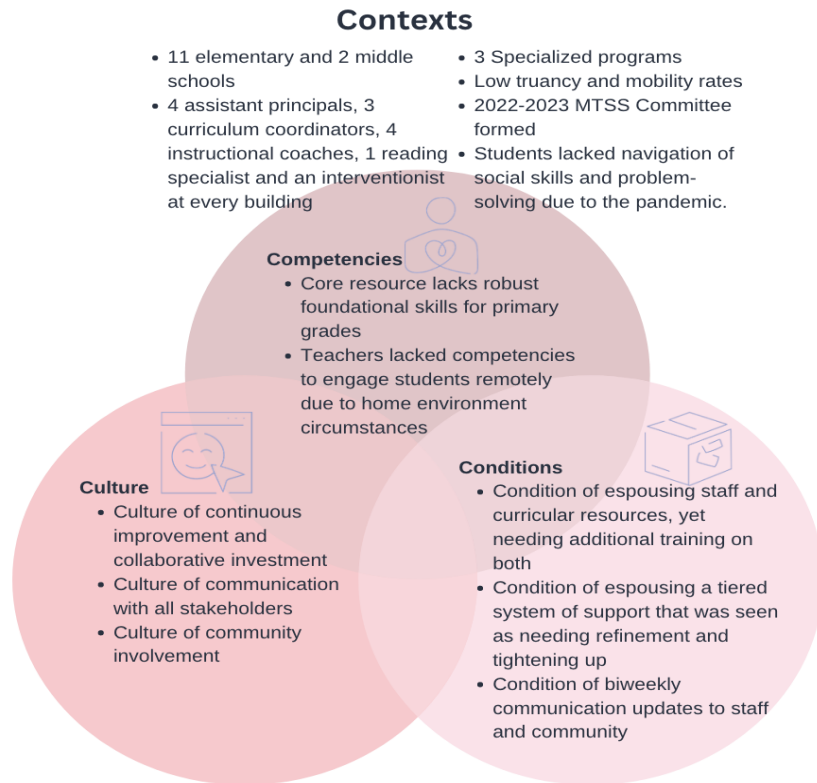
5-year review	2018-19 school year*
<i>Recommendations</i>	<i>2019-20 school year*</i>
5-year review	2025-26 school year
<i>Potential Renewal or Adoption</i>	<i>2027-28 school year</i>

* *Indicates a year during the Covid-19 pandemic.*

Change best begins with consideration of present levels and Wagner’s 4 C’s provides a framework of which to work off. Wagner et al. (2006) identified four arenas in a framework of necessary arenas for change. The four arenas are contexts, culture, competencies, and conditions. There are limits to relying solely on one of the 4 C’s, as the arenas are stronger as interdependent forces. This As-Is explains the district’s current state through the lens of Wagner’s 4 C’s, as defined both in Figure 9 and Figure 10.

Figure 10

District X's As-Is
The current state of the four Arenas of Change (Wagner, 2006) in District X



Contexts

District X has 11 elementary schools and two middle schools. In 2019, the state awarded all District X schools an Exemplary or Commendable academic designation. More so, in the same year, 54% of District X's schools earned Exemplary, the State's highest school designation. In 2022, the state awarded all District X schools Commendable, with one earning Exemplary. Upon further analysis, it became evident that the designation ratings were influenced by attendance, which presented varying definitions across districts throughout the state. The district has approximately 320 full-time employees and approximately 4,800 students. Preschool is housed in two elementary schools, and a two-way dual language program is in one elementary school. Three specialized programs are housed in different elementary and middle schools and are overseen by special programs coordinators. Three

district curriculum coordinators facilitate multiple district committees. Two of the three curriculum coordinators work dual roles as assistant principals, each based in an elementary school, one of which houses a behavior program. One elementary school with the highest student enrollment has a full-time assistant principal. The other elementary schools do not have assistant principals. The need for assistant principals in middle school is expected to increase when elementary sixth grade moves to middle schools in two years. Currently, there are three assistant principals, with two in one building and a third in the other.

Cultural, political, educational, and economic factors influence students in the school setting. They are perceived as beyond educators' control yet significantly impact their work. The interview questions in this study addressed such contexts. Through the pandemic's remote learning, educators witnessed the conditions that students lived in. Each interviewed staff member shared several outside factors that prevented students from succeeding in their courses. They explained that student engagement was challenging when so many limiting home environment factors existed. One participant reported how a student sat in their apartment bathroom for remote learning because it was the only quiet place in the home. Her learning was still disrupted when her learning space was required for use by family members. Another participant reported that students could not get online because, initially, their only device was a parent's phone or they did not have Wi-Fi. For some children, it was a survival mode; they had no food, violence in the home increased, and they lacked sleep. Remote learning for them was not a priority.

Teachers strived to support the home learning environment by meeting virtually in small groups or 1:1. Teachers also met with parents and encouraged strategies such as students setting alarms for remote class times. As one participant shared, "When remote learning

started, parents said I needed to meet more 1:1 with their kids. The needs were so high, but the expectations needed to be realistic. You're one person trying to meet the needs of so many kids in a brand-new learning platform.” Teachers sought creative ways to build class community and friendships virtually by incorporating social-emotional learning (SEL) strategies, SEL lessons, and joke times during lunch. With all this change, additional work, and the daily expectations of educators, the pandemic threw a curveball in the fidelity of implementing new curricular resources. Therefore, in the data review, one is cautioned to consider this impact on academic achievement and growth scores.

Unsurprisingly, the Covid-19 pandemic impacted students, families, and staff socially and emotionally and academically. This was heightened as teachers came out of survival mode and taught in person again. As Miller et al. (2020) pointed out, “[O]ur current reality offers the opportunity to recommit to the basics” (para. 3). Although it was “a breath of fresh air” having students back in the building, interview participants acknowledged students' significant social-emotional and behavioral needs. Notably, these needs were intensified in 2021-2022 as students returned to in-person learning. The following quote by an interview participant highlights the experience.

“I never anticipated dealing with so many things because it (the pandemic) intensified everything. The kids didn't know how to treat, talk to, or interact with each other. There was a clear social-emotional learning gap. They didn't know how to navigate their feelings. Then and now, leaders carry the weight of children's emotions, and self-harm is increasing. Some parents are in denial, so we push the support with building staff, like a social worker or counselor, and eventually, the truth comes out from the child. Parent emotions weigh on leaders too. Classroom procedure basics, like where to sit

and how to sit, they just didn't know because remote learning took that practice away. We were glad to be back in person, but we weren't prepared for the level of needs by staff, students, and families.”

The needs after remote learning were unprecedented and unexpected. The connection between SEL and academics became even more apparent. As one administrator interviewee highlighted, “There needs to be an understanding that MTSS is more than just academic. There are significant SEL needs, and it is widening academic achievement. We need to know how to balance SEL support and meet the achievement gap in academics so they do not get wider.” This is especially true for minority students, who were already behind academically. Reportedly by two interviewees, the district’s core SEL curricular resource lacked features of trauma-informed pieces needed as students emerged from remote learning. As one participant emphasized, “All of our students have gone through some specific, very significant trauma. So, what are we doing to ensure that at a Tier 1 level is going to help all students, especially those students that had more of those significant trauma experiences?” Another participant expressed that the Tier 1 SEL program was lacking in meeting present-day student needs, saying, “It is not applicable.” This statement made me ponder why. I wonder whether SEL programs are adapting to current needs, not only present-day trauma experiences or social needs but also whether these programs reflect the increased content that children today are exposed to. For example, children nowadays have more access to social media platforms where age-inappropriate content is at their fingertips. In contrast to the past, younger children were typically shielded from such content until later in their development.

Education is a constantly evolving profession. It keeps up with society, best practices, and changing student needs. While there have been approximately eighteen district committees,

from technology to SEL to every academic content area, there has not been a committee for MTSS. Due to the pandemic and an inherent need to adapt and enhance existing conditions, including the district framework for interventions, an MTSS committee was established in the fall of 2022. Volunteers of staff and administration were invited to participate in the committee, meeting twice per trimester. With my passion through my research and training in trauma-informed practices and MTSS, the assistant superintendent overseeing the committee invited me to assist in coordinating the jumpstart of the committee work. The committee's purpose was to review historical data, review the current framework and practices, and refine the criteria and process for providing tiered support systems for all students. My first recommendation was to gather and review historical data, review each building's processes, and complete a district Self-Assessment of MTSS Implementation (SAMI) to assess the current state of the MTSS framework. After this initial work, consecutive meetings included education on MTSS because, up until then, it was known across the district as RtI, and MTSS was unfamiliar to some. Eventually, the committee created a vision statement to define MTSS in District X and a communication plan for the vision. Subsequently, the committee outlined districtwide professional learning to help drive the implementation of a common MTSS framework, its processes, and an intervention system. This occurred through Institute Days, School Improvement Plan days, and weekly early-release days known as Professional Learning Monday (PLM). Throughout this process, the committee will focus on academics, social-emotional, and behavior in tandem. The work of the MTSS committee continues to lead the context of District X toward continuous improvement.

Culture

There is the well-known phrase, *culture eats strategy*. Wagner et al. (2006) describe organizational culture as “the invisible but powerful meanings and mindsets held individually and collectively throughout the system” (page 102). The success of any plan hinges on a culture built on a belief in collaboration toward improvement, even if it necessitates change. Creating a robust and positive school culture is difficult for a school leader. A culture of planning and collaborating creates what Wagner et al. (2006) call a *community of practice*. “Communities of practice are characterized by a shared passion, commitment, and identification with a group’s purpose...professionals to learn, grow, and become more effective at their craft” (p. 75). Teachers, leaders and staff in a district need to feel unified through a joint mission and supported in the change process. District X has invested in a culture of striving for continuous improvement through communication. In doing so, district leadership knows every staff member’s name through engagement in school visits and committees. Community involvement has been a focus of continuous improvement through transparency and communication. The website has been updated with pertinent information, monthly updates are sent to the community, and a website dashboard was created to update the community about confirmed positive Covid-19 cases and mitigation efforts during the pandemic. During the pandemic, building administrators communicated with families when positive cases impacted their classrooms. The communication goal was never to be guilty of under-communicating. In the winter of 2021, staff and community feedback was that communication reporting the positive cases was no longer needed at such a frequent intensity.

Moreover, district leadership invited faculty and community stakeholders to collaborate in cultivating continuous improvement. Such opportunities were through various committee

participation and the 2023 Strategic Planning process, which included at least six sessions. Curriculum and other committees, facilitated by the assistant superintendents and the curriculum coordinators, are updated throughout the year on a staff website, and detailed trimester updates are presented to the Board of Education. In 2023, based on feedback from a community committee, my curriculum coordinator counterparts and I created a curriculum-focused website that offered detailed information about District X pedagogy, resources used, and helpful links for the community. This included all content areas, specials, social-emotional learning, and mental health resources.

The interview questions in my study addressed culture and the MTSS framework in District X. A key theme of the interview results was the culture of collaboration. Each interview participant emphasized the value of the time to collaborate, discuss student needs, plan for instruction, and reflect on progress. One participant's building strategy included "a meeting every month on a professional development building day. We had a half hour put aside so classroom teachers could meet with specialists to find out what they were working on so that it could be reinforced in the classroom." Since specialists do not have time in their schedule to meet with teams, these thirty-minute meetings were a start to finding adequate time to support Tier 1 and Tier 2 planning. Another participant explained how the meetings created a collective efficacy effect, "Even if a child wasn't in my class, I might have an idea of an intervention or engagement strategy. So, we were all helping each other. We all knew about every student in our grade, so we knew our kids better than we did before." This same participant continued to explain how the frequency of problem-solving meetings was proactive and developed at each meeting, saying, "We got to the next meeting, and if the intervention didn't seem to work, then we talked about it, asking what do we need to do? We tried something, and it didn't work. Let's

go to the next step. So, it was an all-hands-on-deck kind of work.” Currently, the district provides three 1.5-hour data review days yearly. The data days are typically structured with principals, intervention and special education teams rotating between grade levels. With that said, each participant in the interviews expressed a need for larger chunks of time to collaborate as a team. While planning and reflection happen organically during the day by staff, all interview participants felt that the shorter data meetings for each grade three times yearly did not provide sufficient time to discuss interventions in greater depth. District X leadership acknowledged the need for additional data collaboration around MTSS data and interventions. As a result, they have scheduled district-designated PLMs for the 2023-2024 school year, focusing specifically on data and instruction for interventions.

Conditions

Wagner’s (2006) third arena of change is the conditions. Conditions can set a foundation of support for staff and students. In schools, it can include training, in-house programs, staffing, time, the structure of data collection and review, communication with staff and families and more. Each of these is a conditional factor in District X.

Resources play a crucial role in either reinforcing effective instructional practices or creating a flawed foundation. In a tiered system, Tier 1 should meet the needs of 80% or more of the school population. The interviews conducted provided insight into the existing curricular resources in District X. When asked about the core resources, each interviewee reported that while the core reading resource had strengths, it had concerning areas where it fell short, especially in foundational skills. The identified shortcomings of the core reading program are not surprising, given that the district was undergoing a review of resources process for the ELA resources at that time. The core math includes built-in support features, such as providing

background knowledge for teachers and families. These features include explanations in the teacher edition and family letters home. However, some participants felt that the core math program's intervention resources were lacking compared to the core reading resource. One participant referenced a district intervention list of research-based resources. While the interviewees noted that they gravitate to a few programs on the list that they are familiar with, they admitted they could address even more the diverse needs of students if trained on more resources from the list. This list has fewer options for math interventions, and the other interview participants were unaware of the intervention resource list. One potential reason for the lack of awareness could be that the list is primarily intended for the specialists who are responsible for implementing those intervention resources. However, since the special education team is part of the problem-solving team, they could be encouraged to reference and utilize the list. To that point, the newly formed MTSS committee will start the intervention resources review in the 2022-2023 school year, specifically for reading, math, executive functioning, and SEL.

Human resources provide a layer of support in which each of the interview participants expressed value. Human resources in District X would be considered robust compared to many districts. Every building has a full-time reading specialist and at least one if not two, interventionists who provide reading and math interventions. The average class sizes are 21-26 students, and instructional assistants are staffed to support the special education programming.

Staffing was significantly and negatively impacted by the pandemic. Due to the pandemic, staff were out for longer periods due to mandated quarantine practices. As a result, substitutes were required. However, substitutes were home for their own or a child's quarantine. The impact the pandemic caused in this area forced administrators to desperately jigsaw staff

coverage on a nightly basis. School administrators spent considerable days subbing in classrooms as teachers, specialists, and instructional assistants. While this took away from other administrative duties, supporting students is at the core of the district's culture. As one interview participant stated, "[T]he most valuable aspect is the human bodies. We can have every intervention under the sun purchased, but if we don't have the people to make those groups small enough to give those students more one-on-one attention, it doesn't matter. We need consistent bodies." With consistent staffing to provide interventions, students build rapport and relationships with trusted adults and engage more.

District X has district-level leadership who are immersed in the daily operations and activities at the building level. The leadership consists of eleven elementary principals, two dual-role assistant principals, three full-time assistant principals, four assistant superintendents, and one superintendent. A small group of principals meet every few months with the superintendent. District and all building administrators meet for three hours on a biweekly basis to plan and collaborate on district initiatives, committee work, building needs, and more. In addition, they have small cohorts of building administrators who meet bimonthly with an assistant superintendent to address issues and upcoming plans. These frequent meetings are intended to help administrators plan professional learning and support for staff and students and also distribute information to buildings. The mission of communication circles is here. In addition to district staff and community communication, principals send weekly newsletters to staff and communities. District and building administrators work tirelessly to develop relationships with staff and the community, knowing both by name and need. They are visible daily and responsive when sought out.

An additional theme that surfaced throughout the interviews was the importance of professional learning and resources; quality, consistency, and training of resources. The administrator's relationships with staff, students and families rang no truer than during the pandemic's remote learning. Principals met weekly with psychologists and interventionists to plan how to meet student and staff needs. Still, the resources proved to be another piece of the puzzle. The interviews addressed competencies demonstrated during remote and in-person teaching and targeted instruction through the three tiers. A need that proved to be a theme pertained to staff competencies in delivering strong Tier 1 core instruction in addition to tiered interventions. As one interview participant stated, "I see big holes in it (core resource), like Foundational Reading pieces, phonics and phonemic awareness, especially for lower performing students. It's good for the kids that are kind of middle of the road and maybe a little higher, but it's missing the piece for those lower kids and creating a gap." This demonstrates a need to establish conditions with strong Tier 1 resources, particularly in the primary grades where learning foundational skills happens. As students move up, they do not have the foundational skills to keep up with the rigor of skill expectations. Additionally, while this participant mentioned higher-performing students, they reiterated that it was barely meeting their needs and had concerns about holding students back in the long run who need the ceiling raised. The set of participants in this study unveiled a need for updating the current core, or Tier 1, reading resource. Specifically, a trend was the need to find a resource that supports teachers' competencies in teaching foundational skills for all students and interventionists in their services. "Our reading resource is lacking. It is missing a strong phonics component, leaving primary teachers scrambling to find resources. For math intervention, for the most part, one resource is used" (Since this interview, a resource pilot was implemented across the

district. Additionally, since the resources list was created before Covid, it is currently in review for updating as of the 2022-2023 school year). In light of this, I recommend that during New Teacher onboarding, these resources be reviewed, especially for new specialists who are most likely to utilize them.

As noted, the district has been completing a thorough review of all content area resources. While this process is hopeful and exciting, it also comes with trepidation. One interviewee noted, “I try and give it [resource implementation] a shot and do it the right way. For example, there's a process, a reason why the publishers introduce in that order. Some educators are set in their ways and are hesitant to try it [new implementation]. For them, it is overwhelming when things keep changing.” Another participant shared, “We keep changing things. I want to give us a chance to tweak what we're doing to get better at it. I feel like we're not given that opportunity to do that. And yet for me, that's what I like that every year lately, there's a new something we are doing to get better.” This staff member highlights the juxtaposition that consistent resources provide a structured foundation to improve one’s craft and resource implementation and, over time, can adapt it to meet the needs of the classroom. On the other hand, there is a natural need for continuous improvement in resources and instructional practices; therefore, change is necessary. This holds evidence that while conditions are set up to support staff competencies, it is also impacted by the professional’s perception. What one perceives as a positive change and values professional learning, another may view as temporary or unnecessary. Several times, the interviewed teachers discussed the importance of balancing the need for change over consistency, “[W]e keep changing things. Updates are needed, but I want to give us a chance to adjust what we are using to get better at that. I feel like we're not given that opportunity yet to do that when there's something new every year. But

I know that is how it needs to be now as we update our core resources.” These statements reiterate the importance of balancing consistency, support, and training while keeping resources updated.

With a heavy focus on the pandemic and on tiered systems of support, nearly every interview question addressed conditions. Additionally, the questions that inherently addressed remote learning included descriptions of conditional responses. The interviews provided insight into the conditions specific to District X’s RtI/MTSS framework and supports. District X uses a tiered system of support for academics, which until recently has been referred to as Response to Intervention (RtI). While RtI addresses academic needs, it does not reach the comprehensive scope of social-emotional and behavioral needs. In contrast, MTSS offers a more comprehensive approach that includes academics, social-emotional, and behavioral. The nature of the MTSS framework is systematically designed to prepare staff to proactively meet student needs and encourage collaboration with families. District X leadership strongly advocated for a social-emotional screener adoption and, as of 2022-2023, is still in the review process for board approval.

On the academic side, District X follows the three-tiered academic model, using MAP and Aimsweb benchmarking data as criteria. In 2021, a districtwide system of evaluating benchmark data was instilled. Every grade reviewed their class’s data and completed a Google form answering reflection questions posed by the district. The purpose of these data meetings continues to be on planning targeted instruction, although according to the interviews, there is a recognized need for some adjustments to further embed instructional conversations with more emphasis in these meetings. The aim is that the conversations about targeted instruction become a more prominent and integral part of the data meetings consistently across all

buildings. While the special education team, reading specialists, and interventionists also evaluate the data, the time available is tight for them to attend every grade level's data meeting. These specialist staff bounce between grade levels. This is where having two data days per trimester, rather than three times per year, would be beneficial. With that said, the feedback has been that additional time for these discussions and planning groups is warranted and ultimately supports staff competencies. Although the specialists deliver direct Tier 3 services, they do not have preserved time in their schedule to meet with every grade-level team consistently, other than designated PLM time or open time before and after student attendance times. While buildings strive to provide each team with at least one or two weekly collaboration plan times during the school day, District X does not use a PLC model. District X has instituted a weekly early release time, referred to as PLM that fosters additional staff collaboration and learning. Every Monday, students are dismissed one hour early, thereby providing staff with protected professional learning time. Each Monday is outlined to be directed by the district, building needs, or self-directed by staff. The intention of the PLM as an established condition is a focus on new learning for staff.

Competencies

Competencies are developed through experience, support, and ongoing professional learning. The latter is the approach used most by districts (Wagner, 2006) to improve staff and student competency. It would be difficult to argue with Wagner's assertion that "Skillful, competent adults are a foundation of this work...Teachers and administrators at every level of the system need to develop their competencies regularly through ongoing development opportunities" (Wagner, 2006, p. 99). District X supports the competencies of its staff through involvement in curricular improvement and communication.

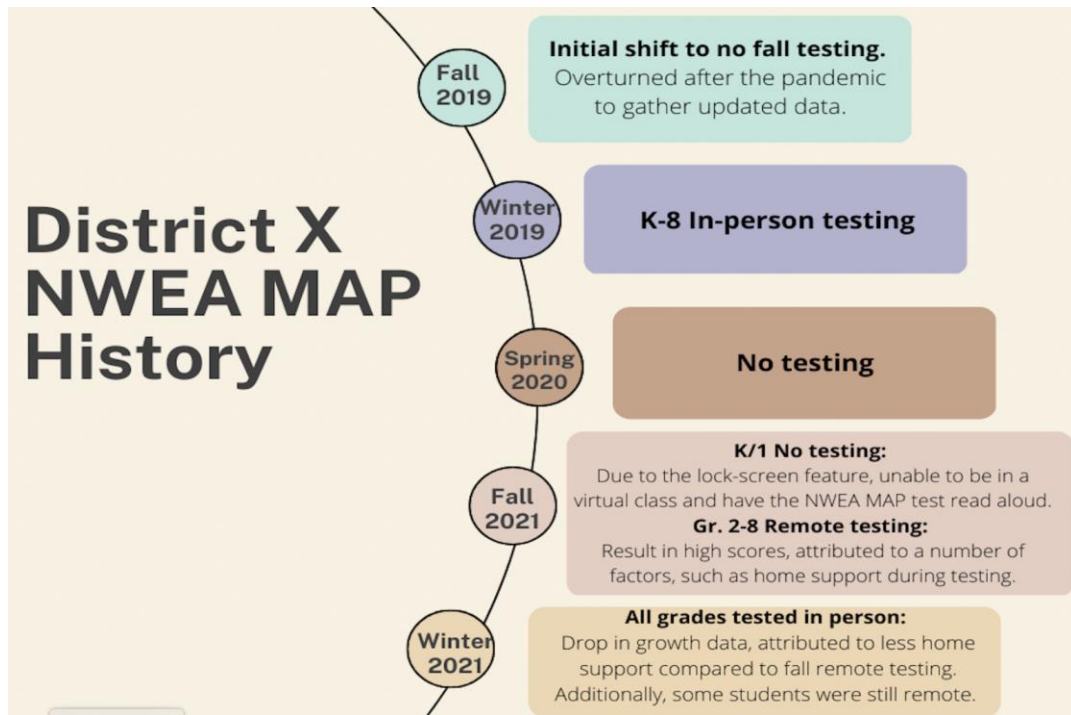
One of District X's competency strengths is communication. Staff and community are provided transparent information through consistent communication via social media, digital newsletters, and availability of leadership, to name a few modes. In addition, access to professional learning is embedded through weekly PLMs. The Mondays are mapped out for the year with identified teacher-directed, building-directed, and district-directed days. At the end of each Monday, staff and administration complete a Google form EXIT slip explaining their work for the day and the impact it will have on teaching and learning. The trimester Grade Level Meetings are another layer of providing professional learning support for competencies. Teachers and specialists are provided a sub so that they can attend their three-hour districtwide grade-level meeting. These meetings are informational and facilitated by the assistant superintendents, curriculum coordinators, and instructional coaches. It is a supportive system for checking in with all staff and providing a common message about curriculum expectations or new initiatives. Once back in their buildings, staff has access to the ongoing support of instructional coaches and curriculum coordinators, who are visible within the buildings. The instructional coaches are assigned to schools so they can build relationships to complete coaching cycles (Knight, 2017) with staff through personalized support. The assistant superintendents, curriculum coordinators and instructional coaches meet weekly to plan around curriculum and professional learning. These meetings serve as a platform for reviewing the PLM EXIT-slip data to determine the type of support to address specific needs and foster continuous improvement.

Quantitative Findings

I sought answers to the research questions by using a combination of quantitative data collected through districtwide historical benchmark data, specifically Northwest Evaluation

Association Measures of Academic Progress (NWEA MAP) testing for reading and math, spanning from spring 2019 to spring 2022 as well as extensive literature reviews on nationwide trends. In addition to the interviews, my mixed-methods approach included a comprehensive review of districtwide historical benchmark data. While the interviews addressed academics and SEL, the quantitative data was solely academic. At the time of the research, District X did not have a social-emotional screener or track behavior referrals across the district; therefore, quantitative data focused on academic benchmark assessments and district criteria for Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions. For this study, the assessment used was NWEA MAP for reading and math, as it was administered to every student. The use of NWEA MAP as a universal assessment allowed for a comprehensive evaluation of academic results across the entire student population. The district also uses Aimsweb as part of its benchmark assessment. However, since Aimsweb was not administered to every student, this study did not include Aimsweb in its review. Correlation was used to analyze the relationship between the pandemic and the number of students qualifying in each tier. Following Carroll & Carroll's (2005) outline, the quantitative data in this study was used to compare the number of students who met district criteria for Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 interventions in reading and math before and after remote learning. This comparison demonstrates the number of students and subgroups in Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 at the start and end of remote learning. In analyzing quantifiable data, it is important to note inconsistencies in District X's testing that were impacted by the pandemic, as outlined in Figure 11.

Figure 11



Each of the interviewees reported that they saw more students qualify for interventions in the 2021-2022 school year when the district returned to in-person learning, with masks and continued distancing. One interview participant explained, “We have a bigger number in the fall of kids who qualify for Tier 2 and Tier 3, and then as the year goes on, that usually drops. But as we continued to benchmark tests in winter and spring [2021-2022], it was not dropping. Their needs continued, and then the governor extended the order of weekly testing and forced masks for only certain individuals. So, the emotions in the community kept popping up, and that emotional piece for our kids was affecting them emotionally and academically.”

Tiered academic data was analyzed by comparing spring 2019 through 2022 NWEA MAP results. In the fall of 2022, eight schools saw an increase in students qualifying for interventions Tier 2, and nine of the eleven elementary schools saw an increase in Tier 3. The

analysis looked at the overall number of students tested and the number of students who met the criteria for Tiers 1, 2, and 3 with reading and math combined. The same data was tabulated separately for reading and math. Table 3 illustrates the data for the spring of 2019 and spring of 2022, reflecting the number of students who qualified for Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 based on the NWEA MAP assessment and district criteria. In the spring of 2019, District X had 6,152 elementary students qualify for Tier 1, 891 students for Tier 2, and 437 students for Tier 3. Of those tiers, 20% in Tier 1 were from minority backgrounds, 36% in Tier 2, and 53% in Tier 3. In the spring of 2022, the numbers were 5,801 students in Tier 1, 801 for Tier 2 and 448 for Tier 3. Of these tiers, 20% in Tier 1 were the minority, 34% in Tier 2, and 51% in Tier 3 were minorities. Although there is not a substantial difference between the 2018-2019 and 2021-2022 school years, there is a positive trend in reducing the number of minority students in Tier 2 and Tier 3. With that, the Tier 1 minority count was unchanged, and there is a positive trend in reducing the number of minority students in Tier 2 and Tier 3. It is important to note that the overall count of students who took the NWEA MAP assessment in the spring of 2019 was 351 more than the total count of students tested in the spring of 2022.

Table 3

DISTRICT X TIER DATA BASED ON NWEA MAP						
TIER	SPRING 2019			SPRING 2022		
TIER 1	6,152			5,801		
TIER 2		891			801	
TIER 3			437			448
TIER 1 MINORITY	20%			20%		
TIER 2 MINORITY	36%			34%		
TIER 3 MINORITY	53%			51%		

Note: Combined math and reading data comparison of students in tiers between spring 2019 and spring 2022 in District X.

In reviewing the spring 2022 NWEA MAP scores, overall, District X's growth declined. There are a number of factors to this drop. First, in the fall of 2020, all students completed the NWEA MAP assessment remotely. Due to the inability to monitor family support during the assessment remotely, the district noticed a discrepancy in the results, specifically a jump in scores. When students returned to in-person learning and completed the assessment in a more controlled environment, a decline in growth and achievement was observed. These results can be attributed to students completing the assessment independently with less adult assistance. Additionally, another contributing factor to the scores is the variation between spring 2021 and spring 2022. During this period, some students completed the assessment in person, while some remained fully remote. The testing environments varied greatly over the years as the district had more students remain remote in 2020-2022, which decreased by the end of spring 2022. Figure 12 and Figure 13 provide a detailed breakdown of the specific subgroups in each tier for reading and math between spring 2019 and spring 2022. From 2019 to 2022, both the majority and minority groups saw an increase in the number of students qualifying for Tier 2 and Tier 3 reading services. There were some notable changes within specific demographic groups. For reading, the percentage of Hispanic students from 2019 to 2022 who met Tier 1 and Tier 3 dropped. However, in Tier 2, the difference was not statistically significant. While the number for Tier 2 and Tier 3 Hispanic students in math increased. Similarly, the number of Black students meeting the criteria for Tier 1 decreased yet increased for both Tier 2 and Tier 3. Additionally, the percentage of multiracial students that qualified for Tier 3 services increased from 2019 to 2022.

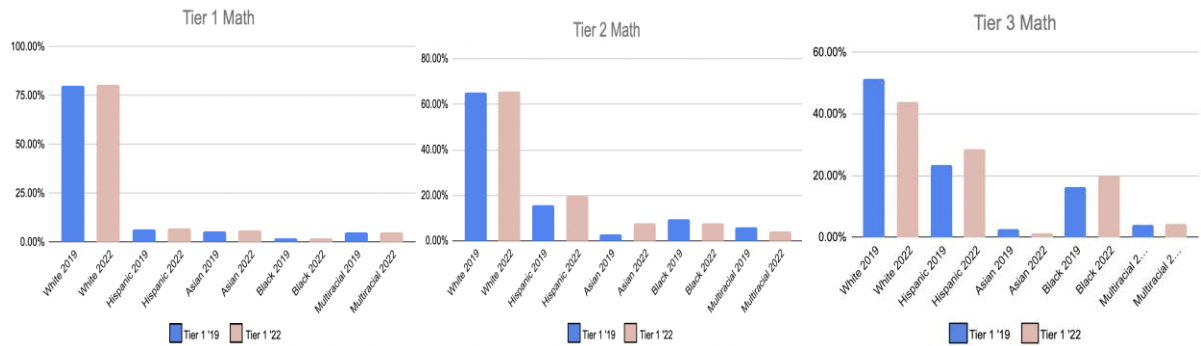
Figure 12

Reading tier data by subgroups



Figure 13

Math tier data by subgroups



Although my research focused on spring 2019 to spring 2022, in my initial data dig, I started by seeking historical data before the pandemic. The purpose was purely to gain a vaster panorama of the district’s history in NWEA MAP results. The chart in Figure 14 was presented at District X’s spring 2022 board meeting and demonstrates an overview of grade-level trends from winter 2014 to winter 2020. Statistically, half of District X’s students fall at or above the median percentile, with half at or below the median percentile.

Figure 14

District X Longitudinal overview of grade level trends

Reading Median Percentiles	Winter 14 (January)	Winter 15 (January)	Winter 16 (January)	Winter 17 (January)	Winter 18 (January)	Winter 19 (December)	Winter 20* (December)	National Median
Kindergarten	68	68	68	74	78	59	71	50
1st	71	71	68	72	87	69	75	50
2nd	78	72	76	76	74	75	78	50
3rd	72	76	70	74	76	67	76	50
4th	73	71	73	74	74	70	71	50
5th	67	74	70	75	73	74	75	50
6th	70	68	74	74	76	73	76	50
7th	73	73	72	78	78	76	78	50
8th	68	73	73	77	79	79	79	50

Note: Historical grade level data trends in reading MAP achievement taken from District X’s website (name omitted for confidentiality).

Conversely, it is important to note that one or a small handful of winter data points, as shown in the chart above, are not conclusive. Such historical data does lend an understanding of trends in growth and achievement. For example, Figure 14 highlights a trend where growth and achievement in math are lower in the intermediate grades. Moving forward from this insight, the district began a multi-year process of resource reviews to foster and support instruction. This is one of many steps, such as creating an MTSS committee, that District X put in place as it began to rise out of the pandemic.

While reports demonstrate students' resiliency and ability to bounce back, NWEA (Kuhfield & Lewis, 2022) sought to predict how much time it would take after the pandemic to close the academic minority achievement gap by grades. Similar to the purpose of Figure 14, Kuhfield and Lewis (2022) also measured the achievement gap by following grade-level scores between 2021 and 2022. The gaps in Table 4 demonstrate the difference between pre-Covid and 2022 status. Based on that data and the 2021-2022 rate of improvement, the authors predicted how many years it would take to close the gaps. Using the percent change in the achievement gap between

the years' scores, they determined the average number of years it would take for each grade to close the gap and catch up to the expected achievement. It is important to emphasize that the rates of improvement in Table 4 extend beyond the federal financial support spending opportunities. The average expected rate to close the gap is predicted to take 3-5+ years.

Table 4

Achievement gaps between spring 2021 and spring 2022 in reading and math by cohort and the rate of continued improvement to close the gaps.

Subject	Cohort	Achievement gap by spring 2021		Achievement gap by spring 2022		Change in gap	% Change	Years to close gap
		Grade	Gap	Grade	Gap			
Reading	K-3	2	-0.14	3	-0.12	0.02	16%	5+
	1-4	3	-0.14	4	-0.09	0.05	36%	1-2
	2-5	4	-0.13	5	-0.10	0.03	25%	3-5
	3-6	5	-0.13	6	-0.10	0.03	24%	3-5
	4-7	6	-0.12	7	-0.12	0.01	4%	5+
	5-8	7	-0.13	8	-0.12	0.01	8%	5+
Math	K-3	2	-0.22	3	-0.18	0.04	18%	3-5
	1-4	3	-0.26	4	-0.19	0.07	27%	3-5
	2-5	4	-0.28	5	-0.22	0.06	23%	3-5
	3-6	5	-0.27	6	-0.19	0.08	31%	1-2
	4-7	6	-0.21	7	-0.21	0.00	0%	5+
	5-8	7	-0.20	8	-0.24	-0.04	-18%	5+

nwea Research

Note: Taken from Kuhfeld, M. and Lewis K., (2022), *Student achievement in 2021–2022: Cause for hope and continued urgency*. Collaborative For Student Growth, NWEA.

The findings in the 2022 NWEA report indicate that students are rebounding from the drop in academic scores from the pandemic. However, high-poverty schools have more ground to make up and are expected to recover more slowly. The NWEA report stated that while students are demonstrating academic resilience on the upward trend, achievement at the end of the 2021-2022 school year was lower than average in prior years, more so in math than reading. Covid-19 mitigation measures had a discernible impact and thwarted students' ability to bounce back during the 2021-2022 school year. As most schools returned to full-day in-person learning, they

continued to battle barriers to learning, such as threats of school closures and lengthy quarantines by staff and students. One interview participant shared, “It was hard to focus on learning when we were focusing so much on relearning how to be students. Students didn’t have the structure and routines at home as much during remote, and they had to be bounce-back kids because they had to rebuild friendships when we returned to in-person. On top of that, everyone was on edge about masks, quarantine and if we would have to go remote again. So much to focus on and still give time to academics.”

Interpretations

Unanswered questions from the research include the social-emotional and behavioral component, as the district does not currently have a universal screener. The newly formed MTSS committee work, of which I support, will continue to address the screener issue through ongoing informational board meetings focusing on the purpose and implementation of social-emotional screeners. There is additional work for the MTSS Committee to continue the resource evaluation cycle. If, at any point, a significant number of students are performing below expectations, it is reflective of the core resource or instruction and is not necessarily attributed to student performance. In such cases, it may be necessary to implement schoolwide interventions rather than relying on additional small intervention groups. These are areas that require ongoing attention and collaboration within the MTSS Committee to ensure a comprehensive and effective MTSS framework. By addressing these areas and conducting ongoing evaluations, the district can better support the academic and social-emotional needs of all students.

This study explores the effects of the pandemic on students and proposes adaptations that districts can make to address student needs. In doing so, the research involved interviewing

various educators from District X and analyzing historical district data. The analysis included a comparison of the student distribution across all three tiers between spring 2019 and 2022, as well as examining subgroups within each tier during the same time period. Overall findings for K-6 yielded 351 fewer students in 2022 that qualified for Tier 1, 91 fewer students who qualified for Tier 2 support, and an increase of 11 students that qualified for Tier 3 support. Furthermore, the percentage of minority students remained unchanged in Tier 1 and dropped by 2% in both Tier 2 and Tier 3.

The interviews shed light on the challenges that both staff and students faced during the pandemic. There was consistency across the interview responses, despite the diverse roles of participants, resulting in the emergence of common themes. Educators had to quickly scramble to adapt to remote platforms while bearing the weight of pressure to meet the diverse needs of all students. District and school leaders rushed to create a structure that enabled staff to teach remotely and provided support to families for accessing Wi-Fi, and meals, and establishing home routines for remote learning. At the same time that these efforts consumed the work of educators, they were juggling their personal home needs.

Moving forward, evidence from the interviews demonstrates the importance of a clear MTSS framework which includes criteria, processes, resources, professional learning, and adequate human and curricular resources for all tiers. Crucial components of a strong MTSS framework must include sufficient collaboration time and establishing effective communication systems among staff and families. Regular reviews of the system will continue refining the supports and services for students and staff. As the district's MTSS committee continues its work to enhance the framework, the number of students in Tier 2 and Tier 3 can shift back toward Tier 1.

Much of the work in schools focuses on struggling learners, particularly during the pandemic. That said, I caution educators about focusing only on struggling learners. In a 2022 Readworks study, “More significantly, teachers are assigning less grade-level work in the wake of the pandemic—the exact moment when students need more grade-level work. Students received about five percentage points more below grade-level texts, and question sets in 2020-21 compared to 2018-19” (Readworks, 2022, p. 4). The study found that students performed nearly the same on grade-level work as on below-grade-level work. Specifically, for the on-grade-level work, students answered 63.4% of questions correctly and 68.2% correctly for the below-grade-level questions (Readworks, 2022, p. 5). As the Readworks study (2022) recommends, “[O]perate as if many of your students, especially students in historically and systemically marginalized groups, are not getting enough chances to do high-quality, grade-level work” (p. 8).

With the goal of fostering career-ready, critical thinkers, we must raise the ceiling for all students. The pandemic impacted struggling students but also high-achievement and gifted students whose unique learning needs were met with less intensity. Specific to District X, I will continue to support this work through the MTSS and Gifted Committees. This is an opportune time to lead these committees through progressive work around the MTSS framework and enrichment and gifted programming. Through collaborative efforts, such as the district’s PLM, grade level meetings, committees, and Data Days, all educators can proactively monitor and meet student needs.






Judgments

A strong framework of tiered supports relies on buy-in, training, and consistent implementation. If a district currently has an established tiered system of support, reflecting on it

with a critical eye with a variety of stakeholders and data can unearth areas of need. Any crisis surges a human yearning to get back to “normal” as quickly as possible. However, our educational system is in a position to face educational inequities and reevaluate the systems for how the needs of all students are met. Student success depends largely upon the quality of instruction received. Our system is in a position to evaluate the pedagogical methods in which we strive to reach *all* students; struggling, on-level, high achieving, gifted, minority, and so forth. As we reflect on the pandemic’s impact on teaching and learning, now is an opportune time to examine existing systems and resources with the intention of updating how schools effectively support all students. To support the overarching themes from Figure 8 (see above on page 53), five overarching focuses can stand as guideposts for districts' professional learning in this process, as demonstrated in Figure 15.

Figure 15

Focus for district professional learning process around a tiered system of supports

<p>Stakeholder involvement in the process of systems improvement and implementation</p> 	<p>Knowledge of present levels and student background</p> 	<p>Accountability and ongoing data review</p> 
<p>Ongoing professional learning and collaboration</p> 	<p>Cycle review of the tiered framework</p> 	

Evidence collected from the qualitative and quantitative data yields insights into the effects of the academic and social-emotional impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic in the school setting. As Stoiber and Gettinger (2016) explained, MTSS emphasizes “the importance of optimizing system-level and organization support through a combined focus on academic and social-behavioral performance indicators” (p. 123). Concurrently, the results of my study provide valuable insight into the strengths of District X’s implemented tiered systems of supports framework and identify areas for continued improvement in meeting the diverse needs of students in light of the pandemic and beyond. More so, analysis of the data revealed the following trending needs as districts strive to meet the needs of students and staff: (a) A clarified MTSS framework encompassing clear criteria, processes, and interventions, communicated effectively to all staff. (b) Triangulated data sources with established criteria that proactively identify students for intervention, including universal academic and social-emotional screeners. (c) Ample time for collaboration between interventionists, specialists, and teachers. (d) Ongoing professional learning for all staff, including training for new staff prior to their first day of instruction and an annual review for veteran staff to enrich their knowledge of tiered instruction, differentiation, and the MTSS framework. (e) Support for differentiation in core classroom instruction through the utilization of core resources and collaboration between teachers and specialists. (f) Data-driven systems that enable teams to proactively problem-solve and monitor progress.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The research in this study calls for a need to reevaluate tiered supports and systems. Districts are already mindful of how they utilize their budget, and the results of this research suggest that significant spending on resources or staffing may not be necessary. Rather, a prioritized

recommendation is to reallocate staffing and schedule time for collaboration while also focusing on enhancing the processes of tiered supports through ongoing professional learning. In doing so, the emergent themes in Figure 8 (see page 53) guide districts to prioritize their efforts. Moreover, Figure 15 provides guideposts for districts developing professional learning to strengthen their tiered system of support. To that end, a reevaluation of the tiered system must integrate a model that meets the needs of struggling, high-achieving, and students identified as gifted students. As districts navigate the post-pandemic period, it is a propitious time to consider how tiered supports can effectively meet all students' diverse academic, social-emotional, and behavioral needs.

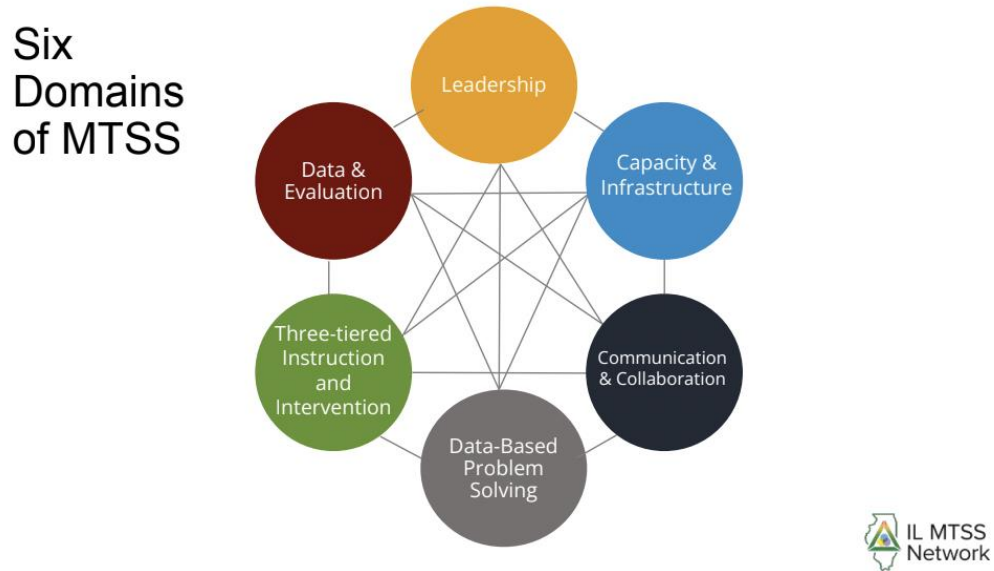
Chapter Five: To-Be Framework

Introduction

The Illinois MTSS Network website defines Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) as “a systemic, prevention-focused, data-informed framework for continuous improvement providing a continuum of supports for *all* learners” (2018, para. 1). This definition encompasses the purpose and each critical component of a tiered support system. Keywords to call attention to are *prevention-focused*. With a clear-defined system, a district’s MTSS framework should be preventative and responsive to individual needs; academically, socially-emotionally, and behaviorally. The Illinois MTSS Network's website emphasized a commitment timeline of 2-4 years to reach full implementation. While the MTSS Network summarized six domains of MTSS (Figure 16), to successfully implement an MTSS framework that will champion student success, my research has identified the following six similar yet essential components, which this To-Be will elaborate on.

1. School-wide, proactive, multi-level system with clear criteria and appropriate staffing and resources
2. Universal screening and ongoing, appropriate progress monitoring
3. Consistent communication systems and 6-8 week cycles between all stakeholders
4. Consistent and proactive data-informed decision-making for fluid movement within the multi-tiered system
5. Ongoing and embedded professional learning
6. Continuous improvement cycle of the framework with representatives from all stakeholders

Figure 16



Wagner (2006, p.106) aptly states, “Your system, any system, is perfectly designed to produce the results you’re getting.” To change the outcomes that we get from students, the *system* has to change, which can be done through Wagner’s 4 C’s (2006). Throughout the analysis, this To-Be approaches the 4 C’s by asking the following questions throughout the analysis; *How well do we create and honor collaborative time to problem-solve (Conditions)? How well do we interpret the data and collaborate to identify learning needs (Competencies)? What are our mindsets about how we characterize student expectations and espouse a collective responsibility for their success (Culture)? How well do we work with families? How well do we focus on Portrait of A Graduate traits, and what belief do we have in student abilities to demonstrate those traits (Context)?* As districts transitioned to post-pandemic, an opportunity presented itself to reflect on systems and supports that address the holistic needs of students and align with the goals as described in the questions. These recommended questions can guide the reflective process toward an improved tiered system of support.

My vision for an MTSS implementation encompasses all six essential components listed in this chapter's introduction and in Figure 16 above. Each component emerged as a crucial need during this study's qualitative interviews. Educators who participated in this study held a strong desire to share their experiences and provide suggestions for improvements. They were on the front lines, pivoting from an in-person platform to remote learning. Through virtual platforms, educators gained unique insight into students' lives, witnessing both successes and significant concerns regarding obstacles to accessing learning and challenges to meeting core needs. It is my hope that the narratives of trauma and lessons learned from this experience are not overshadowed by academic pursuits. Remote and blended learning models presented unprecedented challenges, and the return to full-day in-person learning brought its own surprises, including wearing masks and social distancing. Staff and student chronic absenteeism due to mandated quarantines and unprecedented staffing and sub shortages further exacerbated the challenges. Returning to full-day in-person learning proved to be the most challenging phase of this journey.

As described by interview participants, teachers and leaders experienced immense stress and burnout as they prioritized their work over family to address the social-emotional and core needs of colleagues and students. Unexpected behavior, social-emotional well-being, and mental health challenges arose during remote learning and through the transition back to full-day in-person. These challenges presented the need for a robust social-emotional learning (SEL) and behavioral support system. Recognizing these needs, District X began to evaluate the need for a social-emotional screener, and at the time of this report, the district continues to advocate the board for its implementation. In a profession of continuous improvement, my vision is for educators and leaders to learn from past experiences and enhance support systems to ensure a more resilient present and future.

Future Contexts: Clear Vision of a Tiered System of Support

As educators and leaders, our utmost priority is children's well-being and success. Every decision made is guided by what is best for children. Clear communication ensures we implement instruction and support in the most impactful ways possible. Educators start with good intentions and ideas, but they often feel overwhelmed and stretched thin as the year progresses. The multitude of responsibilities, from addressing everyday academic and emotional needs to planning, finding time to collaborate, communicating with families, grading and reporting, attending meetings and after-school events, creating schedules, and holding safety drills, can lead to a sense of drowning even before the students arrive. It is no surprise that both staff and leaders become overwhelmed quickly. A consistent model of tiered supports sets a foundation for all district staff to confidently and collaboratively implement the tiered processes.

Having a history of developing and refining MTSS systems in multiple district schools, I knew the positive impact such a model could have in District X. As I witnessed the academic, social-emotional, and behavioral needs that emerged during the return to in-person instruction, it was evident that organizational change was essential to support staff and students effectively. In discussions with District X leaders at the start of the 2022-2023 school year, I expressed my concern regarding the current outdated Response to Intervention (RtI) system. I recommended a more concise, collaborative approach (Patton, 2008) by creating an MTSS committee to begin a transition to a more comprehensive model. I knew this committee must include key stakeholders made up of administration and various teaching and specialist roles. Through an MTSS committee, key stakeholders could collaborate on an evaluative process to lead the direction, planning, and implementation of a districtwide MTSS framework. The leaders I spoke with held the same conviction and had committed plans to assemble a districtwide MTSS committee with

these goals.

A future context is that once committee members have a solid understanding of the MTSS system and its purpose, these stakeholders map out components, including screening and criteria for each tier, identify a platform to house all documentation and meeting notes for student problem-solving, and create an ongoing professional learning plan to roll out the district processes. A review cycle of this process will encourage the district to stay up-to-date with research-based recommendations.

Future Culture: Mindset

District X recognized the return to remote learning as an opportunity to foster a collaborative, positive mindset and embarked on a multi-year journey to train administrators and staff in Shawn Achor's Positive Psychology research, otherwise known as "The Happiness Advantage." By adopting an organizational mindset that views challenges as opportunities for growth, staff can overcome setbacks and focus on continuous improvement. Through Achor's "Orange Frog" parable, he teaches about four different mindsets in which we have a choice. Spark, a tadpole, is born green like all other tadpoles. However, he soon realizes that he develops orange spots when he behaves or thinks positively. The orange spots initially outcast Spark. Through persistence and positivity, Spark demonstrates contagious resilience and creative problem-solving. Others slowly join Spark, and as a result, their positive creativity eventually saves the entire community from the annual deluge and deadly predators they had feared up until that point.

District X leaders believed that returning to in-person learning was an ideal time to foster a positive psychology mindset across the district. The training aimed to cultivate a culture of collaboration and creativity, emphasizing the importance of supporting one another and students.

I envision that all staff, including building leaders, will fully embrace the MTSS framework and have clarity on its purpose and processes. With a positive and productive mindset, the tiered system of supports can be more seamlessly implemented with fidelity. With fidelity of implementation and long-term success, effectiveness is measured appropriately.

My vision is that staff and leaders will have a foundational understanding that the purpose of MTSS is to benefit *all* students, not just those who are struggling, and it is not a direct pathway to special education. They will recognize that MTSS is a proactive framework rather than reactive. Staff collaboration plays an essential role in the MTSS processes and improves student and staff outcomes. Therefore, ongoing collaboration, reflection, and communication among staff, families, and students about goals and progress are essential. All this is accomplished with a collective and can-do cultural mindset.

Future Conditions: Collaboration and Screening

In District X, each school typically has two to four teachers per grade, fostering a collaborative culture where teams are in constant communication in an organic nature. To support Wagner's *cultural* area for the envisioned future To-Be state, it is crucial to have frequent, collaborative reflection and planning must occur for core and intervention instruction. This collaborative focus can be viewed as an investment in time to level up instructional design and communication needed to implement individualized supports at all tiers. Previously in other districts, I led staff through successful MTSS implementation by incorporating a monthly collaborative plan where specialists and interventionists joined grade-level teams. I would like to see this come to fruition in District X.

Additionally, improvement is needed around cross-connecting intervention skills back to the classroom and other settings. Collaboration time is essential for the effective implementation of

the MTSS framework. It provides an opportunity for teachers, specialists, and interventionists to come together, share insights and ideas, and develop instructional strategies to meet diverse student needs. While grade-level teams have daily common plan time, with some schedules allowing for thirty to sixty minutes of common plan time, District X does not work off of a Professional Learning Community (PLC) model. A structured PLC model can support staff capabilities with the continued shift to building leaders as instructional leaders. A PLC model with specialist support during each team plan time enhances differentiation and innovative teaching. Student strengths and needs fluctuate between skills; therefore, their needs fluctuate between the tiers. A PLC model reinforces this fluidity to better meet student needs in a timely fashion. By prioritizing collaboration time, districts can foster a culture of teamwork and continuous improvement, ultimately enhancing the MTSS framework on behalf of students.

My research revealed the need for a social-emotional screener and a consistent system for problem-solving across the district. When conducted at least three times per year, universal academic and social-emotional screeners assist in identifying and targeting needs.

MTSS4success.org states,

Teams use screening data to make decisions about program improvement and curriculum, innovation and sustainability, allocation of resources, and equitable services and supports across schools. School teams may use screening data to review school and grade level trends, monitor the effectiveness of schoolwide curriculum and supports, identify areas of need, and provide guidance on how to set measurable schoolwide goals. Teachers may use screening data to identify students needing additional support and improve tiered instruction and supports. (Step 5, para. 1)

Districts that already screen routinely can still benefit from professional learning on how to

analyze data to drive intervention decisions.

An interview participant shared that after the screener data is analyzed and intervention goals are set, there is a conditional need for "[A] system of meeting every six weeks, a system for who and what of progress monitoring, for meetings, and a system for housing data." Even in districts that use screeners three times per year, two areas often lack 1. communicating the results and 2. progress monitoring with teachers and families. The MTSS committee and the systematic processes, including a PLC model, can address these areas as described.

An interface platform can address the need for conditions that foster communication, which each interview participant expressed as lacking. A partnership in planning the next steps with families can further support student needs by providing suggestions for home support. Families need to know who provides the intervention, goals, and progress. As an interviewed administrator stressed, "Communication to know who is getting help and what they're doing, for teachers and parents, is needed. Teachers need to talk to interventionists." To do this, I envision teams having consistently protected collaboration time daily to discuss data and share ideas for scaffolding, which can all be documented in a common interface platform.

If staff are to collaborate and engage in professional learning, then staffing is a condition that needs to be reviewed. District X is privileged regarding the level of support, including three district instructional coaches, three district curriculum coordinators, a district behavior coach, and at least one to three interventionists who work with the reading specialist in each building. However, as the district shifted back to full-day in-person learning, the number of students who qualified for Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions shot up, and each building found itself strapped with time and staffing to meet the level of academic, social-emotional, and behavioral needs. Each building has a social worker and psychologist, yet they, too, were stretched thin. The number of

special education and 504 evaluations peaked, and still, staff felt "(T)here weren't enough hours in the day to accomplish all that the students needed." One interview participant explained that "Staffing needs to increase. Small group interventions aren't small. We are trying to navigate academic needs against social-emotional behavioral needs. We need more qualified staff." As the To-Be (see Appendix A) suggests, a PLC model can refine the planning process, including how student needs are met in Tier 1 and Tier 2 instruction, which can alleviate the sense of staff being stretched thin. As the needs continue to increase, proper staffing with qualified professionals is needed. To support the vision, employing at least two MTSS Directors to provide coaching and leadership for academic and social-emotional screeners and tier processes is recommended. These directors play a vital role in guiding the MTSS framework and implementation, supporting both struggling students and those in need of enrichment. By having dedicated professionals in this role, districts can enhance their capacity to provide comprehensive support across all tiers.

Future Competencies: Professional Learning

Throughout my research, the most prevailing request from teachers has been continuous support. This support represents a variety of areas, including strong core resources, staffing to meet the heightened and evolving student needs, instructional resources and training, systems processes, and adequate collaboration time between specialists and teachers. Building confidence in implementing MTSS is achieved through ongoing professional learning and embedded support such as MTSS Directors and trained specialists. By addressing these needs, districts can create a supportive environment that empowers staff and enhances their abilities.

Coyne et al. (2019) stated, "[A]lthough many schools implement practices and components of MTSS at a surface level, they have not established the systems and tools that make accurate, deep, and sustained implementation possible" (p. 111). To fully leverage the potential and

purpose of the MTSS framework, it must be implemented with fidelity, which requires understanding and significant planning by district and building leadership. Recognizing that Tier 1 serves as the foundational support for all students, District X's ELA Committee is currently reviewing the core resource and intervention resources within it. Effective leadership is essential for the sustainability of MTSS, as it supports the implementation of effective strategies. As District X continues the charge toward strong instructional leadership, providing ongoing training and embedded support for leaders will enhance their competencies at the building level.

Buy-in plays a crucial role in ensuring consistency and fidelity of implementation across each building. Therefore, a future competency is to clarify the what and why of the tiered support system. Professional learning builds internal and external capacity (Wandermans et al., 2008). One component of the To-Be is that staff thoroughly and clearly understand the tiers. Each staff member in the interview stressed the need to educate and clarify the confusion between the tiers of an MTSS system. One interview participant confessed that they thought Tier 3 was special education and reported this misconception to be the case amongst other staff. The span of this misunderstanding became evident when, during a meeting, a special education team member expressed the same sentiment, and the team was of the same understanding. While special education provides interventions, and a child may have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and receive Tier 2 or Tier 3 intervention services, Tier 3 MTSS can look different than special education services. In this case, staff believes that if a child receiving Tier 2 interventions is recommended as a next step to move to Tier 3, they will be evaluated for special education. This misconception bodes the need to clarify the purpose of MTSS that it is *not* a pipeline to special education. In addition, clear criteria between the tiers in tandem will support clarification for staff and families.

As districts emerged from the pandemic, the target continued to move. Kearney (2021) acknowledged this time as an opportunity for ongoing research to examine the supports needed as schools transitioned out and away from the pandemic. In addition to training on the entire MTSS system, districts can offer professional learning to strengthen the core Tier 1 academic and social-emotional instruction.

Wagner (2006) highlights, "Most efforts to improve education have at their core a focus on professional learning as a way to build competency. In this context of school transformation, we define *competencies* as the repertoire of skills and knowledge that influences student learning...But we have come to understand the limits of competency building as a stand-alone strategy for change...Competencies are most effectively built when professional learning is focused, job-embedded, continuous, constructed, and collaborative" (p. 98). In line with Wagner's recommendation, I reiterate the need for a comprehensive professional learning plan and at least two MTSS Directors to lead the charge for this ongoing work and support each school throughout implementation. In conjunction, a roadmap to deliver and embed professional learning will set the system up for consistency and staff buy-in.

CONCLUSION

An effective change plan, like the one proposed in this To-Be scenario, is achieved by creating a solid foundation based on a comprehensive implementation of conditions that foster competencies, thereby influencing the overall organizational culture. To drive change, the individuals within the organization must deeply believe in the collective goals and invest in continuous learning experiences. We can no longer adopt a "this too shall pass" mentality; the disparities in student needs are now the norm. The needs of children are even more significant than before the pandemic and cannot be ignored. A successful program implementation to meet

diverse student needs improves the school and district culture and extends to the wider community. To achieve this, current systems need to be evaluated. From there, a clear and concise action plan involving multiple stakeholders can be developed and implemented. Together Wagner's 4 C's determine the success of the tiered system of support and, ultimately, student success. The MTSS framework and student successes rests on effectively articulating the purpose, processes, and systems of the framework for all staff and community members. The process requires long-term commitment and continuous adaptation. As Cory Turner (2022) quotes Penny Schwinn at the end of his interview with NPR, "It's no longer about COVID recovery...this is just good practice for kids" (8:04).

CHAPTER SIX: STRATEGIES AND ACTIONS

Introduction

Leading change requires a crucial skill set to gain and sustain momentum. Initiating and maintaining change requires leaders to promote resiliency through focus and encourage others to dream and collectively own the process. Kotter's (2014) 8-Step Process for Leading Change comprises components that drive success before, during, and after a change process. This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the strategies and action steps necessary for adapting a tiered support system, drawing on Kotter's 8-Steps to Change and Wagner's 4 C's framework of contexts, culture, competencies, and conditions. Districts can proactively support students post-pandemic by implementing the recommended strategies and actions spanning multiple 4 C's throughout this chapter.

As Reeves (2021) explains, change is both physiological and physical. To effectively lead through change, leaders must seek to understand the pain staff experience and determine the psychological safety they need to provide to move forward. The challenge of any new or refined implementation is buy-in. To be most effective, leaders can create a plan by identifying and capitalizing on current strengths rather than relying on a deficit model for change.

In his book, *Our Iceberg Is Melting* (2017), Kotter employs a narrative featuring characters confronted with a time-sensitive issue and showcases the qualities of successful leaders to explain his 8 Steps for Leading Change. The descriptions of Kotter's 8-Steps inherently align with the 4 C's Strategies and Actions. While Kotter's 8-steps provide an overview, using Wagner's 4 C's provides detailed actions that lead to achievement. Based on my research results, the recommended MTSS Committee encompasses every component of the strategies and actions done through Kotter's 8-steps. The actions of the district and committee will create long-term

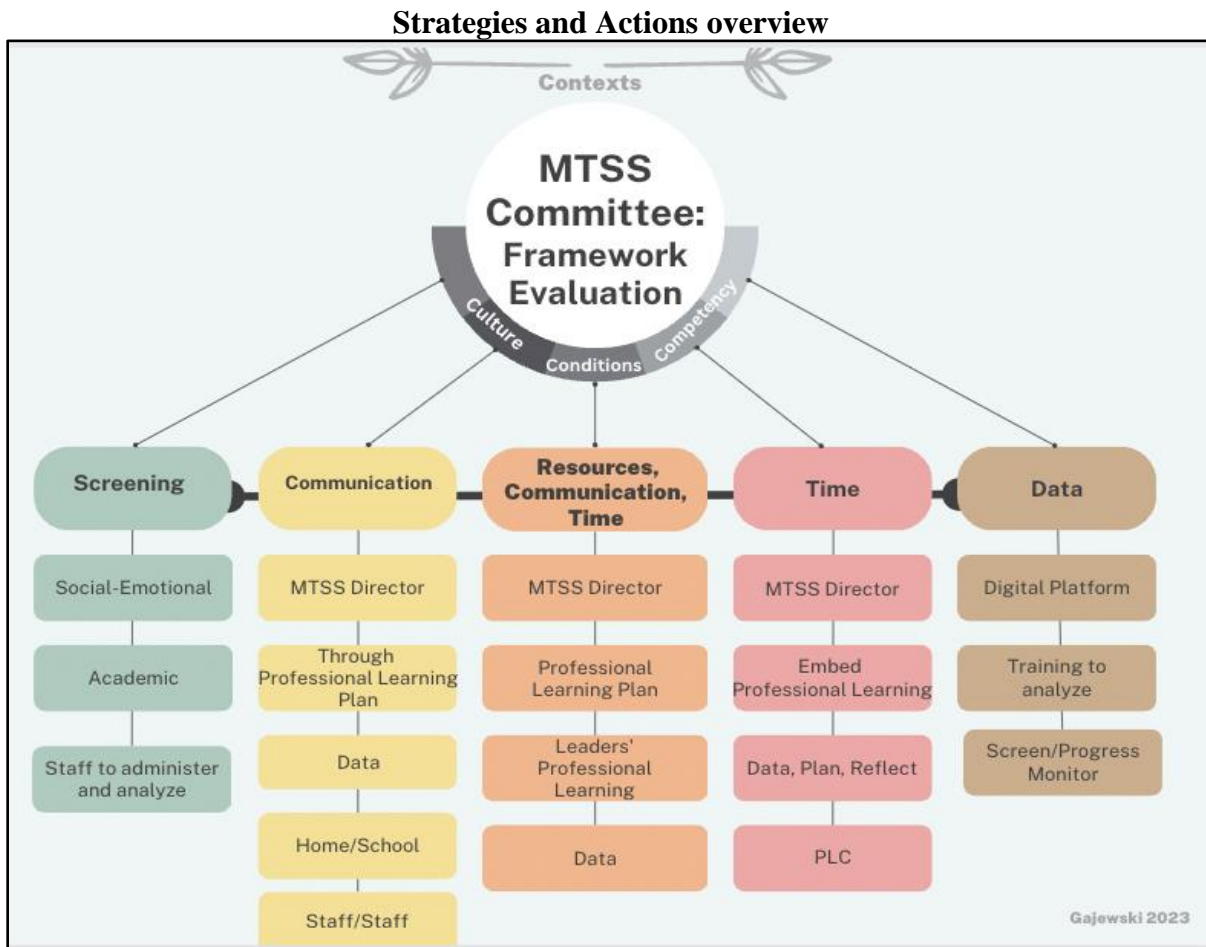
change for improvement and prepare districts for unforeseen crises that directly impact student learning. The following is Kotter's 8-Step Process for Leading Change. Together, the 8-Steps process builds purpose, momentum and longevity of the recommended strategies and actions.

1. Create Urgency - Inspire others to act with a passion and purpose that builds momentum toward a common vision.
2. Put A Team Together - A committed group guiding, coordinating, and communicating the process.
3. Develop Vision and Strategies - Articulate the new vision and get buy-in to make it a reality through initiatives that will bring it to life.
4. Communicate the Change Vision - Go beyond an individual or a small group of committed visionaries to develop a larger, more collective group that is unified in the pursuit.
5. Remove Obstacles - Remove roadblocks to ensure a clear pathway for the collective group to continue their drive and development quickly and efficiently.
6. Set Short-Term Goals - Recognize and embrace small wins into a cumulative grand success, which monitors progress and motivates persistence.
7. Keep the Momentum - Face difficulty throughout the process without skipping any steps.
8. Make Change Stick - Consistently highlight the cause-effect relationship between new behaviors and organizational success until the new behaviors are the norm. Conduct a review cycle of the practices to continue the momentum of the behaviors and mindsets, which Wagner (2006) identifies as the *culture*.

The overarching strategy throughout this chapter is for an MTSS Committee to evaluate the contexts of the district's current tiered system of support framework. All subsequent strategies

and actions stem from the work of the MTSS Committee. The MTSS Committee leads the charge in the system evaluation, and from there, using Kotter's 8 Steps, subsequently leads the recommendations of implementing screeners, communicating the system framework and processes, laying out an ongoing professional learning plan, establishing a data system with training, and outlining a framework review cycle. Each strategy and the corresponding actions outlined in Figure 17 are described throughout this chapter and intended to set up conditions (Wagner, 2006) that support the culture (Wagner, 2006) and staff competencies (Wagner, 2006).

Figure 17



Sense of Urgency

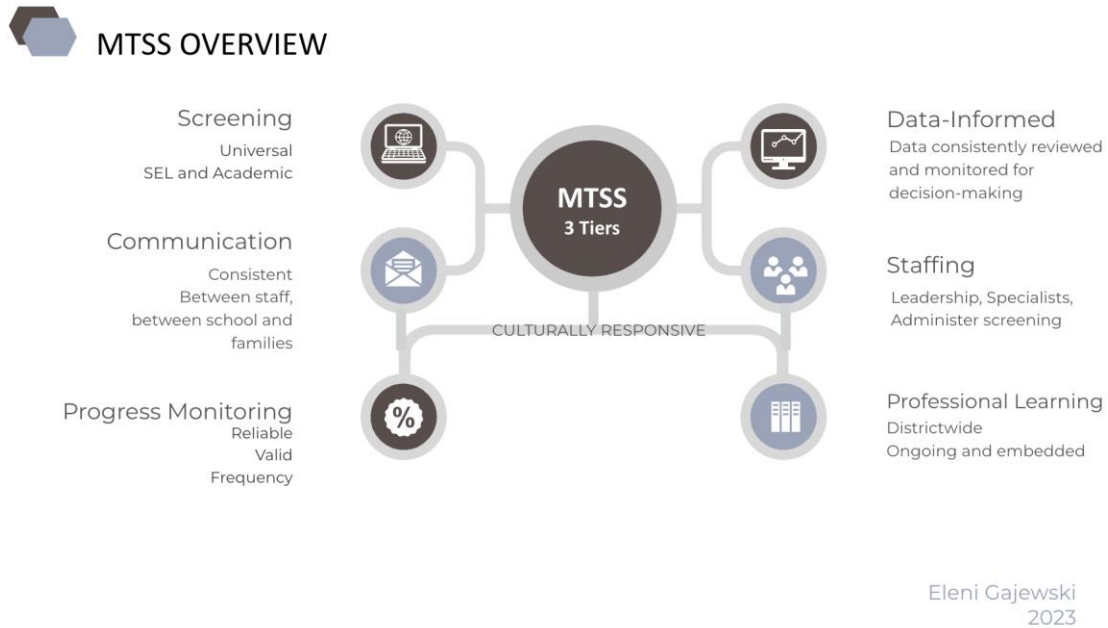
Kotter's (2014) first step to leading change emphasizes the importance of creating a sense of urgency. Establishing an MTSS Committee is the first step in creating a sense of urgency. Leading change to transition from a Response to Intervention (RtI) model to a more comprehensive Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) model requires reviewing the district's student data and RtI/MTSS system history. District X used a RtI model until the writing of this report. Shifting to an MTSS model is all-encompassing and proactive to the whole child, rather than functioning off a responsive model to academic needs. A historical evaluation should also include an in-depth data analysis, particularly to understand the minority groups that lag in moving from intensive supports back to Tier 1. After the holistic review, the next charge of the committee's responsibility is communicating the findings to all stakeholders, emphasizing the positive impact of the MTSS framework and how it supports the district's much-needed progressive shift based on the said evaluation. The qualitative results in this report emphasize the urgent need for consistency across District X, and a robust MTSS framework will provide a solid foundation to achieve this goal.

In addition, my research revealed the conditional (Wagner, 2006) need for a social-emotional screener and a districtwide follow-up system for problem-solving. Students must be monitored using a social-emotional screener three times a year to keep a pulse on patterns and changes in needs. Universal screening in the fall and twice more throughout the year gauges the immediate needs of students who may have missed a significant amount of content or have emergent social-emotional needs. District X currently uses benchmark testing to monitor academic needs three times per year (beginning, middle, and end of the year). Once in an intervention, students in Tier 2 should be monitored monthly or biweekly, whereas Tier 3 intensive supports, provided by

trained staff, should incorporate weekly progress monitoring. Reliable and valid progress monitoring offers benchmark information for minimum performance expectations throughout the year. Screeners and a system prioritizing consistent collaboration between specialists, teachers, and administration establish a proactive practice. Figure 18 illustrates the interrelated relationships among the MTSS components, emphasizing the integration of cultural responsiveness within each component. It highlights the importance of considering and incorporating cultural diversity and inclusivity throughout the MTSS framework. Cultural responsiveness means recognizing and valuing the unique backgrounds and experiences of students. It requires evaluating one's biases; therefore, educators can promote a learning environment with high expectations for all students. Additionally, cultural responsiveness encourages celebrating and integrating every student's background into pedagogical practices. The approach outlined in Figure 18 involves a combination of universal screening, tiered support systems, progress monitoring, and other factors that work together to meet the needs of all students. No one component alone can work independently. Rather, each of the components in Figure 18 are necessary factors for districts to heed in their plans to meet all student needs proactively.

Figure 18

Necessary components of a multi-tiered system of support



Volunteer Army

In his second step, Kotter (2014) conveyed, "[C]hange can only occur when massive numbers of people rally around a common opportunity. They must be brought in and urged to drive change moving in the same direction" (p. 1). Kotter's (2014) fourth step for leading change is to enlist a volunteer army to establish a culture of collaborative goal-setting and focus. In this case, the volunteer army will comprise the volunteer staff of various roles across the district as an MTSS committee.

The volunteer army is formed as an MTSS Committee of stakeholders to collaboratively evaluate the current framework and lead the direction, planning, and implementation of the evaluation for the district's MTSS framework. Since the initiation of my research, District X has established a committee that includes representation from the assistant superintendent level, building administrators, myself as a curriculum coordinator, special education, gifted program,

reading specialists, general education teachers, and the English Language (EL) department. A district leader of the committee sought my input on how to initiate the committee's work and goals. Using my research at the time and experience establishing MTSS systems in previous districts, I made recommendations for a long-term systematic vision based on the six components detailed in the To-Be. Furthermore, knowing an initial step to self-evaluate the district's system would direct our committee's work, I recommended the committee complete the Self-Assessment of MTSS Implementation (SAMI) evaluation tool. The SAMI evaluation results confirmed that the conditions (Wagner, 2006) of the initial stages for a robust MTSS system were, in fact, established in District X. However, the evaluation also highlighted the need for supporting competencies (Wagner, 2006) through high-quality professional learning on MTSS, particularly focusing on its purpose and establishing a proactive problem-solving system through data-driven processes and conditions (Wagner, 2006) that fosters improved communication among all stakeholders. Given that each school has a different process, professional learning for administrator competencies (Wagner, 2006) is necessary to facilitate consistent implementation.

Figure 19 outlines the essential components of the MTSS framework's flow for every child requiring support beyond Tier 1. The review cycle in Figure 19 is critical as student needs fluctuate, just as they did throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. After establishing conditions (Wagner, 2006), including conducting screening and academic benchmark assessments, schools can utilize the gathered data to design interventions. The intervention process includes implementing the plan, monitoring progress, and meeting regularly every 6-8 weeks to review progress and determine if any improvements are necessary. When the central plan outlined in Figure 19 is implemented with fidelity, most students can transition out of the intervention stage and into the sustaining mode, or Tier 1. This framework works well for individual school

implementation and can be applied to districtwide MTSS system processes. For instance, the MTSS Committee completed the SAMI evaluation as an assessment (blue) of the current system. That information guided their discussion (blue) of building and districtwide needs and plans to move forward. Once in the implementation (green) phase, the committee uses the professional learning plans to support staff. With ongoing monitoring and support by the recommended MTSS Directors and leaders, improvements for implementation can be had. Finally, once districts have experience with the implementation phase, they transition into the sustain and scale-up (red) phase, which represents the eighth step in Kotter's change management framework. In this phase, the acceleration of the MTSS system is independently sustained and monitored for ongoing improvements.

Figure 19

MTSS components as a fluid process



Note: Taken from MTSS4Success.org

Strategic Vision and Initiatives

Kotter's third step in developing the change plan is to create a guiding coalition. The guiding coalition develops a culture and conditions (Wagner, 2006) for unified, focused work. The

development is based on forming a vision on which decisions are founded. Articulating how the future will be different, yet brings the vision's goals to life. The guiding coalition is tasked with developing a shared vision and a strategic process that will ensure consistent MTSS implementation across the district. The guiding coalition acts as a driving force, fostering collaboration and ensuring all stakeholders embrace the vision.

Communicate the Vision and Remove Barriers

Kotter's (2014) fourth step is to clearly communicate the vision. The process of this step in my research ties closely with the fifth step to leading change; removing conditional (Wagner, 2006) barriers that allow the volunteer committee to take action. A visible barrier currently in District X is an inconsistent understanding of MTSS and implementation across all schools. With a concise framework articulated to all, building administrators can remove barriers by overseeing consistent implementation.

Relationships are paramount to removing barriers, including teacher-to-student and student-to-student relationships. For many children, school is a safe refuge. Relationships enlighten teachers' background knowledge about student home lives and motivators. Strong school-home relationships mean schools can swiftly support children and families when the needs arise. For example, if food, transportation, or mental health needs are a barrier, as they were during the pandemic, districts can work with the family for resources (Kearney, 2021). In addition to relationships, this competency (Wagner, 2006) builds off the knowledge staff gain from universal screening.

Generate Short-Term Wins

Kotter's (2014) sixth step is celebrating small successes. According to Kotter (2104), the small successes along the way "(M)ust be recognized, collected, and communicated" (p. 6). To support this, MTSS meetings every six weeks create opportunities for staff to celebrate student success by incorporating this practice into the review cycle. Acknowledging successes increases efficacy (Hattie, 2008) and motivates staff to continue fidelity of implementation. Such practices, combined with highlighting short-term wins, guide systematic progress to sustain acceleration in implementation.

Sustain Acceleration

Kotter's (2014) seventh step to sustain acceleration is where the magic happens and MTSS comes to life. MTSS Directors and regular team meetings are crucial. The Directors can provide consistent and embedded support for implementation by routinely meeting with each school's team. Such conditions (Wagner, 2006) of support develop staff and build leader competencies (Wagner, 2006). Additionally, to sustain acceleration, school leaders should participate in team meetings every week to review student progress and every 6-8 weeks with the full team and family. In addition to the aforementioned recommendations, districts can gather staff feedback through surveys to effectively address staff needs and ensure sustained acceleration for long-term implementation.

Data analysis is also vital to monitor the student distribution across tiers and assess the effectiveness of Tier 1 resources and instruction. Regular review cycles of the system will drive continuous improvement in implementation and effectiveness. Monitoring the number of students in each tier by school and district is important. Districts need to know the pipeline of

each tier and the longevity of students going through it. When a significant number of students are in Tier 2 and Tier 3, it is essential to reflect on the core Tier 1 resources and instruction to determine if adjustments or improvements are necessary. When students are not moving fluidly between tiers and preferably back into Tier 1, the framework, Tier 2 and Tier 3 process, and resources must be reviewed. Review cycles of the system will continuously improve the implementation and effectiveness.

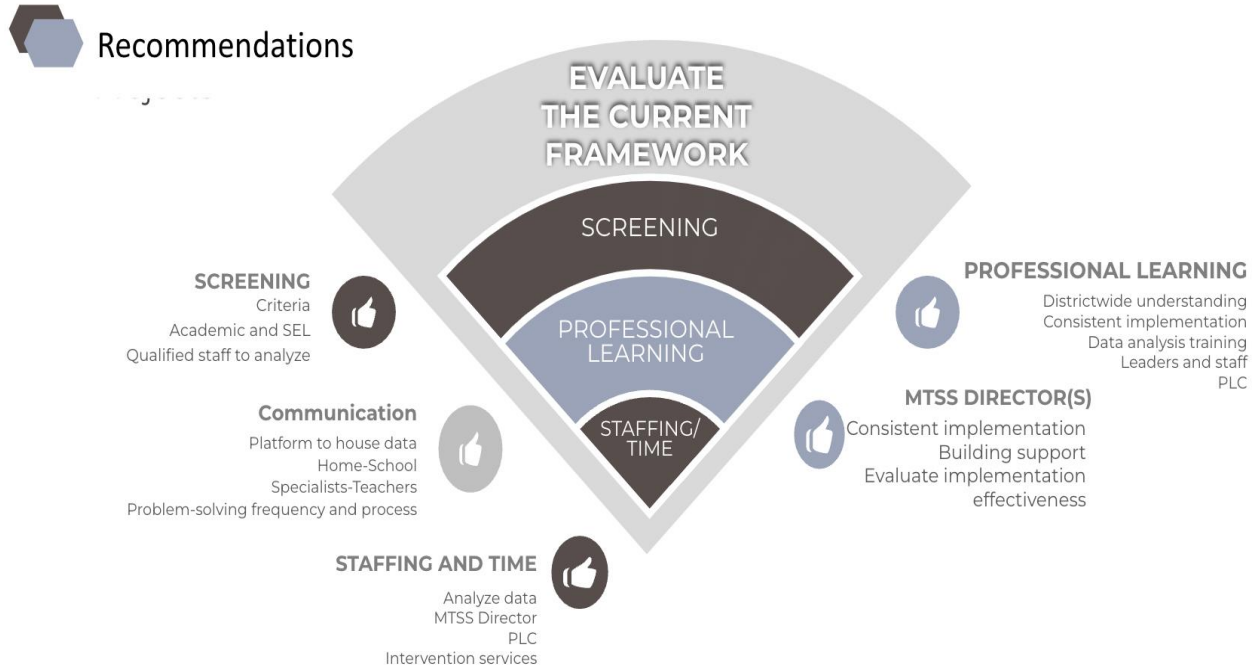
Institute Change

Kotter's (2014) eighth and final step is to institute change. As Kotter (2014) explained, "[A]rticulate the connections between the new behaviors and organizational success, making sure they continue until they become strong enough to replace old habits" (p.1). The premise of this study is to determine adaptations needed to meet the needs of students. The foundational supports and consistent implementation outlined in this report are crucial for initiating change toward a new or adapted MTSS framework. Through the pandemic highlighted, student needs have intensified, requiring a continuous review cycle to remain proactive and develop staff and student competencies. Establishing a consistent, collaborative culture (Wagner, 2006) and communication systems based on a clear and articulate systematic framework enhances staff competencies (Wagner, 2006) and ensures the sustainability and effectiveness of the change. Ongoing training and review processes, including refreshers and staying current with research on best practices for new and experienced staff, are critical to maintaining progress. It is important to remember that change is an evolving process and never truly complete.

In addition to Kotter's 8-steps to leading change, Figure 20 demonstrates the necessary components of a strong MTSS framework. As mentioned, an MTSS Committee is the

overarching strategy to evaluate a district’s framework. Following that are three components; screening, professional learning, and staffing/time. Each of these is described in further detail in Figure 21 and Figure 22 and throughout this chapter.

Figure 20



Strategies and Actions

Student needs drastically increased as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. The following charts outline District X’s current reality, goals, and strategies to meet student needs successfully through specific action plans.

Figure 21

Overarching Strategy:

MTSS committee evaluates the current framework

As-Is	To-Be	Actions
<p>Tiered system of support, recently known in the district as RTI, has 3 tiers and academic criteria for each. However, the implementation of interventions and how teams reflect on data look different in each building.</p> <p>Not all staff are versed in MTSS.</p> <p>The same level of intervention support that exists in each building was established for equity. This can be seen as a pro or a con due to the different needs in the buildings.</p>	<p>Create an MTSS Committee of stakeholders to collaboratively evaluate the current framework and plan to lead the rollout and implementation of the district’s MTSS framework.</p>	<p>MTSS Committee to complete the SAMI evaluation tool and define the following action plans:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Universal screening 3x/year 2. School-wide, proactive, multi-level system with ongoing professional learning, clear criteria and appropriate staffing 3. Consistent communication systems and cycles between all stakeholders 4. Consistent and proactive problem-solving system utilizing appropriate data and reliable and valid progress monitoring 5. Reliable data-informed decision-making for fluid movement within the multi-tiered system 6. Continuous review and improvement cycle

Figure 22

Strategies and Actions

Strategies: screening, communication, resources, time

As-Is	To-Be	Actions (With identified strategies)
<p>No social-emotional screening.</p> <p>Academic benchmark three times per year Staff have minimal competency in data analysis to make instructional decisions.</p>	<p>Universal social-emotional screener three times per year.</p> <p>Identified and articulated screening and criteria for each tier.</p>	<p>Determine reliable and valid screeners for at-risk, dyslexia, and high-achieving students. (Screening, Data)</p> <p>Board presentation on SEL and behavior data and research to recommend a social-emotional screener. (Screening, Data)</p> <p>Train MTSS Directors, administrators, social workers, psychologists, and reading specialists on social-emotional screeners and data analysis. (Screening, Resources, Data)</p> <p>Social workers, psychologists, and reading specialists attend weekly building MTSS meetings to analyze data and plan to meet student needs. (Communication, Data)</p> <p>Prioritize budgeting for screeners, resources, staffing and training. (Screening, Resources, Data)</p> <p>Professional learning plan mapped out to include SEL and behavior. (Screening, Resources, Data)</p>

As-Is	To-Be	Actions (With identified strategies)
<p>Lack of buy-in and consistency in implementation due to the confusion of the current model, including unclarity of the criteria for entering or exiting each tier.</p> <p>Reactive rather than proactive to student needs.</p> <p>Inconsistent documentation of intervention plans and review cycles.</p> <p>Minimal family understanding of the tiered support process.</p>	<p>Through the MTSS Committee, define and articulate the MTSS framework, purpose, and tiers.</p> <p>A refined and clear-tiered system of support that is consistently implemented across all schools.</p> <p>Staff, including building leaders, will invest in the MTSS framework through clarity in the what and why. With this mindset, the tiered system of supports can be fluidly implemented with fidelity.</p> <p>Consistent communication among all stakeholders of staff, guardians, and students as appropriate.</p>	<p>MTSS Committee to develop a professional learning plan to roll out the MTSS process for staff and leaders, as outlined in Figure 23. (Communication, Resources, Time)</p> <p>Ongoing, job-embedded professional learning through MTSS Directors and a PLC model. (Communication, Resources, Time)</p> <p>Building MTSS Teams to meet weekly (administrator, psychologist, reading specialist, and social worker as appropriate) to review student progress and data. MTSS Directors are assigned to schools and attend their team MTSS meetings. (Communication, Data, Time)</p> <p>6-8 weeks updates between the intervention team and families to review intervention data and recommended next steps. (Communication, Data)</p> <p>Interventionists/specialists available during conferences to meet with guardians. (Communication)</p> <p>Individual intervention plans stored in the Embrace® MTSS platform for appropriate staff to access. (Communication, Resources)</p>

As-Is	To-Be	Actions (With identified strategies)
<p>Staff espouses confusion about the purpose of MTSS and the process throughout the tiers.</p> <p>Misunderstanding that MTSS is only for struggling students.</p> <p>Misunderstanding that MTSS is a direct pathway to qualify a student for special education services.</p>	<p>Through the MTSS Committee, define and articulate the MTSS framework, purpose, and tiers.</p> <p>A clear understanding of the tiers through ongoing professional learning.</p> <p>Culture of proactive MTSS for <i>all</i> students, including gifted and high-achieving students.</p> <p>Culture of continuous improvement and collaborative investment to review instruction in all tiers and all students.</p> <p>Culture of making data-informed decisions.</p> <p>System to house historical data documentation, meeting notes, intervention plans and progress accessible to current appropriate staff and between elementary and middle school staff.</p>	<p>Ongoing, job-embedded professional learning, as outlined in Figure 23. (Communication, Resources, Time)</p> <p>Professional learning on differentiation through Institute Day and PLMs by Curriculum Directors and Gifted Committee members. (Communication, Resources)</p> <p>Annual differentiation overview at new teacher onboarding and for veteran staff. (Communication, Resources)</p> <p>Warehouse of resources for teachers to differentiate for all students at all academic levels, including students identified as gifted. (Resources)</p> <p>Training on data analysis for all staff and administrators. (Communication, Resources, Data)</p> <p>PLC model with specialists collaborating to plan differentiated Tier 1 and Tier 2 lessons. (Communication, Resources, Time)</p> <p>Individual intervention plans, data, and meeting notes are stored in the Embrace® MTSS platform for appropriate staff to access. (Communication, Resources, Data) For District X, the Embrace® MTSS platform was adopted after the writing of this chapter.</p>

As-Is	To-Be	Actions (With identified strategies)
<p>Qualitative results included requests by staff for continuous support. Such support varied from strong core Tier 1 resources, staffing to meet heightened student needs, instructional resources and training, transparent, systematic processes, and adequate collaboration time to communicate between specialists and teachers.</p>	<p>District content area committees to review and establish strong core Tier 1 resources for all grades.</p> <p>Foster a culture of belief in a proactive MTSS for <i>all</i> students, including high-performing students.</p> <p>Through a PLC model including specialists and leaders, establish collaborative investment to review instruction for all tiers and make data-informed decisions.</p>	<p>Ongoing Professional learning through PLMs, Institute Days and Grade Level Meetings as outlined in Figure 23. (Communication, Resources, Time)</p> <p>As described above, the Curriculum Directors and Gifted Committee differentiated support for new and veteran staff and leaders. (Communication, Resources)</p> <p>Annual PLC training for new and veteran staff and leaders. (Communication, Resources)</p> <p>PLC model, which includes specialists attending planning and frequent data reflection meetings.</p> <p>PLC instructional planning for differentiation follows a process of Backward Design (Wiggins, G. P., & McTighe, J., 2005). (Communication, Resources, Time)</p> <p>Three Annual Data Days: teams, leaders, and specialists collaborate to meet <i>all</i> student needs through tiered support planning based on core curriculum and interventions. (Communication, Resources, Time, Data)</p>

Screener

The pandemic spiked academic and social-emotional needs. Clear and consistent systems must be in place, understood among all staff, and reviewed for effectiveness to address the many student needs. The system process starts with a universal screener to support decisions moving forward. As one staff member who was interviewed stressed, "We need academic and social-emotional screening to identify students, to know what interventions to try and what data to gather. This must be done before requesting Tier 2 or Tier 3 support." A reliable tiered system of support framework is founded on data-informed decisions. Reliable and valid universal screening tools predict at-risk students needing support or enrichment.

It is widely recognized that various "[f]actors such as poor nutrition, stress, and exposure to environmental toxins, and that exposure to these influences unduly affects poor children and children of color" (Gordon, 2017, para. 1). Moreover, research indicates that students who harbor negative attitudes toward school are more likely to experience diminished academic engagement (Datu & King, 2018). In order to establish goals and monitor progress effectively, screening serves as a crucial foundation, complemented by additional data sources such as attendance, class observations, and diagnostic assessments.

Professional Learning

An essential element of professional learning involves educating staff and families about the criteria for each tier, the frequency of interventions, and who is responsible for implementing the interventions and monitoring progress. One teacher interviewed for this study articulated, "We need, and parents need, a districtwide set of criteria and expectations for both SEL and academics. We need common district expectations for behaviors and responses to behaviors." According to Kearney (2021), "teachers will benefit from professional development that supports

social-emotional learning, mainly regulating emotions" (p. 11). Teachers with professional learning in mental health literacy can proactively identify at-risk students (Sonnemann & Goss, 2020). Students need direct feedback to build a sense of ownership. Students need motivation more than ever, especially those not engaged in learning, whether remotely or in-person. As the need for social-emotional and behavioral support has grown substantially in a short period, MTSS Directors and building mental health teams can assist screening implementation and support teams in planning and implementing targeted support. Targeted support requires professional learning and support systems for schoolwide behavior expectations. Such systems are necessary to develop staff competencies. Today's students deal with the negative aspects of social media, and unfortunately, it can spill over into their school experience. Additionally, during the Covid-19 pandemic, students faced traumatic situations, including violence, illness, stress in the home, neglect, and home insecurities, all factors adding to academic and social-emotional needs throughout the pandemic (Kearney, 2021). Social-emotional needs must first be met in order for students to be available and accessible to learning.

The work around districtwide systems, especially those that are comprehensive like MTSS, is not for the weary. A crucial step for District X's MTSS Committee was first engaging in professional learning around MTSS. Subsequently, the newly formed committee created a vision and mission statement on which all decisions continue to be based. This initial work is recommended for any MTSS Committee, even if they have surpassed their initial startup. Given the constantly evolving needs of students and the education profession, it is critical to conduct ongoing reviews of implementation and effectiveness to ensure that districts stay current with research-based recommendations. Alongside this planning, district administration should identify areas requiring adequate resources and staffing and create an annual professional learning plan

for new and veteran staff. Figure 23 outlines the recommended flow of professional learning, starting with an MTSS overview for all staff, working through the framework and toward the implementation components.

Figure 23

Professional learning series

Accomplished through a calendar of Institute Days, early release days, district-wide grade-level meetings, coaching, and job-embedded support from leaders and MTSS Directors.		
MTSS Overview	MTSS Framework	MTSS Implementation
MTSS purpose	Criteria continued	Framework, data and criteria review
What - both ends of the MTSS diamond, three tiers, academic and SEBMH	Data types, reliability and validity, collection, and analysis	Problem-solving process and resources
Special Education and MTSS	Research-based interventions	Tier 1 and Tier 2 - frequency, who, how, when, why, and where to store data and forms
Who, what, and when per tier	Frequency - data and interventions	Tier 3 - frequency, who, how, when, why, and where to store data and forms (Embrace@MTSS)
Criteria	Goal-Setting	6-week review cycle
MTSS process; screening, data, plan, monitor, review, communication	Data platform (Embrace@MTSS) introduction	Communication with specialists, teachers, guardians, and students

My study calls for action to provide all students with targeted academic, social-emotional and behavioral supports. Strong models of a tiered system of support are most successful when implemented districtwide with support from teachers and administration (Cohen & Honigsfeld,

2017). The professional learning plan outlined in Figure 23 addresses each essential component needed to establish a strong MTSS framework. The plan will involve multiple phases and acknowledges that professional learning is continuous. Ultimately, the goal is to keep or move students back into Tier 1, and this purpose underpins the framework. This means that strong Tier 1 instruction and resources are at the core. An individual intervention plan is implemented when a child needs more than the core Tier 1 supports offered. The plan in Figure 23 emphasizes the importance of collecting benchmark data, implementing and monitoring targeted interventions, and establishing clear criteria and processes for working within each tier. Regular progress monitoring and review every 6-8 weeks support tiered decisions. District-wide professional learning is crucial for understanding and implementing these components effectively. As stated, MTSS is not a direct route to special education. Educators must understand that the framework's flow is fluid; students can move within the tiers, although the purpose is to support students so they can successfully live in Tier 1 as much as possible. In a 2013 synthesis of research on professional learning, The Center for Public Education concluded key features that make professional learning successful,

Most professional development today is ineffective. It neither changes teacher practice nor improves student learning. However, research suggests that effective professional development abides by the following principles:

- The duration of professional development must be significant and ongoing for teachers to learn a new strategy and grapple with the implementation problem.*
- There must be support for a teacher during the implementation stage that addresses the specific challenges of changing classroom practice.*
- Teachers' initial exposure to a concept should not be passive but rather should engage teachers through varied approaches so they can participate actively in making*

sense of a new practice. • Modeling has been found to be a highly effective way to introduce a new concept and help teachers understand a new practice. (p. 6)

Most critically, for MTSS, buy-in impacts consistency and fidelity of implementation. Therefore, it is critical to invest in clarity of the *what* and *why* of the tiered system of support, delivered through a concise roadmap for ongoing professional learning. All of the identified factors above contribute to student success. Each factor is crucial, but even more so due to the pandemic. It is known that professional learning builds internal and external capacity (Wandermans et al., 2008). Therefore, this chapter's professional learning action plan intentionally includes ongoing learning for staff and school leaders.

Hiring multiple MTSS Directors to embed professional learning support would be the most effective way to support teams. This recommendation recognizes that the role of the MTSS Director requires significant expertise and support to ensure the successful implementation of the framework. MTSS and student needs are vast and complex, requiring a systematic framework that can only be implemented properly with more than one director's leadership. With MTSS Director support, specialists in each building can bring to life intervention implementation. After all, "teachers' initial exposure to a concept should not be passive but rather should engage teachers through varied approaches so they can participate actively in making sense of new practice" (Center for Public Education, 2013, p. 6). MTSS Directors establish consistent implementation by facilitating professional learning for all staff, including special educators and building administrators. Their charge is to remove barriers by providing coaching and embedded support. "Professional development can no longer just be about exposing teachers to a concept or providing basic knowledge about a teaching methodology. Instead, professional development in an era of accountability requires a change in a teacher's practice that increases student learning"

(Center for Public Education, 2013, p. 9). For District X and other larger districts, employing multiple Directors is a condition that removes barriers on various levels.

Procedural implementation with fidelity is a critical factor in student progress. Providing professional learning equips staff with the knowledge and abilities to make appropriate steps in supporting student needs. Districts should ensure that all staff, including building administrators, are equipped with a thorough understanding of MTSS and its purpose, thus developing the necessary competence. Transparent and clear communication sets implementation up for long-term success. Such communication includes outlining the purpose of MTSS in the district and the short and long-term implementation plan. In summary, longevity in success requires competence in leaders and staff through training and ongoing support embedded within the MTSS framework.

PLC and Collaboration Time

A strong factor in sustaining acceleration for change is the quality use of time. Each interviewee in this study expressed the need for dedicated time to collaborate around student needs, data, and instructional planning. Implementing a Professional Learning Community (PLC) model district-wide will provide the necessary time and skills for ongoing collaborative conversations. Implementing the PLC model will significantly enhance the quality of District X's already established planning time and data days, prioritizing the focus on student needs and instructional pedagogy. While the PLC model is nuanced and beyond the realm of this report, it is recognized as a best practice for embedded professional learning and fosters highly functioning teams. A PLC model is a collaborative instructional planning process that follows a Backward Design (Wiggins, G. P., & McTighe, J., 2005) model to determine what students are expected to understand, how they will teach, and how to respond if students do not progress.

These three goals are utilized in a question format to guide team planning and discussions. This reflective, collaborative model brings students to the center of planning instruction in all tiers of support using ongoing data to drive discussions. A PLC model founded on this process shifts the planning focus from resources to instruction, encouraging teams and specialists to rely on each other to enhance instruction. Planning around the foundational questions of the PLC model naturally lends itself to planning interventions for all students, including those who are struggling, as well as enrichment for gifted and high-achieving students. Districtwide initial and ongoing professional learning on the PLC model is essential for districts that do not currently operate under such a model. MTSS Directors can oversee and support consistent MTSS implementation across the district by participating in the PLC collaboration. Committing to collaboration time within the day is paramount, and this can be done through a PLC model. This approach acknowledges the importance of collaboration and ongoing professional learning in successfully implementing the MTSS framework.

As Cohen and Honigsfeld (2017) point out, the MTSS framework is most effective when administrators are active participants in the implementation. Administrators are leaders of their building MTSS team and part of the PLC, meaning they have a significant impact on the culture. Additionally, when educators' collaboration is integrated within a can-do belief system of student abilities, implementation and students flourish. The Center for Public Education continued to explain findings that professional learning "programs that were less than 14 hours (like the one-shot workshops) fail to increase student learning, they did not even change teaching practices" (p. 13). Moreover, "studies have shown that teacher mastery of a new skill takes, on average, 20 separate instances of practices..." (p. 15). The study demonstrated how, through a PLC model, successful teams analyzed student work and data to design and evaluate instruction focused on

immediate implementation around specific skills (p. 26). Such successful PLC models thrive on weekly reflection and debriefing as part of their planning and effectively increase collaboration and communication.

Resources

High-quality research-based resources are undoubtedly essential in a robust MTSS model, but the quality of human resources is equally crucial for the successful implementation of any curricular or social-emotional and behavioral resource. Proper staffing with qualified professionals is needed. A PLC model alleviates stretching staff too thin. The PLC model promotes a more high-functioning team. Therefore, embedding professional learning supports, such as an MTSS Director and specialists who regularly meet with leaders and teams, can enhance staff competencies. As Drago-Severson's (2016) *Four Pillars* suggest, knowing the participants render personalized training and implementation processes. The professional learning and collaborative process outlined throughout this chapter will give staff and administrators more confidence and support in implementing a robust MTSS framework.

Professional learning implementation considerations include curricular and human resources, time constraints, competing initiatives and other priorities, leadership, and parent engagement (Kincaid et al., 2007; Menzies et al., 2020; Pinkelman et al., 2015; Turri et al., 2016). District leadership should consider stakeholders, vision, and needs before setting up the training and implementation process (Patton, 2012).

Family Involvement

Finally, all stakeholders play a critical role in implementing a system that supports the diverse needs of every student. Among these stakeholders, families significantly influence a child's educational journey. It is of utmost importance for guardians to have a foundational

understanding of the rationale behind the MTSS. To support this, sharing relevant information on district and school websites serves as an additional means of facilitating information dissemination to families. Furthermore, organizing educational forums within the district can effectively promote this initiative. Engaging in community forums is invaluable in acquainting families with the MTSS framework and their role within it. When a student requires an intervention, families must comprehend the underlying reasons, the intervention plan, and the progress made. In order to ensure clarity, personalized letters should be sent to families, providing a clear articulation of their child's intervention.

To enhance family engagement in the MTSS process, conducting regular check-in meetings every six to eight weeks provides an informative platform for all parties involved and an opportunity to celebrate the student's strengths. It is important to remember that successful change, as emphasized by Reeves (2021), is achieved by capitalizing on strengths. During these meetings, the intervention team should share relevant data with parents, discuss their child's progress and collaboratively determine the next steps.

Assessing the Effectiveness of the Strategies and Actions

As a district curriculum coordinator, I have been tasked with being the MTSS point person starting in the 2023-2024 school year. Responsibilities include co-planning the facilitation of the MTSS Committee, coordinating ongoing professional learning, and supporting schools with implementation. To assess the effectiveness of the described strategies and actions, I will review districtwide data to identify trends. Specifically, I will determine how long, on average, students stay in each Tier and if there are trends of subgroups receiving interventions; overall monitoring the pipeline fluidity. I will also collaborate to reflect, review, and plan differentiated building support. This includes meeting with building administrators and their teams and the districtwide

psychology team meetings. Together, we will review building data, staff's engagement in consistent data collection and analysis, digital platform systems, and communication with families. Success will drive our work to identify where continued support is needed in each school.

Conclusion

Using Kotter's 8-step process and Wagner's 4 C's, the recommended strategies and actions support the implementation and sustainability of a strong MTSS framework. The framework exists to proactively identify students with needs, and there are structures for collaborative, shared decision-making based on data. Success is cultivated when all staff can access built-in professional learning opportunities, tools, resources, and data needed to make informed decisions. The strategies and actions outlined in this study are closely linked to the research and aim to address the stated research questions concerning the pandemic's impact on student needs and the necessary adaptations required in tiered systems of support to meet those needs.

CHAPTER SEVEN: POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

A Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) relies on building a sound infrastructure to underpin the interconnected essences of teaching and learning. Establishing a foundation of clear understandings to enhance the infrastructure is paramount. Policies can provide essential guides and expectations for all stakeholders engaged in the realm of tiered student supports.

In my research, I found a pressing need for a proactive system that identifies students' needs, addresses them appropriately through collaborative processes involving all stakeholders, and consistently monitors progress. Students of all abilities have distinct needs, exacerbated by the pandemic and remote learning. The repercussions of these challenges will persist for years to come. Therefore, districts must be responsive to ongoing and increased needs while also being prepared in the event of future pandemics or natural disasters. By prioritizing a comprehensive tiered support framework and ensuring staff readiness, districts can effectively navigate how to best support their students.

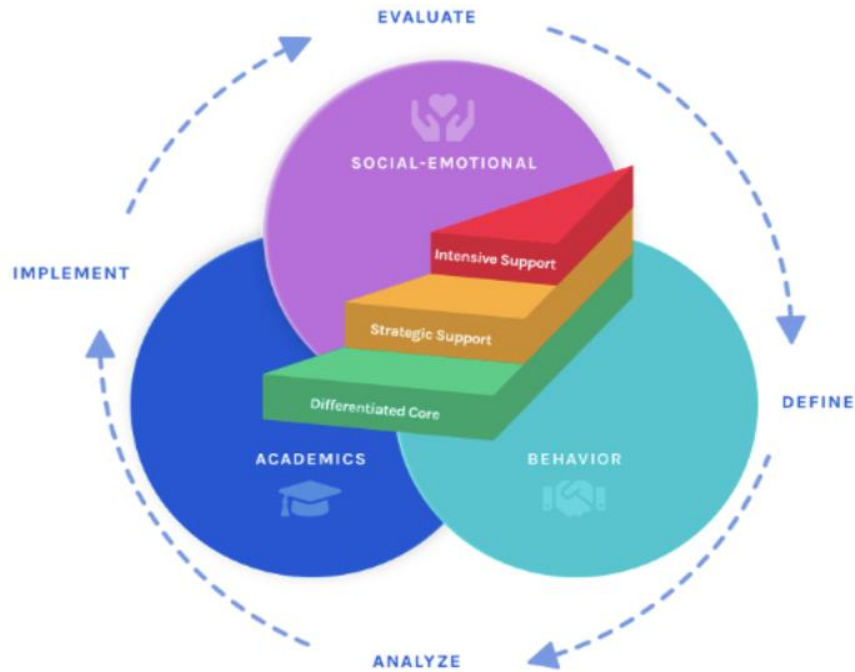
The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted learning for over 50 million students across the nation. As the third year of the pandemic drew to a close and mitigation efforts were fully lifted, new research continued to focus on the academic and social-emotional toll. While current research shows that, despite the pandemic and remote learning for many states, students are closing the gap academically, we cannot lose sight of the social-emotional needs, gifted needs, or the increased gaps that minority groups must now make up.

The interconnectedness of social-emotional needs, behavior, attendance, and academics is demonstrated in Figure 24. Without strong knowledge and understanding by staff and leaders, as defined in Figure 24, the model will crumble, if it can even exist at all. Districts that work

through a consistent MTSS implementation model defined by the policy recommendations will situate themselves to be proactive and responsive to all students' diverse needs.

Figure 24

Interconnectedness of Social-Emotional Needs, Behavior, Attendance, and Academics



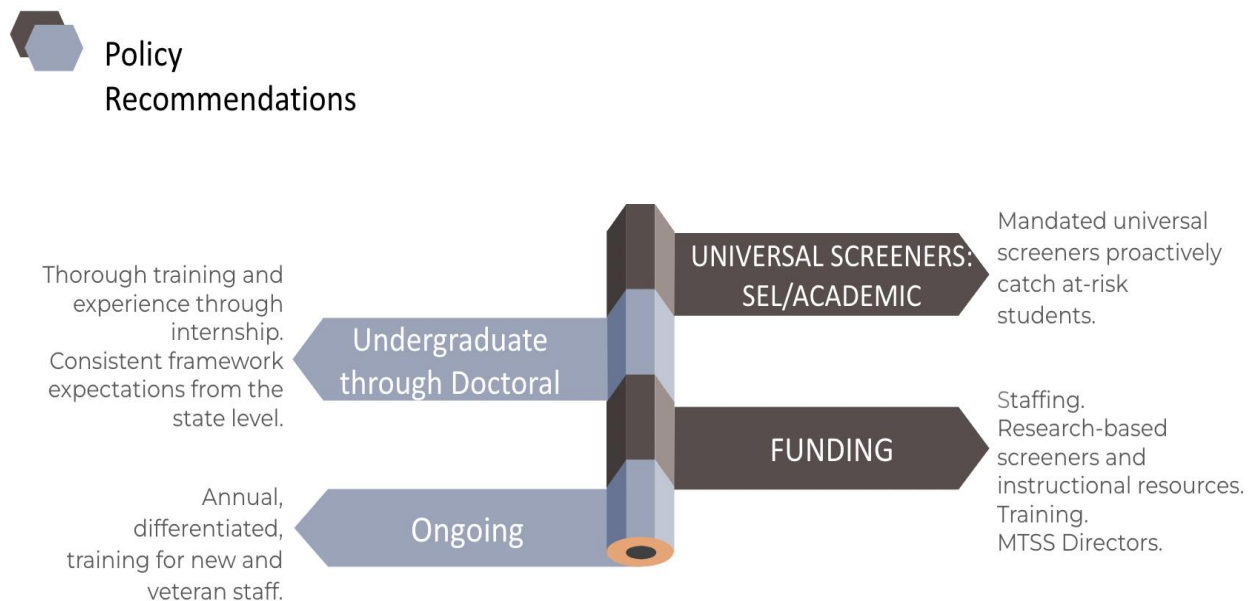
Note: Taken from www.branchingminds.com

The policy proposed in my study advocates for establishment of a steady and proactive MTSS framework in every district. The recommendation underscores the importance of all schools preparing, implementing, and evaluating a support process to address students' academic, social-emotional, and behavioral needs. This policy aims to provide a solid foundation and clarity regarding the purpose, components, and resource implications of the MTSS framework. By mandating the implementation of an MTSS framework in every district, the policy ensures that students at all levels and backgrounds receive the necessary support through a collaborative and proactive tiered support process.

Policy Statement

The proposed policy is intended to start at the state level, with the hope of spreading nationwide. The policy recommends the implementation of a comprehensive MTSS framework in every district. Figure 25 provides an overview of four key areas that outline this policy's necessary components and the levels of support required from the district, state, and national levels. Components of the policy include incorporating MTSS training into undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral educator preparation programs, as well as annual training for new and experienced staff in every district. Additionally, each district must administer academic and social-emotional screeners to address every student's diverse needs. Finally, adequate funding should be allocated to ensure that districts have the necessary staffing to administer and analyze screeners, implement and monitor interventions, and hire knowledgeable MTSS Directors and leaders to foster the effective implementation of the tiered systems.

Figure 25



Training and Professional Learning

My research unearthed a prevailing need to establish foundational knowledge about MTSS among all staff. Consistent implementation starts at the undergraduate level through the doctoral level of the educational system. When educators transition from university into a certified role or from one district to another, it is critical to have a solid understanding of the MTSS framework. With this understanding established, districts can effectively and efficiently implement MTSS. Without a foundational understanding of the framework, each year districts engage in a cycle of educating staff and attempting to implement systems of which staff are unaware. The policy recommendation will be effective as it requires educators enrolled in initial teaching degree programs to complete at least one course and one internship component on MTSS. Additionally, aspiring leaders in master's and doctoral programs will take courses that specifically address leading MTSS implementation. The MTSS topic for both master's and doctoral programs will be a significant component of courses addressing comprehensive data, ethics, and systems design leadership.

The course and internship aspect of the policy is the minimum requirement. It is necessary that every educator and leader, new and veteran, understand MTSS to its core; the purpose and all facets. Such understandings include framework components, culturally responsive practices, screeners, progress monitoring analysis, and inherent biases. Therefore, this requirement is a stepping stone to the policy for districts to follow through on an MTSS implementation plan.

My research findings underscore a critical necessity for districts to strengthen the implementation of an MTSS framework. To achieve this, it is essential to have a comprehensive understanding of the "what," "why," and "how" of the three tiers of MTSS. This understanding is vital for developing targeted interventions that effectively address academic, social-emotional,

and behavioral factors. Consistent implementation starts at the undergraduate level through the doctoral level of the educational system. In addition to university courses for preservice educators and leaders, it is essential that districts provide ongoing staff training. As such, districts will continue to provide ongoing training to new and veteran staff, supporting the longevity of the MTSS model's implementation.

The interviews conducted during my research revealed an all-too-common reality of inconsistent knowledge among staff regarding the MTSS framework, resulting in inconsistent practices and implementation. To address this issue, districts should establish a transparent, ongoing MTSS review and professional learning cycle, enabling them to remain informed about the latest best practices and local needs. By providing ongoing and differentiated training, districts can establish a strong foundation of thoroughly trained staff well-equipped to support students academically, socially, and emotionally.

The recommended professional learning includes data literacy training for staff and leaders on using and analyzing data to make informed decisions. Such training can be offered through the district, universities, and the regional Department of Education. When trained and supported with guided practice, staff and leaders learn to drill down to skills and identify shared needs among students. Using an appropriate districtwide data-collection form that can organize data results in various ways, staff can then analyze trends and outliers before jumping into intervention planning. Students are not just data points, so having a highly qualified team equipped with knowledge about the students and confidence in data analysis helps make informed decisions.

Lastly, districts must employ MTSS Directors to facilitate tiered practices. MTSS Directors are qualified professionals who can lead teams and ensure the appropriate use of processes and

tools. These individuals play a crucial role in overseeing the effective implementation of the MTSS framework, promoting collaboration among educators, and ensuring that interventions appropriately match students' needs. In conclusion, the integration of university courses and continuous district training plays a vital role in equipping educators with a comprehensive understanding of the MTSS framework, fostering a commitment that serves as a strong pillar. Employing dedicated MTSS Directors further strengthens the implementation process, ensuring that tiered practices and instruction are effectively implemented.

By streamlining the implementation of MTSS, including ongoing high-quality professional learning, districts can best support all students and reduce the reliance on special education referrals. By intervening early and effectively through MTSS practices, students receive the support they need to succeed, potentially preventing the need for more intensive interventions. In a comparison of District X's 2020-2021 to 2022-2023 child count of students qualifying for special education, the number of students found eligible for special education services substantially increased with the majority between the ages of 6-10. Just under half of the 70+ increase in students identified was in speech and language impairment, with another third identified in the area of developmental delay. Specifically, 33 students qualified under Speech and/or Language Impairment, 10 qualified under Specific Learning Disability, and 21 qualified under Developmental Delay. Ensuring that staff members are highly trained and educated on the MTSS framework processes can reduce the need for special education referrals unless data deems an evaluation to be an appropriate next step.

Screening

In addition to preservice and ongoing professional learning, universal screening measures are an insurmountable proactive strategy. The indisputable need for a sense of belonging remains at

the forefront and was further influenced by the pandemic and remote learning. Focusing on students' social-emotional and behavioral needs is a precautionary measure that must first be addressed to help a child in mental distress; otherwise, they are unable to access learning. When students have strong mental health, relationships with peers and adults improve, and their brains are more engaged in learning.

A strong MTSS framework that includes screening measures at least three times yearly directly accounts for academic and social-emotional needs. Based on established assessment norms and criteria, reliable and valid universal screeners help districts determine flags that are indicative of needing additional support. Administered three times yearly, universal academic screeners provide districts with data to identify students needing additional support. Screeners provide direction to determine the levels of support needed. Universal SEL and academic screeners are necessary policy components to implement an MTSS framework effectively.

Analysis of Needs

When implementing change, such as a refined or newly implemented MTSS framework throughout a district, analyzing various considerations establishes an understanding of specific areas of need and the change impact. Specifically, considerations include the impact on all stakeholders, including the leaders, staff, families, and, most importantly, students. To thoroughly understand the stakeholder implications and how the policy recommendation will help districts implement MTSS with fidelity, evaluating six areas of disciplines identifies how it will impact all stakeholders. The six considerations are educational, economic, social, political, legal, and ethical demands.

Educational Analysis

The policy requiring an MTSS framework implementation in every district aims to positively affect students academically and social-emotionally. Instituting the policy will result in a more systematic approach to helping staff and students. MTSS is a framework designed specifically to be proactive and meet all student needs in a differentiated and targeted manner. An MTSS framework establishes solid systems to proactively identify struggling students and provide specific interventions early on (Center on Multi-Tiered System of Supports, 2020). The sub-policy that requires MTSS courses in teacher and leader programs, including undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral programs, will result in widespread benefits for districts and students. It ensures that all staff, including leaders, understand MTSS to thoughtfully and proactively implement screeners and interventions appropriately. It takes a commitment of two to four years to implement MTSS (Illinois MTSS Network) successfully, and this policy ensures that districts have a running start. The purpose of the policy is to establish a proactive model in districts through MTSS. The policy also promotes efficient implementation as staff and leaders enter their roles with a solid understanding and capability to implement the processes. Students' social-emotional and academic needs will be supported in a more targeted manner, ultimately increasing learning and growth.

Differentiation For All

Undergraduate classes can and should include classes specific to addressing differentiation, education about English Language Learners, twice-exceptionality, and high-performing students. More poignantly, as an example, gifted students. Gifted students, in particular, often encounter low-hanging fruit. As a result, they typically make little growth, resulting in a plateau of engagement and growth. Remote learning provided a learning environment that was more

homogeneous than differentiated, and teachers struggled to get to know students as deeply and quickly as they could have in person. The suffering growth of high-performing and gifted students was exasperated as the pandemic elevated the focus on struggling students.

Furthermore, the MTSS model historically was founded on a Response to Intervention (RtI) model, which targeted its support for struggling students. While honorable, high-performing and gifted students suffered. Failure to address their needs for enrichment results in a dimmed light for gifted students, profoundly impacting their engagement and lifelong learning. Districts must guide and support teachers to address the unique needs of high-achieving and gifted students with the same fervor of focus on struggling learners. While focusing on struggling students is necessary, districts must maintain focus on all students. MTSS can be the research-based system to address this area of need. This is in harmony with providing acceleration opportunities. We must look at the differentiated support for gifted and accelerated students when they are in a classroom of grade-level performing peers. With university courses supporting differentiation and tiered support for all levels, staff and leaders subsequently have the competency to differentiate confidently.

Collaboration and Communication

To successfully implement MTSS, districts must strategically provide collaborative times and nurture their instructional outcomes. Preserved collaboration times allow teams and leaders to analyze screening, progress-monitoring, and other data, plan for supports, and meet with families. A Professional Learning Community (PLC) model in every district prioritizes collaboration time within and outside the school day. Staff also need PLC and data analysis training to make decisions before referring a student to a tier.

Each interviewee expressed uncertainty regarding the district's tiered criteria, referral processes, and progress-monitoring procedures. Additionally, they expressed frustration due to a lack of understanding about their role in the intervention process and how student progress is tracked when pulled to receive interventions. To effectively address these concerns, it is imperative that districts establish a structured MTSS implementation plan. This plan will provide clear guidelines and expectations, ensuring all stakeholders comprehensively understand the processes involved. With a well-defined framework in place, staff can collaboratively facilitate more effective interventions for students in and out of their homeroom. I have found that interventions and communication improve when the framework processes are articulated and school leadership prioritizes an intervention block for every grade in the daily schedule. A dedicated intervention block enables a collaborative approach with teachers, specialists, interventionists, EL teachers, and special education staff collectively available to deliver interventions, particularly as a push-in model as appropriate. A key to this implementation is collaboration time through a PLC model. Additional necessary components include districtwide standardized forms within a digital platform equipped with current and research-based core and intervention resources. Every stakeholder must know their role in the MTSS processes. Staff must be allotted consistent and sufficient professional time to communicate and collaborate. Otherwise, the fidelity of the MTSS framework and intervention plans will be negatively impacted.

Economic Analysis

While the many nuances of budget are outside the realm of focus for this review, funding allocation is necessary within the policy to promote consistent MTSS implementation across all districts. During and toward the end of the Covid-19 pandemic, districts benefited from funding

support through the Elementary and Secondary School Relief (ESSER) funds. Much of the funds were utilized initially for mitigation efforts, particularly those required by local mandates. Beyond the mandates, many districts utilized the ESSER funds for resources such as intervention and curricular resources and summer school. The relief funds expire in September 2024, leaving districts scrambling to continue to provide appropriate resources that meet the significant needs of the students in their schools. As Susie An of WBEZ (2022) said, "This illustrated the depth of underfunding in education." Districts continue to prioritize how to work with budgets in a way that strategically supports the vast needs that a district must be accountable. While an economic investment is involved in implementing the MTSS framework through the recommended training and allocated resources, the cost of failing to meet students' needs and help them reach their full potential is far greater.

It is worth reiterating the need for universal screening for academic and social-emotional needs. When staff have access to recent data on student progress, or lack thereof, or can identify social-emotional traits of internalizing behaviors, for example, they can act collaboratively to meet student needs. Therefore, funding allocations within the recommended policy require universal screeners, proper staffing support, progress monitoring tools, prevention programs, and ongoing training for all staff and leaders. With adequate funding, districts can provide consistent and appropriate levels of tiered academic and social-emotional support. For instance, not all districts have the same level of intervention or specialist support, and not all districts have budgets allocated to provide MTSS Directors or a sufficient mental health team in each building. An important funding consideration is the various levels of need and the various levels of resources available in each district. As Chang-Bacon (2021) points out, multiple studies "documented substantial returns on investment for an increase in school counselors" (para. 20).

In the wake of the widespread interruption in learning that the pandemic caused, districts have an opportunity to update professional learning and structure strong support system models in tandem with a tiered system structural review.

A strong budget and reliable funding ensure the necessary resources, professional learning, and staffing to implement the MTSS framework as it is intended. Departments of education must disseminate resources that assist schools with aligning their MTSS implementation to meet the needs of all students academically and socially-emotionally. With the necessary resources, collaboration time, and proper data-informed processes, districts can ardently support students. As stated, the needs vary across districts. Therefore, to receive funding that supports equitable implementation, districts must be given guidelines for MTSS processes and submit a detailed plan of how they will allocate resources to implement the processes. This plan must address all academic and social-emotional domains that include attendance and behavioral components.

Social Analysis

The Covid-19 pandemic, as other emergency relief situations that districts have encountered, changed the makeup of the public school system. Still, while the DNA of how schools educate students was temporarily changed, the purpose they serve undoubtedly remains.

To be prepared for future crises resulting in remote learning, it is advantageous for districts to have a solid tiered system of support structure in place that includes a plan for servicing students remotely. While districts continued to offer remote learning opportunities to engage students during this unique time, due to many outside factors, many students did not participate. During a time of crucial need, mental health services were significantly less accessible during the pandemic. As Chang-Bacon (2021) highlights, mental health directly correlates to engagement and academic success, and it is a “flaw of dichotomizing academic and socioemotional

aspirations, as academic engagement is largely precluded in the absence of student well-being” (page 4). The pandemic's remote learning impacted all students. Educators struggled to engage students virtually, and the social-emotional health of students declined. By having a prepared remote services plan, educators and leaders can focus on what matters in the moment rather than scrambling to create a plan while juggling implementation.

It is well-known that increased social-emotional and behavioral needs directly impede academics and have long-term effects in the social realm. In a 2021 meta-analysis, Kearney and Childs found that addressing SEL has many positive long-term social implications, such as fewer arrests, fewer dropouts, and fewer costs to society overall. However, as noted throughout this chapter, additional factors, along with various local and state responsibilities, also play into the success of the MTSS implementation. A final point to note is the increased mental health needs across the nation. Throughout the pandemic, therapists nationwide found themselves overbooked as parents were desperate to get their children an appointment. The American Psychological Association (2021) and local staff reported that therapeutic programs received more referrals than in the past. In response, there is caution about the educational system relying on school mental health teams beyond realistic capabilities. While no clear-cut criteria exist, one solution can be partnerships between districts and outside mental health support teams. Consistent plans, response protocols, and language between home, school, and therapeutic settings can provide a supportive framework for helping students.

This policy will also support staff and community relationships by having a clear process and articulating each staff and family member's role. For in-person, everyday implementation, having a solid MTSS structure built off ongoing professional learning renders staff able to implement and communicate with colleagues and families about goals and progress. Children blossom when

parents are involved and invested in their child's success. Through staff-to-staff and school-to-home partnerships, students will thrive social-emotionally and academically. Staff participation and ownership in the MTSS framework implementation is paramount. Through the recommended MTSS Committee and subsequent school MTSS teams, staff can have a voice and input, resulting in positive social implications in the school setting.

Through historical change and unprecedented circumstances, educators and leaders hold an immense responsibility to address and support the vast needs of students. It is an immense responsibility on one's shoulders. With strong systems through policy, educators can leave their school each day knowing they were successful, and ultimately their students will also be.

Political Analysis

In tandem with a tiered system review, districts have an opportunity to update professional learning and strong structural support systems. In the wake of the widespread interruption in learning that the pandemic caused, it is recommended that this work be completed in collaboration with the community and government agency stakeholders. By means of the recommended preservice and continuously integrated training, staff and leaders can proactively support students and foster social-emotional, behavioral, and academic success within and beyond the school environment. To achieve this, the following political considerations must be considered.

For this policy to take effect across all districts, there must be a collaboration between the state Department of Education and all area superintendents. Each state Department of Education must agree on the tiered support framework and provide appropriate implementation support. For this policy to be most effective, the state Department of Education and superintendents must also agree on the framework so that universities and districts can use it as a consistent model. The

first charge for these groups is to work through the nuances of the MTSS framework expectations and details of the final policy. Additional collaboration, including university leaders, sets clear understandings about the framework and expectations for how it is to be taught through their programs. Just as a review cycle is paramount for districts using MTSS, a review cycle is warranted between state leaders, university leaders, and district superintendents. These stakeholders must meet consistently to reflect on districts' implementation, the level of students' needs in individual districts, and trends throughout the state and nation.

The power of collective action is exemplified by establishing regional MTSS Director networks. The networks play an integral role in the recommended annual review process. The MTSS Directors possess firsthand insights into their district's level of needs and implementation, and should be active participants in the annual review process alongside leaders. As a result of the established framework model and ongoing review cycle, student needs will be consistently addressed.

Legal Analysis

The legal standpoint confirms the need for professional learning around the MTSS framework and universal screeners. All children in the United States have the right to equal educational opportunities. The constitution protects this right no matter their background, race, ethnicity, sex, religion, socioeconomic status or citizenship. This right is one of the most valuable, and it is up to educators to ensure it is alive each school day.

By adopting the framework and utilizing unbiased screening tools, districts can reduce the need for special education referrals and outplacements unless the data substantiates this level of support. Without appropriate data demonstrating that teams have undergone a thorough process of tiered support, qualifying a student for special education services can be preemptive. When

districts have proper screening measures and continuous data tracking, they can recommend specific levels of support that are more likely based on something other than discriminating factors. Ensuring systematic tiers of support protect teams and districts when they recommend moving back a tier toward less support or moving forward with a more intensive evaluation.

Throughout remote learning, many students were unable to access equal educational opportunities. Educators and leaders stood up to the challenge, determined to break down barriers. Providing accommodations such as wireless internet access for students (Johnston & Tonnes, 2020) were implemented on a large scale during remote learning "in ways that have often been deemed unfeasible" (Chang-Bacon, 2021, p. 191). While the need has abated, marginalized populations are still in need. Katz (2017) substantiates that a lack of technology is a proven barrier to learning. As highlighted in chapter six, high achieving and gifted students were, at least initially, not given access to an education that met their unique learning needs. Whereas IDEA protects a specific student population, there exists no "legal foundation" for gifted or marginalized students to receive access to individualized supports. To help maintain these students' rights, Chang-Bacon recommends documenting to demonstrate the level of support needed when working in partnership with local governments. Such a partnership, in turn, will foster the "promotion of policies that are responsive to the lived realities and educational backgrounds of students" (Chang-Bacon, 2021, p. 192). The MTSS model ensures the right to an equal education opportunity accessible to all students, no matter their abilities, background, race, ethnicity, sex, religion, socioeconomic status or citizenship.

Moral and Ethical Analysis

Educators are responsible for acting with honor and dignity. It is a demanding responsibility to be available, aware of, and prepared to support all needs of all students. The word

"intervention" stems from the base word "intervene." While intervening is the purpose of the MTSS framework, it is unrealistic to expect educators to be successful without first providing the right levels of support. With support from state leaders, district leaders, and a strong MTSS framework, educators do not have to feel alone in the mountain of responsibility to monitor every iteration of students' mental health and academic needs. Through the policy recommendations of training, screening, staffing and funding, educators can collaboratively and successfully implement tiered systems of student support through a proactive and responsive model.

Conclusion

Inconsistent MTSS implementation can be changed and supported with new policies. The recommended policy to implement training about the MTSS framework through undergraduate and higher education programs, SEL and academic screeners, ongoing professional learning, and proper funding will help clarify the proactive process of tiered decision-making on behalf of students. The policy will enhance the MTSS's fundamental understanding of preservice and current staff, leaders, and families.

Although the terms "schooling" and "learning" are used interchangeably, it is important to note that the latter can occur beyond the confines of formal educational institutions. As highlighted by Chang-Bacon (2021), remote learning during the pandemic has demonstrated that "[L]earning does indeed occur across many spaces and in many ways" (p. 192). Still, one of the many negative effects of the pandemic is an increased minority gap. While recent findings indicate some improvement in academic growth, schools serving minority groups have been disproportionately affected, facing greater challenges, and have more ground to cover in catching up. To close the achievement gaps and improve student learning for all, Odden (2012) identified

themes of successful districts (p. 27). The following themes are most pertinent to MTSS, specifically to screeners and tiered curricular resources:

They analyze state test scores to determine their current performance situation. • They set very high and ambitious (sometimes "eye-popping") goals for student performance. • They change curriculum programs, define their version of effective instructional practices, and implement structured, systemic, and research-based reading programs. They also make sure the reading program at all levels is sound and works... • They provide appropriate interventions for struggling students. • They organize teachers into collaborative groups. • They invest in ongoing, comprehensive, and intensive professional development. • They implement multiple strategies to help struggling students meet rigorous performance standards • They create a professional culture • They embrace a culture of accountability for student achievement results. (p.27)

The data reported in my study demonstrates the vital need for districts to tighten or implement the MTSS framework, the tiers of intervention, and the processes for each. Meeting the needs of students can only be achieved through proactive screeners, ongoing data collection, frequent data reflection, research-based interventions, high-quality ongoing professional learning for preservice and current staff, and family involvement. A clear MTSS system with an outlined framework is needed so that all stakeholders, including the school and community, can collaborate on behalf of children. Children need support that benefits the whole child. As the pandemic comes to a close, this is an opportune time to reflect on inconsistencies, areas lacking, and disparities among subgroups. The recommended policies ensure a systematic framework across all districts to appropriately serve all students, including at-risk, struggling, high achieving, and gifted. After all, our students need us.

Limitations and Recommendations

This study analyzed the academic and social-emotional impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on students in the academic setting, considering its widespread effects nationally and globally. While this study focuses on local data and participants, the implications can be applied to districts beyond the sample population. However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study and make recommendations for future research. Firstly, the limited participant sample size poses a challenge in terms of generalizing the findings to broader district populations. Although the study reflects a specific population, the information can still hold value for all districts.

Future studies should aim for larger and more diverse samples to more comprehensively understand the needs. Specifically, considering the significant widening of the minority gap during the pandemic, it is imperative that we pay close attention to this issue. Monitoring the effectiveness of an implemented MTSS framework can serve as a layer of monitoring and addressing the progress made in closing the achievement gap, especially for marginalized student populations.

Another important consideration for future research is to examine the impact of the pandemic on subgroups, such as dual language, high-performing, and gifted students. Using this information with the Pillars of Dual Language model (Medina, 2017), MTSS can establish strong linguistically responsive supports in districts. While all students were affected by the pandemic, these subgroups, particularly gifted, require more attention and support than has been given in the past, particularly within the context of Response to Intervention (RtI), Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), and recovery efforts from the pandemic.

Conducting further research around these limitations can deepen our understanding of the post-pandemic landscape and better support student growth for the whole child. Future studies should conduct research on strategies for district preparedness in the face of an emergency or pandemic similar to the magnitude of the Covid-19 pandemic. While the fervent hope is that we never experience another large-scale crisis, it is crucial for districts to proactively prepare. Emergencies like Hurricane Ian, which plowed through in 2022 and severely disrupted schools, highlight the necessity for comprehensive plans for emergency remote instruction. These plans should encompass all essential services, including those tailored to special education, band programs, interventions, and enrichment groups.

Many districts have taken steps towards implementing remote learning days for weather-related disruptions. One example is District X, which demonstrated foresight by devising synchronous and asynchronous lessons, creating virtual learning schedules, and providing class links in each class' prepared remote learning plan. Furthermore, District X's staff provided hard copies of materials in advance, enabling students without internet access or during rare instances of power outages to engage. To enhance preparedness in this area, future studies can undertake a meta-analysis of models for remote implementation. By investing in comprehensive research and analysis, we can empower districts to refine their emergency preparedness and response protocols, ensuring that educational access remains uninterrupted.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the recommendations presented in this study profoundly impact student growth in the aftermath of the global Covid-19 pandemic. Educators and leaders are responsible for fostering student flourishing in various domains amidst challenges that affect academics, social-emotional well-being, and behavior. While some impacts may be beyond their control,

educators and leaders do have a direct influence. The Covid-19 pandemic serves as a reminder to reflect on existing systems that support staff, students, families, and educators. Implementing the recommendations outlined in this study through the MTSS framework, which encompasses research-based systems, strategies, and resources, can effectively support educators in meeting the holistic needs of all students in their educational journey. This is an urgent time to strengthen the educational support systems and build resiliency to navigate unexpected large-scale challenges in the future.

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Appendix A

Contexts

- 11 elementary and 2 middle schools
- 4 assistant principals, 3 curriculum coordinators, 4 instructional coaches, 1 reading specialist and an interventionist at every building
- 3 Specialized programs
- Low truancy and mobility rates
- MTSS Committee
- Districtwide proactive multi-level system for academics and social-emotional and behavioral needs
- Platform houses all meeting notes, data and intervention plans

Competencies

- Core resource with robust foundational skills for primary grades
- Ongoing and embedded professional learning for staff and leaders on the MTSS system

Culture

- Culture of proactive MTSS for *all* students, including high performers
- Culture of continuous improvement and collaborative investment to review instruction at all tiers
- Culture of communication with all stakeholders
- Culture of making data-informed decisions

Conditions

- Universal academic and SEL screeners three times per year
- Two MTSS Coordinators
- A refined and clear tiered system of support consistently implemented across all schools
- System of frequent communication and collaboration among staff through a PLC model

To-Be

Appendix B: Informed Consent: Interview

My name is Eleni Gajewski, and I am a doctoral student at National Louis University. I am asking you to participate in this study, "The Effects of the Covid-19 Pandemic In The School Setting: And The Adaptations Needed Post-Pandemic For Tiered Supports", from June 2022 to June 2023. My research aims to evaluate the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic had on student achievement and evaluate the updated adaptations needed, mainly through a tiered system of support. The hope is that school districts can use the comprehensive evaluation to consider students' needs and how to meet them, both in light of the pandemic and an unexpected future pandemic or natural disaster.

This form outlines the purpose of the study and describes your involvement and rights as a participant. By signing below, you consent to participate in a research project conducted by Eleni Gajewski, a doctoral student at National Louis University, Lisle.

Please understand that the purpose is to provide districts with a basis for understanding the social-emotional and academic impacts of the pandemic on students and adapting to meet the needs of students, and *not* to evaluate coaching or teaching.

Participation in this study will include

- One individual interview is scheduled at your convenience in 2022-2023.
- The interview can be broken into multiple shorter sessions if the interviewee requests.
- Interviews will be approximately 45 minutes and include approximately 15 questions to understand how the district's tiered system of support framework supports data collection, planning, and targeting interventions to meet the needs of students.

- The interview will be organized under the following topics: remote learning experiences, district tiered systems of support framework, and data and impact of tiered supports.
- Interviews will be recorded, and participants may request to view and have final approval on the content of interview transcripts.

Your participation is voluntary and can be discontinued at any time without penalty or bias. The results of this study may be published or otherwise reported at conferences and employed to inform practices. Participants' identities will in no way be revealed (data will be reported anonymously and bear no identifiers that could connect data to individual participants). The researcher will secure recordings, transcripts, and field notes in a locked cabinet in her home office to ensure confidentiality. Only the researcher will have access to data. The data will be destroyed five years after the completion of the study.

There are no anticipated risks or benefits no greater than that encountered in daily life. Further, the information gained from this study could be helpful to the researcher and other schools and school districts looking to initiate or refine tiered supports.

Upon request, you may receive summary results from this study and copies of any publications that may occur. Please email the researcher, Eleni Gajewski, at egajewski@my.nl.edu to request results from this study.

If you have questions or require additional information, please contact the researcher, Eleni Gajewski, by email or phone. If you have any concerns or questions before or during participation that the researcher has not addressed, you may contact my dissertation chair, Dr.

Elizabeth Minor: email: eminor@my.nl.edu; phone: 847-947-5144, or NLU's Institutional Research Board co-chairs Dr. Shaunti Knauth; email: Shaunti.Knauth@nl.edu; phone: (312) 261-352 or Carla Sparks, Ed.D.: email: csparks3@nl.edu; phone: (813) 928-6889.

Thank you for your consideration.

Consent: I understand that by signing below, I agree to participate in the study (The Effects Of The Covid-19 Pandemic On The Need For Tiered Systems Of Supports: And The Adaptations Needed Post-Pandemic For Tiered Supports). My participation will consist of the activities below during a 60-minute period:

- 1 Interview lasting approximately 60 minutes.
- I can request that the interview be broken into (2) sessions.
- Entered into a raffle for a gift card
- I can request to opt out of the raffle by informing the researcher.

Participant's Signature _____ Date _____

Researcher's Signature _____ Date _____

APPENDIX C: Interview Questions

Definitions

Remote is defined as the model in which students attended school virtually.

Blended learning is defined as the model in which students attended school virtually half-day and in-person half-day.

Warm-Up/Background

Please describe your role in the district, the length of time in the district, and the length of time in education.

#1-5 Remote Learning Q's

- Describe your instructional role(s) in the district during the pandemic between March 2020-June 2021.
 - Remote
 - Blended
- In your experience, what was the process for encouraging student engagement during remote learning?
- Are you familiar with the district's tiered system of support? If so, describe your understanding of the systems in place to support struggling students.
 - Probing:
 - SEL, Behavior and Academic
 - Tiers
 - Staff who service each tier
 - Criteria for identification and exiting
 - Frequency/dosage of interventions
 - Frequency of progress monitoring and by whom
 - Frequency of data review
 - Communicating with parents
 - Communicating with teachers
- Were Tier 2 and/or Tier 3 interventions provided during the 2020-2021 *remote* months?
 - Were Tier 2 and/or Tier 3 interventions provided during the 2020-2021 blended learning months?
 - If yes, describe how it was determined which students received interventions.
 - If yes, describe how interventions were implemented.
 - If yes, how was progress monitoring tracked?
- Think about student needs. Describe the differences you have observed during pre-pandemic, remote, blended, and coming back to in-person learning.
 - Social-emotional and behavioral
 - Academic

#6-11 Tiered Systems of Support

- Thinking about the district's *core* reading and math resources, how does each support the growth and achievement of all learners? *If the participant does not use both, describe the most frequently used resources and specify math or reading.*
 - What do you believe are the major strengths of each?
 - What do you believe are the major weaknesses of each?
- What available district resources are you aware of for delivering interventions (specify math, reading, SEL/behavior).
 - Ex. Tier 1/ 2 Bridges and Benchmark Intervention lessons
 - Ex. Tier 2/3 LLI
 - Ex. Tier 2/3 Replacement curricula
- Describe how an intervention resource is determined to be the most appropriate for supporting individual student needs.
 - Research-based
 - Components that support deficit areas
 - Frequency of use
 - Effectiveness as measured by monitoring
- How do the most frequently used *academic* intervention resources support the progress of struggling learners? *Please specify if you are speaking about math or reading.*
 - What do you believe are the major strengths?
 - What do you believe are the major weaknesses?
- What is the length of time a student typically receives a tiered intervention? *Specify if speaking about behavior, academic or social-emotional interventions.*
 - Describe entry and exit criteria.
 - When, how, and what data is used to move a student out of a tier?
 - How is data stored?
- What is your experience with communication about interventions?
 - With families
 - With administration
 - Between teachers/interventionists
 - With students, such as goals and progress

Corresponding Questions
(Milenkiewicz, 2007)

#12-14 Data and Impact of Tiered Supports

- What unexpected student needs emerged between spring 2020 and spring 2022?
 - Foundational skills gaps
 - Increase or decrease in students qualifying for Tier 2 or Tier 3
 - Executive functioning, social-emotional, perseverance, behavior
- As we come out of the pandemic, how does the tiered system of supports meet the current needs of students? Please specify if you are speaking about SEL, behavior, math and reading/academics.
 - Behavior/SEL
 - Academic
 - How do you know?

- To meet the current needs of students as we come out of the pandemic, what would you **change** about the district's tiered systems?
 - Ex. Push-in vs. pull-out intervention

#15-16 Wrap-up

- (If time) What systems are in place to support teachers and interventionists?
 - Professional Learning opportunities?
- Is there anything else that is important for me to know?

Once again, thank you for your voluntary participation and honest responses today. The Consent Form explains how you may access the study results at any time. I truly appreciate your time today.

Appendix D: Interview Invitation Email

Dear _____,

I am working on a research project for my dissertation and need your help. My goal in this study is to increase understanding of the pandemic's impact on students. Ultimately, I will identify adaptations needed in tiered systems of support (MTSS) to meet the evolving needs of students. I am conducting interviews as part of my dissertation research study. As a _____, you are in an ideal position to give valuable first-hand information from your perspective.

The interview takes around 45-60 minutes and is very informal. I am simply trying to capture your thoughts and perspectives on being an educator before, during and after the pandemic. Your responses to the questions will be kept confidential. Each interview will be assigned a number code to help ensure that personal identifiers are not revealed during the analysis and write-up of findings. Compensation for participating in this study includes an individualized token of gratitude as well as being entered into a drawing for a \$50 gift card. Your participation will be a valuable addition to my research, and findings could lead to a greater public understanding of students' needs and recommendations for improvements through tiered supports.

If you are willing to participate, please suggest a day and time that suits you. I will make myself available virtually or in-person to meet at your convenience.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask.

Thank you in advance,

Eleni Gajewski

Doctoral student

National-Louis University