Principal Leadership to Support Data-Based Decision Making in a Multi-Tiered System of Supports

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Doctor of Education in Education Leadership

Title: Principal Leadership to Support Data-Based Decision Making in a Multi-Tiered System of Supports

This mixed-methods case study examined principal leadership with supporting data-based decision making (DBDM) in a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework in a school district in the Pacific Northwest. Using a pragmatist worldview and a convergent mixed-methods approach, the study explored principals' skills in data literacy, leadership practices, and supports that are needed for MTSS implementation.

Quantitative data were collected with a principal survey in which they self-reported skills across academic, behavioral, social emotional, and data-use domains. These data were analyzed with descriptive statistics and ANOVA. Qualitative data were collected via interviews with 14 principals and observations of 10 data teams. These data were analyzed using two rounds of coding, after which all sources of data were integrated through a joint display.

Quantitative findings indicated no statistically significant differences in perceived skills based on role, school level, or years of experience. Principals reported relative strengths in Tier 1 data use and instructional practices, but weaker skills related to Tier 3 interventions and using data to evaluate student response to intervention. Qualitative findings revealed six major themes: (a) MTSS implementation is not uniform across schools, (b) principals play a critical role in MTSS implementation, (c) principals face significant stressors that impede instructional leadership, (d) secondary schools experience implementation challenges, (e) district supports are helpful but uneven, and (f) district support can be improved with better communication and

collaboration with principals, and training for teachers and administrators.

The integrated findings demonstrated convergence in themes of principal leadership of Tier 1 and a need for stronger district support in Tiers 2 and 3. Divergence in systems by school level was found; while there were no statistically significant differences between principal skills by level, qualitative data suggested that secondary schools needed more support for interventions and distributed leadership than did elementary schools.

This study underscores the importance of targeted professional development, coherent district systems, and sustained leadership support to strengthen principal DBDM skills for MTSS implementation. Practical implications for district leaders seeking to build principal capacity in DBDM and improve equitable student outcomes are discussed.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to the principals and leadership team at my school district. Your willingness to engage in this study made it possible. Your dedication to our students and staff is an inspiration.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Principals in public schools are held to high expectations to be instructional leaders, ensuring that they create and sustain highly effective schools that close opportunity gaps for students using data-based decision making (DBDM). Yet there is evidence that not all principals have the knowledge and skills to meet this expectation. As a central office district leader, I have had professional experiences that demonstrate how this can manifest. For example, when I was serving as the district's assessment director, I received a visit from a principal on the eve of a school improvement presentation to our district's school board. Excited about improvement in raw scores on a normed assessment that led her to believe that her students were catching up and closing achievement gaps, she wanted to share her students' winter academic screening data with me. Yet when I examined the data, it was clear that the opposite was actually true; the majority of students had not caught up but instead were even farther behind their peers than before. The principal was chagrined that her presentation to the board, and indeed her principal leadership of the teacher team, was built on a fundamental misunderstanding of the data. She had to work late into the evening to revamp the presentation. Notably, this individual shied away from referring to such data again in the succeeding years of school board presentations. And, hers is not the only example I could share.

This anecdotal scenario raises fundamental questions about principals' knowledge and skills to lead school improvement efforts. Educators attempt to utilize systems to manage and support data-driven decision-making, yet many feel they are drowning in data (Bettesworth et al., 2009; Reeves & Flach, 2011), and, as illustrated above, may misunderstand their data and draw indefensible conclusions.

What essential skills in DBDM do effective principals demonstrate? What do principals know about using data, and what are their gaps in knowledge? What data are principals using to draw conclusions and make decisions? My dissertation case study explored these questions and identified next steps to support continued growth for principals to ensure they can become strong school leaders with the skills to support DBDM in a system where use of data is foundational.

Federal Context and Background of MTSS

Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) has its origins in prevention-based public health models, including psychiatry, vaccination, nutrition, and exercise (Brown-Chidsey & Bickford, 2016). This model reflects a shift from a "wait to fail" model in which interventions are provided only after students have fallen significantly behind, to a model that focuses on ensuring all students are successful because they receive effective instruction and intervention as soon as they show risk (D. Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Moats & Lyon, 1993).

In 2004, Congress reauthorized the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act* (IDEA, 2004) to enhance alignment with the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001 (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 2002) introducing scientific, research-based interventions as a part of the process to identify a specific learning disability. From this research came Response to Intervention (RTI) models that emphasize early intervention and the use of DBDM. The Act stated that lack of access to instruction could not result in a learning disability diagnosis. It also stated that local education agencies (LEAs) were not required to use the discrepancy model, laying the legal groundwork for RTI, and later development of MTSS.

The *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) was approved by Congress in 2015 as a reauthorization of *No Child Left Behind*. This act required LEAs to develop a "multi-tier system of supports" defined as "a comprehensive continuum of evidence-based, systemic practices to

support a rapid response to students' needs, with regular observation to facilitate data-based instructional decision-making" (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). Combining RTI and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), this legislation has driven the expansion of MTSS.

Washington State and Local District Context

Washington State relies on the MTSS framework in *Washington's ESSA Consolidated Plan* (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2018). In Washington, full transition to using RTI to qualify a student for special education services with a Specific Learning Disability (SLD) will occur by the school year 2028-2029 (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, n.d.b). This transition lends urgency to Washington's school districts' efforts to install effective MTSS systems. The study district was chosen as one of three districts to participate in the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction's Last Mile project, creating model districts to support the rest of the state in the transition to using RTI for SLD identification. Participation in this project sets up this district to be a leader in DBDM and provides fertile ground for this study.

Systems Overview

Response to Intervention

The roots of RTI extend back to early research on curriculum-based measurement and the use of progress monitoring to inform instructional decision-making (Deno, 1985) and explorations into reconceptualizing the identification of learning disabilities using how students respond to intervention rather than relying on the discrepancy model (L. Fuchs et al., 2002). Further research into classification of learning disabilities concluded that there is little evidence supporting the discrepancy model and urged adoption of a problem-solving model to determine the response to a provided intervention (Fletcher et al., 2003; Speece & Case, 2001).

Vaughn and Fuchs (2003) discussed the "promise and potential pitfalls" (p. 137) of using a response-to-instruction method of identifying learning disabilities. Benefits include early intervention, identifying students based on risk rather than their deficits, and linkages with instructional planning. They identified questions about the approach including the need for evidence-based interventions and assessments, intensification of interventions, the need for trained staff, and due process issues.

Fuchs and Fuchs (2006) wrote a foundational article describing the principles of RTI to prevent academic failure and reduce inappropriate special education referrals. They describe systems that arose from the same body of scientific evidence behind the federal *Reading First* program (Gamse et al., 2008). These systems include (a) screening all students to determine who is at risk for academic failure, (b) providing multiple tiers of intervention support with more intensity in each tier, and (c) monitoring students to determine which students are responding to the intervention using either a problem-solving model or a standard treatment protocol. In either case, practitioners need expertise in assessment and intervention. The *I* in RTI serves both to provide struggling students with high quality interventions and to be the "intervention-as-test" (D. Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006, p. 95) to determine the degree to which individual students are responding to the intervention to provide useful information in special education determinations.

There are a few different models of RTI. According to Sugai and Horner (2009), RTI has six defining features: interventions that are scientifically based, interventions that are organized along a continuum of increasing intensity, a problem-solving protocol, data-based decision rules, regular and systematic screening, and integrity of implementation. The National Center on RTI (National Center on RTI, 2010) defined four essential components of RTI: a multi-level system for supporting academic and behavioral outcomes, screening, progress monitoring, and data-

based decision making (DBDM). This definition includes primary, secondary, and tertiary levels of prevention.

Positive Behavior Support

Parallel to the development of RTI, researchers were establishing systems and structures to support improved school-wide behavioral systems. Early research presented a systems approach to managing behavior and stressed the importance of clear instruction on behavioral expectations, teaching of skills, and monitoring progress (Lewis & Sugai, 2017). A foundational paper by Sugai and Horner (2002a) defined school-wide positive behavior support (SWPBS) as a preventive approach to improve student behavior and school climate. Additional models began to incorporate academic systems into a three-tiered model where 80-90% of students are successful with Tier 1, an additional 5-10% of students need Tier 2 targeted supports, and 1-5% need intensive, individualized interventions (Sugai et al., 2002).

SWPBS includes four critical elements: social competence and academic achievement, supporting decision making, supporting student behavior, and supporting staff behavior, all within a multi-system perspective (school-wide, classroom, non-classroom, and individual student) with a continuum of behavior support (Sugai & Horner, 2002b). Figure 1 displays these elements. SWPBS includes the establishment of a leadership team, school-wide agreements and supports, data-based action planning, fidelity of implementation, and data-based monitoring (Sugai & Horner, 2002b). Using a systems perspective is essential when the "tricks" of classroom management (strategies, practices, interventions) are inadequate to ensure improvements in student behavior (Sugai & Horner, 2002b, p. 29). Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), a term commonly used interchangeably with SWPBS, is an evidence-based approach to improving student behavior, school climate, and academic outcomes

(Bradshaw et al., 2010). A meta-analysis of school-wide behavior support (Solomon et al., 2012) included 20 studies, largely from elementary schools but also from preschools, middle schools, and high schools. SWPBS was found to be moderately effective in reducing problem behaviors at multiple tiers of service. SWPBS had a higher effect size in unstructured environments (hallways, recess, cafeterias) than in classrooms, presumably due to the traditionally lower levels of training of staff supervising these spaces. Strong effects overall were found in elementary and middle school settings.



Figure 1

Four elements of school-wide positive behavior support

From *The evolution of discipline practices: School-wide positive behavior supports*, by G. Sugai and R. Horner, 2002, *Child & Family Behavior Therapy, 24*(1-2), p. 30.

Bringing it All Together: Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

Sugai and Horner (2009) described RTI as a framework for SWPBS, laying the groundwork for MTSS. They found the practices in the two systems similar, as both include universal screening, scientifically based interventions, data-based decision making by teams, fidelity measures, and progress monitoring. Figure 2 illustrates some of these similarities, but it

still displays these systems as separate, parallel structures. Sugai and Horner noted that simply adding RTI and SWPBS as distinct systems to a school is untenable due to limited time and resources, and consideration should be taken to combine the two. They argued that these systems should not be seen solely as special education initiatives, but rather as school-wide approaches to support all students.

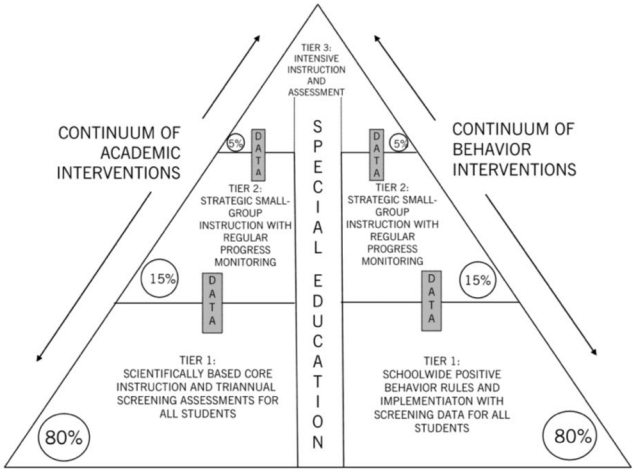


Figure 2. *Continuum of Academic and Behavioral Interventions*
From *Response to Intervention: Principles and strategies for success*, by R. Brown-Chidsey and M. W. Steege, 2010.

Additional research established the connections between student behavior and academic achievement (Algozzine & Algozzine, 2009; McIntosh et al., 2006, 2008), particularly literacy and externalizing problem behavior (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016a). Combined systems are likely to be more effective, provide more seamless support, and contribute to taking down silos and ensuring that teams take responsibility for a whole student (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016a). This dissertation utilizes an integrated model of MTSS as envisioned by McIntosh and Goodman (2016).

The Center on Multi-Tiered System of Supports defines key MTSS elements as screening, multi-level prevention system, progress monitoring, and data-based decision making

(2025). Tier 1 is high quality primary instruction that is designed to meet the needs of all students. Tier 2 is an intervention provided in addition to Tier 1 for students who need additional support. Tier 3 is intensification of the supports offered in Tier 2 and is more individualized based on student needs. These four elements are supported by leadership and policy, professional capacity, and communication and collaboration. Both the National Center on RTI and the Center on Multi-Tiered System of Support utilize Figure 3 to represent MTSS.

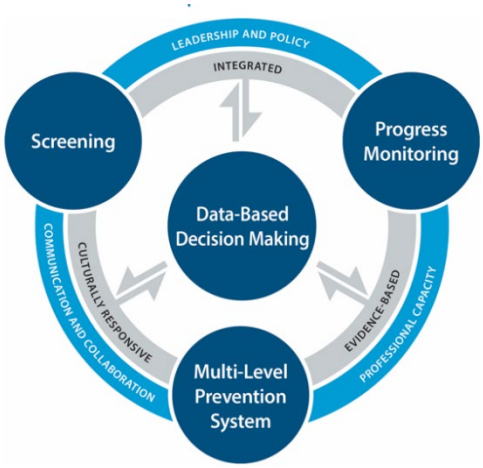


Figure 3. *Multi-tiered System of Supports*
From *Multi-tiered system of supports within schools: The what and the how* by J. E. Harlacher and T. R. Bailey, 2025.

McIntosh and Goodman (2016) describe the rapid increase in MTSS research and publications since 2009. They further describe RTI and PBIS, the foundational systems within MTSS, as having "been implemented on a scale of social significance that has evaded many previous attempts at school reform" (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016a, p. 4). This is a promising reform effort that warrants attention to implementation.

With this overview of MTSS in place, the following chapter will review literature on one key MTSS element: data-based decision making and the principal's role in it.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE SYNTHESIS

The logic model implicit in data-based decision making (DBDM) is that when educators analyze data and adjust their strategies (e.g., curricular, instructional, assessment), student learning outcomes will improve. Hamilton et al. (2009) described data use as a continuous cycle involving several elements: (a) collecting data from various sources; (b) interpreting the data and developing a hypothesis about factors leading to the observed outcomes; (c) changing instructional practice to better meet students' learning needs; and (d) after implementing the instructional change, determining whether the change improved learning by collecting and analyzing additional follow-up data.

In short, effective data use requires understanding what data are needed as a basis for making informed decisions. Teachers can do this individually or in teams but are most successful when working in partnership with effective school leadership (Drake, 2022). Principals are essential for creating environments in which educators can effectively use data to inform practice.

Data Literacy Definition and Application

The definition of data literacy initially focused on skills and knowledge related to collecting and understanding data but did not initially emphasize instructional decision making (Henderson & Corry, 2021; Mandinach & Gummer, 2016). For example, Hamilton et al. (2009) defined data literacy as the proficiency to pose inquiries, provide responses, and comprehend the process of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data. Mandinach and Gummer (2016) expanded the definition to include the ability to collect and analyze multiple types of data to develop

instructional steps. The terms data-based decision making (DBDM) and data-driven decision making (DDDM) are often used interchangeably with data literacy.

Put simply, DBDM means using data to make valid and impactful decisions to benefit students (Harlacher et al., 2024). The Data Quality Campaign defined data-literate educators as individuals who "continuously, effectively, and ethically access, interpret, act on, and communicate multiple types of data from state, local, classroom, and other sources to improve outcomes for students in a manner appropriate to educators' professional roles and responsibilities" (Data Quality Campaign, 2016).

One outcome of the *No Child Left Behind Act* was the requirement of states, districts, and schools to disaggregate data to measure and interpret disparate outcomes among student groups. More recently, the literature has begun to emphasize using data literacy and DBDM to improve equity in student subgroups to improve equitable outcomes for different student groups with an equity lens. Garner et al. (2017) argued that most data-use models treat inequity as a technical rather than a systemic or political issue. Data often "point educators toward ameliorative actions without forcing them to confront systemic inequities that contribute to achievement disparities" (p. 407).

Dodman et al. (2023) expanded these ideas by exploring an equity-focused critical data-driven decision making (CDDDM) framework that includes the broader contexts in which schools operate – especially the social and political systems contributing to disparities in student outcomes. Mandinach and Schildkamp (2021) suggested using an equity lens is the most important shift in DBDM and requires focusing on students' assets and broader identities rather than deficits. They argued that embedding an equity lens into DBDM has promise for guiding and strengthening teacher cultural competence and leads to more equitable student outcomes.

Professional Standards

The American Federation of Teachers (1990) developed competency standards for educators related to assessment data. These include selecting appropriate assessments, scoring and interpreting assessments, using results to inform instructional and school improvement decisions, and communicating results to students and families. Building upon AFT's work, the American Association of School Administrators (AASA; 1997) created standards for principals and central office leaders, adding a leadership lens to data use. Their standards included: involving leaders in assessment policy development, communicating technical data to nontechnical audiences, ensuring technical adequacy and validity in assessments for students from diverse backgrounds, and using assessment data to evaluate programs. Building on the earlier work of AFT and AASA, the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) in partnership with the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) developed new data literacy standards for school and district leaders. Their guidance addresses the use of assessment data, developing and maintaining data systems to support improvement, and using data to collaboratively develop a vision for the school (2015).

In Washington State, concepts of data literacy are visible in the minimum principal evaluation criteria (Washington Administrative Code 392-191A-150, 2013). For example, Criterion 1 speaks to the role of the principal in creating a culture of continuous improvement in which all students are successful. Criterion 3 requires that principals use multiple student data elements to create a data-driven plan for school improvement. Criterion 5 requires principal supervision to improve instruction for all teachers by aligning curriculum, instruction, and assessment. A key takeaway is that concepts of data literacy for principals, and thus, expectations around their practice, are woven throughout national and state standards.

Multiple Sources and Types of Data

Principals and teachers have access to a variety of types of data, including student assessment data (Drake, 2022). However, assessment literacy is not the same as the broader concept of data literacy (Mandinach & Schildkamp, 2021). For example, when driven by the prior, the focus is often confined to narrow assessment data such as numeracy and literacy to the exclusion of science, social/cultural studies, the arts, physical education, and other relevant academic subjects (Mandinach & Schildkamp, 2021). Researchers note other types of data that educators can access and should consider using to improve student outcomes. Beyond assessment results, student demographic data, including disability status, languages spoken, English proficiency, homelessness, and socio-economic status, are important to collect and consider (Mandinach & Schildkamp, 2021). Even further, Drake (2022) encouraged examination of discipline, attendance, and qualitative data gathered through classroom walkthroughs and informal conversations with both teachers and parents as important to consider.

Recent federal initiatives such as the Obama Administration's *Race to the Top* (RttT) within the bounds of the reauthorized *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESEA; 2015) encouraged teacher evaluation using rigorous observation and multiple student data sources. Utilizing broad and diverse data provide added and richer context for characterizing student behaviors and achievement. However, without school leaders and teachers understanding the full context for student achievement and behavior, it is difficult for educators to avoid confirmation bias and to inform next instructional steps (Mandinach & Schildkamp, 2021).

Why Focus on Principals?

Principals are in a unique role as instructional leaders who set expectations for how individuals collect, analyze, and use data for school and classroom decision-making. They model

the use of data and provide structured opportunities for data analysis, all of which impact teacher behavior and attitudes, and thus, practice. They establish expectations for teacher data collection and use and support professional learning communities in which teachers analyze data and adjust their instruction (Jimerson et al., 2021). Additionally, principals are often the gatekeepers of data, determining who can and who cannot access data systems. They are most effective when they model and champion data use (Jimerson et al., 2021).

Shared leadership and decision-making with other central office administrators and teacher leaders is also necessary (Lachat & Smith, 2005), and principals are the hinge point for these relationships. Principal leadership is essential in school improvement, especially when implementing DBDM frameworks (Levin & Datnow, 2012). Principals' dispositions are often imitated by teachers and become the "way things are done" (Whitely et al., 2017, p. 44). Principals can also protect teachers from the distractions of "administrivia" (Butler, 2009; as cited in Levin & Datnow, 2012) so they can focus on DBDM.

Drake's 2022 integrative review of principal data use notes that the literature on data use focuses on how teachers use data and how principals enable the use of data, but less on how principals themselves use data. This is partially because many research articles use passive voice (e.g., "data were used…") so it is difficult to discern *who* is using data, or because the evidence for principals using data is simply lacking (Drake, 2022). Drake identified important roles for principals, including setting a vision, goals, expectations, and norms for data use; modeling effective use of data; devoting teacher time to use data; providing training so teachers understand data; and establishing distributed leadership structures and teams. The subsequent sections review research related to these roles in more detail.

The quality of school leadership is positively related to higher levels of MTSS implementation. A descriptive study by the Schoolwide Integrated Framework for Transformation (SWIFT) analyzed the impact of technical assistance on school leadership quality to improve MTSS implementation (Choi et al., 2019). Hypothesizing that school leadership was a mediating factor between technical assistance and MTSS implementation, researchers recruited five states to participate, and those five states in turn selected 17 LEAs and 59 schools. Multiple levels of schools were included: 59% elementary, 24% middle, and 17% preK-8, representing a mix of rural, suburban, and urban settings. Sixty-two percent of students in participating schools received free or reduced-price lunches.

Measurements included the SWIFT-FIT, a measure of MTSS implementation that includes ten features of the SWIFT framework for inclusive education. Items included administrative leadership and MTSS components. This measure was found to be reliable and valid for measuring MTSS implementation in an earlier technical adequacy study. In the first year the SWIFT-FIT was administered by formally trained assessors who interviewed school leaders, teachers, parent and staff; reviewed documents; and conducted classroom observations. In subsequent years, SEA and LEA staff were trained to participate as assessors with interrater reliability checks. The SWIFT Center provided training to SEA, LEA, and school teams and follow up activities including weekly support from SWIFT technical assistance (SWIFT-TA) with principals and LEA staff.

Structural equation modeling was used to examine the role of leadership in implementation. Results showed that implementation fidelity increased, and multiple domains improved, including administrative leadership, inclusive academic instruction, inclusive behavior instruction, and educator support systems. Academic MTSS, however, showed the least

improvement. In summary, the study found that school leadership is important for school improvement. The researchers recommended a longitudinal study to understand the longer-term impacts of school leadership, and they cautioned, "Operational transformation is a slow, arduous process in schools, indicative of a complete cultural shift in practice" (Choi et al., 2019, p. 24).

Cultivating a Data Culture

Cultivating school culture to maximize teacher data use is a critical school leader role. According to Jimerson et al. (2021), "Leaders are central to establishing trusting, improvement-oriented, and risk-embracing cultures within schools necessary for effective data use…Where the prevailing leadership frame for data use is compliance and monitoring, or where leaders engage in 'name and shame' practices, high-quality educational opportunities for students are precluded" (p. 1). A quantitative study of school leadership and RTI (Maier et al., 2016) examined leadership behaviors and RTI implementation and found that the transformational leadership style of principals was a predictive factor for RTI implementation. Researchers built upon Leithwood and Sun's (2012) synthesis of 79 unpublished studies on the nature of transformational school leadership that identified 11 leadership practices found to have positive effects on school conditions, including positive effects on teachers and small but positive effects on student achievement.

Transformational leaders focus on the intrinsic need of people to be part of an organization that is accomplishing a higher purpose, in contrast with transactional leaders, who set up reward and punishment systems; and passive/avoidant leaders, who leave others to deal with problems without assistance until the problems are dire (Maier et al., 2016). Using a cross-sectional correlational design, researchers compared RTI implementation scores on the National Center on Response to Intervention's *RTI Essential Components Integrity Rubric* to mean scores

for principals on the passive/avoidant, transactional, and transformative leadership styles as measured on the *Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire, 5th Edition*. Participants were largely from Georgia but also New York and Ohio and included school psychologists and educators representing other roles. They rated their school's RTI implementation and their principal's leadership styles. Findings include a significant positive association between transformational leadership and RTI implementation; in contrast, neither transactional nor passive/avoidant leadership predicted RTI implementation.

Researchers in Holland in 2019 conducted an exploratory case study to answer the question, "How do formal school leaders apply leadership behaviors and strategies to support the work of the data team in the data team intervention?" (Schildkamp et al., 2019, p. 289). Teams from 14 Dutch schools participated in surveys about their data use (n = 277). The schools were clustered into *low*, *average*, and *high data use* based on the survey responses. Then four schools were selected: one low use, two average use, and one high use. Over a span of two years, researchers conducted three interviews with each of 30 data team members regarding their perception of the school leaders. They also audio recorded five team meetings for each school. The interviews and audio recordings were analyzed with multiple rounds of coding.

Findings include the critical role of school leaders in communicating a vision for the use of data, norms for data use, and setting goals. Norms created a sense of safety and trust in discussions about data. The active participation of the school leaders helped establish and sustain a data culture and make it clear that the data teamwork was important. Another finding was that leaders attended to their staff's emotional needs, including concerns and frustrations. The leaders also distributed leadership roles to share responsibility and knowledge. Finally, school leaders

were the link between the data team and the rest of the school staff, contributing to greater data use at the school.

Jimerson et al. explored a model for collaborative data use in their 2021 qualitative study in north Texas at an elementary school. The study was set in a large, 700-student preK- grade 4 school described as ethnically diverse, with 40% African American, 25% Hispanic, 20% white, and 10% Asian or Pacific Islander. More than half of the students received free or reduced-price meals. Approximately three quarters of students were meeting the state standard in reading and math. Researchers attended ten data team meetings and transcribed their contents. They also collected an assessment of knowledge about data use and conducted two interviews with each participant. The qualitative data were coded and analyzed. One finding related to principal leadership is that the team had a trusting culture that allowed members to express dissenting opinions and admit to each other when they didn't know how to do something. The teachers attributed this culture to the steady presence of the principal, who attended all the meetings and kept the focus of dialog on the identified problem. He took a collegial stance during meetings and was open to ideas and concerns. He kept the focus of the conversation on factors within the teachers' control. Additionally, he reminded the team about the goal, mission, and vision that students make academic, social, and behavioral growth. He also provided individual assistance to teachers by showing them how to access and organize data and how to use tools such as Excel.

Principal leadership is essential in school improvement efforts. Data driven decision making requires the principal to serve as the site leader in making the use of data a reality (Levin & Datnow, 2012).

Demonstrating a Commitment to Equity

Principals who demonstrate a commitment to equity and serve as active participants in the multi-faceted DBDM processes have a positive impact on how teachers view the importance of the focus on equity and the degree to which DBDM is implemented with fidelity (Dodman et al., 2023). Dodman and colleagues conducted a case study to explore how professional development of data use for equity affected educators' actions and commitment related to addressing inequities. Eight teachers and two administrators participated in multiple professional development sessions about data, equity, and culturally responsive teaching. They participated in a pre and post survey regarding perceptions of roles and responsibilities, perceptions of schools and students, and confidence and interest in collecting and analyzing data. An additional survey measured their attitude toward multicultural education. Administrators were interviewed, and teachers participated in a focus group. Researchers coded the data from the interviews and focus groups. Finally, session notes and actions plans were collected to confirm or disconfirm the participants' reported experiences.

Their findings included a significant increase in the use of data, but a decrease in the equity variables. This was seen as a positive outcome because participants were more aware of inequities and therefore rated equity lower than in the first survey. As for principal engagement, the study found that her physical presence and active engagement provided an environment in which teachers could share concerns and explore issues of equity in the data.

Modeling Effective Use of Data

A mixed methods study found that positive associations with data use can arise from positive, supportive modeling (Jimerson, 2014). Researchers conducted a case study to explore mental models for data use in a small Texas school district. The methods included a survey on

data use, interviews, and focus groups of district and school staff. Principals and teachers were identified for two separate focus groups: one with randomly selected teachers, and one with individuals seen by their peers as strong data users. Among other results, a key finding was that although some regarded data with frustration and reluctance, others enjoyed working with data. Contributing to the mental models were early experiences with data use, particularly leaders at the school or district level who took time to model the use of data. Instructional coaches, specialists, and district leaders all contributed positively to teachers' perceptions of data use.

Yoon's 2016 study of data-driven decision making and principal leadership analyzed data from the Study of Instructional Improvement, which collected data on 38 principals in 38 schools for three years from 2001-02 to 2003-04. The independent variables were years of principal and teacher experience, percentage of students qualifying for free and reduced-price meals, school size, and literacy interventions. Teacher and principal questionnaires were collected. Principal data-driven leadership included use of data for planning programs, student grades, results of testing, informal assessments, and classroom observations. These were combined into a composite score representing data-driven practices.

Teachers' buy-in was measured with the belief in values and changes in school improvement programs and its influence on student achievement. Yoon conducted hierarchical linear modeling to determine how principals and school demographics influenced data driven practices. Interestingly, principals with more experience were found to be less data driven, perhaps because they relied more on prior knowledge than current data. Additional findings indicated that teachers were more likely to buy in when principals used data in their practices. Student outcomes over time were more positive in schools with high teacher buy-in. However, there was not a statistically significant relationship between principal data use and student

outcomes, suggesting that principals' data use may not have a direct impact on student achievement.

Barriers to Principal Data Use

One barrier to utilizing data is that many educators, including principals, lack training in basic concepts, statistics, and knowledge of data (Bettesworth et al., 2009; Mandinach & Schildkamp, 2021). Data use or data literacy is not included in many principal preparation programs (Grigsby & Vesey, 2011). Principals report that they have challenges accessing data, knowing how to analyze data, and using it as a basis for instructional decisions (Grissom et al., 2017). The result is many principals rely on support from the central office or their colleagues; this creates an inconsistent knowledge base across the school district (Miller, 2010). Lack of understanding of key vocabulary may lead principals and other educators to misunderstand the data and thus mischaracterize its implications and/or dismiss it as invalid (Jimerson et al., 2021).

Lack of training and knowledge contribute to a lack of self-efficacy. School leaders who lack self-efficacy have low confidence in their own ability, which can lead them to not act upon important data, even after going through the efforts of collecting it. According to Bettesworth and Alonzo (2009), without adequate training and ability to practice their new skills, educators readily revert back to old practices and impulses rather than analyses based on data, often failing to act. Then the negative impact of the failure to act continues to diminish self-efficacy.

Attitudes, beliefs, and previous experiences with data influence the degree to which educators routinely use data. Educators will make the effort to learn from data only if they believe the analysis is worthwhile (Bettesworth & Alonzo, 2009) and that the data are accurate and reliable (Drake, 2022). Optimistically, principals who have had positive experiences using data in the past are more likely to continue to do so (Jimerson, 2014). Principals with formal

training in the use of data are more likely to report using data (Mingchu Luo, 2008), and principals with higher levels of education are more data driven (Schildkamp et al., 2019, p. 289). However, principals with more years of experience tend to be less data driven, perhaps because they are relying on assumptions rather than examining data (Yoon, 2016) and/or because they were inadequately trained in DBDM strategies (Bettesworth & Alonzo, 2009). On balance, providing better support for principals can help them gain knowledge and skills in data literacy, and thus, encourage improved outcomes for students.

Strategies to Lower Barriers to Principal Data Use

One strategy to improve data use by lowering barriers is to address the frequent lack of professional preparation noted above by providing pre-service and ongoing training. Bettesworth and Alonzo (2009) explored professional development on statistics and measurement principles for school leaders. They conducted two studies: one in the Pacific Northwest with 31 preservice administrators in a licensure program and another in Western Canada with teams of three from five suburban schools. In the first study, they conducted a pre-test of skills and initial survey of perceptions, confidence, and efficacy in data use. They then provided two days of training on measurement principles, statistics, and using data to make instructional decisions. Then participants completed a post-test and exit survey.

These participants were a convenience sample of leaders who were seeking more opportunities for district leadership. There were also three follow up interviews with four of the participants who had different levels of skills; two high-skilled and two low-skilled, as measured on the pre-test. In the second study, a similar approach was followed, but the participants also received a half year of bi-weekly coaching and peer support groups. The pre- and post- tests were analyzed using an ANOVA, the survey questions were analyzed with a frequency count,

and the interviews were analyzed to assess efficacy, confidence, and comfort levels as a result of the training. Results show that the training increased participants' knowledge of measurement and data analysis and their feelings of efficacy regarding using the data to make instructional decisions. Results from the second study showed even greater gains in feelings of efficacy. Feelings of efficacy led to greater motivation to use data, which further increased efficacy. Participants also self-reported increased frequency of analyzing student data. Notable in the context of this paper is the observation that participants deferred to the principal for final decisions (Bettesworth et al., 2009).

Districts can support principals in using data effectively by providing principals with professional development aligned to their role. For example, a mixed methods study by Grissom et al. (2017) found that supports can lower barriers to data use in making personnel decisions. Researchers interviewed 110 central office leaders and 76 principals in six urban school districts and two charter management organizations. They also surveyed the principals in six of the systems. The eight total organizations were selected because they had been collecting measures of teacher effectiveness, such as value-added measures and student achievement measures, including end of course exams and standardized tests, for at least one year. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and then thematically coded. Based on the interviews, each system was scored on each of four dimensions: professional development for principals; connecting principals to supports such as data coaches, human resource staff, or other experts; institutional structures and tools; and building a data use culture.

Professional development for principals included logistics of data systems, accessing reports, obtaining prior years' data, and building skill in knowing which data to use and when. Building trust in the measures facilitated principals having the confidence to discuss data with

teachers. Connections to support and expertise included central personnel deployed to work as data coaches in support of principals and human resource staff assisting with analyzing job candidates' effectiveness ratings. Principal networks assisted novice principals in utilizing data. Institutional structures and tools included data dashboards, data reports, and one notable example of identifying less effective teachers and planning supports for them. Finally, districts facilitated building a data use culture by frequently talking about data, transparently using it in their own decision making, and setting expectations for principals to engage in data. Overall, the study found alignment between higher degrees of system support and higher levels of principal data use.

Central office support can also be useful in lowering barriers for principal data use. Central office leaders can build a data-use culture by modeling, setting expectations, and holding principals accountable (Drake, 2022). The quality of the relationship between school and central office leaders influences the flow of data from the school to the district and the quality of that data (Honig & Venkateswaran, 2012). Grissom et al. (2017) found that when central offices provided higher levels of support, principals perceive that barriers are lower. Highly supportive systems included timeliness of data availability, and the degree of difficulty involved in accessing the data. In highly supportive systems, principals reported that more teachers perceived that the data were valid, reflecting a positive data culture within the school. Grissom et al. (2017) found that when districts provided individual training or coaching on accessing and understanding data, principal skills improved, confidence was raised, and additional support could be provided through repeated, "just-in-time" training sessions. Districts can support principal networks to support and coach less experienced principals. Additional central office

support in the form of data dashboards or reports is helpful, particularly when the data are delivered in a timely way (Drake, 2022).

Summary

This chapter provided a brief overview of developing concepts of data literacy, professional standards for principals regarding data literacy, essential data for principals to consider, an explanation of the necessity to focus on the role of the principal's role in DBDM, as well as barriers and strategies to lower barriers to data understanding and use. This topic is critical for any district attempting to grow data literacy and implement DBDM, and this chapter has set the stage for a case study of principal data literacy in an MTSS system.

More specifically, my dissertation determined the current level of principal skill in implementing DBDM in a school district that was in the process of adopting MTSS system-wide and identified the supports that principals need to enhance their capacity to implement DBDM effectively within an MTSS framework.

CHAPTER III

METHOD

Research Design

I conducted a case study using a mixed methods approach, which allows for the integration of quantitative and qualitative data (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2006), to explore the current levels of principal data literacy and leadership skills to support multi-tiered systems of support. MTSS is a multi-leveled prevention and intervention framework that maximizes student achievement through evidence-based instruction, merging academic and social emotional supports (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016b). The setting is a medium sized school district that has some elements of MTSS in place but has not achieved full implementation. My primary goal was to identify professional development needs of school leaders implementing MTSS. Using a mixed methods approach allows for more insight and stronger understanding of a problem than using a single method (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Mixed methods are also helpful to engage participants in the study, not just as subjects but as key informants about the nature of the problem and co-creators of the solutions (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

This study was conducted in alignment with a pragmatist world view, emphasizing the importance of the research question being asked and the consequences of the research and is oriented toward real world situations (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). This worldview was appropriate because the study was intended to inform the needs and next steps in our school district's implementation of MTSS.

More specifically, I selected a convergent mixed methods design, which is complementary to a pragmatist world view (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). This design allowed me to bring together quantitative and qualitative data to gain a more complete understanding.

Figure 4 provides a diagram of the procedures in this study, and Figure 5 outlines the steps I took to conduct this study.

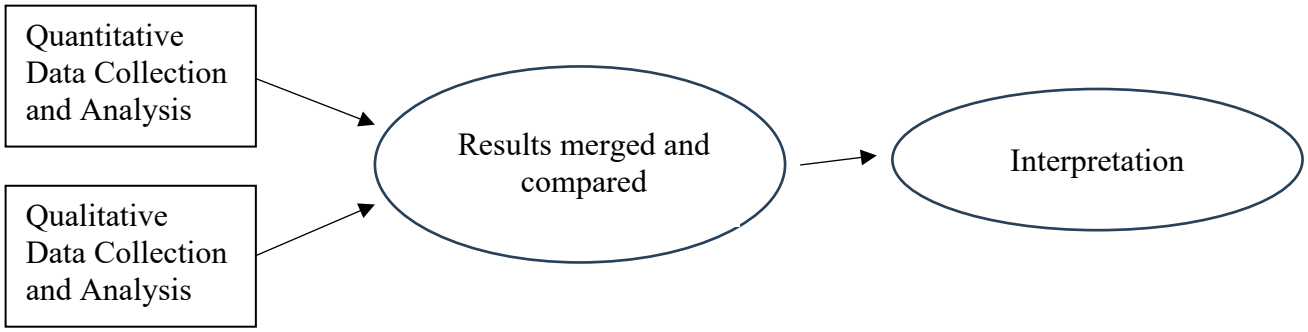


Figure 4. *Diagram of the Procedures*

Adapted from Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017

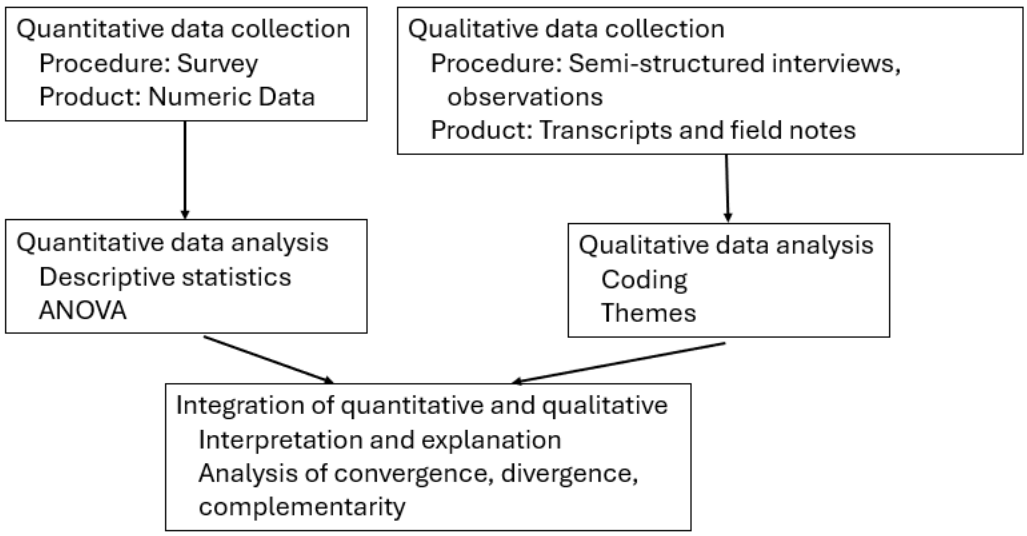


Figure 5. *Key Steps to Conduct the Study*

Adapted from Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017

By employing a pragmatist world view and conducting this study using a convergent mixed methods design, I was able to better understand the current level of data literacy among our school leaders and discern the professional development needs in order to improve our district's implementation of MTSS.

Setting

The district is a large, 14,000 student school district located on the I-5 corridor in Western Washington. The district has 13 elementary schools, four middle schools, three high schools, and four choice schools (an online academy, a career-oriented high school, a performing arts middle school, and a homeschool parent partnership). It is the largest, most diverse district in the county and is among the top 10% largest districts in the state. The student racial demographics largely mirror the state: 43% White, 24% Hispanic/Latino, 16% two or more races, 7% Asian, 5% Black/African American, 3% Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and 1% American Indian/Alaskan Native. Nearly half of the students are low income, which is also similar to the state rate. One notable difference is that military connected students make up nearly 16% of the district student population compared to just under 3% at the state level, due to the district being situated just to the south of Joint Base Lewis-McChord, an Army and Air Force military installation. Additionally, the rate of students with disabilities is 20.2% compared to 14.5% at the state level. Data for this study were collected in the fall of 2025 and the winter of 2026, all within school year 2025-26.

To better understand the context in which this study is set, it is important to provide a brief background on the district's initiatives. NTPS has implemented a Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS) system for more than a decade. Response to Intervention (RTI) systems have been implemented in pockets for a similar time span; RTI adoption is not uniform

across the district. District leaders worked with the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction on readiness to use RTI for identification of students with specific learning disabilities, rather than relying on the outdated discrepancy model. They also established a memorandum of understanding with the local teachers' union to improve behavior support for teachers in classrooms. These two initiatives prompted the district leadership team to devise a plan to refresh these two systems and create a more coherent multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) approach to meeting students' needs.

Participants

The district has 24 principals and 20 assistant principals, all of whom are responsible for instructional leadership to one degree or another. These principals and assistant principals are called "principals" in the rest of this manuscript. I recruited as many principals as possible to participate in the survey, with a goal of having at least six leaders from each level (elementary, middle, high), for a total of 18. I recruited for the survey by attending principal meetings and explaining the purpose of the study, assuring them of confidentiality, and allocating dedicated time in the meeting to complete the survey. Principals and assistant principals hold regular in-person meetings by level, so this required my attendance at three meetings. This sample is appropriate because it includes all levels (elementary, middle, and high) of school leaders in the district and captured a diversity of perspectives in terms of the amount of experience and backgrounds of the principals.

I interviewed 14 principals using a purposive sample (Creswell, 2015). This was possible because I already had strong working relationships with principals and assistant principals at all levels in the district. My intent in ensuring that elementary, middle, and high school levels are represented was to access a full picture of principal skill and knowledge. Similar to other districts

implementing MTSS, elementary level schools generally have stronger implementation, whereas secondary (middle and high) schools have weaker implementation due to differing structural challenges (Durrance, 2023). I continued to interview additional leaders until I reached data saturation (Creswell, 2015).

I also conducted ten observations of data team meetings. I observed teams when their principals or assistant principals were present for the meeting. This allowed me to observe an adequate number of schools, with additional observations as needed to reach data saturation.

Sources of Data and Data Collection Procedures

I gathered quantitative data from a principal survey and qualitative data from principal interviews and observations of school teams discussing data with their principals. This research qualified as *exempt* by the University of Oregon's Institutional Review Board. I completed the online Exempt Self-Assessment Tool, and my research falls within exempt category 1, *research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings*. Participants were limited to adults. I also received approval from the school district superintendent to conduct the research.

Principal Survey

I gathered quantitative data by using a principal survey measuring principal data literacy, their perceptions of implementation of elements of MTSS, and their professional development needs (see Appendix A). The survey had two parts. Part One asked questions about the level of school at which the principal was serving, years of experience as a principal, and whether they were currently a principal or assistant principal. Prior to using Part One of the survey in my study, I field tested it with several district directors and the two principal supervisors to give me feedback on the survey questions (Alonzo & Tindal, 2011). This step improved the questions in the survey by catching a few typographical errors, ensured that principals would be likely to be

able to understand and answer the questions, and also provided an opportunity for me to ensure that district leadership understood the content and intent of the survey, thereby creating transparency and buy-in among district leadership.

Part Two of the survey consisted of all of the questions from the *Perceptions of RtI Skills Survey,* developed by the Florida Problem Solving/Response to Intervention Project (Castillo et al., 2012). The measure was developed to assess educator beliefs about their own skills and abilities to support implementation of Response to Intervention practices with the purpose of determining what professional development needs exist. Development of the measure included 2,397 educators in 68 schools in 2008 and 1,961 educators in 60 schools in 2010, all in a southeastern state. Educators included administrators, teachers, and support personnel. The measure gathers data on three dimensions, which include perceptions of skills in an academic context, skills in a behavior context, and skills in data manipulation and technology skills (see Table 1). Prior to the development of this tool there was no available, valid survey tool to measure educator perceptions of RTI skills. In the 2008 data collection, skill levels were highest for those related to academic factors (M = 3.60, SD = 0.76), followed by behavior (M = 3.38, SD = 0.76), then then data manipulation and technology skills (M =2.99, SD = 0.97). Results in 2010 were similar. The authors found significant associations between factor scores and fidelity of RTI implementation at Tiers 1 and 2, as measured by the *Tiers 1 and II Critical Components Checklist*, which was designed in a prior study to measure implementation of a data-based problem-solving process.

The measure has 75 questions and uses a five-point scale with five possible responses: 1 = *I do not have this skill at all* (NS); 2 = *I have minimal skills in this area; need substantial support to use it* (MsS); 3 = *I have the skills, but still need some support to use it* (SS); 4 = *I can*

use this skill with little support (HS); and 5 = *I am highly skilled in this area and could teach others to use this skill* (VHS). In developing this measure, researchers checked content validity with an expert educator validation panel to ensure questions were clear, represented the research topic, and were of sufficient quality for use.

Table 1

Survey Questions by Domain

Domain	Number of Questions
Academic	23
Behavior	23
Social Emotional	23
Data Use	6

Researchers conducted exploratory common factor analysis to identify the constructs measured in their survey. Three domains emerged from this analysis: "applying RtI skills to academic content, applying skills to behavior content, and skills in manipulating data and using technology to assist in data-based decision making" (Castillo et al., 2012, p. 88). Since the original development of the survey, one additional domain was added to capture applying RtI skills to social emotional skills (Florida PS/StI Statewide Project, 2022). The original *Perceptions of RtI Skills Survey* has additional questions that are irrelevant in the context of my two-part survey, so they were not included. These include the district name, the respondents' role, and grade levels.

Principal Survey Data Collection Procedures

The survey was administered to principals in three separate meetings which were held by level in early fall 2025. The survey was administered during preexisting meetings to ensure

strong participation, as all principals were expected to attend these meetings. I introduced the purpose of the study and the part that the survey played, explained that their participation was voluntary and anonymous, sent the link to them, and then left the meeting to ensure that participants could opt out without my knowledge if they chose not to complete the survey. The survey was delivered online using Qualtrics with the University of Oregon template and logo. This software met the needs of this study because it ensured anonymity for participants. For principals not in attendance at the meeting, I sent a targeted email asking for their participation with a link to the survey. I also followed up with the principals via email twice with group messages explaining the purpose of the study and asking for their participation to be sure their voices were present.

Principal Survey Data Analysis

For part one of the survey, I coded the responses as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Survey Coding

Do you currently serve as a principal or assistant principal?	Assistant principal = 1 Principal = 2
How many years have you served as a principal or assistant principal, in this district or any other?	0-5 = 1 6-10 = 2 11+ = 3
At what level do you *currently serve* as a principal/assistant principal? (check all that apply)	Elementary = 1 Middle = 2 High = 3 Other = 4

Part Two of the survey is made up of questions from the *Perceptions of RtI Skills Survey*, which is scored in four domains: perceptions of RtI skills applied to academic content, perceptions of RtI skills applied to behavior content, perceptions of RtI skills applied to social emotional content, and perceptions of data manipulation and technology use (Florida PS/StI Statewide

Project, 2022). I used ANOVA to check for differences between responses based on three factors: whether the leader was a principal or assistant principal, the level of school at which the principal served (elementary, middle, high), and the years of experience as a principal. To account for the risk of Type 1 error due to multiple analyses using the same data set, I applied the Bonferroni correction to adjust alpha level.

Interviews

I originally planned to conduct at least nine semi-structured interviews, intending to continue interviewing as needed until data saturation was reached. I conducted 14 semi-structured interviews. Table 3 displays these data by level. These interview questions were adapted from a previously published study of RTI implementation and principal leadership which used interviews and focus groups (Meyer & Behar-Horenstein, 2015). The interview questions are included in Appendix B.

Table 3
Principal Interviews

Elementary	6
Middle	4
High	4
Total	14

Interview Data Collection Procedures

Three weeks prior to conducting the interviews, I recruited participants from each level (elementary, middle, and high). Because I am a district leader, I acknowledge that power dynamics could be an issue; I did not want anyone to feel pressured to participate if they didn't want to participate, and I was hoping to elicit honest responses rather than what people thought I

would want to hear. Therefore, I emphasized the voluntary and confidential nature of the interviews and gave potential participants multiple opportunities to decline. I provided them with an informed consent form to read prior to the interview date and time, and I reviewed that form with participants just prior to the start of each interview.

Interviews were conducted from October 8 to November 14, 2025. I held the interviews on Microsoft Teams and recorded them with permission of the participants. This enabled me to access transcripts. Each interview lasted about 45 minutes. The interview protocol followed Creswell and Creswell Báez's (2021) interview structure, including an introduction, the opening question, content questions, follow up questions, and closing instructions. The introduction described the purpose of the study, a prompt for myself to ensure I had a signed consent form, an overview of the interview including the number of questions and how long I expected it to take, a request for permission to record the session, and asking if the interviewee had any questions. The opening question was intended to create a sense of ease for the interviewee. The content questions were open-ended and began with the words *what* or *how* to encourage the interviewee to talk. Probes including "tell me more" or "what is an example of that?" were used to ask the interviewee to expand upon their thinking and share more. The last question prompted the interviewee to add additional information that I may not have asked about. The closing instructions included a reminder that everything they had said was confidential, asking if I could follow up with them if I had questions or wanted them to review their transcript, and thanking them for their participation. At the end of the interview, I explained that I was looking for opportunities to observe principals working with their teacher teams and discussing data and asked if they might have an upcoming opportunity for me and my coinvestigator. This allowed me to recruit schools for the observation section.

Interview Data Analysis

I conducted coding of the interview transcripts using Dedoose version 10.0.59 (2025). My first round of coding was Descriptive coding with the goal of reflecting what I heard and saw in general (Saldaña, 2021). In this process, I read every transcript while viewing the recordings to ensure they were accurate. Then I assigned short phrases or words to capture content and surface-level meaning. This process generated 165 codes and subcodes. The second round of coding was In Vivo coding to capture the voices of the principals and represent their perspectives (Saldaña, 2021). In this process, I identified exact words or phrases from the interviews that captured the participants' experiences. Following the two rounds of coding, I grouped the codes and quotations into categories and subcategories to work toward identifying key themes. This process generated six primary themes with 22 subthemes.

Observations

I originally planned to conduct at least nine observations, with a minimum of three from each level, intending to continue observing as needed until data saturation was reached. Ultimately, I conducted 10 observations of teacher/principal teams discussing data. During the principal interviews, I asked each principal if they would consent to observations of meetings in which they were discussing data with teachers related to our MTSS system. Of the 13 interviews I conducted, one principal declined an observation, three principals did not provide information about when the observations might occur, and ten principals sent me dates and times to observe the meeting of their choice. My intent in conducting observations was to observe principals utilizing data and leading data discussions with teachers. It was my hope that these observations would enable me to identify strengths in principal skills and also identify gaps which might assist with identifying professional development needs. The observations also allowed me to

triangulate the principal self-perceptions collected via the surveys and interviews. The observations were conducted from October 2025 to January 2026.

Observation Data Collection Procedures

During the observations, I recorded the roles of the participants, the purpose of the meeting being observed, and the content of the discussion. I was looking specifically for evidence of MTSS processes and data use. My field notes captured an account of what I saw and heard. A colleague, another leader in the school district, served as a co-investigator, and we debriefed each observation to reconcile our notes into a single reflection. The *Observation Notetaking Template* is available in Appendix C.

Observation Data Analysis

Following the tradition of ethnographic case studies, my co-investigator and I took notes during the meetings and wrote up our impressions after the meetings as systematically as possible. Following the guidance in *Writing Ethnographic Field Notes*, we utilized the strategy of "jotting" to include key activities, sensory details, textured descriptions, and the participants' emotional expressions. Then we used the jottings to write up more complete field notes to capture the themes of the meetings (Emerson et al., 2011), resulting in the vignettes in Appendix D. From the field notes and vignettes, we looked for evidence of the findings from the survey and the themes from the interviews. We modified and added to the themes identified in the interviews through this process.

Bringing it All Together

Following the guidance of Creswell and Plano Clark (2017), the final step of analysis was to examine the quantitative and qualitative findings for a more complete understanding of the research question, combining the two data sets, looking for ways in which they converged and

diverged. I analyzed the results using joint displays to compare the results side by side. I began by reviewing my findings from the quantitative portion of the study, and then I layered on the themes from the qualitative portion. First, I looked for themes that diverged. For example, principals might have self-assessed their skills as *high* in *using data to make decisions*, but it might have become clear in the observations that they needed to build their skills in this area. Next, I looked for convergence, or points where the survey and the interviews/observations aligned. For example, I thought that I might see that principals self-identify *high levels* of skill in *identifying Tier 2 interventions* and find evidence to confirm that in the interviews and/or observations.

Threats to Validity and Research Integrity

Because this is a mixed methods study, I discuss both threats to validity and research integrity separately below. The conscious choice to do a mixed methods study provides methodological triangulation. Using both a quantitative and qualitative approach not only provides validation of the research findings, but it also provides a fuller and more complete picture of a phenomenon (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003)

Threats to Validity in the Quantitative Portion

There were three primary potential threats to internal validity in this study: history, instrumentation, and differential selection. I discuss each of these threats and my plans to minimize them in the paragraphs below.

This study took place in a district that has a history of implementing PBIS and MTSS with varying levels of success. Several initiatives were co-occurring with this research that may have posed a history threat (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). In Washington State, districts are expected to move away from the special education discrepancy model toward using RTI to

identify students with specific learning disabilities by 2028 (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, n.d.-a). This district participated in a project with the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction to refine systems to prepare for this change and to serve as a model and resource for other districts. Thus, principals will be engaged in professional development focused on DBDM, RTI, and MTSS within the next several school years. Therefore, during the course of data collection from fall of 2025 to winter 2026, principals may have refined their knowledge and skills, which could make earlier data collection (e.g., in the fall) less reflective of their actual knowledge and skills by the spring. I minimized this threat by compressing the quantitative and qualitative data collection into a relatively brief span of months. My hope was that my research findings could be helpful and complementary to the school district's preparation for these changes.

Another potential history threat was posed by federal level cuts to education funding and concerns related to the rumored complete closure of the U.S. Department of Education. These cuts could impact special education funding as well as any projects on MTSS and RTI. These impacts were impossible to predict and would be challenging to mitigate. Because these threats were so amorphous, I intended to develop a plan to minimize these threats as they became more apparent. Fortunately, changes in funding and significant policy changes did not occur during the study.

Instrumentation also posed a potential threat (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). I minimized this threat by using a research-validated survey with evidence that the questions provide a valid and reliable measurement of RTI skills (Castillo et al., 2015).

Research Integrity of the Qualitative Portion

I began by reflecting on my positionality as a researcher. Specifically, I am noting my professional position as an assistant superintendent of instructional services in the district I studied. This position bestows hierarchical power, and I strove to remain aware of the possibility that this could influence the interview responses and observations. In doing "backyard" research (Glesne, 1999), power dynamics cannot be ignored. Even if I were conducting this research in a district outside of my own, bias can creep into the collection and analysis because the presence of an outside observer can disrupt the activities of the participants. Individuals being observed can switch to "an on-stage role or special persona, a presentation of self to the outsider" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 265). To counter this issue, I made my intentions clear by describing the research project in advance to participants, being as unobtrusive in observations as possible by sitting off to the side of the group being observed, and by staying as long as possible to begin to fit into the landscape (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

In addition, my own professional experience has led to bias that must be recognized. I spent several years serving as the state director for a federally funded school improvement project called *Reading First,* which employed structures that later became known as RTI, and this experience was transformative for me as a professional. We provided grant funding to more than 85 schools across the state to employ scientifically-based reading research to improve reading outcomes for students in grades K-3. Our outcomes were strong. Since joining a school district, I have witnessed first-hand the improved academic outcomes of schools with strong data-based decision making and targeted interventions. My bias in favor of MTSS and my wish to improve outcomes for students has led to the selection of this topic of study. They also require me to be mindful of my potential bias and take steps to mitigate it.

The purpose of including qualitative research in this study was ensuring that the voice of the participants was captured. I offered first level member checking with every interview participant to ensure that the transcript of their interview reflected what they meant to say. One participant asked for the transcript of the interview but did not follow up with any suggested changes. All others declined this opportunity. I also sought out second level member checking with the analysis and interpretation of the themes. I shared the interview results draft with a principal, selected because he had served as the primary principal contact for the district. His feedback was that it represented the principals' perspectives.

Throughout the interviews and observations, I maintained an audit trail. I maintained a detailed log of all the research steps that occurred. I recorded the date, time, and context of each interview and observation. I documented the setting, including who and how many people were present, how many interruptions occurred, and any other relevant details. I maintained all notes and transcripts. I used verbatim quotations in the final analysis.

Utilizing a purposive sample for both the interviews and the observations enabled me to interview and observe representative examples from a range of skills and knowledge, from beginner to seasoned expert (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Although a narrative approach typically requires only one or two individuals (Creswell & Creswell, 2023), I planned a minimum of at least nine interviews and nine observations, with additional interviews and observations until I reached data saturation (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

Specific to the observations, I employed three strategies to improve the likelihood that my findings would be credible: prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). First, prolonged engagement in data team meetings enabled me to spend enough time observing to become thoroughly oriented to what I was observing and to

avoid distracting the group participants because I was an outsider. Second, persistent observation allowed me to go beyond mere immersion in the experience by identifying the most important happenings. “If prolonged engagement provides scope, persistent observation provides depth” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 304). Third, I utilized investigator triangulation. With a co-investigator, I developed an observation tool that we could both use to collect our notes, and we debriefed after each observation and collaborated on the identification of themes.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

By conducting this study, I sought to learn what support and professional development principals need to enhance schools' implementation of MTSS. As a district leader, I am in a unique position to provide the identified supports. This case study provides critical information which can inform strategies to improve academic and behavioral outcomes for our students.

Principal Survey

Of the district's 44 principals (assistant principals included), 35 began the survey. Four of these individuals did not complete the survey and were removed from these results. Therefore, the following results reflect 31 of 44 possible respondents (70.5%) as seen in Table 4. The high school level had the highest participation, with 91.7% of principals completing the survey; followed by the middle level, with 77.8%; and finally the elementary level, with 59.1% completing. There is a parent partnership school that enrolls students in kindergarten through grade 8; that principal did not respond and is represented in the Other column in Table 4.

Table 4
Survey Respondents by Level of School and Assistant versus Principal Role

Role	Elementary		Middle		High		Other		Total	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Principal	8	61.5%	4	80.0%	5	100%	0	0.0%	17	70.8%
Assistant Principal	5	55.6%	3	75%	6	85.7%			14	70.0%
Count of Respondents	13	59.1%	7	77.8%	11	91.7%	0	0.0%	31	72.1%
Total Possible	22		9		12		1		44	70.5%

The principal of a virtual academy that serves students from kindergarten through grade 12 responded as a high school principal. This exceeded my anticipated response rate of eight leaders from each level (elementary, middle, high) for a minimum of 24 participants.

Variance by Principal or Assistant Principal Role

The sample included 17 principals and 14 assistant principals. To see if administrators' responses in the academic, behavior, social emotional, and data use domains differed based on position (principal or assistant principal), I conducted a one-way ANOVA. Although I could have used an independent *T*-Test for this analysis, I selected ANOVA for consistency with the analyses to follow.

In the **academic** domain, Levene's test was statistically significant, $p = .046$. Therefore, the assumption of homogeneity of variance is violated. In this scenario, Strunk and Mwavita (2020) recommend utilizing the Welch correction. Using this correction, results for the academic domain showed no significant difference, $F(1, 29 = .42, p = .522)$. Therefore, this study does not provide evidence to suggest a difference between principals' and assistant principals' responses to survey questions for the academic domain (see Table 5).

Table 5

Variance by Assistant Principal or Principal

Measure	Assistant Principals		Principals		$F(1, 29)$	p
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*		
Academic	86.29	13.62	83.47	9.70	.422	.522
Behavior	86.64	10.75	83.29	11.08	.720	.403
Social Emotional	82.07	13.92	80.18	12.28	.162	.690
Data Use	36.79	6.13	36.24	6.02	.063	.803

Note: For the Academic Domain, Welch's correction is noted rather than the Levene Statistic.

For the **behavior domain,** the statistical assumption of homogeneity of variance was met (Levene's test was not significant, $p = .755$), but the omnibus test of the behavior domain was not statistically significant, $F(1, 29) = .403$. For the **social emotional domain**, the statistical assumption of homogeneity of variance was again met (Levene's test was not significant, $p = .487$.), while the omnibus test of the social emotional learning domain was not statistically significant, $F(1,29) = .16$, $p = .690$. For the **data use domain**, the statistical assumption of homogeneity of variance was met (Levene's test was not significant, $p = .637$.), but the omnibus test of the data use domain was not statistically significant, $F(1, 29) = .06$, $p = .803$. In summary, I found no significant difference in any of the four measured domains when I compared responses of principals to responses of assistant principals.

Variance by Level of School

In all, the sample included responses from 13 elementary, 7 middle, and 11 high school principals. To see if principals' responses in the academic, behavior, social emotional, and data use domains were associated with the level of school at which they serve as an administrator, I conducted a one-way ANOVA.

For the **academic domain**, the statistical assumption of homogeneity of variance was met (Levene's test was not significant, $p = .644$), and the omnibus test of the academic domain was not statistically significant, $F(2, 28) = .05$, $p = .950$. In the **behavior domain**, the statistical assumption of homogeneity of variance was met (Levene's test was not significant, $p = .745$), and the omnibus test of the behavior domain was not statistically significant, $F(2, 28) = .31$, $p = .735$.. Similarly, in the **social emotional domain**, the statistical assumption of homogeneity of variance was met (Levene's test was not significant, $p = .785$), yet once again the omnibus test of the social emotional domain was not statistically significant, $F(2, 28) = 253$, $p = .778$. Finally, in

the **data use domain**, the statistical assumption of homogeneity of variance was met (Levene's test was not significant, $p = .55$) while the omnibus test of the data use domain was not statistically significant, $F(2, 28) = .29$, $p = .747$. Thus, insufficient evidence exists to suggest a difference among these groups in any of the four domains included in the survey.

Table 6

Variance by Level of School

Measure	Elementary		Middle		High		$F(1, 28)$	p
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*		
Academic	84.00	10.34	85.71	12.04	85.00	13.45	.05	.950
Behavior	83.31	10.10	87.43	11.63	84.91	12.00	.31	.735
Social Emotional	79.46	11.65	83.86	12.95	81.10	14.96	.25	.778
Data Use	37.23	5.04	35.36	5.61	35.37	7.45	.29	.747

Variance by Years of Experience

To facilitate data analysis, I recoded the years of experience into 3 ranges of 1-5 years, 6-10 years, and 11+ years (see Table 7).

Table 7

Survey Respondents by Years of Experience

Years of Experience	n	Percent
1-5	9	29.03%
6-10	6	19.35%
11+	16	51.61%
Total	31	100%

To see if principals' responses in the academic, behavior, social emotional learning, and data use domains differed by years of experience, I conducted a one-way ANOVA. Table 8 presents these results.For the **academic domain**, the statistical assumption of homogeneity of variance was met (Levene's test was not significant, $p = .205$), and the omnibus test of the academic domain was not statistically significant, $F(2, 28) = .10$, $p = .908$. In the **behavior domain**, the statistical assumption of homogeneity of variance was met (Levene's test was not significant, $p = .606$), and the omnibus test of the behavior domain was not statistically significant, $F(2, 28) = .08$, $p = .920$. In the **social emotional learning domain**, the statistical assumption of homogeneity of variance was met (Levene's test was not significant, $p = .99$), and the omnibus test of the social emotional domain was not statistically significant, $F(2, 28) = .03$, $p = .973$. In the **data use domain**, the statistical assumption of homogeneity of variance was met (Levene's test was not significant, $p = .99$), and the omnibus test of the data use domain was not statistically significant, $F(2, 28) = .58$, $p = .567$. In summary, there were no statistically significant differences in responses to the four domains measured by the survey related to level of school led.

Table 8

Variance by Years of Experience

Measure	1-5 Years		6-10 Years		11 or More		$F(1, 28)$	p
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*		
Academic	86.11	14.22	84.83	9.50	83.94	11.20	.10	.908
Behavior	85.89	10.54	83.50	8.80	84.69	12.26	.08	.920
Social Emotional	80.78	13.25	82.17	14.32	80.75	12.97	.03	.973
Data Use	36.67	6.28	38.67	5.32	35.56	6.16	.58	.567

Additional Analysis

Following the guidance of Castillo et al. (2012), I conducted additional data analysis to calculate a mean for each item to determine perceived skill levels. Table 9 lists the mean score of the survey items which respondents ranked the highest in terms of their perceived skill. Table 10 lists the mean score of the survey items which respondents ranked the lowest, including multiple items where the means were within 0.01 points of each other. Identifying the highest- and lowest-ranking items in this way allowed me to identify the skills principals in the participating district feel confident about and the skills they perceive as weaker. Such an analysis can provide important information to the district in that skills that respondents rank especially low are likely to negatively impact MTSS implementation and will require support to improve (Castillo et al., 2012).

Table 9

Perceived Strengths by Domain

Domain	Perceived Strengths	*M*	*SD*
Academic	I have the skill to access the data necessary to determine the percentage of students in Tier 1 instruction who meet grade-level standards/expectations in academics.	4.16	0.58
	I have the skill to use data to define students' current level of performance for: academics.	4.16	0.69
Behavior	I have the skill to access the data necessary to determine the percentage of students in Tier 1 instruction who meet grade-level standards/expectations in behavior.	4.32	0.60
Social Emotional	I have the skill to access the data necessary to determine the percentage of students in Tier 1 instruction who meet grade-level standards/expectations in social/emotional skills.	3.90	0.83
	I have the skill to collaborate with school staff in determining student progress and response to instruction/intervention for: Social/Emotional Skills.	3.94	0.73
Data Use	I have the skill to analyze graphed student data for: Large groups (Tier 1).	4.19	0.54
	I have the skill to analyze graphed student data for: Individual students.	4.19	0.48

Principals in this study indicated that they believe their strengths lie in in Tier 1 in all of the domains: academics, behavior, social emotional, and data use. Their perceived weaknesses were related to Tier 3 academic curriculum, Tier 3 behavior curriculum, Tier 3 social emotional curriculum, and determining students' level of response to intervention and using that information to make adjustments.

Table 10
Perceived Weaknesses by Domain

Domain	Perceived Weaknesses	*M*	*SD*
Academic	I have the skill to access resources (e.g. internet sources, professional literature) to develop evidence-based interventions for: academic/intensive Tier 3 curricula.	3.26	1.00
Behavior	I have the skill to access resources (e.g. internet sources, professional literature) to develop evidence-based interventions for: behavioral intensive /Tier 3 curricula.	3.45	0.93
	I have the skill to ensure that any supplemental and/or intensive interventions are integrated and aligned (scope, sequence, pacing, language) with Tier 1 instruction in the general education classroom: behavior.	3.45	0.81
Social Emotional	I have the skill to access resources (e.g. internet sources, professional literature) to develop evidence-based interventions for: social/emotional intensive/Tier 3 curricula.	3.26	1.00
Data Use	I have the skill to determine the "level of response to intervention" and use this information to make modifications to instruction/intervention.	3.65	0.71

In summary, although respondents to my survey had no statistically significant differences by domain when grouping by three different principal characteristics—whether the respondent was working as a principal or assistant principal, the grade level where they were working, and their experience level—responses to the survey indicated that the principals and assistant principals surveyed in this study identified themselves as having clear strengths in

knowledge regarding Tier 1 and weaknesses regarding Tier 3. The subsequent results section will discuss themes from principal interviews and how those themes converge, diverge, and complement the quantitative findings.

Principal Interviews

I conducted 14 interviews: six from elementary school, and four each from middle and high school. This number was sufficient for me to reach data saturation, as new themes stopped being shared. In this section, I share six themes that emerged: MTSS is not being implemented uniformly, principals are critical to MTSS implementation, principal stressors, secondary-specific challenges, helpful district supports, and ways the district can improve support.

MTSS Implementation Is Not Uniform

The principals described varying levels of implementation of MTSS. At the time of the interview, the schools were in the first year of a multi-year process, and it was clear that departments and grade levels had different levels of implementation, particularly when it came to implementation for behavior supports, which varied much more than implementation for academic supports. Principal M explained, “I would say that we are in different spaces, in different areas of academics versus attendance versus SEL. It really is a continuum, right? In some places we are done, we are good and some places we’re like, oh, we’re noticing some holes.”

For the district, Tier 1 had been a focus in the year in which I conducted my study, and principals noted that additional refinement would be needed for the intervention system. Recent curriculum and assessment adoptions added complexity to implementation at the elementary level. Some schools rated themselves highly and indicated that they were refining and improving MTSS, while others had just begun to build systems. Principal I noted, “This is a three or four

year process and we're at the second month of the first step. So it's early." Similarly, Principal B shared that implementation is not yet widespread. "Feels like it hasn't really been happening. Like maybe there's pockets of grade levels or teachers within grade levels that have been doing the work together but not on a systems level at all. Right now it's very much… in infancy."

Principals Are Critical to MTSS Implementation

All principals interviewed described their roles as leaders in a system that is implementing MTSS. They identified multiple responsibilities, including equity, coaching and modeling instruction, keeping the focus on implementation, distributed leadership, motivating and celebrating, growing the skills to operate in a PLC, protecting PLC time, holding high expectations and accountability, modeling data use, collaboration with colleagues, and building tiered systems.

Focus on Equity. Principals noted that one of the important roles they play when a school is implementing MTSS is keeping a focus on equitable outcomes. The district MTSS systems expect disaggregation of data to identify inequities, but principals perceive this as something that teachers find difficult. The principals explained that they thought it was easier to look at inequitable outcomes from a leader's perspective, analyzing a whole system, than from the perspective of individual teachers, with only their class data to review. One principal addressed this challenge by asking their teams to avoid disaggregation, using the logic that teachers' focus needs to be on the whole group when proficiency rates are low. Principal L explained, "from the balcony, it's very easy to see disproportionality within data. I can look at 500 students and see where some gaps are, but when we get down to the classroom level, it's a lot harder to see the disproportionality."

Principal K noted that their role often involves keeping the focus on adult responsibility for disparate outcomes. “To get data that maybe says, huh, there’s a segment of population that doesn’t feel good or isn’t being supported or isn’t being successful,” is difficult, they explained. “That next step is the hard part and that is I know all these things about me. You know, I'm a good person. …Well then what am I gonna do about this group over here? … Like, not what can the kids do about it… That’s the hard part.” Seven of the 14 principals interviewed included some reference to the importance of keeping the focus on equity when working with their MTSS data.

Coaching and Modeling for Teachers. Another important role that principals said they fill is providing coaching and modeling for teachers. Several principals discussed how they model keeping a focus on students’ assets rather than their deficits. “We’re aware of deficits for sure,” said Principal L, “but... let’s keep focused on where we’re building to and what this child brings to [school]. … So that’s kind of like a one-on-one coaching or a wise question at the right time.” Another shared, “I've communicated with all staff that like I need you to communicate with me how I can support you. So if you're struggling, if something is not working or something is preventing you, you know from moving forward or you need to let me know how I can support you” (Principal F.)

Principals help problem solve with teachers who need additional individual support on effective Tier 1 instruction, which includes whole group instruction and small group differentiation. Collecting and utilizing data is also an ongoing responsibility that many teachers need help with. “We’re still teaching our teachers,” Principal A explained. “Here’s the kind of data we’re talking about. Here’s how you can collect it. Here’s how you can use it. I know for us, one of the things that we’re working on here is coming back to some best practices.”

Setting the Vision and Focusing on Implementation. A critical role for principals implementing an MTSS system is setting the vision and keeping the focus on implementation. Principals discussed the importance of making it clear to their staff that they believed in MTSS as a system to increase student achievement and something that wasn't going away. Some teachers get on board right away, some take more time, and some will not implement anything new without explicit direction from the principal. "You always have your early adopters. You always have your people that will do it when everybody's doing it," Principal C shared, "And then you have your people that unless I come alongside them and say, hey, this is what we're doing, they're not gonna do it." Similarly, Principal K stated, "We do what's best for kids and that's our purpose, and we're here for them and they're not here for us and we got to figure it out."

Repeated reminders in staff newsletters, staff meetings, and one-on-one conversations are opportunities to continue to emphasize the importance of MTSS and help staff maintain focus when they are frustrated or tired. "Making sure that they know that I think it's important and that it will work is the biggest thing," said Principal D. Another principal explained, "I think what matters to me is going to matter to the staff. You have to find the authentic way to not micromanage, to keep people at the table, but to understand that this is really a priority" (Principal A).

In the year in which I conducted the interviews, district professional development had been focused on strengthening Tier 1 instruction. Those interviewed emphasized that it takes repeated principal reminders so teachers don't shift their focus to interventions before improving on Tier 1. Principal E stated, "at each meeting I talk about that importance of Tier 1. And everybody gets that, you know, everybody's getting Tier 1, and 80% of our kids should meet it."

The principals indicated that maintaining a sense of urgency or momentum is also important. Principals also expressed the need to help teachers see that while they are responsible for only part of the work, it is part of a greater whole. "What they [teachers] really need is they just really need to do this part of it, but also trust that in doing this part of it, that helps the whole system work and function," Principal L explained, "and so my job is to model what that looks like to continually keep repeating the vision."

Managing the change process is also critical, and acknowledging to their staff that this change isn't always easy. According to Principal A,

> Any change is a big change and you know, the idea that this isn't that big or we're just minorly tweaking. If you move teachers' coffee in the staff room, it's big…. All changes are perceived by classroom teachers as big changes. If you change the color of the workbook, there's going to be five people that tell you why that color makes kids not learn as well. It's supporting without overly validating to the point where people can have the excuse to not change their practice.

Conversely, a few principals reluctantly shared that some of their principal colleagues are not implementing MTSS in alignment with the district model.

A critical component of MTSS is assembling a tiered system of supports. Principals widely acknowledged that a focus on Tier 1 instruction in the current year was important to ensure that the majority of students are successful with Tier 1 instruction alone. Intervention supports are still a work in progress. "We're really starting to see some holes or some things that we need to add into our systems," Principal M shared. "We have really nice foundational skills, Tier 2 intervention… but we don't have something for comprehension in our older grades yet that's really outlined like this is like the work that they do within LAP. This is the work that they

do. I think in math our Tier 2 supports are a little bit wonky too. Similarly, behavior supports, particularly Tier 3, are widely seen as needing more development. “Every kid has their own story. Every family has their own story,” Principal M stated, “But I think specifically those Tier 3, it’s not like a global profile of…a Tier 3 kid. It’s usually having a menu of supports.” Principals interviewed emphasized that information on tiered supports for secondary schools is in greatest need of development, as will be explored more in a subsequent section.

Distributed Leadership. Although principals set the vision and focus on implementation, they recognize that they can’t do all the work themselves. Distributed leadership is viewed as a positive strategy for implementation of MTSS. “I think distributive leadership’s important because …our teachers are gonna be more open to learning from somebody that’s sitting in a classroom doing it right now,” explained Principal I. Teacher leaders, often in their roles as leaders of PLCs but also in more informal ways, help share the leadership load and influence their peers. On the other hand, some principals see their role as leading everything, at least in the early stages of this work, but they acknowledge that distributed leadership is still the ultimate goal of sustainability. “I’m kind of the leader of it. So I do [it] all. I mean, I’m the one who sets up the meetings. I’m the one who plots out all of the data,” Principal E shared. “I'm the one who, unless I’m sick or I have another engagement, I’m the one who runs those meetings. I’m the one who puts all the notes and disseminates it all out. So I do worry that you know… I want to make sure all of those systems don’t die when I leave.”

Principals as Motivators and Cheerleaders of a Positive Culture. Principals work to motivate and celebrate their teachers’ work. They recognize that the job of teaching is challenging and want their teachers to stay optimistic and hopeful. They share praise and celebrations in staff newsletters, emails, and staff meetings. They believe that they can grow a

sense of collective efficacy by highlighting what they see as exemplary. “I think I really try to like starting at the outside of the year, but then throughout the year, try to kind of motivate people by highlighting the work that is going on and the depth of work that goes on in a school,” Principal N said. “And so really recognizing the different things, really trying to celebrate the different pieces that go into that, so people have an optimistic and hopeful mindset with, you know, we can support this kid.”

Principals support a healthy school culture, in order to be well equipped to tackle implementation, by helping to solve conflicts. Principal G noted, “There is a collegiality problem there as well where the two special education teachers aren’t getting along and so I’m having to do a lot of mediating between the two of them.” Principals also focus on building trusting cultures. They analyze teacher survey data to see how teachers rate their own beliefs and practices in comparison to how they rate their colleagues’ belief and practices, referred to as an “I versus them” analysis. Closing this gap is important for building collective teacher efficacy. Sometimes teachers need extra assistance with behavior challenges, and they need to be able to talk with their administrator without judgement. Principal M emphasized,

> Trust, integrity, servant leadership. All of those things need to happen and be in place both ways. Trust of teachers, teachers’ trust of administration, trust of each other in order for MTSS to be successful…I worked on that culture of like if a teacher is having a hard time with a particular thing, whether it be behavioral or academic, that they feel comfortable brainstorming with me about things. And knowing it’s not going to reflect poorly on them as a teacher, it’s everybody gets a coach because everyone has something that they can be coached in…You know, people, especially this time of year and in February and March, their buckets are a little lower. They’re tired. It gets real. It gets

dark here in Washington, and things that are small deals become big deals. So you have to address things open and honestly and immediately.

Principals Protect PLC Time for Growing Teacher Skills in Functioning PLCs.

Principals highly value the dedicated PLC time for teachers and are actively building teachers' skills in functioning as a team member or leader in their PLCs. "I just think like the level of like thoughtful, careful work that our teachers are doing and how they really do it collaboratively and they take it seriously is really like that's probably the most critical thing," Principal G shared. "It's like that teacher collective efficacy." Principal C agreed, "I think that accountability helps them understand that there isn't a time like PLC time. It's a sacred time to me. This is, this is a time when …these are the only things that we're talking about. and I want it to affect student learning. That's the most important thing."

Principals see some past PLC work as ineffective because PLC time had started to be used as staff meetings or, worse, opportunities to complain without problem solving. They feel encouraged that refocusing PLCs on student achievement is having a positive effect. "The PLCS in the past have been business meetings, dissemination of information that's discussed at the leadership meetings, gripe sessions about systems that we're trying to implement or just kids that aren't doing what they're supposed to do," shared Principal J. "And so just by going to PLCS this year and seeing the teachers engage in the conversations we want them to engage in, it gives me a lot of optimism that we're focused on the right thing."

Placing the responsibility for student learning on the teachers is supported by the PLC process. Principal J continued,

You're still gonna have staff that are going to blame students and families for the reason why you know something's not successful. I mean that's real, …but we can only control

> what we can control. I don't think it's widespread and it's not vocalized publicly but I definitely have teachers that you know - What I taught, I taught. I taught the content. You know, it's their fault that they didn't learn it. And you know, we need to be better and really start looking at, OK, well, if … they didn't learn it, how do I need to change?

This sentiment was shared by four other principals as well.

Coaching and Modeling Data Use. With a new screening assessment and a new English Language Arts curriculum introduced to elementary schools the year in which I collected data, there was a lot for teachers to learn. Principals see their role regarding use of data as a coach and mentor. For one thing, ensuring that PLCs and teachers are using multiple data points to determine the level of student performance is critical. Principal M stated, "Right now with our new…reading adoption, we are noticing that at this point, some of the kids, our data's a little wonky, but it was also the first time we've used DIBELS. So we're in a transitionary space, right?" Principals noted that the use of the district adopted social emotional screener could be improved. "I don't think we've utilized it well and that's not specific to this district, "Principal J shared. "I think that's anywhere that you usually have some sort of behavioral screener that gets used or doesn't get used. And maybe it's because there's so many things on going on. Oftentimes we're so focused on the externalized behaviors."

Collaboration with Colleagues. The principals have their own principal PLCs by level: one for elementary, one for middle, and one for high school. At the elementary level, principals reported that the PLC structure for principals was an effective structure for focusing improving schools. For example, Principal K stated,

> Ultimately what came out of it was we had a discussion about the form, the four step problem solving model and everybody was really on the same page that that tool is really

> effective for School Improvement Plan writing or monitoring like the health of our system over time.

At all levels, principals acknowledged that the year in which I collected data represented an opportunity for a PLC refresh and an opportunity to collaborate with colleagues around important challenges related to student achievement. According to Principal E,

> I was really thrilled that our PLC wants to focus on math, that we kind of came to that determination because then it keeps our eye on it. So it doesn't just become a thing that collects dust over the year and that we look at twice a year, right…The more that it becomes something that we just do, the better gains we're going to make…There's that balance of, you know, not adding one more thing to our plate, but making that become something that is just part of what we do.

Principals noted that PLCs are a way to determine common strategies and vocabulary for discussion back in their building, which enhances a district focus.

Multiple principals reported challenges with ensuring that their own principal PLC was functioning like a PLC rather than a district business meeting. The principal PLCs had become more like business meetings over time, rather than focusing on student data and instruction. For others, they had become a way for principals to break down the isolation that principals often feel and a way to vent their frustrations. "I was PLC leader for like three or four years with one of the principal groups and you know, it was really hard because you get together and people just need that process time," Principal A reflected, "I think PLCS have degenerated into complaint sessions."

Some principals had not experienced effective PLCs themselves and therefore were struggling to model and support their teacher PLCs. According to Principal G, "we talked about

what professional development do we need as principals to really fully understand what PLC should look like? Because I think there's a wide variance in … understanding of what a PLC should look like." An additional struggle is building trust so principals can be vulnerable with each other so they can collaborate to grow their skills as a group. "I am pretty convinced that if you, when you talk about those baby steps at a meeting, everybody's going to nod like, oh yeah, anybody can do that," Principal A shared, "But I guarantee you a third of the people are like, oh, that's a good idea. They just don't want to say it because if you say it, it would imply that you aren't doing it. And that's frowned upon. Like we're just like teachers. That's frowned upon. We we're supposed to be good at everything."

Principals Experience Many Stressors

Although I did not specifically inquire about stressors that might be interfering with MTSS implementation, a number of themes related to this topic emerged. Student behavior was widely seen as more challenging and disruptive than at any prior time. Additionally, principals thought that some teachers were resistant to change and unwilling to implement new approaches, making implementation building-wide a challenge. Lastly, the many competing demands of being a principal leaves many of them feeling overwhelmed and inadequate for the job.

Student Behavior. Disruptive student behavior is widely viewed as more intense that any prior year. Principals' ability to focus on implementation is often interrupted by needing to address challenging behaviors. Principal M described it this way:

> Friday I had a kid in my conference room, a kid in my office. Another kid threatened to shoot his teacher. I had to put that kid in the psych's office with a psych…. My PBIS para had someone who was blowing out in her room. My counselor was making a CPS call because a kid is playing with a lighter and lighting a fire under the TV and burned

himself. And I'm like, the parent's like, well, I don't want to have this conversation in front of the kid. It's escalating about. I'm like, I don't have any place for this child to go. So that's what it's like every day in my world. So I don't have a lot of time to do instructional leadership, but ideally I would.

Another principal shared,

> It's really just trying to teach and have teachers be able to teach without their teaching get[ting] interrupted because somebody's throwing a desk over and stomping and screaming, you know? I think that interrupts the flow of the momentum of teachers teaching and even us. Like we're in the heat of our observations right now, but often [assistant principal F] and I are spending an hour and a half to two hours with kids that are completely blowing out and [making] the threat of hurting other people and I think that really people's emotions and their stamina get affected by that and so I think that to be able to focus on what a true MTSS model is, is being interrupted because they're exhausted and they don't know, you know, what else to do because of the kids that are coming in. It's hard. It's been hard…[it] is a struggle" (Principal F)

Resistant Teachers. Principals interviewed said that although most teachers are excited and eager to learn new strategies to support students, a small number are resistant to change, and that resistance creates a challenge for principals. Some teachers operate as independent practitioners and want to be left alone to do what they've always done. Principal A noted that a few teachers express "all this newfangled stuff, whatever this change or whatever you're trying to do, just gets in the way of me prepping for what I know that my kids need." This principal further explained, "I don't know if it's a combination of experience and cynicism that they just want to be left to do what they know what their kids need…Let me teach what I know how to

teach." Principals have conversations with these teachers about their expectations and explore whether this particular school or district is a good fit for them. "Of course with any school culture you have your group of people that are the naysayers and you know that are the toxic people that doesn't matter what you do, they're not happy and it's really trying to like bring them in," explained Principal F. "Or if they aren't willing to come in, make them realize that this might not be the right setting for them."

In addition, principals are very conscious of the presence and impact of the teacher's union and are hesitant to expect change too quickly. "We're a very union heavy school. And that doesn't necessarily get in the way of MTSS, but it makes it so that I need to be really conscious of things like the contract when I'm asking people to do things," Principal C explained. Like although I've set up the schedule to have common planning for like teachers, I haven't required them to meet during that time, right? Whereas in another building you might do that and it you might be able to kind of push that a little bit more."

Never Enough Time. These factors and more contribute to some principals feeling like they are not doing an adequate job. "I just remember sitting in training for admins last year and going over spreadsheets and how I should be managing my LAP teacher and what I should be looking at in terms of data," Principal A reflected, and I'm just like, Holy God, someone needs to sue me for malpractice. Cause I'm not getting that done." This principal was not alone. "I don't have time. I'm not getting my own [professional development] done. I'm not doing my own Teacher Preparation/Evaluation Program [work]," Principal M shared, echoing Principal A's concerns. "I'm not doing a lot of other things because I have a lot of kids that have some really significant needs and so that's where I need to be, right? Safety first, right? I'm barely hanging on. Barely hanging on."

Special Education Themes

Although I did not ask questions specific to special education services, a number of principals spent considerable time discussing this subject. The district's focus on MTSS, including 3 tiers of instruction and intervention, has highlighted general confusion regarding the lack of progress monitoring, curriculum needs, concerns about over identification, and some promising practices regarding inclusion and coteaching.

Lack of Progress Monitoring

Principal L was concerned that there is not continuity of supports from general education to special education, and they noted some areas that need improvement. "If we find that they're not progressing as we would hope, then we kick it over to MDT [Multidisciplinary Team] usually and then from there, it kind of is its own beast. That's a little troubling." Principal L explained, "Once it falls over into that, I lose some amount of data continuity, I lose some amount of, you know, who's managing the plans and so there's a hole there. That's what I'm working on right now."

Principal G echoed this sentiment, explaining that different data systems are in use for progress monitoring students served by special education, and in general these students receive less progress monitoring, which he sees as upside-down. "We definitely have some work to do in terms of like the processes that our special education team uses because our data in that area has been really weak for a really long time." This situation is exacerbated by uneven resource allocation between general education and special education. In some cases, schools have more staffing in general education (Title/LAP) than they do special education. So, the group size in Tier 3 is often smaller than it might be in special education, where the needs are typically greater.

Curriculum Needs

While Tier 1 curriculum is well defined by the district, that is not always the case for special education. Principal C expressed this concern:

> We are all over the place and what we're using is for curriculum and special Ed. That makes no sense. Like I don't understand why we don't have [a] special Ed curriculum for math….These are our highest need students and oftentimes teachers are just making things up as they go along. That is not systematic.

In many cases, special education teachers are left on their own to determine what students should learn and how. Principals expressed a need for greater district definition of curriculum for intervention and stronger professional development opportunities for teachers.

Overidentification for Special Education

As described in Chapter One, this district has significantly more students receiving special education services than the state or nation. Both district staff and principals feel urgency to figure out the root cause of these high rates. In addition, in Washington there is a mandatory transition to MTSS/RTI to identify students with specific learning disabilities rather than relying on the older discrepancy model by 2028. Principal B summed up this concern: "It's both the MTSS 2028 deadline as well as we have like 30% IEP students, which is like double the state average. …We shouldn't be at 30%. We're over using SPED."

In an attempt to reduce the over reliance on special education, principals push back and ask for more data or implementation of more tiered interventions prior to referring a student. This can create tension with general education teachers who are frustrated when they perceive the system is responding too slowly and denying students access to special education. "I could see our special education department and our general education sometimes can kind of butt heads

because general education may say we've exhausted every intervention. It's time to go down the SPED route," Principal D explained. "But as we try to show them, that doesn't mean it's a quick fix or that it's even appropriate. So sometimes it's getting the right interventions in place before we even go to that SPED referral. But sometimes teachers feel like they're waiting too long until those kids get intervention. We're trying to fix that."

Strategies to address this issue include restructuring the student study team meetings so they are led by teachers and include special education teachers in the process from the outset. In the past, some SSTs have been led by school counselors who don't necessarily understand instruction the way teachers do. Additionally, structures to explore other resources to support students can be helpful. One principal described the student study team meeting this way:

> We brainstorm from a list of interventions that we've generated, like what might be beneficial to the student. And then we schedule follow-up meetings and monitor their progress. And sometimes we find like, oh, these interventions worked and the kid's OK. And other times it's like, OK…these interventions didn't work. What else can we try? You know, what human resources do we have to give this intervention if they just need like X number more repetitions with this skill? And then sometimes then we do have to refer on to MDT, but the special education teachers have already been a part of that whole process and so it's no surprise to them. (Principal G)

Inclusion and Coteaching

The district's focus on inclusion at all levels and coteaching at the secondary level leaves some principals feeling encouraged about next steps. According to Principal N, "We offer ELA co-taught at every grade level [and] in math we're gonna talk about it this year. I mean I think it would involve some amending IEP's potentially…but I think that might be the way to go." They

continued, “We've been trying to do more co-teaching and reach kids and for the inclusion sake of it. …and I see that working really well.” However, principals also noted that to expand coteaching there is likely a need for an additional teacher or paraeducators to support that system, and existing budget constraints may limit the district’s ability to provide that.

Needs Differed by Level

Implementing MTSS is arguably challenging for principals at every level, but some secondary-specific issues arose in the interviews. These principals noted a need for interventions, a focus on improving Tier 1, including clarity needed on curriculum issues, and scheduling constraints.

Need for Intervention Time and Materials

Secondary principals, and middle school principals in particular, identified needs for intervention classes. Even when there are available courses, they are uncertain about the degree to which they are catching students up. “I think most of the middle schools have math intervention classes scheduled like we have one for each grade level,” Principal N shared. “I think that’s OK…but it doesn’t probably meet enough of our kids’ needs.” For English Language Arts in particular, students who begin middle school with skill deficits are not likely to catch up due to a lack of high-quality curriculum and intervention classes. “Especially on the language arts side of things in my time in the district, just not a clear guide for how to do intervention where I still don’t know if you get a canned program that it’s better,” Principal N continued. “At least I think it makes people feel like it’s better because you’re going, oh, here’s the Scholastic thing. Use that. And that’s just what you do. I don’t know if that’s reaching necessarily better outcomes, but I think we’ve always been grasping a little bit for what model do we use for those interventions. I think that could be improved.”

Improving Tier 1

Although some principals believe that their teachers provide strong, responsive Tier I instruction, others wonder if it could be strengthened. This theme was especially clear with principals who have worked at both the elementary and secondary levels. They have seen first-hand the variety of ways that teachers differentiate at the elementary level and wonder if differentiated instruction could be strengthened at secondary. Principal D has worked at multiple levels and noted, "So elementary teachers kind of do it secondhand by running three separate groups at once. Middle school, it's a little different."

Principal N echoed, "I still think middle school teachers struggle to do that in real time. They teach one lesson a couple different ways. Maybe they try to UDL it [create it using Universal Design for Learning strategies]… but then it's like the kids either get it or they don't and then they circle back the next day with the whole group." Principal E added that there are various interpretations of curriculum guidance from the district: "you know there's going to be some squabbling about …what curriculum are we using or this person does too many labs or this person doesn't do enough labs and that kind of thing."

Scheduling Constraints

It is no surprise that scheduling time for interventions presents a challenge in a system with a 6-period day. "It can be very difficult to implement during the school day academic interventions. Super difficult," explained Principal K. Attempts to use advisory time to deliver interventions have had mixed results, particularly because many students choose not to attend advisory. "Advisory is ungraded," Principal K shared. "I don't care how good we get at it and how good we sell it. Even good students do the math of an ungraded time or a Starbucks … when we have open campus, right. We're just up against some different things that … make it

difficult to put real academic interventions into the daily day-to-day."

District Supports Are Helpful

One of the interview questions directly asked principals how the district can improve its support for MTSS implementation. This prompted a number of themes about what principals appreciated about the current level and type of support.

Top-Down Structure

Themes around the district's clarity of structure, focus on Tier I, and defined time for PLCs were noted. Additionally, principals said they appreciated having the district directors as thought partners. The school district established a calendar with weekly early release times for PLCs, established expectations for PLCs, and provided detailed professional development on PLCs within an MTSS system. Although this sort of "top down" approach was not universally favored, some principals appreciated the clarity of structure and expectations. "I really like the structure that you guys are giving us that's really laid out very clearly of here's … the steps that we're supposed to do," Principal E said. "I think that is so much more helpful than saying here read a book and do your best at it.…In some situations I think top down is incredibly helpful to help guide it and then once we're running on our own then allow a little bit more autonomy. But I appreciate the top down."

The support from the district in terms of focusing the PLC time on student learning rather than staff meeting topics, as previously noted, was also appreciated. Principal J tied this focus to the hope for strong student growth:

> I would say Tier 1is better than it's been and … the good news is that I see that we're going to have some definite incremental or maybe even exponential growth this year as that has you know become not just our focus, but the district focus. That's all we talk

about, I mean so. The PLCs in the past have been business meetings, dissemination of information that's discussed at the leadership meetings, gripe sessions about systems that we're trying to implement or just kids that aren't doing what they're supposed to do. And so just by going to PLCs this year and seeing the teachers engage in the conversations we want them to engage in, it gives me a lot of optimism that we're focused on the right thing."

Another Principal noted that the district-led nature of the work freed up his own leadership capital:

> I think whenever a district is working on a structure that exists within schools so that schools can do right by students, I think that that's time well spent and … when you do that, it gives leaders an opportunity to implement it and sometimes we can say, hey, this is a district initiative and that helps me not spend quite as much of my own leadership capital in my asks. So it's not just, [the principal] really wants us to do this piece of paper for something called data-based decision making. Like what is that even about? He's all about data. I get to say, well this is the direction we're going as a district and here's our district vision and my vision of how that might work here. (Principal L)

Most principals appreciated the reservation of specific district time weekly for PLCs. On the other hand, some principals preferred the prior model of fewer days but more time for PLC meetings. Principal N summed this up:

> 50 minutes is challenging kind of …to do a full like almost anything in it…It is hard to … pull out data, make decisions, make a plan for next meeting, who's bringing what? You got to be really efficient. I do think folks have identified that kind of as a barrier.

Principal A agreed: “I’m being pretty gentle for the team directed PLCS at this point, cause I wanna see where they’re at when they get the boat in the water and also they need process time.”

Thought Partners

Multiple principals called out the district directors as helpful thought partners. Principal A reported,

> I have a thought partner…. Like that’s the help is where are you stuck? What do you need? Like tell me where you’re stuck. Like a smart person that you trust that is not trying to find fault with your implementation, but it’s really trying to help you….It’s almost like counseling for the principal that’s trying to lift this.

Principal M noted, “I appreciate that there is an intention to listen to what we think we want or need.” Principal N echoed, “I just think there’s a lot of strength... All the departments, they are very…transparent and like willing to work with us, it’s transparent, just responsive.” Appreciation for the data displays and custom reports provided by the district was also expressed. For example, Principal H said, “We’ve been working with someone in the district office…. I’m confident it’ll be helpful.” On the other hand, one principal noted that his colleagues do not always find district support to be helpful, stating that some have expressed a “gripe about responsiveness maybe from like [specific department]” (Principal M).

Improvements Are Still Needed

Principals also shared several themes regarding what the district should change to better support MTSS implementation. These themes centered around improved communication and seeking input from principals, avoiding sending mixed messages, and providing training for teachers and administrators.

Communication and Input

With the district's renewed focus on MTSS, implementation and communication from the district has generated confusion. Clarifying the definitions of the three tiers is needed. In some cases, the special education supports are perceived as Tier 3, rather than specially designed instruction. "One team… is getting a different message than school psychs, and it's causing friction," explained Principal B. Another shared, "[Confusing messages are]… frustrating for principals because we are trying to roll this out with our staff and then I'm in front of the staff being questioned. And now I have to come back and go, well, they tweaked it a little bit" (Principal F).

Principals want additional opportunities for input on district work. They want to provide feedback in advance of district leaders making decisions about upcoming implementation. Principal K explained that they want genuine engagement or even early notification of things that are happening: "This is happening, right? We got cut with this, got cut or whatever this funding. So you need to start preparing yourself. This is going to go away. Figure this out. Give enough warning, right?"

Training Needs

Principals expressed significant needs for training for both teachers and administrators, particularly additional training on accessing and interpreting data. This is a greater need than in prior years due to the new curriculum and new assessment system. Progress monitoring was identified as an area of need. Principal E stated, "An area of growth for me is…I am great at looking at data and then putting in support. My struggle is then looping back around and making sure we [are] seeing the growth that we want to see." Differentiation in Tier 1 would be improved with professional development. Principal F explained, "teachers don't know how to decipher the data, and they also don't know how to run small groups." Similarly, Principal B

stated, “We could have 100 interventions, but it’s really the interventions within the classroom I think is the most important thing.”

Observations

I conducted ten observations: four at elementary schools and three each at middle and high schools. This number was sufficient for me to reach data saturation, as new themes stopped being shared. Table 11 summarizes the observations. In this section, I describe four themes from the interviews that were apparent in the observations: *Coaching and Modeling Data*, *Principals as Motivators and Cheerleaders for Positive Culture*, *Distributed Leadership*, and *Setting the Vision and Focusing on Implementation*. Additionally, although it did not emerge as a theme in the interviews, there was a notable difference between the next steps identified in the elementary and middle school teams versus the high school teams.

Table 11

Observations by Level

School Code	Level	Name of Meeting	Focus
A	Elementary	Student Intervention Team	Students referred for academic, behavior, or attendance concerns
G	Elementary	MTSS Team	Following up on individual students
L	Elementary	Kinder Data Team	Grade level team identifying students for support
M	Elementary	Tier 2 Team	Students referred for academic, behavior, or attendance concerns
C	Middle	Tier 3 Team	Students referred for academic, behavior, or attendance concerns
D	Middle	Student Focus Team	Students referred for academic, behavior, or attendance concerns
E	Middle	Student Study Team	Students referred for academic, behavior, or attendance concerns
I	High	Prevention & Intervention	Students referred for academic, behavior, or attendance concerns

School Code	Level	Name of Meeting	Focus
J	High	Tier 2 Admin Meeting	Students referred for academic, behavior, or attendance concerns; also administration updates
K	High	Student Study Team	Students referred for academic, behavior, or attendance concerns

Teams varied, not only in what they were called and their stated purposes, but also in composition. There was significant variability in who participated in the team meetings, both by role and also by level. In all but one school (90%), the principal was a team member. In secondary schools, the assistant principals were almost always present, but this was less true at the elementary level. Counselors participated in all but three meetings (70%). The Title/LAP Interventionist is a role that only exists at the elementary level, and these staff were present at all but one (75%) meeting at that level. Classroom teachers were only team members at the elementary level (100%) and one middle school (33%), although at the secondary level they sometimes had submitted referrals to the team. The role of the resource/special education teacher was included in three out of four elementary meetings (75%), one at the middle level (33%), and only at one high school (33%). School psychologists were represented at all levels, but less so at high school (75% elementary, 66% middle, 33% high). Mental health specialists were only present at one elementary (25%), one middle school (33%), and two high school meetings (66%). The role of dean only exists at one middle school, and he attended that meeting; deans also attended at two of three high school meetings (66%). A speech language pathologist was present at only one meeting (10%), at the middle level. A nurse was present for a high school meeting (10%). Finally, a paraeducator was present at one middle school (33%) and all three high school meetings (100%).

Table 12
Participation by Role

Role	Elementary				Middle			High		
	A	G	L	M	C	D	E	I	J	K
Principal	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x
Asst Principal				x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Counselor	x	x		x	*	x	x	x		x
School Psychologist	x	x		x	x	x		x		
Classroom Teacher	x	x	x	x			x			
Title/LAP Interventionist		x	x	x	-	-	-	-	-	-
Resource/Special Ed Teacher		x	x	x			x			x
Paraeducator					x			x	x	x
Dean	-	-	-	-	x	-	x	x		x
Mental Health Specialist	x				x			x		x
Speech Language Pathologist						x				
Nurse										x

Note: A dash indicates that the role does not exist at the school. For example, no elementary schools in the district and only two middle schools have deans. Additionally, some positions are itinerant and may not be able to be present on a given day, including nurses and mental health specialists. An asterisk indicates that the counselor is on the team but was absent the day of the observation.

Coaching and Modeling Data Use

Principals coaching and modeling data use for teachers was clearly visible in principal actions at two elementary schools (50%) and one middle school (33%). Specifically in School G, the principal noted a student's foundational skills, explaining, "So he has trouble with blending

and doesn't remember the letter sounds." This comment was both summarizing what had been shared by some members of the team and simultaneously explaining it to other members. Additionally, the principal at School L displayed and explained DIBELS data by pointing out that of 67 kindergarteners, more than half were below benchmark. He continued to explain the meaning of the composite score and shared the purpose of progress monitoring. He described a goal for the number of progress monitoring probes he wanted to see before the winter benchmark and urged teachers to use DIBELS instead of their home-made assessments, explaining the "why" to them. In a third school, a principal checked SWIS office discipline referrals and explained to the team how to understand what she saw (School E).

Principals as Motivators and Cheerleaders of a Positive Culture

Principal L began the kindergarten data team meeting by thanking the team for being present and pointing to snacks, encouraging teachers to make sure they are "fed and nourished" and to take care of any "bio needs." He pointed to the DIBELS data that were displayed, and stated that every year there are students who come into kindergarten far below benchmark and "Year after year ya'll move kids… it's a testament to how intentional you are and how well you instruct." This supportive, complimentary approach may have contributed to the successful push for the teachers to commit to new progress monitoring later in the meeting. Principal C inserted the standing agenda item "Celebrations" as a way to pause and reflect on the student growth that had occurred as a result of the team's actions. While it was clearly focused on student success, the team was able to draw a direct connection between their actions and student growth. In one meeting they celebrated a student with stronger relationships with adults who had also volunteered for hallway cleanup and had joined a mentoring program. Another student was noted as improving. At School A, the principal consistently used affirming language, complimented the

teachers, and reinforced their professional strengths.

Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership was evident at every observation (100%), although to varying degrees. The meeting facilitator was most often the principal, particularly at the elementary level (100%). Assistant principals were often facilitators at middle (66%) and high schools (66%). The Title/LAP interventionist, the counselor, and the dean each facilitated one meeting (10%). Table 13 displays the meeting facilitator by role and level.

Table 13
Meeting Facilitation by Role

Role	Elementary				Middle			High		
	A	G	L	M	C	D	E	I	J	K
Principal	x	x	x	x	x		x			
Asst Principal					x	x			x	x
Counselor								x		
Title/LAP Interventionist		x								
Dean					x					

Note: At School C there was a rotation of principal, assistant principal, and dean, depending upon the focus for that week.

Regardless of the facilitator, team members were quick to share what they knew about a given student. At School M, for example, a student was brought forward by a second-grade teacher because he didn't seem to be making progress in class. The assistant principal noted his absences and tardies, the Title/LAP teacher described his current interventions as well as his past interventions, and the principal noted some family dynamics regarding missing school. The principal chose to focus first on his attendance and suggested that a student from an older grade might be paired with him at recess to play games to build his interest in attending school. The counselor added that she knew of a fifth grader who would be a good candidate as a mentor. Clear collaboration and decision making was evident.

Another example of distributed leadership is School K, where the team discussed a student who had been hit by a car earlier in the year and had just returned to school the day before. Team members discussed how to help her move around the school in her wheelchair, including providing her with an elevator key. The school psychologist noted that an evaluation for an IEP had been scheduled, and in the meantime the student would need an adult to help her transition between classes. The counselor shared that the family is not "demanding" one-on-one support. The mental health specialists noted that they needed to craft a plan for her in case of emergencies, fire drills, and lockdowns. The assistant principal shared that there is a plan to evacuate students in wheelchairs from the upstairs classrooms, and she will talk with the lead teacher to ensure they are aware of the student's needs.

At School D, the team focused on a student with 15 missing assignments and a few Ds. The student has an IEP for speech only and was referred to this team by the speech language pathologist because she is having difficulty with comprehension. The assistant principal logged into the district's data warehouse and viewed the student's attendance patterns. She was being pulled from advisory class and sometimes choir for speech services, but recently academic concerns had arisen. Instead of speech services, the speech language pathologist shared that they spend their time catching up on missing assignments. The student told her that her parent doesn't believe in doing homework. The assistant principal asked if the student was taking part in the school's core-flex time [when students are sent to various teachers to catch up on assignments or receive additional instruction]. The counselor explained that the student doesn't go to core-flex, but that she had met with the student's mother to discuss the missing assignments. She shared that the mother works nights and is unable to provide accountability for schoolwork at home.

The counselor further explained that the student recently arrived at school crying because her speech minutes had been reduced from twice to once per week.

The counselor examined the student's accommodations in her IEP and noted that an annual review was coming up. The assistant principal suggested scheduling her speech minutes during advisory to get her to come to school more regularly. The assistant principal asked the speech language pathologist if she could check in with the student every morning, as she's the motivator for the student to come to school. The principal asked the counselor to talk with the teachers to soften their tone and approach. The speech language pathologist indicated that not all of the teachers were providing the accommodations in the IEP, and there is a need to make sure all the teachers have a copy of the "IEP at a Glance." The school psychologist said, "This pumpkin needs more support - hygiene needs." The counselor added that her hair usually isn't washed and the student is "totally overwhelmed." The school psychologist asked if there were any other actions, and the counselor said she would follow up with teachers.

Two meetings demonstrated weaker distributed leadership. At School E, the principal displayed a document pre-filled with information about each student, including their SBA scores, current grades, DESSA, attendance, SPED/504 status, the student's photo, and easyCBM reading and math data. While many roles were represented in the meeting including counselors, the dean, and the assistant principal, the only team members who contributed were the teachers who brought the concerns forward, with occasional participation by the resource/special education teacher, while the counselors and dean silently observed. During the principal interview, this same principal expressed concern about the lack of distributed leadership, explaining that she sets up the meetings, gathers all the data, facilitates the meetings, takes notes, and disseminates information and tasks. She worried that if she leaves the school, the systems will not continue. At

School J, the principal was present for part of the meeting but only participated when discussing one of more than 14 students. One of the assistant principals ran the meeting and there was obvious tension between her and another assistant principal. In addition, few notes were taken about next steps or actions that team members would take.

Setting the Vision and Focusing on Implementation

Explicit setting of vision was not observed in most schools, perhaps because the observations were occurring mid-semester and were part of a routine, and, therefore, explicit statements about vision weren't present. However, I did observe one example of vision setting at School L, in which the principal clearly explained that the kindergarten team has a history of "growing" their students. His statement implied his expectation that this growth would continue. He also shared his vision for a more complete MTSS system by modeling data use and sharing his wish for additional progress monitoring and small group differentiation.

Evidence for focusing on implementation is found in the way that the majority of schools utilized data about attendance, academic achievement, social emotional skills, and mental health in an integrated way. For example, in School M the team discussed lack of progress by a student and recognized absences and tardies as having an impact. The principal asked, "Are we looking at a kiddo who has major holes because of absenteeism, or are we looking at something else?" School C utilizes a cycle of team meetings with one meeting per month dedicated to behavior, one sorted by attendance, one for missing assignments, and one for Ds and Fs. In all cases they also examined the same characteristics, recognizing that one may influence another. In School D, the principal logged into the district data warehouse to examine attendance patterns for students with missing assignments and reading comprehension difficulty. The WARNS assessment was utilized for students with attendance problems, in recognition that to improve attendance may

require understanding the root causes of poor attendance, including depression/anxiety, substance abuse, defiance, family environmental factors, and school engagement. In School I, the meeting was accompanied by a projection of a spreadsheet by student with absences, SWIS referrals, number of Ds, and suspensions noted.

Next Steps

In four elementaries (100%), three middle schools (100%), and one high school (33%), team members selected clear intervention steps for students. This included academic interventions, behavior interventions, strategies to address attendance concerns including calling parents and conducting community engagement boards for truancy, assigning peer tutors, focusing on medical needs by involving a nurse, putting students on check-in check-out supports, connecting families without outside agencies, providing hygiene support and school supplies, and referring students to mental health specialists, among others. There were systems to follow up in two to four weeks to determine if the efforts were successful. In two high schools (66%), the focus was not on next steps specific to the student. In one of these, the suggested intervention was repeatedly assigning a paraeducator to attend the general education class with no discussion of how that support would be helpful. In another, team members were shown a list of students and told to "go through the list and look at your caseload. Pick a couple of unhighlighted kids and find out what's going on." These teams had intentions to support students, but they seemed to lack skills to select interventions aligned to students' needs and there was little structured follow up.

In summary, the observations provided evidence of four themes developed from the interviews: *Coaching and Modeling Data*, *Principals as Motivators and Cheerleaders for Positive Culture*, *Distributed Leadership*, and *Setting the Vision and Focusing on*

Implementation, as well as a notable difference in next steps seen at the elementary and middle levels compared to the high school level.

Mixed Methods Integration

Because this mixed-methods study included principal self-perception data, interviews with principals, and observations of data teams, I created a joint display of the results to demonstrate areas of convergence and divergence (see Table 14). Areas of convergence include effective Tier 1 systems and a clear need for improved Tier 3 systems. Findings diverged between the survey, where principals rated their overall skills similarly by school level, and the interviews and observations, where qualitative results suggested secondary-specific needs.

Table 14

Joint Display

MTSS Tier	Quantitative Findings (Survey Results)	Qualitative Findings (Interview and Observation Themes)	Integration Type	Interpretation
Tier 1: Core Instruction and Universal Systems	Principals self-reported strong skills in accessing Tier 1 data for academics (4.16), behavior (4.32), and social/emotional skills (3.90), analyzing Tier 1 data for large groups (4.19) and for individuals (4.19).	Principals are aware of the importance of their role Tier 1 systems by leading PLC discussions, modeling data use, supporting teacher collaboration, protecting PLC time, and maintaining a focus on instructional improvement.	Convergence	Both quantitative and qualitative findings indicate that principals are actively engaged in Tier 1 data use and leadership of instructional improvement processes.
Tier 3: Intensive and Individualized Interventions	Principals reported the lowest perceived skill levels in accessing resources for Tier 3 academic (3.26), behavioral (3.45), and social-emotional interventions (3.26). They also report low skills in determining the level of response to intervention and using that information to make modifications to intervention (3.65).	Principal interviews indicated a need for improved Tier 3 interventions, better resources, and additional guidance for MTSS implementation. The observations indicated that two high schools lacked skills in identifying interventions.	Convergence	Quantitative weaknesses correspond with qualitative calls for additional district support in intervention systems.

MTSS Tier	Quantitative Findings (Survey Results)	Qualitative Findings (Interview and Observation Themes)	Integration Type	Interpretation
Systems by School Level	Quantitative findings showed no statistically significant differences in survey responses by role, years of experience, or school level.	The interviews revealed secondary-specific challenges including a need for interventions, a focus on improving Tier 1, including clarity needed on curriculum issues, and scheduling constraints. The observations revealed weaker distributed leadership at the secondary level compared to elementary.	Divergence	While principals report similar levels of data literacy across contexts, qualitative findings reveal areas for secondary growth, particularly at high school.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Insights gleaned from surveys, interviews, and observations of data teams provide actionable information the district can use to enhance our support of data-based decision making in our MTSS implementation. In this chapter, I will first discuss the limitations of the study, then I will link key findings to previous research and share implications for the district before discussing ideas for future research.

Limitations

As with all research, this study has limitations. As noted in Chapter III, threats to validity and research integrity were considered from the design stage. Use of both quantitative and qualitative methods allowed for methodological triangulation. Validity threats of history, instrumentation, and differential selection each had mitigation strategies to minimize them, but limitations must be noted. This study took place in a district with dynamic and evolving systems and changing state and federal conditions, and findings may become less relevant with time. My strategies to uphold research integrity in the qualitative portion included acknowledgement of my professional positionality and bias, as well as utilizing a co-investigator for observations. The intent of the study was to inform this district's next steps given its history, characteristics, and staff knowledge, and therefore the findings may not be generalizable to districts with differing characteristics. Despite these limitations, however, the study also provides important contributions to our understanding of DBDM implementation in the district.

Reflections on the Literature

At its core, DBDM means using data to make valid and impactful decisions to benefit students (Harlacher et al., 2024). This study found ample evidence that DBDM is seen by

principals as crucially important in this district. Mandinach and Schildkamp (2021) surfaced the need to focus on data beyond a narrow focus on numeracy and literacy assessment data. Principals in this district examine a broad variety of assessment, attendance, credit attainment, social-emotional, and behavioral data in alignment with Drake's (2022) recommendations. Principals have a critical role in schools, and their modeling of data use, expectations for teacher data use, and support for PLCs maximizes their effectiveness as instructional leaders (Jimerson et al., 2021). These approaches by principals were highly visible in the observations. However, secondary schools demonstrated weaker distributed leadership structures, and high schools in particular lacked skills in identifying interventions for struggling students.

Shared leadership and decision-making, as observed in the data teams, is essential for school improvement (Levin & Datnow, 2012) and the degree of distributed leadership evident was in alignment with this at the elementary level. Rather than "name and shame" practices (Jimerson et al., 2021), it was clear that this district's principals create trusting, improvement-oriented cultures for effective data use. Principals who demonstrate a commitment to equity and who actively participate as DBDM leaders influence the degree to which DBDM is implemented with fidelity and keeps a focus on equity (Dodman et al., 2023). This commitment is reflected in the equity theme that arose from the interviews.

A barrier to DBDM highlighted in Chapter II is lack of training in basic concepts, statistics, and knowledge of data (Bettesworth at al., 2009; Mandinach & Schildkamp, 2021). There was little evidence that these skills were lacking in the principals who participated in my study. To the contrary, they demonstrated high levels of access and understanding of multiple relevant data sets. They accessed the student information system, the district's data warehouse, the SEL assessment system, and data grids with grades, attendance, and discipline data provided

by the district. The support from the district in the form of data dashboards and reports was evident throughout the observations (Drake, 2022). This finding aligns well with the findings of Grissom et al. (2017) that when central offices provide high levels of support, principals perceive lower barriers to data use.

Recommendations

Principals in this district bring many strengths to DBDM, not the least of which are strong skills in accessing, understanding, and interpreting a broad range of data. The work that lies ahead is beyond the technical issues of DBDM and is more adaptive in nature. Specifically, the district should focus on strengthening implementation of the adopted MTSS four-step problem solving model. Within that model, there are three areas of need: (a) improving Tier 1 instruction, particularly at the secondary level; (b) clearly identifying and implementing interventions at the secondary level, along with developing data team members' skills to match interventions to student needs; and (c) strengthening distributed leadership of data teams at the secondary level. These three areas of need will require systematic district level support.

Recommendation 1: Improve Tier 1 Instruction

At all levels, but particularly secondary, improving Tier 1 instruction should be a continued focus. Specific strategies should include developing district-level common agreements around instruction, curriculum, and environment (Harlacher et al., 2024). The measure of success is 80% of students succeeding with only Tier 1 support. The district's PLC structures should aid in this effort, and ongoing professional development is expected to assist teacher teams in honing their Tier 1 instruction to meet the needs of most learners. This includes content-specific work to clarify common high-leverage practices, clear identification of adopted curricula, and common

behavior expectations (Harlacher et al., 2024). Adjusting the district's administrative learning walk protocol to reflect these emphases would continue to reinforce these strategies.

Recommendation 2: Identify and Implement Interventions

Again focusing on the secondary level, the district needs to inventory existing interventions, and, where gaps are identified, identify and implement interventions. Some existing interventions, for example the WARNS system for attendance, are research-based and available but not implemented in all schools. There are also systemic gaps in interventions, such as secondary reading and math, and adoption of effective materials is needed, followed by professional development for teachers providing the interventions. The structure of the 6-period day in middle and high school poses a barrier, so exploration of core-flex structures, intervention periods, and/or co-teaching is recommended. The American Institute for Research's Center on Multi-Tiered System of Supports has specific guidance for secondary schools, including two documents: *Considerations for Multi-Tiered System of Supports: High School Settings* (Center on Multi-Tiered System of Supports, 2025) and *Considerations for Multi-Tiered System of Supports: Middle School Settings* (2025) that can serve as resources for exploring barriers and ways to address them.

Recommendation 3: Strengthen Distributed Leadership

Most schools had strong distributed leadership, but two stood out as having weaker systems. One principal knows it is an area of growth, and she is actively working on it. She may need resources or mentoring to make the changes. Another school had a somewhat dysfunctional team with minimal engagement from the principal and obvious tensions between two assistant principals. This team needs support to understand their dynamics and the root cause of the

tension so they can rebuild and become more functional. One strategy would be to visit another school with a stronger Tier 2 team to observe their processes.

Recommendation 4: Address Special Education Needs

This district has a much higher proportion of students in special education than the state. This is likely a result of weak Tiers 1 and 2; improvement in these tiers should help reduce the need for special education. In addition, there is a need to identify curriculum for use in special education, and teachers need professional development to implement the identified curriculum. Inclusion structures and coteaching offer promising ways to improve outcomes for students in special education.

Future Research

Helpful future research could explore examples of effective MTSS systems at the secondary level. No standard MTSS framework for secondary schools currently exists (Center on Multi-Tiered System of Supports, 2025). This presents a challenge for secondary schools, as they have no models to follow and experience different barriers than their elementary counterparts. Additionally, application of implementation science to MTSS systems could create a road map for schools to follow.

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APPENDIX A

PRINCIPAL MTSS SURVEY

Introduction:

You are invited to participate in a research study. This study is exploring principal leadership in a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS). This survey should take less than 30 minutes. Your participation in this survey is completely voluntary. Participation in this survey is not a requirement of your employment with [district].

Declining to participate will not affect your relationship with the researcher or the school district. You can choose not to participate. Even if you decide to start this survey, you can change your mind later. If you have any questions about the study, you can contact Sarah Rich, Assistant Superintendent of Instructional Services, at srich@ntps.org. The completion of this survey indicates your consent to participate.

The results of this survey will be used to inform professional development and support for principals. Please answer honestly. Your answers are anonymous and confidential. Thank you!

PART 1

1. Do you currently serve as a principal or assistant principal?
   ☐ Principal
   ☐ Assistant Principal

2. How many years of experience do you have:

   In education in any role? ___

   In education as an administrator (principal or principal? ___

3. At what level have you ever served as a principal or assistant principal (select all that apply)?
   ☐ Elementary
   ☐ Middle
   ☐ High
   ☐ Other (e.g. K-8, 5-9)

4. At what level do you currently serve as a principal or assistant principal?
   ☐ Elementary
   ☐ Middle
   ☐ High
   ☐ Other (e.g. K-8, 5-9)

5. My school has the right teaming structure to implement MTSS.
   ☐ Strongly disagree

☐ Disagree
☐ Agree
☐ Strongly agree
☐ Don't know

6. My school has an MTSS team that utilizes data to make decisions.
   ☐ Strongly disagree
   ☐ Disagree
   ☐ Agree
   ☐ Strongly agree
   ☐ Don't know

7. I have made or will make changes to my MTSS teaming structure this school year (2025-26).
   ☐ Strongly disagree
   ☐ Disagree
   ☐ Agree
   ☐ Strongly agree
   ☐ Don't know

PART 2
The following questions measure beliefs about your skills and abilities to support the implementation of MTSS. Please reach each statement about a skill related to an assessment, instruction, and/or interventions below, and then evaluate YOUR skill level within the context or working as a school principal or assistant principal. Where indicated, rate your skill separately for academics (reading and math), behavior, and social emotional learning (SEL).

There are no right or wrong answers. Please answer honestly. Your answers are anonymous and confidential. Thank you!

8. I have the skill to access the data necessary to determine the percentage of students in Tier 1 instruction who meet grade-level standards/expectations in:

	I do not have this skill at all	I have minimal skills in this area; need substantial support to use it	I have the skill, but still need some support to use it	I can use this skill with little support	I am highly skilled in this area and could teach others this skill
Academics	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Behavior	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Social emotional skills	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

9. I have the skill to **use data** to make decisions about individuals and groups of students related to the:

	I do not have this skill at all	I have minimal skills in this area; need substantial support to use it	I have the skill, but still need some support to use it	I can use this skill with little support	I am highly skilled in this area and could teach others this skill
Tier 1 academic curriculum	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Tier 1 behavior expectations/building discipline matrix	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Tier 1 social emotional curriculum	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

I have the skill to perform each of the following steps when identifying the problem for a student or groups of students for whom concerns have been raised:

10. I have the skill to define the concern in terms of what the student(s) should know, understand, and do:

	I do not have this skill at all	I have minimal skills in this area; need substantial support to use it	I have the skill, but still need some support to use it	I can use this skill with little support	I am highly skilled in this area and could teach others this skill
Academics	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Behavior	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Social emotional skills	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

11. Use data to define students' current level of performance for:

	I do not have this skill at all	I have minimal skills in this area; need substantial support to use it	I have the skill, but still need some support to use it	I can use this skill with little support	I am highly skilled in this area and could teach others this skill
Academics	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Behavior	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Social emotional skills	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

12. I have the skill to calculate the gap between student current performance and the goal (grade level standard/expectation) for:

	I do not have this skill at all	I have minimal skills in this area; need substantial support to use it	I have the skill, but still need some support to use it	I can use this skill with little support	I am highly skilled in this area and could teach others this skill
Academics	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Behavior	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Social emotional skills	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

13. I have the skill to determine the desired level of performance (i.e. goal, grade-level standard) for:

	I do not have this skill at all	I have minimal skills in this area; need substantial support to use it	I have the skill, but still need some support to use it	I can use this skill with little support	I am highly skilled in this area and could teach others this skill
Academics	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Behavior	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Social emotional skills	☐	☐	☐	☐	☒

14. I have the skill to determine the current level of peer performance for the same skill for:

	I do not have this skill at all	I have minimal skills in this area; need substantial support to use it	I have the skill, but still need some support to use it	I can use this skill with little support	I am highly skilled in this area and could teach others this skill
Academics	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Behavior	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Social emotional skills	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

15. I have the skill to calculate the gap between student current performance and the goal (grade level standard/expectation) for:

	I do not have this skill at all	I have minimal skills in this area; need substantial support to use it	I have the skill, but still need some support to use it	I can use this skill with little support	I am highly skilled in this area and could teach others this skill
Academics	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Behavior	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Social emotional skills	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

16. I have the skill to use gap data to determine whether Tier 1 instruction should be adjusted or whether supplemental instruction should be provided for:

	I do not have this skill at all	I have minimal skills in this area; need substantial support to use it	I have the skill, but still need some support to use it	I can use this skill with little support	I am highly skilled in this area and could teach others this skill
Academics	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Behavior	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Social emotional skills	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

I have the skill to perform each of the following steps when identifying the problem for a student or groups of students for whom concerns have been raised:

17. I have the skills to develop potential reasons (hypotheses) that a student or group of students is/are not achieving desired levels or performance (i.e. grade level standards/expectations) for:

	I do not have this skill at all	I have minimal skills in this area; need substantial support to use it	I have the skill, but still need some support to use it	I can use this skill with little support	I am highly skilled in this area and could teach others this skill
Academics	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Behavior	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Social emotional skills	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

18. I have the skill to identify the most appropriate data to use to determine the reasons (hypotheses) that are likely to be barriers to attaining the desired goal for:

	I do not have this skill at all	I have minimal skills in this area; need substantial support to use it	I have the skill, but still need some support to use it	I can use this skill with little support	I am highly skilled in this area and could teach others this skill
Academics	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Behavior	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Social emotional skills	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

19. I have the skill to identify the appropriate supplemental (Tier 2) or intensive (Tier 3) intervention(s) available in my building for students identified as at-risk for:

	I do not have this skill at all	I have minimal skills in this area; need substantial support to use it	I have the skill, but still need some support to use it	I can use this skill with little support	I am highly skilled in this area and could teach others this skill
Academics	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Behavior	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Social emotional skills	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

20. I have the skill to access resources (e.g. internet sources, professional literature) to develop evidence-based interventions for:

	I do not have this skill at all	I have minimal skills in this area; need substantial support to use it	I have the skill, but still need some support to use it	I can use this skill with little support	I am highly skilled in this area and could teach others this skill
Academic Tier 1 curricula	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Behavioral Tier 1 curricula	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Social emotional skills Tier 1 curricula	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Academic supplemental/Tier 2 curricula	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Behavioral supplemental/Tier 2 curricula	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Social emotional supplemental/Tier 2 curricula	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Academic intensive/Tier 3 curricula	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Behavioral intensive/Tier 3 curricula	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Social emotional skills intensive/Tier 3 curricula	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

21. I have the skill to ensure that any supplemental and/or intensive interventions are integrated and aligned (scope, sequence, pacing, language) with Tier 1 instruction in the general education classroom:

	I do not have this skill at all	I have minimal skills in this area; need substantial support to use it	I have the skill, but still need some support to use it	I can use this skill with little support	I am highly skilled in this area and could teach others this skill
Academics	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Behavior	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Social emotional skills	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

22. I have the skill to ensure that the proposed intervention plan is supported by the data that were collected for:

	I do not have this skill at all	I have minimal skills in this area; need substantial support to use it	I have the skill, but still need some support to use it	I can use this skill with little support	I am highly skilled in this area and could teach others this skill
Academics	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Behavior	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Social emotional skills	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

23. I have the skill to provide the support necessary to ensure that the intervention is implemented appropriately (e.g. coaching, performance feedback) for:

	I do not have this skill at all	I have minimal skills in this area; need substantial support to use it	I have the skill, but still need some support to use it	I can use this skill with little support	I am highly skilled in this area and could teach others this skill
Academics	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Behavior	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Social emotional skills	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

24. I have the skill to determine if an intervention was implemented as it was intended (e.g. components of plan, sufficient amount of time per week) for:

	I do not have this skill at all	I have minimal skills in this area; need substantial support to use it	I have the skill, but still need some support to use it	I can use this skill with little support	I am highly skilled in this area and could teach others this skill
Academics	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Behavior	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Social emotional skills	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

25. I have the skill to select appropriate data sources (e.g. benchmark, formative, attendance, behavioral observations) to use for progress monitoring of student performance during intervention:

	I do not have this skill at all	I have minimal skills in this area; need substantial support to use it	I have the skill, but still need some support to use it	I can use this skill with little support	I am highly skilled in this area and could teach others this skill
Academics	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Behavior	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Social emotional skills	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

26. I have the skill to involve students in goal-setting and monitoring their own progress for:

	I do not have this skill at all	I have minimal skills in this area; need substantial support to use it	I have the skill, but still need some support to use it	I can use this skill with little support	I am highly skilled in this area and could teach others this skill
Academics	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Behavior	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Social emotional skills	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

27. I have the skill to collaborate with school staff in determining student progress and response to instruction/intervention for:

	I do not have this skill at all	I have minimal skills in this area; need substantial support to use it	I have the skill, but still need some support to use it	I can use this skill with little support	I am highly skilled in this area and could teach others this skill
Academics	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Behavior	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Social emotional skills	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

28. I have the skill to collaborate with parents/guardians in determining student progress and response to instruction/intervention for:

	I do not have this skill at all	I have minimal skills in this area; need substantial support to use it	I have the skill, but still need some support to use it	I can use this skill with little support	I am highly skilled in this area and could teach others this skill
Academics	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Behavior	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Social emotional skills	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

29. I have the skill to collaborate with school staff in determining student progress and response to instruction/intervention for:

	I do not have this skill at all	I have minimal skills in this area; need substantial support to use it	I have the skill, but still need some support to use it	I can use this skill with little support	I am highly skilled in this area and could teach others this skill
Academics	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Behavior	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Social emotional skills	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

30. I have the skill to monitor aggregate data to determine overall effectiveness of supplemental interventions (e.g. at least 70% of students receiving the intervention attain grade level standards and/or make significant growth toward goals or standards) for:

	I do not have this skill at all	I have minimal skills in this area; need substantial support to use it	I have the skill, but still need some support to use it	I can use this skill with little support	I am highly skilled in this area and could teach others this skill
Academics	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Behavior	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Social emotional skills	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

31. I have the skill to analyze graphed student data for:

	I do not have this skill at all	I have minimal skills in this area; need substantial support to use it	I have the skill, but still need some support to use it	I can use this skill with little support	I am highly skilled in this area and could teach others this skill
Large groups (Tier 1)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Small Groups (Tier 2)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Individual students	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Aimlines (growth rate needed)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Trendlines (actual growth rate)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☒

32. I have the skill to determine the "level of response to intervention" and use this information to make modifications to instruction/intervention.

☐ I do not have this skill at all

☐ I have minimal skills in this area; need support to use it

☐ I have this skill, but still need some support to use it

☐ I can use this skill with little support

☐ I am highly skilled in this area and could teach others this skill

APPENDIX B

PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Time of interview:
Date:
Place:
Interviewer:
Interviewee:
Position of the Interviewee:
Consent form received?
Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to this interview. For this project, I'm going to interview at least nine principals/assistant principals. I will identify key themes from the interviews and may pull out specific quotes, but I will protect your anonymity. Nothing you say here can be traced back to you, so please be as candid and honest as you can.

This is a study of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support in our district. This is often shortened to MTSS. By MTSS I mean both PBIS and RTI systems, working either independently or together. I will use the information gleaned from this dissertation to develop a strategy to provide professional development and other resources to ensure we can continue to improve our system and support all learners.

I expect this interview to last no more than 60 minutes. It has a total of twelve questions. Do I have your consent to record the interview? Thank you. Do you have any questions before we begin?

START RECORDING

Opening Question:

1. Please tell me about your overall impressions of MTSS.

Content Questions:

2. Describe the MTSS system at your school.
3. Please describe the level of implementation of MTSS at your school.
4. Please describe any school structures or processes that support MTSS at your school.
5. What is your role in supporting MTSS implementation?
6. What kind of support does your school need to improve MTSS systems?
7. Please tell me about any school structures, processes, or aspects of your school culture that support the effectiveness of MTSS.
8. Please tell me about any school structures, processes, or aspects of culture that get in the way of the effectiveness of MTSS?
9. Describe how the district can improve its support of MTSS implementation at your school.
10. What changes are needed at your school in order for MTSS to be improved and sustained?
11. What changes are needed at the district in order for MTSS to be improved and sustained?

Probes include:

- Can you walk me through that?
- What were your feelings when that happened?
- How did that start?
- Tell me more.
- What is an example of that?
- I'm not sure I understand…
- How did you feel?

Follow Up Question

12. Is there anything that I should have asked that you wish to respond to? Anything I missed?

Closing Instructions

That brings us nearly to the end of our interview today. As a reminder, everything you've said is confidential. While the purpose of the interviews is to determine themes, and as qualitative research I may include quotations when I'm sharing my findings, I will ensure that none of them can be tied directly or indirectly to you as an individual. Would you mind if I followed up with you if I have questions? Would you be interested in reading the transcript of our interview today in order to ensure that your thoughts and opinions are accurately captured? Thank you so much for your time, attention, and input to this project!

APPENDIX C

OBSERVATION NOTETAKING TEMPLATE

Time of meeting:

Date:

Place:

Participants:

Name of meeting (MDT, SST, Leadership):

End time of the meeting:

Did principal or other team members have to leave?

Interruptions (time gaps):

Location:

Overall feeling / affect of the team members:

Content of the meeting/agenda items:

Notes:

APPENDIX D

OBSERVATIONS

SCHOOL A OBSERVATION (Elementary)

Time of meeting: 12:30-1:40

Date: 10/14/25

Participants: principal, mental health specialist, mental health specialist intern, teachers, counselor, school psychologist

Name of meeting (MDT, SST, Leadership): Student Intervention Team (SIT)

Did principal or other team members have to leave? No.

Interruptions (time gaps): None

Location: School A principal's office at a small conference table

Overall feeling / affect of the team members: There was a sense of trust, honesty, and mutual support. This was a routine, understood activity; no teacher had to have the task explained. Some teachers were a little surprised when they walked into the room because there were more people than usual.

The principal consistently used affirming language, complimented the teachers, and reinforced their professional strengths. He acted as a problem solver, helping teachers identify student needs, prioritize concerns, and plan specific next steps. He connected teachers and families to school and community supports. He set clear expectations for the meeting and kept it on track. He used the meetings to strengthen school systems by gathering data, and planning follow-up meetings.

Content of the meeting/agenda items:

Twice per year, a few weeks before conferences, every teacher in the school is scheduled for a 10 minute meeting with this team. Teachers provide the team with information about students of concern who are not otherwise receiving support. Each teacher entered the room with 1-3 students in mind who need additional support. I was able to observe five teachers participating in this process.

The first kindergarten teacher brought two students of concern. Their behaviors included crying, defiance, perfectionism, and anxiety. The principal asked if she had engaged with the families and what alternative strategies she had tried. He also asked how his leadership team can support smoother transitions of students into kindergarten. The school psychologist noted that the classroom carpet is dirty, "like a kennel." The principal responded with a plan to clean the carpet on an upcoming Friday before a long weekend to give it time to dry.

The second kindergarten teacher entered, and the principal said, "10 minutes, ready, set, go!" This teacher noted two students of concern. The first student takes all of her clothes off when using the restroom. The teacher is providing rewards for appropriate bathroom behavior. The counselor suggested that there might be parenting classes they could connect the family with. The teacher also noted that there is a significant concern with body odor and wondered if the student was having accidents before school and then coming in the same clothes. The principal noted that he will have the office professional book a double period for the conference, and he will talk to the parent about the concern. The second student comes in every day with the same question asking to see photos of the teacher's own children and names them each day. The principal asked if he loves dinosaurs or trains. The teacher said yes, and he's very repetitive and a "toe walker." The school psychologist says, "it's a duck." The principal asked if there was any

child find activity, and the school psychologist said no. The principal stated, “I’m coming to that conference.”

The next teacher was a fifth-grade teacher. After quick introductions, the principal stated, “This is your time – go.” The teacher only had one student to discuss, a student who “blows up” when redirected. The parent has told her that she has difficulty getting medications refilled. The principal states that the student came from another district and had “the single worst IEP I’ve ever read.” The principal shared that the student has had difficulty with peers and friendships in the prior year, and the parent lost her spot on the waiting list for WISE [wraparound community family support team]. The principal asked the teacher if she has been calling for behavior support. The mental health counselor noted that the student is attending counseling by an outside provider but it is only twice per month and should be more frequent. The principal pressed on, “What other community supports can we lead this family to? Are there other family needs? Do they have stable housing?” The mental health counselor said they have basic needs met but nothing beyond that, and that last summer his only friend moved away. The principal asked the counselor to determine if the student needed a weekend food backpack. He also noted that the student is receiving reading and math intervention. The team scheduled the student for the next student study team meeting.

During a brief break, the principal explained that he has been doing these types of meetings for 25 years. He gives each teacher time before fall and spring conferences to talk about students of concern. He believes the meetings allow the teachers to share concerns that are distracting them and helps him prioritize which conferences to attend. This allows him to “be the lightning rod” with parents so teachers can be the “good guy.” He noted that he will say things to parents like, “I raised two children with ADHD, so let’s talk about that.”

The next teacher came in with concerns about a first grader. He is the youngest of four children; they had been in foster care but were just returned to their mother. He urinates in his pants at school. One day recently it happened twice. He is late most days and comes to school very tired. Disruptive behaviors are increasing. The principal noted that the family has been here for a few weeks and the student receives both reading and math interventions. The teacher noted that she is concerned that if she offers too much help the parent may withdraw, as this is something she has experienced with other parents whose students had been returned from foster care. The counselor offered to attend the conference to offer gentle support. She also suggests that the parent may need an additional bed for the children and she would reach out to the education foundation for assistance.

The final first grade teacher was five minutes late to her scheduled time, so the principal called her and asked her to come to the office. She brought three students of concern. The first student was diagnosed with ADHD, talks like a baby, hits other students in their privates, takes his shoes off during instruction, and speaks disrespectfully. The principal indicated he would refer this student to the Tier 2 PBIS team. The next student has multiple tardies and unexcused absences. The principal noted that the assistant principal was supposed to call the family and asked the counselor to follow up. The teacher said the student is receiving interventions in reading and math. The principal explored when he is late, and how late he tends to be. He referred the student to the attendance team for follow up. Regarding the third student, the principal asked, “Tell me what the day looks like for him?” The teacher says that he is really smart, but breaks down over things that are too hard; she believes he can do the work, but he chooses not to. The principal asked, “have you not seen the IEP?” There was a group discussion about how many accommodations were listed, including an emotional support stuffy and snacks.

The teacher indicated that when he gets a snack, all the students want a snack, so she sends him outside the room to have a snack. The principal suggested giving him a “non disruptive code” meaning, “I need a snack.”

SCHOOL G OBSERVATION (Elementary)

Time of meeting: 7:51 AM - 8:10 AM

Date:1/30/26

Participants: counselor, grade level teacher, school psychologist, special education teacher, principal, multi-lingual teacher, Title I interventionist, observers

Name of meeting (MDT, SST, Leadership): MTSS Team focused on a single student

Did principal or other team members have to leave? All team members, including the principal, participated without leaving.

Interruptions (time gaps): no interruptions

Location: conference room in the administration area

Overall feeling / affect of the team members:

The team showed clear concern and empathy for students, acted in a collaborative manner, and the principal demonstrated knowledge about student assessment data.

Content of the meeting/agenda items:

The meeting was facilitated by the Title/LAP teacher. The meeting began with a teacher sharing her concerns about a specific second grade student. This student has difficulty concentrating and is getting all "ones" on his assessments. Even when prompted to do subtraction, he can only do addition. The multilingual teacher added that his processing seems slow and is likely impeding his ability to learn letter names and sounds. The student has the "attention of a gnat" and his clothes have holes in them from chewing. The principal asked about his school enrollment history. The team discussed what they knew about his kindergarten and first grade history. The principal noted his foundational skills: "so he has trouble with blending and doesn't remember the letter sounds." The principal asked about the efficacy of the Tier 3 foundational skills

supports, and the teacher indicated that the attention issues were so great that it was not effective. The principal continued to summarize that he has attention deficits, kindergarten letter literacy skills, and language processing struggles. The counselor also noted social skills, patterns of withdrawal, and anxiety. The meeting facilitator summarized his current services and social-emotional support with the counselor, individual attention from the teacher, and multilingual supports. The facilitator asked if it should be recommended to the parent to take him to the pediatrician for a diagnosis because they cannot diagnose ADHD, but noted that they could consider a diagnosis of Other Health Impairment. The principal asked if this was necessary and if they could make progress with additional intervention. The facilitator summarized the action steps of the teacher setting up a parent meeting and getting more information about his first two years of school.

SCHOOL L OBSERVATION (Elementary)

Start time of meeting: 12:35 PM - 1:00 PM

Date:11/14/25

Participants: Principal, 2 Title/LAP teachers, 3 Kinder teachers. One teacher was delayed in a transition and was 5 minutes late.

Name of meeting (MDT, SST, Leadership): Kinder Data Team.

Did principal or other team members have to leave? No.

Interruptions (time gaps): none

Location: In principal's office at a conference table. There were snacks on a table and a large monitor on the wall with DIBELS data displayed.

Overall feeling / affect of the team members: This meeting had a positive and collaborative feeling. All of the staff present knew their students well. The principal was welcoming and encouraging. He focused on DIBELS reading data for this meeting, and explained how to interpret the data. He complimented the teachers on their efforts to grow their students. He also gently pushed them to begin progress monitoring. His leadership moves combined high support and high expectations for teachers, resulting in teacher willingness to expand their skills and practice.

Content of the meeting/agenda items:

The principal began the meeting by thanking the team for being present. He pointed to the snacks and said they should each make sure they are fed and nourished, and they should take care of any "bio needs." He then pointed to the beginning of year DIBELS data that was displayed. He stated that every year there are students who come into kindergarten far below benchmark, and "Year after year ya'll move kids… it's a testament to how intentional you are

and how well you instruct." Of the 67 kindergarteners, over half were below benchmark. He explained that the Title I team can provide interventions to half of the students who need it, and the rest are with the classroom teachers during that intervention time. He pulled up a spreadsheet with all the kindergarteners listed, and they were sorted by DIBELS composite score. They were color coded by special education (red), served by Title I (green), in need but not yet served (white). The teacher asked if the composite score is all the tests combined, and the principal said yes. The principal pulled up progress monitoring and showed the teachers the aimline. He explained that he wanted the students to make more than a year's worth of growth. He proceeded student by student to discuss each one. He asked if each student would be a good fit for Title I interventions. One particular student had already been discussed by the student study team and has very little growth. The student has speech issues, and the parent is concerned. The principal asked, "we didn't decide to evaluate for special education?" The resource teacher explained that they were still monitoring and collecting data. For another student, the teacher noted "huge speech" concerns. The principal noted lack of growth, and the resource teacher pointed out that there are attendance problems with this student. The principal asked if he was on the assistant principal's attendance list, and the teacher said yes. Attendance in transitional kindergarten (a program for four year olds) was also an issue for this student. The team moved quickly through multiple students, asking questions about Title I interventions, if they should stay in interventions, and whether they are making progress. At one point, they discussed a student who needs intervention but is not yet receiving it because the Title I groups were full. The resource teacher noted a need for progress monitoring to see if that student's needs were greater than other students in the groups: "I will pull her and give a DIBELS and ECRI check." The principal

continued to ask probing questions such as, “Who has this student?” and “What’s going on with him/her?”

After reviewing the students, the principal asked about the students who are not in intervention but who still need support. He asked if the teachers were doing small group work during the Title I time when students in intervention were pulled to another class. Two teachers said no, and one said yes. The principal recommended small group ECRI work, “never a bad move.” He showed the teachers how to view the students’ groups by skill needs. He asked them what resources they wanted to use. One teacher explained, “I’m sorry, there are so many behaviors this year.” Another stated, “I do flashcards with letters, sounds, words we know. Sometimes dictation and mini ECRI lessons.” This teacher said she hadn’t looked at the interventions recommended in the online tool yet, but that she will when she has more time. The principal stated, “OK, know that it’s a tool, a resource. My one ask is that we’re looking at students falling between Title and being on grade level and that we’re using that intervention time intentially in class.” He asked if they were progress monitoring the students, and the teachers indicated that they have their own phoneme segmenting assessment that they sometime use. The principal said, “OK, hmmm. Here’s my concern and my ask. When we get to the middle of the year, assessment for some kids will only have two data points.” One teacher said, “You’d like more?” The principal answered, “Yes. Three data points is a good starting point. If we can get in a progress monitor between now and then we can make good determinations about progressing well or stuck behind.” He continued, explaining that students who don’t get progress monitoring because they are not in Title groups are the ones to work on. He asked if they could commit to doing a DIBELS progress monitoring probe for 14 students between the three of them. They explained that they didn’t remember how to use the assessment, and the resource teacher

offered to help them. The principal explained that “eventually we might increase the frequency, but now is not the time for that. Let’s take one step forward.” Then he demonstrated how to complete the assessment, reminded the teachers about the scoring rules, and the resource teacher again offered to support assessing the students. The teachers left with the agreement that they would do one progress monitor probe with those 14 students.

SCHOOL M OBSERVATION (Elementary)

Time of meeting: 7:45- 8:05

Date:12/2/2025

Participants:

Second grade teacher, counselor, LAP teacher, school psychologist, special education teacher, speech language pathologist, assistant principal, principal. After 20 minutes the second grade teacher left and a kindergarten teacher joined.

Name of meeting (MDT, SST, Leadership): Tier 2 meeting

Did principal or other team members have to leave? All team members, including the principal, participated without leaving.

Interruptions (time gaps): the bell rang at 8:20

Location: conference room in administration area

Overall feeling / affect of the team members: The feeling was collaborative, and the meeting was organized and efficient. The principal seemed nervous and often spoke directly to the observers to explain what was happening, as if to demonstrate the quality of the system to the observers.

Content of the meeting/agenda items:

The principal started by asking the second grade teacher to share her concerns. The teacher shared that a student of hers is not making progress, despite trying hard. The LAP teacher noted that the student is receiving Tier 2 reading support, and that the student has been receiving interventions since kindergarten. The assistant principal noted that the student has a lot of absences and tardies. The principal noted that the family has moved out of the district, and that is likely contributing to poor attendance. Additionally, the principal noted that this student is the

"baby" of the family, and the parent is permissive about school avoidance because the family believes he can learn from places other than school. In the past the student has missed months of school and attended very little in kindergarten. The principal asked about what kind of progress the student has made in LAP. The LAP teacher reported that he is making progress with his letter sounds, but not nonsense word fluency. The principal noted that last year the family filled out the home language survey and said "Spanglish" was their language: **"**Remember all that poop I went through?" As an observer, I didn't know what this meant, but the team seemed to understand. The principal noted that the student is receiving intervention for both math and reading. The LAP teacher stated that he is not making progress. The school psychologist asked to see the LAP teacher's laptop screen to view the data. The principal asked, are we looking at a kiddo who has major holes because of absenteeism, or are we looking at something else?" The principal continued with wondering aloud if putting the student into a Tier 2 attendance group, thereby getting him excited to come to school, might help his academic growth. The LAP teacher explained that he does not understand place value and can only add one digit numbers. The principal asked the classroom teacher what other things are a focus, and she responded that they are working in a small group on math. The principal said, "OK, let's build off the attendance. Can we progress monitor right now and then again right before break?" Then she suggested that maybe a student from an older grade would like to play a game with him at recess to build his interest in attending school. The counselor said she had a fifth grader who wanted to "get out" of recess and she would try to match them up. The couneslor asked the assistant principal to talk to the parent about putting the student on the "attendance board." The meeting concluded and the teacher departed.

At 8:06 a kindergarten teacher joined to talk about one of her students. This student doesn't recognize his name, letters, numbers, and has no one-to-one correspondence. His parents have concerns about the student hitting others, and he is receiving a behavior intervention. The teacher begins each day with social stories and rewards to teach behavior. There is some discussion among the group about the older siblings and if they were served in special education. The speech language pathologist said that she had screened him for speech, but he only had developmentally appropriate errors. The LAP teacher said that he was having symptoms of absence seizures with no blinking, staring straight ahead. The LAP teacher said he is starting to make progress with phoneme awareness and letter sounds, but nonsense word fluency is too hard. The assistant principal noted that he has regular attendance and has only missed one day of school. The principal shared that his grandmother is raising all the children in his family because his mother left them to work as a nanny in Europe, and that the older sibling has ADHD and couldn't get any medication because the grandmother doesn't have legal custody. There was more discussion about the challenges that older siblings face.

The principal asked if he is doing better at "hands and feet to self," and the teacher said he wants to do better but he is very impulsive. The principal wondered if they need to adjust the support at recess and asked the assistant principal to check with the recess team. The principal asked the counselor to build a relationship with the grandparent. Then she said we need to put him on the calendar for a check in February to see if he is doing better. She also asked the speech language pathologist to check if he passed his hearing and vision screening.

SCHOOL C OBSERVATION (Middle)

Time of meeting: 10:10 AM - 11:00 AM

Date:1/28/26

Participants: Principal, assistant principal, school psychologist, PBIS/ISS para, mental health specialists, dean. The assistant principal arrived ten minutes after the start of the meeting.

Name of meeting (MDT, SST, Leadership): Tier 3 Team

Did the principal or other team members have to leave? No.

Interruptions (time gaps): none.

Location: Conference Room

Overall feeling / affect of the team members: The overall feeling of the meeting was collaborative and positive. The principal facilitated in a calm and organized but efficient manner. He solicited input from each team member according to their role and their knowledge of each student. The collaboration was underscored at the end of the meeting when the rotating responsibility for bringing data and facilitating was reviewed.

Content of the meeting/agenda items:

The agenda was displayed on a screen with the following items:

-Norms review

-Celebrations

-New student referrals

-Review current student process

-Check in as needed

The principal reviewed the norms and agenda, and pulled up a spreadsheet with student names.

Celebrations:

The school psychologist noted that one student on the list had made growth, showing progress with motivation and relationships with adults. They recommended "beefing up" the student's 504 plan and introducing a motivating reward system. He noted that the student enjoys making his mother proud. The paraeducator had also had positive interactions with the student. The principal said that he had volunteered to do hallway cleanup and he had joined Reach 360 [school mentoring program]. The paraeducator briefly noted that another student on the list is doing well, and also joined the mentoring group.

New Student Referrals:

A new student had been added to the list because he had 51 absences so far. The spreadsheet included the student's picture. The principal used the spreadsheet to assign to the assistant principal, who had just entered the room. The assistant principal stated, "I will jump on him."

Review Current Student Process:

The list of current students was displayed on the screen. The columns included name, grade, follow-up person, birthday, date added, follow-up date, precise problem, interventions, and notes.

Student one has speech difficulties according to the school psychologist, who noted it sounds like a receptive communication concern with body language not being understood. It overlaps with this student's social-emotional concerns. The school psychologist will move forward with a special education evaluation. The principal set a new follow-up date three weeks out.

Student two had a counselor assigned to him, and the counselor was absent so they moved on.

Student three was an eighth grader. One of his teachers referred him to this team due to concerns about dyslexia. There was discussion about what school district the student had come from and if he had received a dyslexia screener while there. The principal shared that he is a multilingual learner and failing two classes. The principal stated that he has been in the country for 2-3 years and reads at a second grade level. He assigned next steps to the school psychologist for follow-up.

The assistant principal addressed student four. They had conducted a threat assessment because of an event a week prior. They determined that his threat was reactive, he didn't pose a threat, and he will be coming back to school. The principal said he is tardy for every class and wanders the school. The assistant principal indicated that he would do a WARNS assessment [root cause analysis of attendance problems].

Student five was noted by the principal as "coming back." Although I as an observer didn't understand this, the team seemed to. He continued, "we'll check in on him after he's been back for a few weeks" and selected a follow up date for a future team meeting..

Student six was added to the list because the parent asked for a 504 plan. The school psychologist noted an inability to advocate for himself, such as asking to go to the bathroom. There were also concerns with focus, attention, and a possible diagnosis with ADHD. The principal chose the counselor as the individual to follow up.

Check In as Needed:

The paraeducator noted that student seven has continued poor language and attitude issues. The assistant principal said, "We can contact his moms and tell them we are going to put him back on check in check out."

Student eight was seen by the dean leaving second period, and the assistant principal reported that someone had seen him downtown with his mother, vaping. There was discussion about encouraging him to stay at school, and that it was sometimes successful, but not sustainable to check on him every hour. The principal asked what the student enjoys at school. The assistant principal said his friends are important to him. He suggested altering his schedule to a preferred class for sixth period to encourage him to stay at school for the whole day. He shared that the student comes to class with no backpack, no supplies, and doesn't do work. When asked about his goals, he says he doesn't have any. He's been offered food, clothing, and even forgiving missing assignments as possible rewards, but he always says he's not interested. He has been given in school suspension in the past and enjoyed it because he likes the paraeducator who staffs the room. Supplies have been offered, and he turns them down. The dean indicated that the student has figured out that he can have control over situations and can refuse to work and knows no one can make him. The principal asked if he would enjoy an enrichment class such as art or robotics. The assistant principal agreed to meet with him and find out.

The meeting closed with a review of the weekly cycle of focus for this team: week 1, behavior, led by the dean; week 2, attendance and hall passes, led by the assistant principal; week 3, missing assignments; week 4, Ds and Fs, led by the principal.

SCHOOL D OBSERVATION (Middle)

Time of meeting: 10:00 - 10:45 AM

Date:12/11/2025

Participants: Principal, assistant principal, two school counselors, school psychologist, speech language pathologist, resource teacher.

Name of meeting (MDT, SST, Leadership): Student Focus Team

Did principal or other team members have to leave? The principal left at 10:30, but the assistant principal was leading the meeting, so it continued. The principal later returned before the meeting ended.

Interruptions (time gaps): none

Location: Conference room in the administration office

Overall feeling / affect of the team members: This meeting was facilitated by the assistant principal in an organized, efficient manner. Team members seemed to feel comfortable offering their knowledge of students and suggestions for support. They clearly knew their students well and cared about them. For most students there were clear action steps assigned to specific staff.

Content of the meeting/agenda items:

The assistant principal facilitated the meeting, and started by discussing a student who had been referred to this team. Examining a Google form that the assistant principal displayed on the screen, the team learned that this student has 15 missing assignments and a few Ds. The student has an IEP for speech only, and the student was referred to this team by the speech language pathologist because she is having difficulty with comprehension. The assistant principal logged into the district's data warehouse and viewed her attendance patterns. She is being pulled from advisory class and sometimes choir for speech services, but recently academic

concerns have arisen. Instead of speech services, the speech language pathologist shared that they are spending their time catching up on missing assignments. The student had shared that her parent doesn't believe in homework. The assistant principal asked if she was taking part in the school's core-flex time in which students are sent to various teachers to catch up on assignments or receive additional instruction. The counselor explained that she doesn't go to core-flex, and she had met with the student's mother to discuss the missing assignments. She shared that the mother works nights and is unable to provide accountability for school work at home. The counselor further explained that the student recently arrived to school crying because her speech minutes had been reduced from twice to once per week. The counselor examined the student's accommodations in her IEP and noted that an annual review is coming up. The assistant principal suggested scheduling her speech minutes during advisory to get her to come to school more regularly. The assistant principal asked the speech language pathologist if she could check in with the student every morning, as she's the motivator for the student to come to school. The principal asked the counselor to talk with the teachers to soften their tone and approach. The speech language pathologist indicated that not all of the teachers were providing the accommodations in the IEP, and there is a need to make sure all the teachers have a copy of the "IEP at a Glance." The school psychologist said, "This pumpkin needs more support - hygiene needs." The counselor added that her hair usually isn't washed and the student is "totally overwhelmed." The school psychologist asked if there were any other actions, and the counselor said she would follow up with teachers.

Next, the assistant principal led a conversation on student attendance and reviewed a google form with attendance data. It was sorted by unexcused periods, high to low, but also showed excused absences and a total. The assistant principal asked a counselor about a few

students and if we could administer the WARNS assessment [root cause analysis of attendance problems]. Another student was noted by the counselor as going onto an attendance stay petition with the court system. The assistant principal asked, “But I see her all time, so what is happening?” The principal agreed, saying, “ I see her with her assignments in her hand.” The school psychologist noted that she believes the student has a learning difference and difficulty seeing, and that she is trying to get the student to wear her glasses. The assistant principal asked if a district vision specialist could be of assistance. The school psychologist noted that she would reach out to the vision specialist.

Another student has been added to the list because they come to school smelling bad. They have called child protective services due to concerns about neglect. The counselor shared that she offered a new backpack, but the student refused, and that the student’s current backpack is “in quarantine because it smells so bad.” The assistant principal said, “Get him a new one.” Then she added, “Let’s do a WARNS.”

Moving to the next student, the group discussed the student’s refusal to go to class. The assistant principal shares that the family is considering an online school or a half day schedule. The student’s IEP team and WISE team are working with the family.

Next, they jumped to a student a little further down on the list. The counselor says she is working with her on completing missing assignments and that no one at home is supporting any accountability, but they are working with her during core-flex time.

The next student was introduced by the school psychologist. She explained that the student has an IEP and is on the list for another team meeting next week to see if his IEP needs revision to include study skills. She reports he’s a “big internalizer” and lacks engagement in school. He struggles to connect with his peers, and he wears the same sweatshirt every day. He is

a “hard one to figure out - flying under the radar and may eventually drop out.” The counselor suggested an attendance contract. The assistant principal asks the school psychologist to schedule a meeting with his family.

Turning to the next student, the assistant principal asks, “How did this student get to us?” The school psychologist says that they evaluated him for special education but that he “didn’t qualify on discrepancy by one point.” The counselor reported that she is working with all students on the list who have one or more Fs and is working on a plan with each of them.

The assistant principal said, “I’m worried about this next student." The counselor said she is going to be intentional about meeting with him weekly. The assistant principal said she emailed the student’s mother to ask for dates to meet. “The baby talk thing is super weird.” The school psychologist said there is “mental health stuff going on” and that “under the radar, he bullies.” The assistant principal said that he believes it’s funny to “rage bait” his peers. They just completed a no contact agreement with another student. There have been a lot of incidents with peers and once he said, “You wanna see how bad it’s gonna be?”

The team turned their attention to another student who missed 18 days of the first 25 days of school. He was going to the bus stop, hiding in bushes, waiting until the bus left, and then going to home to tell his mother he couldn’t get to school. The counselor said that his mother doesn’t have a car and can’t get him to school herself. She reported that she had this student’s mother as a student, and a recent meeting went well because now the student knows that people care about him.

One of the counselors added another student to the list, stating that teachers are concerned that he is falling asleep in class. She reported that his father is saving money to move but there is no date for the move. She is confused by the family dynamics; his parents are going through a divorce.

His father committed to getting his son more sleep at night. The student told the counselor he has a "new mom" in another town. She said, "I have a check in my gut because the student and Dad's stories are different." She says she will reach out to the native student program paraeducator, at which point the principal sighed and says that individual hasn't been here yet this year. The assistant principal committed to reaching out to the teachers to be sure they are aware of the student's accommodations. The school psychologist indicated that teachers complain because they have so many students with pages of accommodations, and they find it difficult to manage, and they don't always believe the students need them. The assistant principal asked if the principal could send out a message in the staff newsletter on this topic. He agreed and said that upcoming training might include how to provide accommodations.

SCHOOL E OBSERVATION (Middle)

Time of meeting: 8:00 AM - 8:57 AM

Date:11/13/25

Participants: Principal, assistant principal, dean, counselors, special education teacher, and multiple teachers rotating in and out. At one point there were a total of nine people.

Type of meeting (MDT, SST, Leadership): Student Study Team (SST).

Did principal or other team members have to leave? All team members, including the principal, participated without leaving.

Interruptions (time gaps): none

Location: conference room near the counseling center

Overall feeling / affect of the team members: The team members walked in with a clear sense of purpose. Several teachers joined the meeting up 5-10 minutes late. The principal displayed a document pre-filled with information about each student, including their SBA scores, current grades, DESSA, attendance, SPED/504 status, the student's photo, and easyCBM reading and math data. The principal facilitated the meeting efficiently and with a process that identified student strengths, struggles, where the problems occur, when they started, specific behavior and academic concerns, and interventions attempted. Next steps were identified for most students.

Content of the meeting/agenda items:

The first student was referred to this team because of behavior concerns and difficulty making friends. The teacher described that the student tries to make friends by annoying others. The student wants attention, and positive attention from adults is helpful. This student has a 504, and the parents have refused consent for a special education evaluation. The principal discussed

similarities with the student's sibling. The principal asked, "Do we have any lunch groups started yet, or Big Brothers/Big Sisters?"

The second student was brought forward by another teacher. This student is a newcomer English Learner who struggles in math. His teacher shared that the concern is beyond a language issue and that he has problems with academic issues, executive function, and organization. The parent wants to start the special education referral process as of conference week. The principal pulled up SWIS [office discipline] data to look at behavior referrals and found only one major and one minor. The special education teacher asked if there were any medical diagnoses. The principal identified the next step as taking the student to the multidisciplinary team for a possible special education referral. She said, "OK, we have a plan."

The third student on the list has high academic test scores but behavior concerns including lying on the floor and refusing to do work. The principal checked the SWIS referrals and found none. She said, "We rarely see blues in SST," referring to his high academic performance. Then she asked a teacher about his behavior in orchestra class, and the teacher described that he will only do work when he wants to, and when redirected he sneers and swears. His math teacher added, "If I ask him a question he will answer a different question." His English Language Arts teacher said that he has been "shutting down" in class for the last several weeks. She had reached out to his parents to tell them that he needs to stop tapping coins on his desk and that he had shoved his desk at her. The parent responded by asking what she had done to provoke him. At the last conference the parents said he should be allowed to have outbursts. One of his teachers added, "The apple fell straight to the ground and didn't even roll from the tree." Several team members laughed. The counselor asked what supports were written into his IEP, and the special education teacher said, "Allow breaks." She added that the student

genuinely thought he was a cat in the fifth grade. “Not a furry, he actually believed it.” The principal asked, “Is it worth having an IEP meeting?” The special education teacher said that the IEP isn’t due until May, so it would be good to have a check in sooner. The principal said, “OK - Time’s up! Thanks folks,” indicating that it was time to move to the next student.

The fourth student’s family had once again requested a special education evaluation. The earlier evaluation request was denied because of low attendance. Attendance continues to be a serious problem. The principal said, “Why don’t you tell me from your limited experience what you’ve seen?” His math teacher said that he is polite and respectful. His English Language Arts teacher agreed, and added that he has written a few words and they are hard to read. The principal asked, “Is he not coming because he’s so low? Where is he on [the] attendance team?” She noted that he misses 75% of school days. One teacher said, “My guess is that he’s so behind because he missed so many days….let’s flush quarter one and start fresh.” More discussion centered on possible supports, including changing his grade to passing to give him a fresh start, doing a partial day of school, doing a home visit, and connecting him with native student supports. The principal said she would set up a meeting with the parent to see what the barriers are. She noted that his current address is urgent care, not a residence.

SCHOOL I OBSERVATION (High School)

Time of meeting: 7:45 AM - 8:55 AM

Date:1/8/2026

Participants: Assistant principal, counselors, dean, school psychologist, behavior paraeducator. Part way through the meeting, a mental health specialist joined and also a substance abuse education and prevention professional from an outside agency;

Name of meeting (MDT, SST, Leadership): Prevention and Intervention (P&I)

Did principal or other team members have to leave? The behavior paraeducator left after his agenda item, which seemed routine. The dean left at 8:24 for the passing period and returned eight minutes later. The substance abuse education and prevention person entered late and only stayed for her one agenda item.

Location: counseling center conference room

Overall feeling / affect of the team members: Team members seemed comfortable, focused on students, and familiar with the routine. The assistant principal and dean both had radios on. All the participants had laptops out and were following along with a shared spreadsheet. They were all highly engaged in the conversation. Most of the discussions of student concerns did not end with clear next steps.The counselor facilitated the meeting.

Content of the meeting/agenda items:

The agenda was as follows:

1. Updates/concerns from
    a. BA [behavior paraeducator]
    b. MKV [unhoused student support]
    c. Admin discipline update

2. Individual student concerns/updates
    a. New concerns about individual students (concern, interventions tried and action steps) or review referral form submission from staff
    b. Review previous students to progress monitor and update results (if applicable)
    c. Discuss any Special Education referrals/concerns/updates
3. Updates/concerns from:
    a. Mental health
    b. [substance abuse education and prevention] approx 8:30
4. Data review/updates/concerns
    a. New concerns about individual students

After the norms review by the counselor who was facilitating the meeting, the behavior paraeductor discussed several students that he had been assigned to support. One student has raised his grades, and the assistant principal praised, “Positive results for positive relationships.” A counselor noted that she is working on a 504 plan for the student. A second student is struggling with substitute teachers. After a brief discussion about who the student’s IEP case manager is, the counselor facilitating asked for an updated list of students and case managers. Multiple staff expressed frustration that the student’s special education status was no longer visible in the student’s profile in the student information system. A third student has been getting into fights, and leaves school after lunch every day. The counselor facilitator asked if someone could check his attendance and check with his family. The student’s assigned counselor said that he is one of several children, and his father recently passed away. There are eight to nine people in the household. “Their world went upside down when dad passed. He needs a lot of embracing and reassurance to be sure things will be okay,” she added. The facilitator said, “I appreciate that

you can check in. He has potential, and lots of factors are putting him at risk." Then she turned to the behavior paraeducator and said, "Can you start snagging [student]?" He said yes.

Next, the assistant principal said that support for unhoused students has been recently reduced due to budget restrictions. He said that each of the remaining staff would be picking up more students. He also shared that there has been an increase in "slap fights" in the bathroom and shared some strategies to address them. He also noted, without detail, that students at the school were involved in a recent student suicide. Team members appeared to understand.

The next agenda item was attendance data. The facilitator projected a spreadsheet with students highlighted by color. After noting that there were a lot of students on the list, she asked team members to "go through the list and look at your caseload. Pick a couple of unhighlighted kids and find out what's going on." There were no specific action steps requested or noted.

The team turned their attention to a list of individual students displayed on the screen. The facilitator paused at each student whose column wasn't marked "complete" to indicate that the situation was resolved. They briefly discussed a student who had been hospitalized, a student with attendance concerns and school avoidance, a student receiving wraparound community support, and another student with mental health needs. Team members weighed in with what they know about each student and the supports they were providing, but no notes were taken and clear next steps were lacking.

The facilitator asked if there were any other students to add. In response, the assistant principal said, "Has anyone been in contact with [student]?" The counselor said that the family was looking for a treatment facility and that she would call the parent.

The assistant principal named another student and said he was hoping to get into [dropout recovery school]. “Happy to get him over there. Hopefully he can get his diploma and get to Alaska and drive a truck.”

The facilitator turned to the mental health specialists and asked, “Anything from your world?” In response, the specialist shared that there is a new suicide protocol being explored by the district that is evidence-based. The assistant principal asked about safety drills during advisory, and how to teach students that what they post online can “have an impact.” The specialist said that there had been no proactive teaching about cell phones and pictures and that Tier 1 information sessions would be helpful, but not impactful in advisory periods because attendance is so low.

The substance abuse education and prevention professional entered the conference room, and the assistant principal asked, “Can you talk to [student] and [student] about vaping?” She indicated that there is a curriculum, and she can get them connected to it right away. After a brief discussion she left the room.

The facilitator projected another spreadsheet that was sorted by counselor and included students’ grade level and Ds and Fs. She explained the color coding: yellow was for students at risk of not graduating, green was students who were on track. “That way teachers know who they need to push through.” The assistant principal asked if it would be useful for teachers to reach out to the parents of students who have an F in first semester, rather than waiting for spring conferences. The facilitator responded, “We encourage them to communicate with families. It’s better coming from teachers rather than counselors.” The assistant principal again said that he would like the teachers during fall conferences to look at grades and start making calls home..

The facilitator said, “It’s about their time. That would have to come from you.” Having reached the end of the agenda, the meeting adjourned.

SCHOOL J OBSERVATION (High School)

Time of meeting: 8:15 AM - 8:50 AM

Date:1/27/26

Participants: Principal, three assistant principals (AP1, AP2, AP3), in-school suspension paraeducator

Name of meeting (MDT, SST, Leadership): Tier 2 Admin Meeting

Did principal or other team members have to leave? The bell rang at 8:25 and AP3 said, "Do we need to go out there?" All team members left to supervise the passing period. At 8:31 the meeting resumed without the principal or AP2. The principal returned at 8:40 and worked on his computer without interacting with the team, and left again at 8:47 and said, "I might be back."

Location: Administration conference room

Overall feeling / affect of the team members: The meeting was facilitated by AP1. While the principal was there, he did not participate in the meeting except to discuss a single student. There was a professional tone, but there were clear underlying tensions between AP1 and AP2.

Content of the meeting/agenda items:

AP1 served as the facilitator. She displayed a list of students with IEPs who also had five or more office discipline referrals. The spreadsheet included the administrator assigned to the student, the student's name, grade, attendance type (regular, at-risk, or chronically absent), current number of Fs, total credits failed, SWIS referrals, suspensions, notes, and the number of electronic hall passes. There were suggested next steps already drafted, and minimal notes were taken during the meeting. Next steps were sometimes verbally discussed but not noted.

Student 1 is a regular attender who has used 0 digital hall passes. AP2 noted that he is out of class a lot.

Student 2 has issues with non-compliance with a particular teacher. AP2 shared that she has been talking with parents. AP1 said that she would assign a para educator to that period. AP2 added that his family doesn't think he should be in biology because he doesn't value it. She asked, "Can we take him out of the class?" Team members agreed to look at changes for his schedule for the next semester.

Student 3 has spent 20 hours out of class. AP2 said he and his girlfriend are "smitten," and out of class a lot together. He is ineligible for basketball because of his failing grades. AP2 also noted that he is only failing two classes now, as opposed to three earlier in the semester. AP1 said she would add him to the "no pass" list, with the goal of keeping him in class.

With student 4, there was a brief discussion that his teachers aren't utilizing the electronic hall pass system, so the data are incorrect.

For student 5, AP2 noted that she has been trying to reach her father. She had detention assigned for missing classes. The student has anxiety. The team limited her to two passes per day.

Students 6-8 have SWIS referrals from their fourth period biology class. AP1 said she was going to add paraeducator support to that class. There was some discussion about whether one of the students would be a good fit for the restorative justice center. The principal said, "I don't know what that the criteria is for selecting student advocates but that wouldn't be a good placement." There was additional discussion about which class to move the student into. The principal suggested finding an elective that the student might like.

At this point the bell rang and the team went out to monitor the hallway. When the meeting resumed, AP2 did not return because her students had already been addressed. The next

interactions were largely between AP1 and AP3, and the mood was noticeably more collegial and relaxed.

Student 9 is chronically late to school, usually arriving in second or third period. AP3 noted that parents struggle to get him out of bed, but that his discipline issues are better than when he was at another high school. He added that he wants to go to [drop-out retrieval school] and that he has a probation officer, but it wasn't known which probation officer. AP1 said, "his parents are responsive. Let's get them in."

Students 9 - 12 were glossed over. Student 13 was also having trouble with biology, and AP1 again said she would assign a paraeducator to the class. AP3 shared that he isn't eligible for wrestling, but that he is using fewer hall passes and skipping class less. Additional discussion resulted in the in-school suspension paraeducator agreeing to talk with him.

Student 14 had an IEP in elementary school and was now being considered for a 504 plan. He is now 10.5 credits behind. AP1 said that she would assign the behavior paraeducator (absent from this meeting) to support him in his first period class.

Additional students were briefly discussed, including one who is a "bouncy boy", a student who is "not as spicy as she was," and a student who is a good student but deliberately and repeatedly passes gas in one particular period. AP1 referred to him as "a stinker."

Team members summarized their next steps: AP1 will schedule time with the behavior paraeducator to ask her to talk with a few students. The in-school suspension paraeducator said she would connect with a few students, and AP3 noted he would check in with parents regarding two students. The other students discussed lacked clear next steps.

SCHOOL K OBSERVATION (High School)

Time of meeting: 12:10 PM - 1:00 PM

Date:1/22/26

Participants: principal, assistant principal, dean, counselors, mental health, nurse, special education teacher, behavior paraeducator

Name of meeting (MDT, SST, Leadership): Student Study Team

Did principal or other team members have to leave? The dean and another team member left briefly during a passing period

Interruptions (time gaps): Trouble with the projection system delayed the start, and people trickled in a few minutes late. **Location:** Administration office conference room

Overall feeling / affect of the team members: A total of 12 people participated, and there were not enough chairs for everyone so some team members stood. The feeling of the team was collaborative, student focused, and empathetic. Everyone seemed to feel comfortable sharing their input and the meeting was efficient and structured with next steps noted for most students.

Content of the meeting/agenda items:

Projected onto the screen was a spreadsheet with absences, SWIS referrals, number of Fs, number of Ds, suspensions. For each student, a profile page with their photo, name, and the following text boxes: area student is struggling, where do the problems occur, when did the problems begin, description of learning and/or behavior concerns, classroom interventions attempted, precise problem statement, first short term goal, reinforcement, new response by staff to understand behavior. As the meeting proceeded, the note taker filled out each box with information. One of the two assistant principals facilitated the meeting.

The principal began with the first student. This student had been hit by a car in the front of the school earlier in the year and yesterday was her first day back. Team members discussed how to help her move around the school in her wheelchair, including providing her with an elevator key. The school psychologist noted that an evaluation for an IEP had been scheduled, and in the meantime she will need an adult to help her transition between classes. The counselor shared that the family is not "demanding" one-on-one support. The mental health specialists noted that they needed to craft a plan for her in the case of emergencies, fire drills, and lockdowns. The assistant principal shared that there is a plan to evacuate students in wheelchairs from the upstairs classrooms, and she will talk with the lead teacher to ensure they are aware of her.

The second student discussed was chronically absent and had major office referrals for skipping class and marijuana. The special education teacher said that she was put into a study support class first period to provide much-needed structure. She noted that her home life was not stable. The dean said that the student was already on BECCA [truancy court] and is working with True North [substance abuse education and prevention]. He also noted that she is not defiant, but simply wanders around the school and doesn't go to class. The principal asked, "Do we know what she's capable of academically?" The assistant principal responded that she would be passing her classes if she came to school regularly. The mental health specialist said that she does well with positive reinforcement and enjoys connecting with adults but "during lunch there are other things she'd rather do, and she's getting caught up in stuff that is serious." The assistant principal asked if there were other school resources that they could provide. The assistant principal suggested that she could be a peer tutor at the restorative center, and the counselor said that would be good to try in the second semester. The counselor suggested after-school tutoring,

and the mental health specialist said that the student often stops by her office after school, and she would probably attend if she was walked down to the room. The assistant principal said, "anything else before we move on?"

The third student is a ninth grader who is only on the list because of the data, not because he was referred. The assistant principal said he has been "flying under the radar" and has a few lunch detentions for tardies. He has all Fs except for physical education. The counselor knew him and shared that they are working on a 504 plan for anxiety, and there are possible medical concerns, including an eating disorder or cyclic vomiting disorder. The mother shared with her that she is struggling to get him to go to school. The assistant principal shared that he passed all of his classes last year. The counselor said, "he's little." The assistant principal said, "we need to focus on meeting his medical needs so we can then focus on academics. Is it on your radar, [dean]?" The dean said no, probably because his absences are all excused.

The fourth student is on the list due to her grades. She is chronically absent, skips class, has anxiety but her parent won't allow her to see the mental health specialist. Her sister is supposed to bring her to school, but she doesn't attend either. The principal shared that both students come to campus but don't go to class. The dean said he had talked with each of her teachers to see if she can pass by the end of the semester. In response, her English teacher said yes if she would take the final exam, but the ceramics teacher said no because she hadn't produced anything to grade. The physical education teacher said he would pass her if she came every day until the end of the semester. The assistant principal said that at the quarter she had been doing better, but now she is skipping to spend time with friends. The dean said that the native student navigator had attended her community engagement board [truancy] meeting, but then the parent said she had never come to another meeting. The assistant principal suggested

enrolling her as a peer mentor in the restorative center, and the counselor said she would talk with the parent about that schedule change.