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Abstract

Current literature exists centered on Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) framework, its components, and ways in which MTSS is intended to support all students. Yet, there is a gap in the literature that examines how elementary schools are implementing it. This dissertation study sought to understand what the MTSS framework implementation at the elementary level looks like in practice. The theoretical framework used to help guide this study was Implementation Science. The research question used to guide this study was: How are elementary schools implementing the MTSS framework? There were three elementary buildings within the same school district in Central, N.Y. that were examined. The data collection for this study entailed interviews with each of the elementary principals, the dean of students, classroom teachers, special education teachers, reading specialists, literacy curriculum specialists, the district math coordinator, and teaching assistants. Additionally, data was collected through observations of intervention services and team meetings. Although there were some differences with the way in each building implemented the MTSS framework, there were many similarities across all three buildings. Moreover, each elementary building identified nearly forty percent of their total student population for reading intervention support and literature suggests that between 11-20% of the total population of students may need additional intervention support. Some of the staff in each building did not have a clear understanding of what the MTSS framework entails, how to use data to make informed decisions, how to progress monitor students in tiers 2 and 3, but believed that when a student continued to not make progress with the interventions they put in place it meant that special education testing may be needed. While the district directive was no new instruction should be taught while students were pulled out for their intervention support, many of teachers did teach new content and continued with core instruction. Some tier 2 students who were pulled out from core instruction to receive intervention services were given instruction by instructional teaching assistants who have not been provided any formal training on how to intervene with students who need additional academic support. A major implication from this research study is to implore educational policy makers, district leaders, and educators to closely examine their intervention systems in place and recognize that if more than 11-20% of their total student population is identified in need of intervention services, then the real issue is with their tier 1 instruction, not because of any deficits within the children.

Examining the MTSS framework implementation at the elementary level

by

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Dissertation

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for the degree of
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I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my longtime professor and mentor, Dr. George Theoharis, Ph.D. We first met ten years ago when I began taking coursework for my C.A.S. in Educational Leadership. You have taught me a lot about diversity, equity and inclusion but most importantly the need this world has for social justice leaders like yourself and how to continue to be a light for others who do not always have a voice at the table. You always challenged me to grow in various ways throughout my course studies but especially during my dissertation journey, continued to push me to cross the finish line and I undoubtedly would not be here without your unwavering support. While the dissertation process nearly broke me, you supported me through each step and made it feel attainable while holding me to high standards, which at times felt a little too high, but here I stand proudly to say, "I can do hard things and will continue the hard work to fight for social justice for all children. Thanks, George!"

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Chapter 1: Examining the MTSS framework implementation at the elementary level

Multi Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) and Response to Intervention (RTI) are two intervention models that are being implemented in elementary schools in the United States but specifically in New York State (NYS). MTSS involves tiered intervention support for students in relation to their academic, behavioral, and socio-emotional needs whereas RTI solely focuses on tiered academic intervention support for students who are identified in need of additional support. MTSS has been chosen by numerous school districts in the United States to help bridge the best practice to actual practice gap to support all students academically, behaviorally and socio-emotionally (Briesch et al., 2020). Some scholars argue that MTSS is a model that can meet the needs of all learners but others argue that there is not enough guidance from states in how to implement each component (Briesch et al., 2020). Many states do give some guidance on how to implement the MTSS model but the interventions to use and how to progress monitor is widely varied (Briesch et al., 2020).

MTSS and RTI frameworks are currently being used in grades K-6 in school districts across the United States with the idea that they help meet the needs of all learners. MTSS can be viewed as combining multiple implementation models into one coherent system that addresses the academic, behavioral and social competence of all learners (Freeman et al., 2015; McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). Implementing Evidence Based Practices (EBP), such as MTSS, can be challenging because it requires organizational change that involves joint problem solving and long term support for systems change at the district level (Freeman et al., 2015). Reeves

(2009) discuss how to address change in schools and challenges leaders to examine why educational policy implementation in schools often fails. Leading change in schools requires leaders to dive deep into the various components involved in the change process to navigate how changes can be sustained in their schools, and how EBPs can be implemented with fidelity (Fullan,1994; Reeves, 2009).

Given the complexities around the MTSS framework implementation process, I examined the implementation of the MTSS framework in three elementary buildings, within the same school district, located in Central, N.Y. to gain a deeper understanding of how the schools implement the MTSS framework and the obstacles they encounter in their daily practice. In this chapter, I begin with describing why this topic means a great deal to me. I include my motivation for the study and research questions.

Motivation for the Study

Elementary Years

When reflecting on my elementary school years, although I have some fond memories, a lot of my memories consist of extremely challenging times in my life. Yet, they helped shape me into who I am today as a mother, professional and learner. It is important to reflect on these challenges to have a deeper understanding of my why in life.

When I was younger, I was extremely hyper, could not sit still through lessons in school, had a very short attention span and shouted out regularly in my elementary school years. I lost my recess every day and do not remember a time when I did not see my name written on the board with several checks next to it. I

was diagnosed with Dyslexia, and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (A.D.H.D.) in 1988. This was during a time when not many females were receiving these diagnoses and my second grade teacher thought my diagnoses would mean I would not be her problem anymore as I would be in Special Education. During my elementary years, special education students would receive instruction in another room and only be in the general education classroom for some of the day.

My father was the oldest of ten children, lived in a four-room house, and was extremely poor. He felt lucky to have teachers that guided him through high school and into college, as he was the only person in his family to attend college. My dad earned two Bachelor of Science degrees and three master's degrees. He was working on his Ph.D. but didn't finish as he had four children at home. My father's experiences were not the norm and he was the only person in his family to break the poverty cycle. He strongly believed that education was his way out and placed a high emphasis on it.

When my parents were told I had all these difficulties in school and that my teachers wanted to put me in Special Education, my father refused and fought them to not give me that label. He believed it would prevent me from attending college and it would negatively impact me for the rest of my life. I will never forget being 7 years old, hearing my parents screaming, and my dad sitting me down to tell me that I was a genius like him. Apparently, I scored in the genius range on my intelligence quotient test but that my difficulties reading and, sitting still were things my teachers believed required me to be in different classes. He went on to tell me how I would never be allowed in college if I received that label and even though I could not

read or recognize any letters like my peers, I would have to work harder to learn from here on out as he would not allow them to take away my college opportunities.

It was not until sixth grade that I was able to read simple books like *Dick and Jane* but in the years in between something happened to me. We already lived in an affluent area with a good school district, but my father would tell the principal to put me in the best teacher's class each year. By the time I was in sixth grade, I was placed in the accelerated reading class even though I could barely read words. Yet, my teachers saw the strengths I did have and allowed me to participate in different ways by giving me books on tape, allowing me to share using visuals, and graphic organizers, etc. I believe it was because of them that I gained confidence as a learner, developed an understanding of differentiation, but also learned so much from my peers that were accelerated which is why I firmly believe kids should not be pulled out of the classroom or put into homogenized groups.

Adult Life

I had a difficult time deciding what I wanted to do for a career because school was always so challenging for me. After I took some classes, I realized the difference teachers can make on children and I wanted to pursue a teaching career to make an impact on children's lives. I went on to become an elementary teacher. My parents told me that I could not tell anyone about my diagnoses, so I only revealed it to a handful of people until I was in my certificate of advanced studies classes in Educational Leadership at Syracuse University. I cried the entire time I shared my relived trauma I experienced during my elementary years and I am not sure anyone even understood anything I said but saying it all out loud in front of so many people

made me realize it was ok to finally start talking about it in public. I knew I had my degrees, teacher certifications, and that no one could take those away from me.

I was a general education teacher for eight years and always had the students with disabilities in my class. I felt empowered with what I was allowed to do for them, the same way the good teachers I experienced did for me, and had great experiences. I knew the difference I was making at that level and I wanted to make a larger impact so I decided to continue on with my education.

Ironically, during my internship in my school district for my certificate of advanced studies in Educational Leadership, I was charged with examining the reading department and tasked with repurposing personnel to better meet the needs in the district. It was extremely challenging to say the least, but I did learn a lot during that experience. One of the programs that I examined was the RTI framework that was being implemented. I found that the qualifying cut off points in the tiers were different at each of the elementary buildings. Additionally, each elementary building was implementing the framework differently in every grade level. I wondered if this was unique to our school district and began exploring other districts. During my research apprenticeship as part of my doctoral program, I examined a rural school and suburban school district. I found out the implementation of the RTI framework varied greatly across the school districts and also within different buildings inside each school district. Some districts had reading specialists pulling kids out for academic interventions during their math time, some districts had kids shuffled into homogenized groups to receive instruction for 6-8 weeks and then reshuffled again based on one pre-assessment

given to them. When I began examining the literature, I found a gap between what the frameworks said should happen when implementing MTSS and RTI and the implementation of the RTI/MTSS frameworks inside school. I became passionate about studying/writing about this topic for my dissertation to shed light on what is happening during the implementation of the frameworks and to add to the literature.

In this study, I examined the MTSS implementation process in three elementary buildings in the same school district located in Central, N.Y. The district in which this study took place, was also the district in which I worked for ten years. Therefore, I did have insider status with some staff in each building and some participants. I had not worked in this district for five years prior to this study so staffing did change quite a bit and many of the participants did not know me prior. Yet, since I had worked in the district for so long, I did have a working relationship with one of the principals and a few of the AIS specialists. Since I worked in this district for ten years as an elementary teacher and worked on my internship in this district, I believe it helped me build trust with the participants. Moreover, I have built a reputation in the district for being a highly effective teacher, worked well with colleagues and administrators to problem solve together, and able to understand problems from multiple perspectives.

I spent significant time in each school learning about how they worked and seeing the MTSS framework in action. I also interviewed the three elementary principals, teachers, reading specialists, instructional coaches and a dean of students to gain a clear understanding of how the MTSS framework is was implemented in

their elementary schools. My research question is as follows: “How are elementary schools implementing the MTSS framework?”

Foundational Terms

Action Frameworks: “include conceptual frameworks to guide the progression from selection of an empirically-supported treatment of given dimensions to the full implementation of the target practice in a relevant context” (Fixsen et al., 2013).

AIMSweb: “A data-intensive assessment and reporting tool launched in 2000 to help educators track their students’ progress in subjects such as reading and mathematics. Pearson developed national growth norms for each aimsweb measure, which take into account varying growth rates of students with different abilities, allow teachers to compare a student’s growth rate with his or her peers” (Pearson, 2012).

8:1+1 Program: “The maximum class size for special classes containing students whose management needs are determined to be intensive, and requiring a significant degree of individualized attention and intervention, cannot exceed eight students, with one or more supplementary school personnel assigned to each class during periods of instruction” (The State Education Department of the state of New York, 2008).

Culturally proficient leadership: Culturally proficient leadership focuses on how to effectively serve marginalized students (Kahlifa, 2020.)

CKLA: “Core Knowledge Language Arts (CKLA) is a program (preschool-grade 5) for teaching reading, writing, listening, and speaking while also building students’

vocabulary and knowledge across essential domains in literature, world and American history, and the sciences” (Core Knowledge Language Arts, 2023).

Competency drivers: The systematic strategy of how the organization will develop, increase, and sustain educator and administrator ability to effectively implement EBPs to the students benefit (National Implementation Research Network, 2017).

Evidence based practice (EBP): An evidence-based practice refers to a program, practice or intervention that has been proven through research and science based studies to have positive effects on measured outcomes (Ebbole, 2007).

Helio Health: is a local mental health agency that provides services to students in school setting. “Helio Health provides drug and alcohol withdrawal and stabilization services, inpatient rehabilitation, outpatient counseling services, gambling outpatient services, child and adolescent services, peer support and engagement, and more” (Retrieved from Helio Health LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/helio-health-inc>).

Implementation: “Implementation is defined as a specified set of activities designed to put into practice an activity or program of known dimensions...implementation processes are purposeful and are described in sufficient detail such that independent observers can detect the presence and strength of the ‘specific set of activities’ related to implementation” (Fixsen et al., 2005).

Implementation science : “the scientific study of methods to promote the

systematic uptake of research findings and other evidence-based practices in routine practice.” (Schultes et al., 2021).

Kid Talks: “These are intended for teachers and staff to discuss their student’s behavior with other teachers on their grade level and other staff members that work with that student to discuss any strategies they have implemented that work with the student. Additionally, the teacher is expected to identify two strategies that could work, choose one to implement, and follow up in a couple weeks on how that worked” (Principal participants).

Liberty clinic: is a school based mental health service provider where therapists provide treatment to children and families. ‘Our goal is to improve the quality of life for our clients and to improve their ability to succeed academically.’ (Retrieved from: <https://www.liberty-resources.org/mental-health-outpatient-services/>)

Multi Tiered System of Supports (MTSS): A school wide prevention framework for improving learning outcomes for every student through an integrated tiered system of high quality EBPs and standards based instruction that address students’ academic, social-emotional, and behavioral needs (California Association of School Psychologists, 2014).

Really Great Screener: a screener used from the program Really Great Reading that teachers use to assess students’ reading (<https://www.reallygreatreading.com/diagnostics>).

Response to Intervention (RTI): RTI is a service delivery model that implements scientifically based interventions and frequently monitors how the student responds to those interventions in a timely fashion to determine if there is a need to change the intervention (Brown & Steege, 2010).

Student Support Team (SST): is an organized process to meet the individual needs of all students. The purpose of the SST process is to intervene early with evidence-based strategies and interventions in order to support students successfully in academics and behavior (Principal Participants).

Step 2 Lessons: “These are lessons taken from the second step elementary curriculum that states it is a leading research-based SEL curriculum for students in Kindergarten–Grade 5” (Retrieved from: <https://www.secondstep.org/elementary-school-curriculum>).

Tier 3 Blocks: “These are blocks in the schedule in each elementary building are where the intervention staff works with identified tier 2 and tier 3 students focused on reading” (AIS specialists in each building).

2 by 10's: At its core, the 2x10 strategy is about consistently building relationships with students. Teachers or principals select a particular student and set a goal to engage in a 2 minute conversation with that student for 10 consecutive school days. These conversations might happen at the beginning or end of a class period (Retrieved from: <https://www.panoramaed.com/blog/2x10-relationship-building-strategy>).

What I need now time (WINN): “These blocks in the schedule in each elementary building are when the intervention staff works with identified tier 2 students focused on math” (AIS specialists in each building).

Organization of the Dissertation

In chapter two, I provide a thorough literature review that includes a more in depth look at academic intervention services (AIS), RTI, and the MTSS framework. Additionally, I review the challenges identified in the literature about implementing evidence- based practices (EBP) such as the MTSS framework. Further, I will provide a closer look at implementation science as I believe this conceptual framework provided me with necessary tools to use to examine the MTSS implementation process at the three elementary schools.

In chapter three, I provide a detailed description of my methods used for this study and the participants involved. Chapters four through seven are the data chapters for this study with chapters four through six focusing on one elementary building for each chapter and chapter seven is a cross analysis of the key issues that surfaced across the schools. I conclude this dissertation in chapter 8 with a discussion of the key findings and implications from this study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Scholars have written about the need for early intervention services for struggling readers in grades K-2 (Buffim et al., 2010; Foorman, Herrera, & Dombeck, 2017; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007; Gersten & Dimino, 2006; Lipsky & Gartner, 1996). Early literacy intervention in kindergarten through grade 2 can reduce the number of students who fail to meet grade level expectations (Foorman, Herrera, & Dombeck, 2017). Early literacy is directly correlated with students' academic achievement (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Dowdall et al., 2020; Partanen et al., 2019). Yet, when children are identified as struggling readers, they often are subjected to multiple pull out intervention sessions, causing them to miss out on core instruction and falling further behind (Theoharis, 2010). Additionally, students receiving interventions have lowered expectations from their teachers and are not given rigorous work (Lipsky & Gartner, 1996).

Academic intervention service (AIS) models are used to provide early intervention to students who are at risk but also to provide a procedure for identifying students with learning disabilities (Gersten & Dimino, 2006). Schools grappled with high special education referral rates, which can occur when educators encounter students who are not on grade level (Buffim, Mattos, & Weber, 2010). Schools acknowledge that there are students who are not meeting grade level requirements but finding ways to meet their needs can be challenging. Educators assume that the system is equitable and it's the students, parents and community that need to change (Yosso, 2005). Schools face lean school budgets, causing many schools to cut personnel and reallocate their resources as needed. The blame of a

student's lack of academic achievement is often placed on parents, lack of funding, the kids, and/or society (Buffim, Mattos, & Weber, 2010). Schools struggle with adjusting their practices when students are not succeeding.

Moreover, while there is literature that supports early intervention for students who are not meeting grade level expectations, there is also literature that identifies the issues that students encounter when receiving interventions. Therefore, examining the implementation process of the MTSS framework at the elementary level will help add to the literature on how schools are supporting students that have been identified as needing additional academic and behavioral support.

Method for Literature Synthesis

To ground this study, I gathered literature that was peer-reviewed on RTI, MTSS frameworks, EBPs, and implementation science and implementation science model used in education. I conducted through Syracuse University library databases and included books, academic articles, and both qualitative and quantitative studies. The databases I used to complete this literature review were: ProQuest, Jstor, Summons, and Sage. I searched these data bases using these key terms: academic intervention services, response to intervention, MTSS frameworks, evidence based practices, research to practice gap, implementation science, implementation science defined, implementation science in education, implementation science components, implementation science and MTSS framework. I reviewed over one hundred articles and created my literature review by condensing the information I read.

When reviewing the literature on the response to intervention and MTSS frameworks, a lot of literature began by examining the need for these frameworks to exist. Therefore, my first section in my literature analysis examines the background into why these frameworks were developed. Next, the literature discussed the components needed in order to implement the frameworks with fidelity and the next part of my literature analyses discusses the frameworks more in depth. While reading the literature, I discovered that even the researchers that agreed that RTI and MTSS frameworks are beneficial for students who are identified as needing additional support, believed that the implementation of these frameworks are extremely challenging and there are a lot of components needed in order to implement these frameworks with fidelity. Therefore, I examined literature that explored implementing evidence based practices and found literature pertaining to the research to practice gap. When reading literature about the research to practice gap, I discovered implementation science and the implementation science framework and how it is used in different fields to help implement evidence based practices with fidelity. Since my larger study is focused on examining the MTSS framework implementation at the elementary level, I wanted to explore the literature that reviewed the implementation science model being utilized to examine the implementation of the MTSS framework. Therefore, as you read my review of the literature I have examined, you will see the themes that I created. I organized this literature review using the following themes: why RTI and MTSS frameworks exist, RTI and MTSS frameworks, implementation challenges, and implementation science.

Why RTI and MTSS frameworks exist

The reauthorization of the Individual with Disabilities Improvement Act in 2004 (IDEIA, 2004) was developed in part to have schools in the United States reevaluate practices for identifying students with disabilities (Sansosti & Noltemeyer, 2008). Under this reauthorization, schools were given a choice between the intelligence-achievement discrepancy model and the response to intervention (RTI) model to identify students with disabilities, where as previously, the intelligence-achievement discrepancy model was encouraged to identify students with learning disabilities (LD) (IDEIA, 2004).

Historically, practitioners conceptualized ability as intelligence quotient (IQ) (Kovaleski, VanderHeyden, & Shapiro, 2013). Critics argued that IQ tests are poor indexes of intelligence because abstract reasoning is only one piece of the full range of mental abilities (Armendariz & Adrian, 2016). Additionally, IQ tests are racially biased and can negatively impact people of color (Goldstein et al, 2023; Suzuki & Valencia, 1997). Barnett (2004) discussed how skeptics have long debated the process of special education determination and the discrepancy model doesn't present solutions to the student's perceived exhibited deficits. Since the discrepancy model was typically used later in a child's elementary school career and administered after a child has shown significant underachievement academically, it was referred to as a wait to fail model (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007). Schools should not wait for students to fall so far behind that they qualify for special education services before getting the help that they need (Buffum, Mattos, & Weber, 2010). Many school districts decided to implement an RTI model prior to special education

referrals in hopes to better meet the needs of all students by providing systematic, intensive and evidence-based interventions (The IRIS Center, 2009). IDEA (2004) Part B of the law, allowed special education funds to be allocated to RTI/MTSS frameworks prior to students being found special education eligible. Since numerous school districts across the country are utilizing the RTI/MTSS frameworks to help meet the needs of students who are identified as needing either or both academic or behavioral support, it is necessary to understand the frameworks in greater detail.

RTI and MTSS frameworks

While RTI and MTSS frameworks often get lumped together within both the literature and multiple practitioners understanding, there are differences between the two frameworks that need to be identified. The RTI framework supports students who are struggling academically in reading and has been used to help students who are struggling in mathematics as well (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017). Typically, it is used to only support students who are not meeting grade level expectations in these two content areas and need additional support (Jimerson et al., 2015). With the passing of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) 2015, school districts reexamined their current models of support for students and recognize the need is much larger than just supporting students who are not academically performing at grade level (Charlton et al., 2020). The MTSS framework included response to intervention, but it encompassed much more than just academic support for struggling learners (Sugai & Horner, 2009). The MTSS framework was designed to support students who are both struggling or excelling in reading and

math content areas, along with help students who may need behavioral support intervention (Sugai & Horner, 2009). The MTSS model grew from two parallel programs: the RTI model that supports student's academic needs and the Positive Behavioral Intervention of Supports (PBIS) model that supported student's behavior needs (Charlton et al., 2020). Scholars began to identify common features between the RTI and PBIS model and began to promote a single, inclusive model that supported students academic, behavioral, and socio-emotional needs which is how the MTSS model emerged (Charlton et al., 2020). In this section, I provide a more in depth look at the two frameworks.

RTI at the elementary level

Response to Intervention (RTI) framework allows students to receive individualized appropriate research-based interventions at an earlier age (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). RTI models prescribed intense interventions to be in place with struggling students and implement data driven decision making in regard to student placement. RTI was a service delivery model that intended to implement scientifically based interventions and frequently monitors how the student responds to those interventions in a timely fashion to determine if there is a need to change the intervention (Brown & Steege, 2010). The lack of effective teaching and monitoring of students has lead to inappropriate identification of disabilities (Soodak & Podell, 1993). While perhaps not the intent, educators used RTI models as an alternative method for identifying students with disabilities (Marston, 2005). Before being assessed with a standardized or potentially culturally biased test to determine special education eligibility, RTI was intended to allow students from

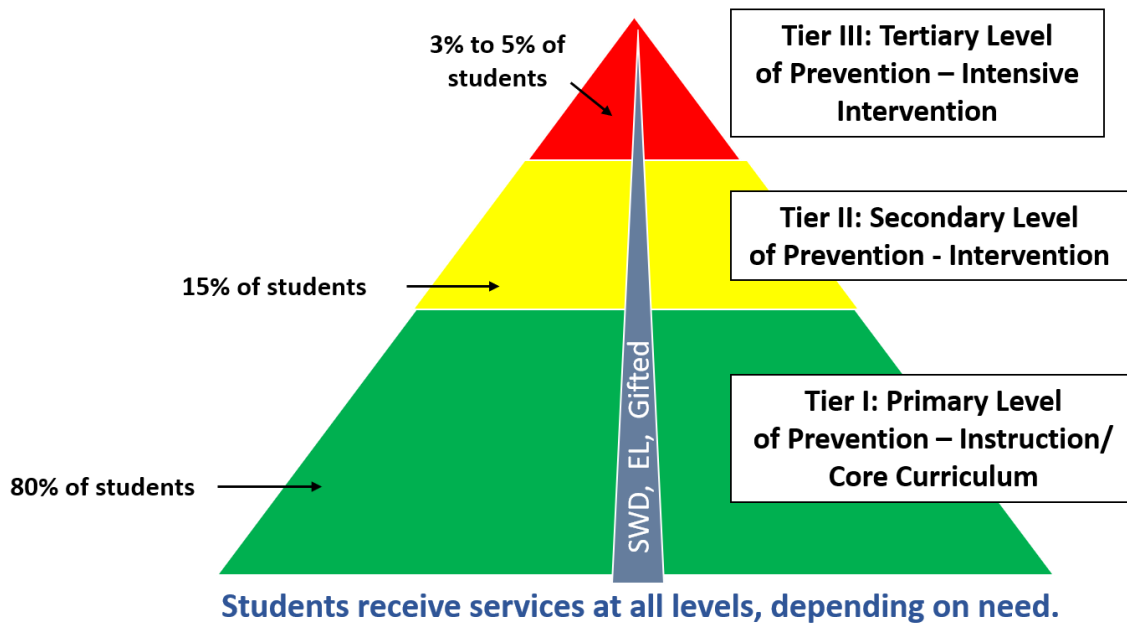
diverse backgrounds to receive appropriate research-based interventions at different tiers (Linan-Thompson et al., 2006).

RTI was supposed to reduce the risk of students being over identified for special education services. When RTI and PBIS appeared in federal and state laws and regulations, multi-tiered models primarily focused on prevention and early intervention (VanDerHeyden et al., 2016). When a student was identified as performing below grade level benchmarks, educators using RTI as a tiered model were meant to designate three or more levels of researched based instruction that was planned specifically for those students who are identified. RTI was supposed to require continuous progress monitoring in each tier to inform instruction (Alahmari, 2019). In an RTI model, school staffs were responsible for providing students with a multi tiered approach to instruction to ensure students receive an appropriate level of support based on their needs (Barnes & Harlacher, 2008). RTI was intended as a preventative tool for schools to use when students experience underachievement academically (Fuchs & Fuchs 2007, 2006). Buffim et al. (2010), discussed where schools should begin with the implementation process and how schools need to ask the right questions before implementing the RTI framework. Further, they suggested asking, “What is the fundamental purpose of our school? What knowledge and skills will our children need to be successful adults? What must we do to make learning a reality for every student?” (Buffim, Mattos, & Weber, 2010). Developing a school vision statement was supposed to be extremely helpful to this process.

RTI framework components

The first tier was typically instruction given to all students by the general education teacher in the classroom. Tier 1 was supposed to consist of an educator using a scientifically validated curriculum that is researched-based and it is estimated that approximately 80% of the students should meet mastery from Tier 1 instruction (Buffim, Mattos, & Weber, 2010). Students were supposed to move to Tier 2 when they have made inadequate progress during the Tier 1 instruction and at this level small group instruction was supposed to occur with students who have similar needs using an academic program that should have been proven in validation studies (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017). Tier 2 was supposed to involve targeted short-term interventions that focus on 15% of the population that was not responding to the Tier 1 instruction. Tier 3 was meant for the 5% of the student population that have shown inadequate progress in both Tiers 1 and 2 and is given to a smaller group of students with more intensive instructional interventions. Tier 3 involved an individualized more intense instruction where the instructor is progress monitoring the student's responsiveness to interventions and adjusting their program to determine the need of the student (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017). See figure 1:

Figure 1 RTI Tier Pyramid



Note. The figure has been retrieved from <https://www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/Curriculum-and-Instruction/Pages/Response-to-Intervention.aspx>.

Fuchs & Fuchs (2006) state that schools should identify a criterion from the universal screening tool, such as scores below the 25th percentile, to help identify the students in need of additional support. Next, RTI proponents put forth that educators need to monitor, through assessment, the identified students response to general education instruction. Teachers are asked to monitor progress of these students for 8-10 weeks by using the data collected to inform their future instruction needed to better meet the needs of the students. Each tier is supposed to include a different academic intervention, becoming more intensive as a student moves from Tier 1 to Tier 2 and from Tier 2 to Tier 3 (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Fuchs,

Mock, Morgan, & Young, 2003). Each tier is supposed to include ongoing data collection, progressing monitoring, and adjusting of the intervention to meet students' needs.

The Institute of Education Services (IES) has released a guide (Gersten, 2009) on RTI and multi-tiered intervention at the primary grade levels summarized critical research components and identified which frameworks have been more effective. Gersten, et al. (2009) discussed the five recommendations for implementing multiple tiers at the elementary level. The IES released guide for implementation of the tiered supports suggested that Tier 1 utilized a universal screening measure in the beginning, middle and end of the year to identify students who were struggling in reading. The recommended target areas when using the screening based on the readings should focus on letter naming fluency, phoneme segmentation, pseudo-word reading, word identification, and oral reading fluency. The IES guide then suggested that students should receive differentiated instruction based on the outcomes from the universal screening and that professional development may be needed for practitioners to individualize instructions based on the universal screening outcomes. Fixsen et al., (2015) indicate the need for differentiation to expand the overall quality of Tier 1 instructions and materials and not have students who are underperforming in reading wait to receive a more individualized, differentiated Tier 1 instruction. A key part of RTI and this tiered model is that both Tier 2 and Tier 3 instruction is intended to supplement, *not replace*, Tier 1 instruction. Tier 2 and Tier 3 instruction is supposed to be aligned with the content being taught. Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions should involve

teacher modeling of the skills they expect students to gain mastery on and teachers correcting the errors or misunderstandings the students may encounter immediately (Fixsen et al., 2015).

While RTI is one part of the MTSS framework, the MTSS framework encompasses more than just identifying students who are at risk in reading. Moreover, the MTSS framework was designed with the whole child approach in mind and incorporates both academic and behavioral supports to students who are not only identified at risk but to students who are performing above grade level as well. It is imperative to have an in depth understanding of the MTSS framework and its components to recognize why it is not interchangeable with RTI.

MTSS at the elementary level

A shift is happening in elementary schools that is examining equitable distribution of available supports to all students at the elementary level and the Multi-Tiered Systems Supports (MTSS), is being utilized by many districts to provide continuous improvement that involves data-based problem solving and decision making to support students across all levels of the educational system (Kozleski & Huber, 2012). MTSS was designed to meet the needs of a range of students by having support staff collaborate with general education teachers to provide an equitable distribution of support needs amongst all students at the elementary level (Hehir & Katzmand, 2012). MTSS is a framework that is utilized by districts at the elementary level that incorporates both academic and behavioral support to all students and many researchers believe MTSS implementation can address issues of inequities that surface amongst students (Jackson et al., 2016; Sullivan & Osher,

2019). These readings suggest that MTSS provides research-based, universal, targeted design with intensive supports using data based decision-making.

MTSS framework components

Multi-tiered in MTSS refers to different levels of support for students academically, socially, emotionally, and behaviorally. Bender (2009) discussed how MTSS was intended to integrate a continuum of practices, strategies, resources, structures that includes a responsive and comprehensive framework that addresses barriers to student learning. Batsche et al., (2005) discussed that the multi tier approach was supposed to include interventions that were categorized into three tiers. Tier 1 is intended to include differentiated core instruction; Tiers 2 and 3 should provide intensive individualized interventions. The screening and monitoring procedures vary between academic and behavior but the three-tier concept is similar (Batsche et al., 2005). Educators should use a problem-solving model that includes evaluating the data collected to continuously inform their decision-making about evidence-based instruction and the needed interventions (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). MTSS was intended to recognize that instruction and/or other issues, rather than student ability, might be the reasons why a student is not learning. Therefore, the MTSS framework should integrate a continuum of supports to students.

The academic support of the MTSS framework suggested administering a universal screening at least twice a year to all students, utilizing valid and reliable assessment tools, monitoring Tier 2 students monthly, and Tier 3 students weekly

and vary instructional support through group size and frequency (Schiller et al., 2020).

The first tier is considered Tier 1 where instruction is provided to all students, and like RtI 80-89% of students should respond with mastery to the content taught in this first tier level of instruction. Tier 2 is designated for 10-15% of the student population that did not demonstrate mastery and need additional instruction/re-teaching of the content taught in Tier 1. Tier 2 interventions were intended to be given in a smaller group size, with individualized content strategies typically three times a week. Tier 3 was meant to support the students with a more intense intervention of support after they have not mastered the content or achieved the goals set within the first two tiers and designed to reach 1-5% of the student population (Nitz et al., 2023; Schiller et al., 2020).

While these are the suggested percentages to make implementation ideal within the framework, it does vary within school districts. If a larger percentage of the student population does not respond to the Tier 2 and Tier 3 reading interventions, then the Tier 1 instruction needs to be reevaluated. Tiers 2 and 3 were intended to be in a group of 2-3 students, four to five times a week, with an intense level of support from specialized trained professionals (Jimerson, Burns, & VanDerHeyden, 2016). These intervention supports for academic, behavioral and socio-emotional should be connected to the general content and supplement Tier 1 instruction given and not replace Tier 1 instruction.

MTSS and RTI Implementation complexities

The MTSS framework is designed to meet all students' needs and provide interventions for every child based on their need within the tiers. Some research studies support the effectiveness of MTSS (Bradshaw et al., 2012; Burns et al., 2005; Hughes & Dexter, 2011; Ruffini et al., 2016). Yet, the implementation of the framework can be challenging, especially without adequate professional development and scholars have doubted educators' capacity to implement MTSS with fidelity (Castillo, et al., 2016; Kratochwill et al., 2007). Schools are finding it challenging incorporating all of the components in the framework to meet all the needs of their students with their current resources (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017). There was a larger study conducted by Balu et al. in 2015 that evaluated RTI intervention practices and although the study findings show that RTI wasn't effective, Fuchs and Fuchs critiqued the study to say the findings were skewed because the implementation of the framework was not being done with fidelity.

The Evaluation of Response to Intervention Practices 2015 study was conducted across 13 states using two different samples: an impact sample of 146 elementary schools with three or more years of implementing RTI approaches in reading and a reference sample of schools of elementary schools in the 13 states (Balu et al., 2015). The results from this study indicated that RTI was not effective in meeting the needs of students just above or just below the cut off point of eligibility for intervention and in some cases was seen as a hindrance. Balu et al., (2015) stated:

In grade 1, about three fourths of students remained in the same reading tier, and one fourth of students moved between tiers, from fall to winter.

Assignment to Tier 2 or Tier 3 intervention services in impact sample schools had a negative effect on performance on a comprehensive reading measure for first-graders just below the Tier 1 cut point on a screening test. The estimated effects on reading outcomes in Grades 2 and 3 are not statically significant.

Fuchs & Fuchs (2017) critiqued the study by saying that the implementation of RTI in the schools studied was not done with fidelity so it wasn't RTI that was unsuccessful, rather the schools implementation that was to blame. Fuchs and Fuchs (2017) believe the national evaluation report provides a descriptive variation on the way educators implemented RTI throughout the study schools. They highlighted a criterion that the national evaluation report utilized that was not met by all 146 schools.

The national evaluation report found 89 out of 146 impact schools were fully implementing RTI, which Fuchs and Fuchs (2017) believed indicated that the remaining schools were not fully implementing RTI based on the evaluation team's own criteria. They argue that the implementation is challenging for all schools and may be too burdensome for educators to follow the components of RTI with fidelity because of their plates are already so full with all the other duties required of them. Since practitioners already have numerous daily tasks, Fuchs & Fuchs (2017), believe that the complexity of RTI can be extremely challenging especially when navigating the implementation processes. Researchers have cited educators' professional learning as necessary in order to build capacity to implement MTSS with fidelity (Castillo et al., 2016; Kratochwill et al., 2007). Yet, these readings indicated that building educators' capacity on all of the MTSS components can be difficult because there are considerable variability in professional learning content,

practices implemented and scope and sequence (Shapiro, 2014; Sugai & Horner, 2009).

Equity Concerns

Disproportionality issues have occurred in RTI models because RTI ignores ecological factors such as classroom management, classroom instruction, and issues with the curriculum that could cause low student achievement (Stuart et al., 2011). Moreover, RTI models solely assess academic success and do not account for the other components that impact student learning. RTI has caused growing concerns about the overrepresentation of students of color, and Native American children in special education (Thorius & Maxcy, 2015). Some researchers believe MTSS implementation can address issues of inequities that surface amongst students (Jackson et al., 2016; Sullivan & Osher, 2019). These readings suggest that MTSS provides research-based, universal, targeted design with intensive supports using data based decision-making. The issue with this logic is the ecological variables such as instruction, classroom environment, curriculum are being completely ignored and the Tier 1 instruction that is given to all students is not enough alone to disrupt the oppression of minority students (Artiles et al., 2010). Moreover, MTSS alone cannot cancel the sociopolitical contexts because there are no educational contexts with a neutral base (Sullivan et. al, 2023). While some scholars argue MTSS is effective, there is still a large disproportionality between how many students of color there are in special education and out of school suspensions compared to their white cohorts (Fallon et al., 2023; Parrish, 2002). Additionally, many scholars have argued that deficit-thinking perspective continues to surface within school systems

and when staff maintain a deficit perspective then utilizing the MTSS model will continue to underserve marginalized students (Avant, 2016; Edirmanasinghe et al., 2022; Zammit, 2020).

Deficit Thinking Perspective

Valencia (1997) led framing of deficit thinking in education nearly thirty years ago, and this continues to be an important perspective taken up by numerous scholars. Valencia argued that a deficit-thinking perspective means seeing a student's lack of academic success as due to the student's internal deficits such as their lack of motivation, intellectual abilities, or lack of linguistic capabilities as opposed to examining the root causes of inferior schools or systemic issues (Valencia, 1997). While there is a varying degree in how scholars utilize the concept of deficit thinking, a large number of scholars agree that deficit thinking encompasses a 'blame the victim' perspective specifically towards marginalized groups (McKay & Devlin, 2016; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Valencia, 1997).

Ferri (2016) critically examined RTI and found numerous issues with the service model, screening procedures, and implementation process. Although the U.S. has widely adopted RTI, there is lack of research indicating improved academic or behavioral student outcomes or a decrease in special education referrals (O'Connor & Freeman, 2012). Moreover, Ferri (2016) argued that RTI 'retains a deficit-orientation associated with traditional special education practice' and believes the focus needs to be centered on the way a student learns, not how they respond to EBPs. Interestingly, there is no clear guidance on what EBPs should be utilized or what should be done when a student is not responding to Tier 3

instruction. Additionally, the implementation of the RTI model often has students receiving more intense instruction by educators, sometimes paraprofessionals without proper training, often in another room and outside the general education classroom (Ferri, 2016). Both the RTI and MTSS frameworks require students to be progress monitored with the intervention that is given to them by the tier 2 or tier 3 instructors. Yet, the progress-monitoring component within the frameworks can have glaring issues that could deepen instructor's deficit thinking perspectives.

Progress Monitoring

Both RTI and MTSS frameworks include a component that focuses on progress monitoring students. Ferri (2016) discussed how students are evaluated typically 8-12 weeks and if the student does not respond to the intervention in that time frame then they are in need of more intensive instruction labeling them as deficient. Further, if a student is not making progress, then teachers sometimes continue with the program intervention even though that intervention may not be working for the student (Ferri, 2016). Ferri (2016) indicates further implementation questions in regards to RTI:

Who will provide instruction at tiers 2 and 3? How will it be funded? Who decides whether and when a student moves up or down a tier? In practice, schools implementing RTI often maintain the deficit-based assumptions about students but these assumptions are further bolstered by assertions that interventions are 'research-based'. In other words, if we can assume that the instruction that is delivered by the teacher (with fidelity) is further authorized as research-based, then if a student doesn't 'respond' it must be the student (not the intervention) that is deficient.

Ferri argues that it is important that school districts critically examine their RTI and MTSS frameworks and evaluate each component they have in place to meet the needs of all learners. Ferri is not alone with her arguments in why RTI is not

beneficial for all students, but school districts in New York State and around the U.S. are continuing to utilize it nonetheless (Fallon et al., 2023; Howley et al., 2023; O'Connor & Freeman, 2012).

There is a body of literature that indicates that the implementation of the MTSS framework is quite complex and that school districts struggle achieving implementation fidelity when implementing the MTSS framework (Fallon et al., 2023; Howley et al., 2023; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007). Given the assumption within the RTI and MTSS framework and the literature on the challenges of implementation, it raises important questions of how MTSS is being implemented and also if there are underlying flaws within the framework. It is important to examine the implementation of evidence-based practices in education and the complexities related to the implementation process.

Implementation Challenges in K12 Education

Research to Practice Gap

Research has been done throughout the years that identified findings, which could be helpful for educational practitioners, but many of these findings are not implemented at the classroom level (Blasé et al., 2017; Chi, 2021; Eagle et al., 2015). While this gap from research findings to classroom implementation has been recognized for decades amongst researchers, the gap still exists and reasons why it exists vary (Aliko & Andre, 2021; Nordstrum et al., 2017; Shultes et al., 2021). Chi (2021) discusses the reasons researchers suggest the gap exists: research based knowledge tends to be too theoretical or abstract, researchers address issues that are not important to teachers, practitioners find researchers' work inaccessible due

to their writing styles, and practitioners do not have time to read all of the research findings that are published. The U.S. Institute of Education Sciences (IES) has supported research that is more focused on evidence-based findings that work to improve students' learning outcomes in classrooms (Chi, 2021).

Evidence Base Practice (EBP)

Research has highlighted the gaps that happen between the educational policies, which incorporate research-based decision making and the reality of the knowledge base practitioners possess in order to implement the policy. Joyce & Cartwright (2020) discuss how the evidence-based practice (EBP) focuses research on what works but less research on will that work on a larger level. Joyce & Cartwright (2020) argue that EBP research should focus more on producing evidence that would provide practitioners a better understanding if the EBP would work for them at their local level.

There are so many different variables that are often unaccounted for when developing EBP to truly determine if the EBP will work in all different school settings. Joyce & Cartwright (2020) believe that when practitioners implement these different EBP within their schools, there is little room for tinkering when it comes to the implementation process in order to achieve fidelity. Therefore, they argue that EBP research should focus on the facts that make the program the most likely to work in different school settings and give a local context for school districts to develop a plan that is needed in order to better understand if the EBP will be successful in their schools.

Another issue that adds to the research to practice gap is that journals

written that examine educational policies or EBP often do not provide an easy way for practitioners to understand the most effective way to implement the policies within their schools. Responsibility is often placed on school officials to decipher what the educational policy entails, and interpret it within their own understanding of how it can be implemented within their schools. This can lead to misapprehensions of the policy and failure to employ it properly (Fixsen et. al., 2009; Joyce & Cartwright, 2020).

Implementation science is “the scientific study of methods to promote the systematic uptake of research findings and other evidence-based practices in routine practice” (Schultes et. al., 2021). Implementation Science helps study the gap between research and practice to help practitioners take research based interventions and apply them in everyday operation. The science of implementation has caused researchers to examine the components they believe are at the core of the implementation process when translating research findings into practice. Implementation research can shed light onto why implementing EBP can be complex.

The persistent gap between what works in practice and what worked in research is in part due to the lack of support for the effectiveness planning when implementing policies (Joyce & Cartwright, 2020). The research to practice gap has highlighted the challenges that organizations encounter involving fidelity, scalability and sustainability (Fixsen et al., 2015). Fixsen et al., (2005) conducted a review of literature related to the synthesis of transdisciplinary implementation evaluation and then used that research knowledge to form each component of the active

implementation frameworks. Therefore, active implementation frameworks have been developed to help practitioners implement evidence-based interventions systematically, but the complexity of the implementation frameworks requires skills and knowledge that include the understanding of implementation theory and research (Fixsen et al., 2005; Schultes et al., 2021).

Fixsen et al. (2015) discuss how implementation processes are purposeful and need to be described in great detail so that the presence and strength of the innovation can be detected by independent observers. Moreover, active implementation frameworks use well specified implementation supports, which in turn will have a large impact on the intervention/innovation outcomes in practice (Fixsen et al., 2015). An innovation can be defined as anything new to the human service system, organization, or individual and the extent to which it is operationalized will impact the level of its effectiveness in practice (Fixsen et al., 2015).

Implementation Science

Implementation science is “the scientific study of methods to promote the systematic uptake of research findings and other evidence-based practices in routine practice” (Schultes et al., 2021). The goal of implementation science is to integrate research and practice in a way that will help those being served have greater outcomes of success (Metz et al., 2021). Implementation science examines the factors that impact the evidence-based practices in routine application (Fixsen et al., 2019). Moreover, implementation science identifies the factors that aid or restrict the use of the evidence based practices (EBP) in the routine practice and

then manages those factors to ensure the EBPs are being implemented consistently and with fidelity (Fixsen et al., 2005).

Active implementation frameworks, such as implementation science, can give guidance to planning and testing hypotheses that will further research but it is imperative that researchers and practitioners have a clear understanding of what implementation science entails. The goal of implementation science is to bridge the gap between effective practice and theory (Fixsen et al., 2009). Implementation science integrates implementation supports (e.g. training coaching, teams, and leadership) to help implement evidence-based practice into routine use (McColskey-Leary & Garman-McClaine, 2021). Implementation science often begins with exploration activities that include identifying a need for a new practice and creating buy-in. Implementation science relies on data to assess the desired outcomes, focuses on improving systems, addresses policy and practice, uses improvement cycles and supports practitioners' needs (McColskey-Leary & Garman-McClaine, 2021).

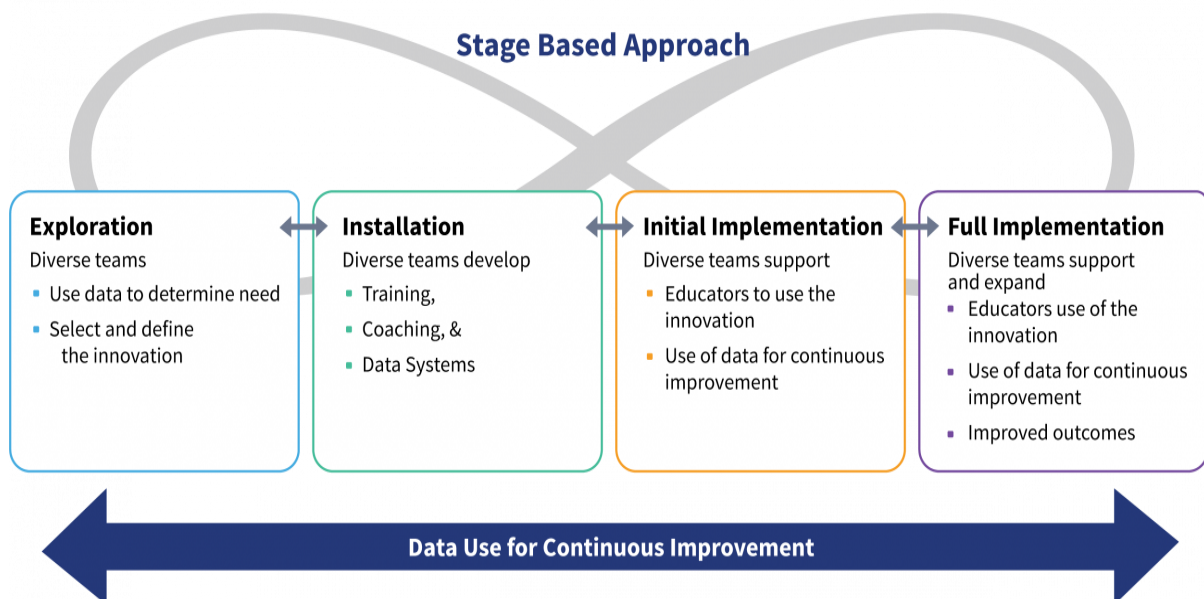
Implementation science involves change within the current operating system, and for the change to occur successfully, the people within the system need to be ready for the change (Moir, 2018). Achieving organizational readiness for change is quite complex and the individuals within the organization should be confident and committed in their ability to change practices. Moir (2018) states school initiatives and programs are not always implemented with the same quality as intended by the program designers, which in turn results in poor outcomes.

Implementation Framework

Implementation science is complex and involves various components in order for it to be successful (Fixsen et al., 2015). In this study, the researcher will be using the Fixsen et al., 2014 implementation science framework which has four implementation stages: exploration, installation, initial implementation, and full implementation. Although researchers and practitioners begin with the exploration stage, the four-implementation stages are not linear, and it is likely that organizations could be involved in multiple stages simultaneously or move back and forth between them throughout the implementation process. The exploration stage involves developing team structures, communication plans, and choosing an innovation that will best meet the needs of the organization. See Figure 2:

Figure 2 Implementation Stages

Key to the Learning Process...



Note. Image retrieved from the National Implementation Research Network. (n.d.). Framework 2: Implementation Stages. *Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute*. Retrieved in October 2022 from <https://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/module-1/implementation-stages>

Exploration phase

During the exploration phase is when the implementation team is formed; their goal is to use data to examine the need of students prior to discussing possible solutions or EBPs (Blase et al., 2015). After determining the problem or students' needs, the organizations examine innovations to determine which one will best meet the needs of the intended population. Organizations should convene groups of stakeholders, partners, and leaders that will help determine which innovation is right for their organization and can be seen as the leadership team of the innovation (Fixsen et al., 2015). It is during this time that the leadership team discusses what changes they believe need to be made and the complexities they may encounter when taking an innovation from research into practice.

Prior to implementing an EBP, it is necessary to have a clear understanding and sufficient details about the EBP to train staff to use it competently and measure the use of it with fidelity (National Implementation Research Network, 2017). After having a clear understanding of the EBP, it is necessary to determine its utility because just being deemed an evidence-based program is not enough (Fixsen et al., 2015). The National Implementation Research Network (NIRN) defines an EBP as usable with the following components: clear description of the program, clear program components that define the program, operational definitions of program components and practical fidelity assessment. Fixsen et al. (2015) discusses how innovations can provide a strong foundation for teaching, doing, and assessing in practice when the innovations meet the usable intervention criteria.

It is important to evaluate the EBP to see if it's a good fit for the needs and

values of an organization (National Implementation Research Network, 2017). The organization needs to determine if the EBP aligns with their equity lens, consider the potential impacts of the program or practice on the population, and ultimately decide if the program will have equitable outcomes for all individuals. Additionally, the NIRN discusses the need for the EBP to have clear inclusion and exclusion criteria for which the program was intended and defines the population it will help. Once the EBP selected by an organization has been examined more thoroughly and has a clear description, clear program components, operational definitions and a good fit for the needs and values of the organization, then the organization can begin to examine the installation implementation stage.

Installation Phase

The goal of this stage in the implementation process is to install the implementation infrastructure: training, coaching, data systems, etc. by making necessary organizational changes to policies, procedures, changing schedules and providing supports needed to begin the work so staff feel confident in using the innovation (Blase et al., 2015). During this phase, nothing is happening with students yet as the behind the scenes preparations are being made for the implementation stage. At this stage, it is necessary to thoughtfully install the competency drivers (who and how will teachers be selected, trained, and coached). Communication protocols, guidance documents, and data routines articulated for monitoring student outcomes are all elements that need to happen during the installation phase (Blase et al., 2015).

During the installation phase, it is necessary for the implementation team to

have ongoing professional learning and support for staff utilizing the EBP, and opportunities to coach the staff on how to use the program as it was intended. Additionally, staff members need to have a system for collecting, analyzing, and using data for decision making that includes measures of fidelity of the EBP in relation to implementation, capacity and outcome data (National Implementation Research Network, 2017).

Initial Implementation

During the initial implementation phase, a group of practitioners begin to use the new EBP, and data and feedback are used regularly to inform decision-making and improve the implementation of the EBP. The implementation team will develop strategies that promote continuous learning with rapid cycle problem solving by using data to assess the implementation, identify problems and solutions, and inform decision-making (National Implementation Research Network, 2017). When issues arise, it is important that the implementation team addresses the barriers quickly so they do not continue to surface and reoccur. Additionally, it is crucial that implementation teams center on equity- based implementation to create equitable outcomes for all (National Implementation Research Network, 2017).

This phase of the implementation model is a time when everyone is new to their roles and a time of vulnerability for the intervention as people may experience self-doubt or feelings of incompetence. The people providing coaching, training, monitoring to the staff are new to their roles, and the classroom teachers are new to the instructional practices and routines creating vulnerabilities and feelings of incompetency (Blase et al., 2015). At this stage, it is necessary for educators,

leaders, and implementation teams to place an emphasis on coaching, and use data to make decisions. It should be expected that the implementation process will be a multiyear process, and will require school administrative procedures and district expectations and supports.

Full Implementation

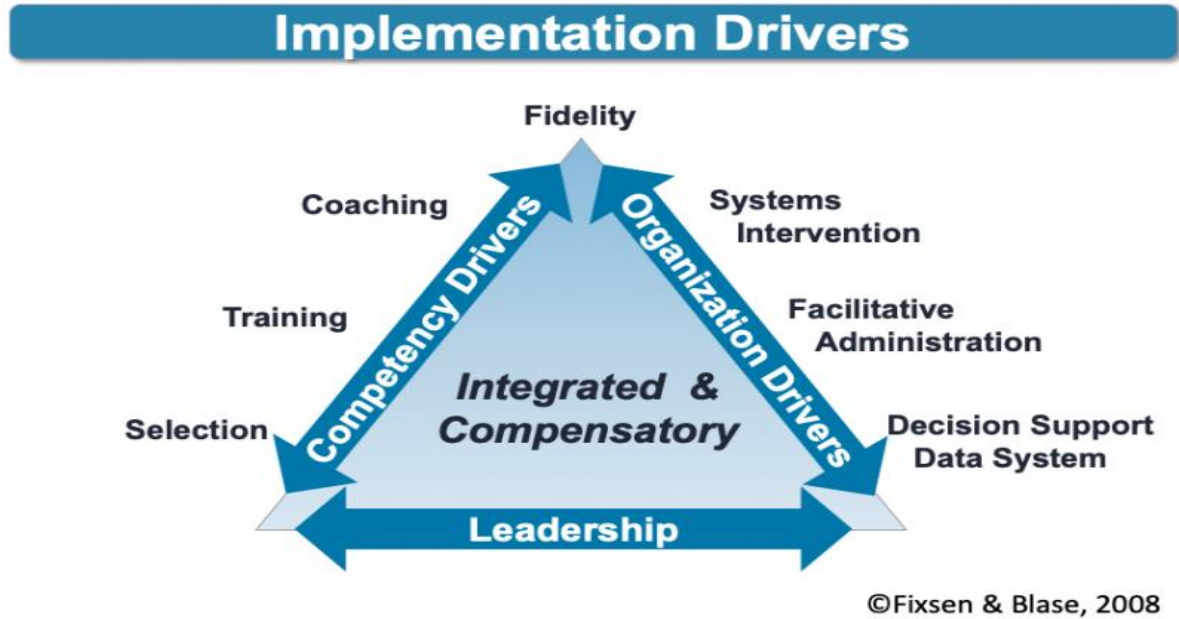
Full implementation is reached when the innovation becomes a “way of work” and even though there are always new students, new teachers, new staff, etc entering into the scene, the leadership and implementation team continue to make changes to the innovation based on the data they collect (Blase et al., 2015). During this stage, data are used to inform decision-making and improve implementation of the EBP. During the full implementation stage, staff implementing the EBP should be able to utilize it with fidelity and ease. Additionally, data collected should indicate that the identified outcomes of the EBP are taking place (National Implementation Research Network, 2017).

Implementation Drivers

Fixsen et al., (2005) identified nine individual implementation drivers that are organized in three categories: 1) Competency, 2) Organizational and 3) Leadership. These drivers provide external support to the staff and the organizational capacity needed to sustain large-scale system change. Implementation drivers of competency organization and leadership must be tested, set up and adjusted for fidelity implementation prior to implementing the EBP (Fixsen et al., 2011). The implementation drivers are used by school leaders as a map to identify what changes needs to be made or systems in place for quality

implementation. See Figure 3:

Figure 3 *Implementation Drivers*



Note. Blase, K. A. & Van Dyke, M. K. (2021). Implementation drivers: responsibility analysis. Chapel Hill, NC: Active Implementation Research Network. www.activeimplementation.org/resources

Leadership drivers

Leadership is crucial to the implementation process, and it is necessary for implementation teams to be empowered to make decisions. Leaders who are engaged and focus on their role rather than the position of authority are needed to help ensure that the new EBP is being implemented with fidelity. There is a growing need for this transformative leadership amongst school leaders because they are positioned to influence the implementation of the educational policies in their schools, can advocate for marginalized students, and ensure equitable access to resources within their buildings (Theoharis & O’Toole, 2011). It is necessary to

have equitable resources, but they alone are not enough to achieve social justice in education. School leaders are often the voices for marginalized students and can control the school resource distribution within their schools to directly help those marginalized students. Social justice-oriented school leaders can ensure successful group representation of all stakeholders within the decision making process at their schools.

School leadership and student achievement are correlated, and culturally proficient leaders become advocates to meet the needs of all students (DuFour & Mattos, 2013; Welborn, 2019). Culturally proficient leadership focuses on how to effectively serve marginalized students (Kahlifa, 2020). Educational leaders may have a culturally proficient vision in place, but without intentional actions there is little change (Welborn, 2019). School leaders have the ability to form actionable steps to increase student outcomes using professional learning communities and parent community partnerships. In order for leaders to best understand the moral imperative for creating a school culture that is focused on cultural proficient practices, it is necessary for all leaders to attend preparation programs that give them the tools, common language, and understandings on how to be active change agents within their school communities (Welborn, 2019).

Competency Drivers

There are four competency drivers: selection, training, coaching and fidelity assessment. Selection includes selecting candidates that will be the first to implement the EBP. The implementation team will have to specify skills and abilities that are needed for the staff to be selected to implement the EBP. Training

involves providing all staff involved information related to the theory of the EBP and the components of the EBP. It is necessary to develop a coaching system that actively implements plans which detail what is being coached, what evidence-based coaching strategies are being implemented, and uses multiple sources of data to provide feedback (National Implementation Research Network, 2017). Fidelity incorporates using an EBP as its intended and the entire organization is accountable for program quality.

Organization Drivers

Organization drivers include decision support data systems, facilitative administration, and systems interventions. A decision support data system includes data that is reliable, reported frequently, and used to make decisions. The decision support data system should include both qualitative and quantitative indicators to allow for the examination of the practitioners' experiences. (National Implementation Research Network, 2017). Facilitative administration refers to how leaders use strategies to ensure the EBP is being implemented with fidelity using data to drive their decision-making. Systems interventions are how the leaders collaborate with external partners to secure the necessary support to sustain the EBP. Fixsen et al. (2013) discusses the importance of finding external partners that are knowledgeable with implementation science and experience with interventions in practice.

Implementation Science in Education

Education programs are adopted and often federally funded without being linked to direct evidence of program effectiveness or the fidelity of implementation

(Nordstrum et al., 2017). Herman (1999) examined 2,665 comprehensive school reform grants to determine the level in which the programs being implemented had research backing and found that only one in five were rated as showing strong evidence, while two-thirds had mixed, weak, or no research backing. Additional investigations of CSR designs that indicated a strong research backing found that the reforms did not alter instructional practices and/or did not produce the results intended (Rowan et al., 2009). Evidence based practices are derived from multiple high quality studies indicating positive student outcomes and the studies have been peer reviewed and the research design allows one to infer the practice led to the student improvement (Tyler et al., 2017).

Implementation at sites is difficult, and research supports that instructional improvement programs that are strongly supported by local leaders who demand fidelity to program designs can change teachers' classroom practices (Correnti and Rowan, 2007). Implementation research in education groundwork was slowly being examined during the early 1990s and 2000s, and it was revealed that innovation focused on changing very specific curriculum embedded elements of instructional practice was associated with instructional change (Nordstrum et al., 2017).

Implementation Science examines the implementation of interventions thought to be effective in complex learning environments (Glasgow et al., 2012). Researchers have attempted to identify the factors associated with program outcomes and found that it is most likely the implementation process that causes issues affecting the program outcomes as opposed to the systems of supports structured around it or the program itself (Nordstrum et al., 2017). The NIRN suggests "the philosophy,

values and principles that underlie the program provide the guidance for all educational and program decisions and evaluations, and are used to promote consistency, integrity and sustainable effort across classrooms, schools and districts.”

Implementation Science Model within the MTSS framework

In my dissertation study, I will use the Fixsen and Blase (2008) framework because of its emphasis on large-scale system change in the field of education. This framework is used by several states and supported by the office of special education programs (OSEP) State Personnel Development Grants program to implement MTSS framework within schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Fixsen and Blase (2008) identified three core components that are considered best practices when implementing any research program in a human service setting. The three components are implementation drivers because competency, leadership and organization are the drivers of system change in education. The competency drivers are the capacity building resources that will help with the fidelity of the implementation of MTSS.

The leadership component for MTSS would be focused on forming a district leadership team that is responsible for creating the plan on how to implement MTSS within the district. The district leadership team would be responsible for providing the vision and support for the elementary buildings to implement the MTSS framework with fidelity. George & Kincaid (2008) discuss how it is necessary for the district leadership team to coordinate the professional development needed and evaluate the effectiveness of the implementation of MTSS. There must be a district

coordinator that is able to support the school sites throughout the implementation process.

The competency drivers would consist of hiring individuals that have knowledge and experience that is needed when implementing the MTSS framework. Planning professional development needs to happen at the district level by examining what support systems are needed for effective MTSS implementation and sustainability (George & Kincaid, 2008). It is crucial that careful attention is given to the planning of resources needed within the implementation stages of MTSS and the district leader needs to have a trained staff that can interpret the data that is collected in order to support the needs of the students.

The organization drivers for MTSS include decision support data system, facilitative administrators and system integration. Developing a school wide intervention team that can function as the support system for instructional problem solving using data driven decision-making. The NIRN (2017) discuss how having school teams that evaluate the data is essential to the continued implementation of the EBP.

Conclusion

The literature reviewed discussed the research to practice gap and how implementation science emerged and developed into the implementation model to help bridge the gap between the knowing-doing when implementing new EBPs. The stages of the implementation science model provide a road map for human service practitioners to utilize when implementing a new EBP. It is important to restate that the stages in the implementation science model are not linear and practitioners

can be in multiple stages simultaneously. Implementation science uses research to evaluate if the new EBP is being implemented with fidelity and stresses the use of data driven decision-making.

Implementation science in general is relatively new, but has been widely used in the medical field. Recently, educators have been utilizing the implementation science model to implement new EBPs, which is why I believe it was instrumental in my larger research project of studying the implementation of the MTSS framework in grade K-6. Specifically, researchers have identified implementation science as an active framework that aligns with the MTSS model and suggest using implementation science when examining MTSS models (Bohanon et al., 2016; Cavanaugh, 2013; Charlton et al., 2020; Dillard, 2017; Eagle et al., 2015; Freeman et al., 2015; Nellis & Fenning, 2023; Sanetti & Luh, 2019; Sailor, 2015; Sanetti & Meek, 2019; Zhang & Xin, 2023). There is little research that seeks to understand the complexities and implementation of MTSS and my dissertation study will help to address that. Therefore, I am interested in examining the implementation of the MTSS framework in three elementary buildings within the same school district to answer my research question: “How are elementary schools implementing the MTSS framework?”

Chapter 3 Methodology

Since the literature indicated the implementation of the MTSS framework can be quite complex, for this dissertation I examined the MTSS implementation in three elementary buildings within the same school district located in Central, N.Y. to address the following research question:

1. "How are elementary schools implementing the MTSS framework?"

To address this question, a qualitative study was the most effective with providing in depth details on what the MTSS framework implementation process looks like in three elementary buildings located in Central, N.Y. To understand the implementation of the MTSS framework in these three buildings, I interviewed the principals, classroom teachers, AIS specialists, instructional coaches and dean of students in each building both in person and over zoom. Additionally, I observed team meetings and classrooms in each school to gain a clearer understanding of how the students are put into the three different tiers. I will discuss this in these sections: Design, West Bridge Elementary, William Elementary, Perez Elementary, District MTSS overview, Procedures, Interviews, Analysis and Conclusion.

The reason why I chose qualitative methods is because it can provide data on barriers to implementation and provide evidence of policy and program impact (Patton et. al., 2015). Creswell & Poth (2016) highlight when qualitative research is a better fit for the research problem under study and suggest that researchers

should use qualitative research approaches when a complex understanding of the problem is needed, a desire to empower individuals, and an understanding of the contexts in which participants in the study address the problem. When examining the MTSS/RTI frameworks, there is a gap in the literature in relation to the implementation of these frameworks at the ground level. Moreover, practitioners and school leaders grapple with the various components of the frameworks when determining how to implement them within their schools. Therefore, a qualitative study examining the MTSS framework being implemented in a Central, N.Y. school district at the elementary level will contribute to the gap in literature and add understandings of the contexts in which the participants are implementing the MTSS framework by providing detailed descriptions of what is happening at the ground level.

I reached out by email to contact local school districts to see which ones would be willing to participate in the study examining the implementation of their MTSS frameworks. The criteria needed for the school district to be included in my study are: a public school in central New York, a district that has at least three elementary buildings implementing the MTSS framework, a district that has school demographics that include both racial and economic diversity, and a district willing to participate in my study that is currently implementing a MTSS framework. Moreover, racial and economic diversity would be defined as schools that have an overall student population that has students identified in the various subgroups for racial ethnicities on the NYSED website, and schools where 35% or more of students are economically challenged. I contacted two school districts and chose a suburban

school district located in Central, N.Y. that met the criteria and the district leadership was willing for me to engage in this study in their school. I began my research study after I received IRB approval and reached out to participants by email to begin setting up interviews for data collection. I researched one elementary building at a time to help organize data collection.

Settings

This study took place in a suburban school district within Central, N.Y. The district has six elementary buildings and each building has grades Kindergarten through fourth grade. The following data was retrieved from the New York State Department of Education and the latest district data at a glance was for the school year 2019-20. There are approximately 8,000 total students, with an average class size of 20 students in grades 3 and 4. There is an overall graduation rate of 87% and an attendance rate of 94%.

Since I explained to the assistant superintendent I was interested in examining the implementation of the MTSS framework, he chose three buildings in different stages of the MTSS framework implementation process. I will refer to the buildings as West Bridge Elementary, William Elementary and Perez Elementary. Tables 1 gives an overview of district demographics.

Table 1

District Demographics

<u>District/Student Demographics</u>	<u>Percentage of Students</u>
American Indian	1%
Asian	3%
Hispanic	5%
White	81%
Multiracial	6%
English Language Learners	2%
Students with Disabilities	16%
Economically Disadvantaged	41%
<u>Homeless</u>	<u>1 %</u>

Note. Data retrieved from data.nysed.gov

The information gathered for the building demographics was retrieved from the New York State education department website (NYSED, 2021). The details for each elementary building are as follows:

West Bridge Elementary

Building and Student Demographics:

There are approximately 400 students in grades K-4, one principal, one school counselor and 36 teachers. The average class size has 19 students and an attendance rate of 91%. This elementary is on a NYS Comprehensive school improvement plan. Table 2 describes the building and student demographics in greater detail.

Table 2*West Bridge Elementary Demographics*

Building/Student Demographics	Percentage of students
American Indian	2%
African American	10%
Asian	3%
Hispanic	9%
White	68%
Multiracial	9%
English Language Learners	0%
Students with Disabilities	26%
Economically Disadvantaged	76%
Free or Reduced Price Lunch	76%
Homeless	3%

Note. Data retrieved from data.nysed.gov

William Elementary

Building and Student Demographics

There are approximately 300 students in grades K-4, one principal, one social worker and 33 teachers. This building has the 8:1:1 program, which is the maximum class size for special classes containing students whose management needs are determined to be intensive, and cannot exceed more than eight students. William Elementary has approximately 300 students total. The grades are K-4 and the average class size is 18 and an attendance rate of 91%. Table 3 describes the building and student demographics in greater detail.

Table 3

William Elementary Demographics

Building/Student Demographics	Percentage of students
American Indian	1%
African American	5%
Asian	2%
Hispanic	4%
White	82%
Multiracial	7%
English Language Learners	0%
Students with Disabilities	24%
Economically Disadvantaged	38%
Homeless	0%

Note. Data retrieved from data.nysed.gov

Perez Elementary

Building and Student Demographics

This building has approximately 600 students with an average class size of 22 and an overall attendance rate of 91%. This building has one principal, one dean of students, one social worker, and 45 teachers. Perez Elementary is one of the two elementary buildings that have English Language Learners (ELL) students. Table 4 describes the building and student demographics in greater detail.

Table 4

Perez Elementary Demographics

Building/Student Demographics	Percentage of students
American Indian	0%
African American	3%
Asian	9%
Hispanic	4%
White	78%
Multiracial	5%
English Language Learners	10%
Students with Disabilities	23%
Economically Disadvantaged	56%
Free or Reduced Price Lunch	46%
Homeless	2%

Note. Data retrieved from data.nysed.gov

District MTSS overview

It is important for this study to understand the overall MTSS model in this school district. While some components will vary within each elementary building, there are overarching guidelines that each building follows. Each building administered the AIMSweb tests in September, January, and May. The AIS specialists then use this test to group their students into different tier groups on their school data day and ask for input from teachers. After those groups are

formed, students who are identified for tier 2 and tier 3 for reading support are pulled from their general education classrooms and received intervention support by either an AIS specialist, AIS teaching assistant (TA), or an instructional teaching assistant (ITA) during the *what I need now* (WINN) time in the instructional schedule. West Bridge elementary building only pulls tier 3 students and tier 2 students are expected to receive their intervention support in the general education classroom. There are no students identified as tier 2 students for math support in any of the buildings. The tier 3 students received math support from the AIS specialists and are pulled out of their general education classroom during a designated tier 3 time in the instructional schedule. During this tier 3 time in the instructional schedule it is expected that classroom teachers worked on math instruction and the ITAs would push in to assist classrooms during this time.

Procedures

Etikan et al. (2016) reveal that purposive sampling is used by a researcher when they decide what needs to be known and finds the people they believe will have the knowledge on the problem they are studying. Therefore, I will be using purposive sampling when determining the participants in the study. I have read literature pertaining to MTSS frameworks in elementary schools and recognize the importance the leader has on the implementation process and believe that the principal needs to be interviewed. Additionally, I know that the reading specialists and teachers are also key participants in the MTSS framework implementation and they would be key participants to the study. I have found a school district that is implementing the MTSS framework within Central, N.Y. and studied three

elementary buildings within the district to gain knowledge of their MTSS framework implementation process.

I reached out by email to contact local school districts to see which ones would be willing to participate in the study examining the implementation of their MTSS frameworks. The criteria needed for the school district to be included in my study are: a public school in central New York, a district that has at least three elementary buildings implementing the MTSS framework, a district that has school demographics that include both racial and economic diversity, and a district willing to participate in my study that is currently implementing a MTSS framework. Moreover, racial and economic diversity would be defined as schools that have an overall student population that has students identified in the various subgroups for racial ethnicities on the NYSED website, and schools where over 35% of students are economically challenged. I contacted two school districts and chose a suburban school district located in Central, N.Y. that met the criteria and the district leadership was willing for me to engage in this study in their school. I began my research study after I received IRB approval and reached out to participants by email to begin setting up interviews for data collection.

Data Collection

Participants

The participants at West Bridge were as follows: the principal with seven years in the building, a fourth grade teacher with twenty years in the building, a kindergarten teacher with six years in the building, a second grade teacher with five years in the building, an AIS specialist with twenty eight years in the building, and AIS specialist

with twelve years in the building, and a first grade teacher with three years in the building. The participants at William Elementary included in this study were: the principal with four years in the building, instructional specialist with two years in the building, a fourth grade teacher with three years in the building, a third grade teacher with eight years in the building, a second grade teacher with five years in the building, an AIS specialist with twenty six years in the building, an AIS specialist with two years in the building, and a Special Education teacher with four years in the building. The participants at Perez Elementary were: a principal with five years in the building, the dean of students with three years in the building, a first grade teacher with three years in the building, two Kindergarten teachers- one with four years and one with three years in the building and an AIS specialist with three years in the building.

Interviews

Kvale (1996; 2003) discusses how interviews can elicit narrative data that allows researchers the opportunity to investigate people's views in greater depth. Berg (2007) indicates how interviews not only provide a snapshot and detailed view of the participant's view but also allows the interviewees to express their own thoughts and feelings in their own voice. After reviewing the literature on RTI and MTSS frameworks, the staff who play an integral role in the implementation of the frameworks has been identified as follows: the principal, reading specialists, and teachers. Therefore, I interviewed the principal in each building, the reading specialists and the teachers. The interviews were over zoom and in person. Zoom interviews allowed the participants more flexibility when determining an interview time. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. I decided to do individual

interviews instead of group focus group interviews because during my research apprenticeship I found that teachers are reluctant to speak freely about their MTSS experiences when surrounded by their colleagues.

To answer the research question “How are elementary schools implementing the MTSS framework? In each building, I had contacted participants via emails listed on the school website to inform them about my study and ask if they would like to participate. After I scheduled the interviews, I met with each participant in person and explained the consent form. Next, I interviewed these participants formally by recording the interviews through zoom and following the interview protocol. Tables 5, 6 and 7 lists the participants that were interviewed and recorded.

Table 5
West Bridge Description of Participants and Interviews

Participant	Role	Years in building	Interview frequency and length	Interview location
Principal	oversees teachers and students	7	five lasting longer sixty minutes	main office zoom
General Ed. Teacher	Fourth grade	20	once over sixty minutes	classroom
General Ed. Teacher	Kindergarten	6	once forty five minutes	classroom
General Ed. Teacher	Second Grade	5	once forty five minutes	classroom
AIS Specialist Teacher	Provides reading and math support	28	three forty five minutes	classroom
AIS Specialist Teacher	Provides reading and math support	12	once forty five minutes	classroom
Special Ed. Teacher	First Grade	3	once forty five minutes	classroom

Note: Data retrieved from participants at West Bridge

Table 6
William Description of Participants and Interviews

Participant	Role	Years in building	Interview frequency and length	Interview location
Principal	oversees teachers and students	4	five lasting longer sixty minutes	main office zoom
Instructional Specialist	oversees teachers and ITAs	2	two lasting more than 60 minutes	main office
General Ed. Teacher	Fourth grade	3	once over sixty minutes	zoom
General Ed. Teacher	Third	8	once forty five minutes	classroom
General Ed. Teacher	Second Grade	5	once forty five minutes	classroom
AIS Specialist Teacher	Provides reading and math support	26	once forty five minutes	zoom
AIS Specialist Teacher	Provides reading and math support	2	once forty five minutes	zoom
Special Ed. Teacher	Second Grade	4	once forty five minutes	classroom

Note: Data retrieved from participants at William Elementary

Table 7
Perez Description of Participants and Interviews

Participant	Role	Years in building	Interview frequency and length	Interview location
Principal	oversees teachers and students	5	five lasting longer sixty minutes	main office zoom
Dean of students	oversees teachers and students	3	2 lasting longer sixty minutes	main office zoom
General Ed. Teacher	First grade	3	once over sixty minutes	classroom
General Ed. Teacher	Kindergarten	4	once forty five minutes	classroom
General Ed. Teacher	Kindergarten	3	once forty five minutes	classroom
AIS Specialist Teacher	Provides reading and math support	3	once forty five minutes	classroom

Note: Data retrieved from participants at Perez Elementary

I chose a semi structured interview protocol based on the literature review

that I have done on RTI, MTSS and Implementation Science. A semi-structured interview, which means the questions were predetermined, but the interviewer can ask for clarification, which creates a nice flow in the interview (Hitchcok & Hughes, 2002). The researcher needs to know when to stop the interview and how many interviews are enough to collect the data they are looking for when studying the research problem (Hitchcok & Hughes, 2002). I have included my interview protocol and aligned the questions with the implementation framework stages in Appendix A. During the first interview with the principals, I focused on understanding the participant's backgrounds, MTSS framework implementation and their understanding of how it operates in their building. I began with questions that described their leadership values and experience: e.g. "Please describe a few of the overarching values or beliefs that drive your leadership. How long have you been a principal at this elementary?" Next, I began asking about the MTSS implementation in their buildings and asked "Can you walk me through how MTSS is implemented in your building?" Additionally, I asked the principals about scheduling, grade levels they think are either proficient or not when implementing the framework to help determine which teachers to interview. The second interview was spent discussing observations I have made and things that teachers have discussed during their interviews. Since I was in the buildings observing team meetings, WINN and tier 3 blocks, I had multiple in person conversations with the principals in each building. The last interview with the principals was spent on the socio-emotional and behavioral components of their MTSS model because these were lightly mentioned throughout my interviews and observations.

In order to triangulate data, it is necessary for the researcher to gather data that is descriptive and contains a variety of different perspectives, that include interviewing people who hold different viewpoints and varying amounts of power (Denzin, 2009; Kolb, 2016). The assistant superintendent in charge of Elementary Education and the Response to Intervention administrator asked to be interviewed prior to my data collection in the buildings. They were interviewed via zoom together and asked to be interviewed prior to the data collection so they can clarify key terms I may encounter and have a clear understanding of the district's goals and visions for the MTSS framework implementation as they believed what I would encounter within the buildings may look differently. They asked to be interviewed at the same time, which is why this interview was done with both of them at the same time.

The researcher needs to keep a detailed summary of any field notes, observations, and interview notes any time they are interacting with the participants and analyzing the data to ensure within method triangulation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin, 2009). It can be helpful for the researcher to record interviews and have them transcribed but it is necessary for the researcher to review the transcription to ensure accuracy. Genzuk (2003) discusses the need for researchers to document behavioral data, opinions, feelings, knowledge and sensory data when conducting interviews.

Observations

Observation in qualitative research is one of the most fundamental research approaches and entails uses ones senses by listening and looking to collect data in a

meaningful and systematic way (McKechnie, 2008, p. 573). Similarly, Adler (1994) discussed observations as a fundamental base for all research methods. In this study, I observed team meetings in each building and took field notes on my laptop. Tables 8, 9, and 10 show the participants for each meeting and location.

Table 8
West Bridge Elementary Team Meetings

Participant	Number of Participants	Meeting Location
Principal	1	AIS classroom
AIS specialists	3	AIS classroom
AIS TA	1	AIS classroom
Second Grade Teachers	6	AIS classroom
Special Ed. Teacher	1	AIS classroom
Instructional Specialist	1	AIS classroom
Principal	1	AIS classroom
AIS specialists	4	AIS classroom
Third Grade Teachers	5	AIS classroom
Special Ed. Teacher	1	AIS classroom
Instructional Specialist	1	AIS classroom
Principal	1	AIS classroom
AIS specialists	3	AIS classroom
AIS TA	1	AIS classroom
First Grade Teachers	5	AIS classroom
Special Ed. Teacher	1	AIS classroom
Instructional Specialist	1	AIS classroom

Note: Data retrieved from West Bridge Elementary team meetings

Table 9
William Elementary Team Meetings

Participant	Number of Participants	Meeting Location
Principal	1	AIS classroom
AIS specialists	1	AIS classroom
AIS TA	1	AIS classroom
Kindergarten Teacher	1	AIS classroom
Special Ed. Teacher	1	AIS classroom
Instructional Specialist	1	AIS classroom
Principal	1	AIS classroom
AIS specialists	1	AIS classroom
Third Grade Teacher	1	AIS classroom
Special Ed. Teacher	1	AIS classroom
Instructional Specialist	1	AIS classroom
Speech Teacher	1	AIS classroom
Principal	1	AIS classroom
AIS specialists	1	AIS classroom
AIS TA	1	AIS classroom
Kindergarten Teacher	1	AIS classroom
Special Ed. Teacher	1	AIS classroom
Instructional Specialist	1	AIS classroom

Note: Data retrieved from William Elementary team meetings

Table 10
Perez Team Meetings

Participant	Number of Participants	Meeting Location
AIS specialists	2	Cafeteria
AIS TA	1	Cafeteria
Kindergarten Teachers	5	Cafeteria
Special Ed. Teacher	1	Cafeteria
Instructional Specialist	1	Cafeteria
AIS specialists	2	Cafeteria
AIS TA	1	Cafeteria
First Grade Teachers	6	Cafeteria
Special Ed. Teacher	1	Cafeteria
Instructional Specialist	1	Cafeteria

Note: Data retrieved from Perez team meetings

Prior to each observation, I told the staff present about my study, gave them the consent form to review, and explained I was there to simply observe. I did not

interact with participants during the team meetings until after the meeting ended and in some cases, staff members that wanted to share with me additional thoughts on what MTSS implementation looked like in their building approached me. During the team meetings, I recorded them using my phone and tried to capture as many details as possible on my laptop. I was observing their team meetings to see what happened during them and wanted to know what data they discussed. Field notes from each team meeting ranged from 2-4 pages and the memos after each one I wrote ranged from 2-3 pages in length. Additionally, I observed tier 3 and WINN blocks in the schedules in each building. I would take breaks in between classrooms and jot field notes on my laptop.

I observed 2-3 team meetings in each building that involve teachers and/or administrators only to provide insight on how data is used within the MTSS framework implementation. Additionally, I observed WINN and Tier 3 blocks throughout the school day which involved observing general education classrooms, AIS and TA classrooms and gathered information on what happened during these blocks in the schedule. I asked the principals if they have a master schedule that included times for their MTSS implementation and team meetings. I collected data over a period of one school year. This included a three month focused timeframe for most of the observations and in-person interviews. Tables 11, 12, 13 describe the participants and locations for tier 3 and WINN observations.

Table 11
West Bridge Elementary Tier 3/WINN Observations

Participant	Number of Participants	Number of Observations	Location
AIS specialists	5	8	AIS classroom
AIS TA	1	8	AIS classroom
Kindergarten Teacher	4	4	Classroom
Special Ed. Teacher	3	4	Classroom
First Grade	5	4	Classroom
Third Grade Teacher	5	4	Classroom
Fourth Grade Teacher	4	4	Classroom

Note: Data retrieved from West Bridge Elementary Tier 3/WINN observation data

Table 12
William Elementary Tier 3/WINN Observations

Participant	Number of Participants	Number of Observations	Location
AIS specialists	2	8	AIS classroom
AIS TA	1	8	AIS classroom
Special Ed. Teacher	3	5	Classroom
Second Grade Teacher	3	5	Classroom
Third Grade Teacher	5	5	Classroom
Fourth Grade Teacher	4	5	Classroom

Note: Data retrieved from William Elementary Tier 3/WINN observation data

Table 13
Perez Elementary Tier 3/WINN Observations

Participant	Number of Participants	Number of Observations	Location
AIS specialists	2	4	AIS classroom
AIS TA	1	4	AIS classroom
Special Ed. Teacher	1	4	Classroom
Kindergarten Teacher	4	4	Classroom

Note: Data retrieved from Perez Elementary Tier 3/WINN observation data

I observed approximately 40 tier 3 and WINN time sessions and examined what the classroom, special education and AIS teachers are working on during these scheduled blocks of time. I was able to chat with the teachers during my

observations and ask questions about what they were not only working on with students but also what MTSS implementation looks like each day in their classrooms. Some teachers wanted to share their thoughts on MTSS and discussed at great length their lack of guidance, training and coaching in relation to it.

Analysis

Ethnographic research uses an approach to the data collection that typically does not follow a plan that is set up at the beginning and the categories for interpreting what people say or do is not pre-determined or fixed (Genzuk, 2003). The interviewer needs to interpret the interviews as raw data and use analytical categories to help give meaning to the data. The interviewer needs to become familiar with the data by reading the transcripts, checking for accuracy, before coding can begin. Once the researcher has reviewed the transcripts and is familiar with the data, then the coding process can begin, and the researcher can begin to note the themes that emerge. The researcher can code line by line of the transcript using short phrases that becomes a code. The codes can then be placed in larger groups that make sense to be placed together and be referred to as the themes (Griffiee, 2005).

I knew that I had a lot of data to code and spent some time trying to figure out the best way to organize it all. I decided that the best way for me to analyze it would be to start with the organization of it. I did not want to hand code the data because I was worried I would missed codes with so many different data pieces that contained so many pages each. Therefore, I decided to put each data piece e.g. interviews, observations, and memos into a two by two table in Microsoft word. I

used one column on the left for the data and I used the column on the right to code it. This organization helped me to quickly visualize the codes and also made it possible for me to copy and paste them into a new document so I could alphabetize them and see how often codes repeated.

I used Glaser and Strauss' constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1965) for data analysis by sorting the codes into groups according to attributes. After I open coded the memos and transcripts I then used axial coding to look for connections between codes and create categories that connect the codes together. For example, when I began coding the data from William Elementary, I gave each line of data a code by using a shortened phrase to represent that line, see Appendix C, but did not find this analysis useful. The interviews and recorded team meetings were so long they generated so many individual codes and I felt overwhelmed by that process. Therefore, I examined all of the codes I created from William Elementary data and decided to create larger codes that related to MTSS and Implementation Science along with codes that were unique to the building, see Appendix D and wrote them on yellow sticky notes for my own referencing. I continued to put all of my data in two by two tables in word documents and used the codes found in Appendix D but when I began to search for larger themes I went back again through all of the data and color coded it using the highlighter function in word. For example, any data that pertained to progress monitoring was highlighted dark green. This color-coding made it extremely easy for me to see the data that pertained to the larger themes and locate them when writing my data analysis chapters.

I decided to use priori codes from readings but also from the data I already coded at William Elementary since open coding did not work for me. Further, I created priori codes and used a top down approach that focused on implementation science such as: organizational, leadership, data systems, competency but the codes I already created from coding line by line also lead me to create codes based on MTSS components such as: tiers, data collection, data analysis, universal screening. Further, there were also things the participants kept discussing a lot about that then generated codes as well such as: CKLA, scheduling, mistrust, lack of MTSS knowledge. After I coded all the data in one building, I began to look for patterns on how the codes related to each other. I decided that since there was no literature written describing what MTSS implementation looked like at the elementary level that I would use those themes to structure my data chapters to paint a picture of what MTSS implementation looked like in each school.

Trustworthiness

Qualitative researchers utilize member checking, thick description, and peer reviews to validate their findings (Creswell & Miller, 2010). The results found by the qualitative researcher should include the voices of the participants, a complex description and interpretation of the problem and the contribution to the literature (Fetters et al., 2013).

Creating a thorough qualitative research process involves an emphasis on rigorous methods. The researcher frames the study to evaluate the problem they are looking to examine and determine the best methods to utilize to help gain a better understanding of the problem they are looking to research. The researcher

needs to have specified data collection procedures, typically collecting multiple forms of data, and then provide a detailed description of the data that was collected by conducting multiple levels of data analysis. Qualitative researchers often check with participants to verify the data they are collecting is properly portraying the messages they want to convey about the problem the researcher is examining. Therefore, they will often give the transcripts they have to the participants to review to be sure the message is accurate. Genzuk (2003) discusses the importance of triangulating the data by cross validating the different kinds of data collected. I did meet with each principal after reviewing my findings and themes and asked if there was anything they wanted to add or did not think was a representation of their school. Additionally, I had to check back with AIS specialists in each building to be sure the data reflected the numbers accurately in each building. These participants agreed with the data collection and initial analysis.

Since qualitative research is studying social realities, it means that qualitative research ethics are more complex. Researchers have a continuous moral responsibility to navigate between their own positionalities, literature they have reviewed, and not allow that to influence their findings in a way that distorts them (Ryen, 2016). Moreover, the stories that come from the data collected have to be produced from the participants knowledge and information given, rather than being produced from the researcher's point of view. Qualitative research helps contribute to the literature by providing a fuller picture of the problem that is being studied but this is only achieved through rigorous data collection, continuous reflection by the

researcher and authentic data that is not distorted by the researcher's past experiences with the problem.

Qualitative researchers can spend a lot of time at the research site and can possibly lose sight of the fact that they need to present multiple perspectives within the problem they are studying. It is necessary for the researcher to remain objective, acknowledge their positionality, and be able to present the findings from multiple perspectives they have collected within their data. Additionally, the APA standards on ethics also discuss the need to report findings based on actual data and not to report false findings. Fetters et al. (2013) discusses that the results found by the qualitative researcher should include the voices of the participants, a complex description and interpretation of the problem and the contribution to the literature.

I collected multiple forms of data for this study, which included interviews from numerous participants, classroom observations, team meeting observations and site observations. After each interview or field observation, I wrote detailed memos and coded those as well. I spent hours coding all of the data and when themes began to emerge I did check back with some participants to verify pieces of data. For example, when I uncovered that nearly 40% of the total student population received reading interventions, I reached back out to the participants that provided that data to be sure that was accurate. Additionally, I spent my last interview with each principal giving them a brief overview of my initial findings for their building and asked if there were any other important pieces they wanted to share and/or if there was anything they believed inaccurate.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues can happen throughout the qualitative research process. It is necessary to gather the approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University to ensure that ethical issues are made aware and addressed in regards to the respects of the persons, justice and concern for the welfare of participants. The respects of the persons also include the data that is collected from the persons and how it will be kept private throughout the study. Justice refers to treating all the participants equally and fairly. Concern for the welfare means that the researcher has to provide evidence that they will not place the participants at risk.

It is necessary for researchers to get an informed consent page signed by each participant, which explains to the participant what the study is about and that they are a part of the problem being studied by the researcher. Qualitative researchers need to protect the identities of the participants and the location of the research. Some participants may not want to be anonymous, but most researchers will give pseudonyms to participants to keep their identity hidden. In this study, I will be using pseudonyms for all participants. Additionally, it is important that the researcher doesn't break the trust they have gained with the participants. Trust plays an integral role in the qualitative research process and needs to be maintained throughout the entire research study (Ryen, 2016).

I believe that my positionality was in check throughout the study because even though I had previous experiences with RTI and MTSS as a teacher/intern and extensive literature reviews, I made sure to gain a clear understanding of what the MTSS implementation looked like at each site through participants and

observations. Additionally, my positionality was not ignored throughout the study. For example, when I was observing in the buildings and noticed that students were pulled from core instruction to receive their interventions, I knew based on my previous teachings and readings that pull out instruction was a hindrance for students but did not talk about that to the participants at all. Moreover, I tried to gain a deeper understanding of how the MTSS framework was implemented in the three elementary buildings and the system the staff has in place to meet the needs of all their learners. Additionally, I used the implementation science framework to help guide my data interpretation and keep my positionality in check. I recognized that my experiences personally and professionally could not be ignored. Moreover, based on my professional experiences and the literature reviews I have done, I questioned things like what data they used, how marginalized students are impacted by the framework, and dug deeper into what happened when the MTSS framework is implemented real time. I recognized that being an insider in the district allowed me to have established connections with some participants but also created issues with participants thinking I knew what is happening even though I have not worked there in five years. Additionally, even though I did work in the district for an extensive amount of time, it's been almost five years since I last worked there and a lot of things have changed, which is why I was interested in examining their current MTSS framework implementation process.

After my data analysis, I wrestled immensely with how to present the findings to the district and the superintendent. I felt compelled to discuss the areas in which their MTSS model was not being implemented with fidelity and how I

believed the data indicated there was a tier 1 problem in the district. Yet, I did not want to make the principals, leaders and teachers feel too criticized and decided I would present my findings after my defense ended.

Chapter 4 West Bridge Elementary: “We find kids and say okay, God, they need more help now. So the ins come in but the outs don't seem to match.”

This data chapter is meant to give a detailed picture of what the MTSS implementation looked like at West Bridge Elementary. The data I collected at West Bridge Elementary focused heavily on the academic component of MTSS. West Bridge Elementary staff discussed the way in which they support students academically in both reading and math. The West Bridge Elementary staff used a universal screening tool to identify students at risk that is administered in September, January and again in June. The universal screening tool for reading and math is called AIMSweb. The entire AIS staff, which includes the specialists, AIS ta, and ITAs administer it. After the AIMSweb testing has been completed, the AIS staff identifies the students who scored below the twentieth percentile and then West Bridge has a data day where the AIS staff meets with each grade level to then have further discussions with teachers on which students they believe need intervention services. Once the student groupings are formed, the AIS staff will pull those students out of the general education classroom to receive those intervention services in another location in the building. Table 14 illustrates how AIS specialists and ITA/TAs provide interventions to tier 3 and tier 2 students.

Table 14
Description of AIS and ITA/TA Tier Groups

AIS Tier 3 Groups	AIS Tier 2 Groups	TA/ITA Tier 2 Groups
30 minute interventions 5 days a week 3 students per 1 AIS specialist Files kept on SchoolTool Letter sent home to family Academic progress tracked and reported to families	30 minute interventions 5 days a week 6 students per 1 AIS specialist Files kept on SchoolTool Letter sent home to the family Academic progress tracked and reported to families	30 minute interventions 5 days a week 6 students per 1 TA/ITA No files or goals kept Do not notify parents No progress tracked or reported

Note: Data retrieved from AIS specialists

Table 14 highlights how the AIS specialists notify families that their child received intervention support. Additionally, that the AIS specialists set a goal, track the progress of the student and report that progress to the student’s families. The ITAs and TA do not notify families that their child is pulled from the classroom to work with them. The ITAs and TA do not set goals, progress monitor students or report any data back to families. I questioned how the ITAs and TA knew if the intervention they used with the students worked, how they could alter their instruction without using any data and what instruction did these students miss when they received this instruction.

The Assistant Superintendent created a master schedule for West Bridge to follow that includes a WINN block and Tier 3 block. The AIS staff has been directed by him to only pull students for intervention services during these blocks in the schedule. Students are also pulled during these blocks in the schedule for additional services they may receive like occupational therapy (OT), physical therapy (PT), English Language Learners (ELL), resource, and students with disabilities work on

their IEP minutes mostly by the Special Education teacher pushing in during this time.

While in the buildings, I was able to attend data meetings, conduct some teacher interviews, visit classrooms, and observe WINN and Tier 3 time. While observing WINN time, the teachers explained the MTSS implementation in their building. At West Bridge Elementary, I talked with 15 classroom teachers, 2 special education teachers, and 2 AIS specialists during observations and visits. Additionally, I interviewed two AIS specialists and one classroom teacher for an hour each. I also met with the AIS specialists an additional 5 times after observations to get clarification on what I saw related to the MTSS implementation.

West Bridge Elementary is different than the other two buildings I observed in that it has been on a New York State improvement plan for Math and the highest level of students living in poverty within the district. The data I collected on this building highlights how the staff at West Bridge Elementary implements MTSS while being on the New York State improvement plan.

After reviewing, coding and analyzing the data I collected, it became evident that the teachers and principal focused a lot of their responses on the academic piece of MTSS. The principal stated that MTSS includes academic, behavioral and socio-emotional components but did not discuss the latter two during our first three conversations. I discussed this with the principal after most of my data collection in order to gather more data on the other two components, but it was clear this school's focus is on academic MTSS and only minimally on behavioral and social-emotional components. In the remainder of this chapter I discuss the Academic

MTSS implementation, followed by a brief description of the behavior/social-emotional implementation. I conclude the chapter with a presentation of equity issues that I found as part of MTSS implementation.

Academic MTSS Implementation

The academic component of MTSS was the main focus of my time spent with West Bridge Elementary. The participants discussed the new English Language Arts (ELA) program the district adopted which is called Core Knowledge Language Arts (CKLA) and discussed repeatedly how West Bridge was working on a New York State (NYS) Improvement plan focused on Math. When I coded the data, I used codes that were components of the academic piece of MTSS. I use those components to organize my findings here. They are: Scheduling, Data Systems, Team Meetings, and WINN/Tier 3 block. These subsection titles connected to not only the academic components of MTSS but also the way in which all three buildings are implementing MTSS within the district.

Scheduling

Scheduling is an important piece to the way in which West Bridge Elementary is implementing MTSS. The Assistant Superintendent shared that he determined the master schedule to show staff how to incorporate all the instructional blocks efficiently and also designate chunks of time for the academic component of MTSS. West Bridge has a What I need now (WINN) block for thirty minutes a day in each grade level where they work on math intervention support and a Tier 3 block for thirty minutes a day where they work on reading support.

The staff believes the schedule is difficult to adhere to and has encountered challenges with it.

The installation phase of Implementation Science is designed to install the implementation infrastructure: training, coaching, data systems, etc. by making necessary organizational changes to policies, procedures, changing schedules and providing supports needed to begin the work so staff feel confident in using the innovation (Blase et al., 2015). The Assistant Superintendent made a master schedule to incorporate academic intervention services for students but the staff lacked the training, coaching, data systems and supports needed in order to feel confident implementing MTSS. Therefore, many participants were frustrated when they encountered challenges within the schedule because they did not have clear guidance from the district.

The principal confirmed that they were given a master schedule by the Assistant Superintendent for elementary education and expected everyone to adhere to it. This is the first year that the district adopted a new ELA program called CKLA and it is something that each participant discussed in great detail with me. The schedule has blocked out time for CKLA, Math, WINN and Tier 3 time for each grade level. All participants believe the schedule is extremely challenging because they are finding it difficult to fit everything in the way the schedule indicates. WINN and Tier 3 blocks are used for students to receive additional support in Special Education, English Language Learners, Reading, or Math services. The students who are not pulled out for those supports remain in the classroom and work with their classroom teacher. The Assistant Superintendent added 2 additional AIS teachers

and 2 instructional teaching assistants to help meet the needs of all students during their WINN and Tier 3 blocks because of a formula the Assistant Superintendent created to determine the staffing needs in each building and they are there all day. The Principal explained the staffing for the academic component of MTSS as follows, “So, staffing wise, we have 5 AIS providers. We have an AIS teaching assistant, and we have 2 instructional TAs so that's our fleet, if you will, of interventionists.”

The AIS providers only work with students that are identified as Tier 3 for ELA and are expected by the Assistant Superintendent to keep those group sizes to three students per teacher ratio. The AIS teaching assistant works with students identified in Tier 3 but were not determined by the AIS department as needing as high of academic support intervention so they work with a group size of 6. The instructional teaching assistants (ITAs) work with the additional students that were identified at risk and identify those students as tier 2 as well so they can work in a group size of 6 students per teaching assistant.

Most of the teacher participants at West Bridge Elementary believe that because the CKLA program is new that the district has lowered their expectations for the MTSS implementation this current school year and that the district does not have specific guidelines as to how MTSS should look like in their classrooms. Implementation Science indicates that the leadership team needs to provide staff with a clear description of an EBP, clear program components that define the program, operational definitions of program components and practical fidelity assessment (NIRN, 2017). Even though the Assistant Superintendent and principal stated they provided their staff with an MTSS guidance document, a lot of the staff

do not know what the specific expectations are during WINN and Tier 3 blocks in the schedule. Moreover, many participants were unclear about what exactly they should be doing with students during these blocks in the schedule. Further, communication protocols, guidance documents, and data routines articulated for monitoring student outcomes are all elements that need to happen during the installation phase (Blase et al., 2015) but the staff at West Bridge do not have clear communication protocols, guidance documents or data routines articulated. In turn, the AIS staff wanted to follow the NYS improvement plan while the Assistant Superintendent wanted the AIS staff to focus more on additional reading support services.

The AIS staff had heated discussions with the Assistant Superintendent over what the expectations for them should be during WINN and Tier 3 blocks. Since, the Assistant Superintendent provided the building with 2 additional AIS staff and 2 ITAs, he believes the AIS staff should be servicing more students for reading services and less students for math services. The AIS staff, principal, general education and special education teachers believe that they needed to focus more heavily on their math intervention support because West Bridge being on the NYS improvement plan for math. One AIS specialist discussed this issue:

Okay, he's never going to be ok with what we are doing now. He wants more focus on ELA. Let's just say he wants like 75 of the kids getting reading, and then only a little bit getting math. All the other elementary buildings aren't doing hardly any math at all. We're doing a heavier amount of math because we had it designed that way because of the State improvement plan. So this is how he wants our schedule. He said if there are 6 of us available he wants 4 of us doing Reading and 2 of us doing Math at the same time. Those kids, then I said to him, are no longer eligible for reading. So we have kids that are doubled and need both math and reading support. And I said, I am not going to take a double student who needs both reading and math. He goes 'Well,

then, you pick kids that are only math'.. And this is where we had an issue because how can we not service students who need math because they need reading too? So we went to the superintendent and the teacher union president who basically told him he needs to let us do what we are doing for this year but he keeps telling us we need to service more students for ELA.....I was at an AIS meeting at the district office and after it ended I went to the bathroom and he waited for me to come out and started telling me again how we need to shift now from servicing so many math students to servicing more reading students.

A Reading Specialist discussed the schedule:

We got the schedule again, gave us this set master schedule, with all of our times built in, and when you looked at our schedule, if there was a child who should receive both reading and math, and they were tier 3 reading they would not get math, because we had to pull them in tier 2 during WINN time, and then we would pull them for tier 3 during math. So we said, absolutely unacceptable. We went to the Superintendent, the union president and I mean it got it got up the point of the board of education. My husband's on the board of education in the district, and I said, when they start talking about me in executive session, understand that I will- I'm gonna fight for these kids because they come in here with so little knowledge and need both reading and math.

The AIS specialists are extremely frustrated that the Assistant Superintendent wants them to support more students with reading services and fewer students with math services even though West Bridge Elementary is on a NYS improvement plan for math. Additionally, they were outraged that the Assistant Superintendent suggested they only provide math intervention services to students who do not qualify or need reading intervention services to then be able to adhere to the schedule and the blocks of times designated for the support services. The AIS specialists could not understand why they would be given that directive knowing then that the students who had the highest need for math intervention support would not get it if they also needed reading support. Further, even though the Assistant Superintendent has been given the directive from the Superintendent and

union president to stop insisting the AIS specialists make these changes, he continues to press them on it every chance he sees them.

During the exploration phase the implementation team is formed; their goal is to use data to examine the need of students prior to discussing possible solutions or EBPs (Blase et al., 2015). None of the participants discussed anything about a district implementation team and the participants are frustrated that the Assistant Superintendent continued to focus more heavily on intervention services related to reading but not math. Since the staff at West Bridge believed they had to adhere to the NYS improvement plan put in place related to Math, there is a disconnect between the district focus and the NYS focus for the staff at West Bridge and I believe that if the district had spent more time during the exploration and installation phases, then these issues would have been addressed prior to the implementation phase. Further, Fixsen et al., (2015) discussed how organizations should convene groups of stakeholders to help the organization determine the needs of the students and innovation best to address their needs and I am questioning which stakeholders were involved at the exploration stage. The Assistant Superintendent created the schedule based on logistics, which in turn created equity issues within the schedule by not providing students who needed intervention support services based on scheduling concerns and not student's needs.

While I understand the frustration the AIS specialists had, I was questioning why the Assistant Superintendent wanted them to pick up additional students for reading support. I wanted to determine what their current caseloads were and see

if that would shed light as to why the Assistant Superintendent was being so insistent on the AIS staff picking up additional students for reading support and less for math support. I wondered if they were providing more math support to students than reading support. Luckily, the AIS specialist provided me with the caseloads for the AIS staff and ITAs for both reading and math.

Tables 15 and 16 indicate the caseload of both the AIS and ITA staff. It is important to note that the ITA staff pushes into general education classrooms during their designated time to support students during math and do not have an official list or number of students they work with during that time. The tables show that combined between the AIS and ITA staff there are servicing 170 students out of 445 total populations of students in the building. Therefore, they are servicing 38% of the total student population for reading services and it is important to note that the students they are servicing are considered the highest risk or tier 3. This means that at West Bridge Elementary 38% of the students have been identified and provided the highest tier intervention for reading. MTSS framework suggests that Tier 3 interventions serve 5 percent of students. Also, the teachers at West Bridge Elementary shared they are not servicing an additional 40 students who qualify for tier 3 because of the group sizing and staffing. The AIS staff said the Assistant Superintendent gave the directive that tier 3 groups should be no larger than 3 students per 1 AIS specialist. Since they only have 5 AIS specialists, they believe they can only service 15 students in tier 3 during the designated block of time in the schedule. If they identify more than 15 students for tier 3, then those students are put in groups to work with the AIS TA and the ITAs. This means that the teachers at

West Bridge Elementary have identified 47 percent of their student population in need of tier 3 reading services.

Table 15

West Bridge AIS staff caseload

Grade Level	Subject	Number of students in AIS	Total number of students
Kindergarten	ELA	23	89
First	ELA	24	83
First	Math	15	83
Second	ELA	34	95
Second	Math	27	95
Third	ELA	18	90
Third	Math	29	90
Fourth	ELA	32	88
Fourth	Math	27	88

Note. Data retrieved from AIS specialists

Table 16

West Bridge ITA/TA staff caseload

Grade Level	Subject	Number of students in AIS	Total number of students
Kindergarten	ELA	0	89
First	ELA	10	83
Second	ELA	11	95
Third	ELA	7	90
Fourth	ELA	11	88

Note. Data retrieved from AIS specialists

It is more challenging to identify how many students are being given math intervention support because the ITAs and AIS TA pushes into the general education classrooms during tier 3 to provide students with support but they do not keep track of which students they work with. The AIS specialists did report the students they provide additional math support to which is a total of 98 students out of the 445 total student population. Therefore, the AIS specialists are providing math support to 22% of the total student population. They consider their groups to be tier 2 so they can work with groups of 6 per AIS specialist. The recommended MTSS tier 2 percentage of student intervention is 15 percent. While they are servicing over the recommended percentage for tier 2 services in math, it is concerning that the Assistant Superintendent wants the AIS staff to provide more reading support services to students when they are currently providing support to 38% of the student population.

The tension between the AIS staff and Assistant Superintendent is centered on the number of students that are being serviced by the AIS specialists for ELA and math. The Assistant Superintendent wants the AIS staff to increase their caseload for reading services even though they are currently servicing 38 percent of the total student population. Another way to examine the data is by analyzing the academic pyramid from MTSS and the recommended total percentage of students that should receive any additional intervention services is 20 percent of the total student population. Therefore, the AIS specialists are already servicing nearly double that recommended percentage and being pushed to service more. Interestingly, they are servicing 22 percent of students for math, which is 2 percent higher than the MTSS recommended 20 percent.

The organization drivers for implementation science include decision support data system, facilitative administrators and system integration. The AIS specialists described their data day and how they use both the universal screener and teacher input to determine their student academic intervention support needs but none of the participants discussed any data support system in place at West Bridge. Developing a school wide intervention team that can function as the support system for instructional problem solving using data driven decision-making is necessary when implementing MTSS. Moreover, the AIS specialists viewed these two data points and determined which students needed additional interventional support but they did not discuss any other implications of these data points. They followed a data system formula that if a student was below the 20th percentile on the AIMSweb universal screener and their teacher believed they needed additional

reading support then that means the way to best support that student was to provide pulled out reading services. Yet, if they dissected the data differently and hypothetically determined that 80% of the first graders identified for reading intervention services lacked phonological skills, then possibly their efforts may be better used by working with first grade teachers on how to better support their students in that identified area.

After learning about their intervention caseloads and staffing, I sought to understand how it was determined which students receive AIS services for additional support. The teachers and principal explained how students were identified for AIS services and the process they use when determining tiers for the students. They indicated what data they collect and how they use it to form their groups.

Data System

The principal explained that they determine the needs of students based on the AIMSweb benchmark given three times of year in October, January and June.

The principal described:

We definitely use AIMS web for whatever it's good, and whatever it's bad points are, we use it so there is a piece of it, but we also do some classroom stuff, some of the classroom assessments and things like that. So I don't know if we're further ahead or not, but we've been doing it for a little bit. So you know, in terms of using assessment data, not just AIMS web stuff is a way to help group our students.

Once they administer AIMSweb testing for both ELA and Math, the AIS staff reviewed the data to determine which students they believed need to be supported by the AIS staff and the ITAs. Afterwards, the AIS staff met with each grade level to discuss the students they believe need their support. The principal called this their

“data day” where they discuss the results of the AIMSweb data. The principal indicated that additional data discussions were supposed to happen around unit tests during the teacher’s professional learning community meetings. Since CKLA was so new, the principals shared that it was difficult for teachers to know what to do with the CKLA data being collected. The principal also indicated that the teachers were much more familiar with the math curriculum. Since the building is on the NYS improvement plan for math, the data meetings that I attended were focused on math discussions. Since the principal indicated that the data systems being used were centered on AIMSweb benchmarks being administered three times a year and unit assessments given by teachers, it made me question how teachers were using data to not only inform their instruction but also how they were using it to support students they identified in need of intervention support. Therefore, I observed the team meetings that take place in the building to gain a deeper understanding of what happens and how teachers discuss data and use it to inform their teaching.

Team meetings

West Bridge Elementary has team meetings each week for every grade level that is sixty minutes in length and each grade level has a designated day of the week to meet. Therefore, each day one grade level meets for sixty minutes with the expectation that the grade level team is discussing data about their students. The team meetings typically have the grade level team in attendance, along with AIS specialists and the principal. The team meetings that I attended were centered on the district unit math benchmark that was given in February.

The district has one math instructional coach for grades K-6. The math instructional coach attended the data meetings I observed. He helped the teachers understand the benchmark data that they gave to their students. The math coach shared that since he is the only coach for the district, it takes time for him to circulate to every grade level in every building to talk about the benchmark data. During the meetings I observed in April he led a discussion of the second benchmark data. Those data were collected in January and the teams were discussing them for the first time in April. Data for MTSS is intended to be used to adjust groupings and tier intervention often, which requires both regular collection of data and immediate discussion of the data to target interventions and avoid static groups. Staff members need to have a system for collecting, analyzing, and using data for decision making that includes measures of fidelity of the EBP in relation to implementation, capacity and outcome data (National Implementation Research Network, 2017). West Bridge is collecting data 3 times a year and waited months to discuss it.

One data meeting I observed consisted of the third grade general education and special education teachers, math instructional coach, principal, and three AIS specialists. During this data meeting the instructional team analyzed which standards the fourth grade students struggled with, and the teachers discussed why their students might have struggled with these math standards. The teachers discussed their students struggled with reading the questions and misinterpreting what the question was asking. At this meeting, the math coach also told the teachers to follow the math curriculum program and read the question through three times.

He showed them on the smartboard where to find the steps on what to do each time the question was reread.

One teacher wanted to talk about a fraction question and began asking how she could teach students with visual impairments how to put fractions on a number line. The other teachers offered suggestions, "I use a whiteboard and fraction cards." Another said "[I] use sentence strips." The instructional coach offered many strategies to help. He showed them how to access different computer games/programs to help them put them on the number line easier. He suggested different websites with various resources like worksheets and games to play that could help as well. Interestingly, when one teacher offered their advice and suggestions on what they did with a student, the teacher who needed help said that would not work with students x and y. The teachers all knew which students she was referring to when she said that. It was because of conversations like this that made me believe the teachers were having more regular discussions about their students with their grade level team because they knew each other's students by name. It seemed like they also had an understanding of what challenges other teacher's students had because they have discussed students in the past.

Another teacher asked the instructional coach how to score a question that had multiple steps. The instructional coach showed them how it should be scored and then talked about how scoring would look differently next year because over the summer they were revamping the tests. The instructional coach said that this particular module had the lessons paced out of order. The lesson that was intended to be taught first in the sequence of lessons was placed at the end of the module. If

teachers did not know the first lesson to start the module was placed at the end of the module and just taught the unit with the first lesson they saw in the module then their students would not have gotten the necessary information to perform well on this assessment. All the teachers looked puzzled and said they did not know that.

This data piece highlighted that these staff members at West Bridge were trying to make sense of the data they collected from their students but are finding out that the data collected is quite possibly skewed since the lessons in the module were out of order and they possibly did not teach the lessons sequentially. I believe this is important for several reasons: how often are the teachers at West Bridge teaching lessons and missing important pieces within the scope and sequence? How proficient are the teachers at West Bridge with the curriculum they are teaching since none of them knew that something was missing in the beginning of the unit that according to the math coach would have completely skewed the student's results? If some teachers at West Bridge are not proficient with the curriculum, but believed they followed the necessary scope and sequence and then analyzed their student data to what would their conclusions be about that data?

One teacher asked the instructional coach how to teach spiraling activities and if they should be done independently or as a whole group. The coach told him that if the students needed things read to them then to do that as a whole group and then give them a few minutes to try the problem and circle back whole group to go over it. The teachers seemed extremely comfortable with the instructional coach and freely shared what their struggles were when working with their students and asked for advice. The teachers also seemed comfortable with their grade level to

have open discussions about what they were seeing with their students and offering each other help. I think that these open discussions are important to create a space of learning for teachers and to help build teacher's capacity. I believe that teachers, just like students, need to feel comfortable to share failures without fear of what may come next.

After the meeting ended, I chatted with the instructional coach. I asked him how often he ran data meetings like this one and he said only three times a year in each elementary building and even then it was difficult covering all the buildings and getting to the grade levels in a timely manner after the test had been given. He said there is only one math instructional coach in the district and that he found it extremely challenging connecting with all the buildings.

Since the math coach indicated that it was challenging to meet with all of the teachers in the district in a timeframe he thought would be sufficient to provide teachers with meaningful feedback about their student's performance on unit tests, I asked him what spiraling meant since he had mentioned it to the teachers during the meeting. He said in an ideal situation, the teacher would give the unit assessment, look at the unit assessment data and then spiral back to the information that the students were not understanding but he said the new math director told grade levels they could make the tests shorter and they then cut out all the spiraling questions in the benchmark tests and now he can not determine what the students mastered or didn't because they were cut out. I asked him when the spiraling lessons take place and he said usually during WINN time.

Another data meeting I observed and the math coach attended did not go as smoothly. The teachers were not analyzing the data in the same way as the previous meeting. The math coach was discussing second graders performance and examining questions related to subtracting and adding. The teachers did not have their student tests in front of them and could not recall why some did so poorly with certain questions. I questioned how this math data meeting was disseminating data collected if the data collected was left in the teacher's classrooms. The math coach gave the teachers additional strategies to use with their students to help build their addition and subtraction skills but left after fifteen minutes most likely because the teacher's did not have their student data to discuss. The next item on their agenda was field trips and they discussed at length which field trip venue they should pick and why. Next on their agenda was the report card and examining the ELA portion of it since it did not currently align with the CKLA program that the district adopted. The teacher who was a representative for the report card committee explained which changes they were contemplating making and asked for feedback from the rest of the teachers. Lastly, on their agenda were kid talks. A teacher asked if any one had any kid talks to address and they all said no and ended the meeting. This data piece is important because it depicts how a typical data meeting could look like for the staff at West Bridge. MTSS and implementation science indicate that data systems need to be in place to regularly inform teacher's instruction and this data piece provides a closer look at how some staff at West Bridge are not bringing data to discuss at data dissemination meetings. Therefore, if it is determined that their students are not proficient in an area knowing they are not having continuous data

dissemination or data discussions about their students or content they are teaching, then how can anyone determine what the root causes of the student's lack of performance and rule out gaps in content taught as one of them.

After this meeting, I chatted with the math coach again about the data being collected and analyzed. I asked the math coach where the benchmark tests came from and he said it was created by a committee and they tweaked them. He said they are given three times a year and put into their math curriculum program online that then indicates if a student is underperforming or identified as at risk. He said they determined what the cut scores would be to identify those students but when I asked him if those are what is used to determine the AIS math students he said he had no idea because he doesn't work with AIS staff. I then asked the AIS specialists how they determine which students are identified in need of additional math support and they said they look at AIMSweb testing and talk with their classroom teachers.

The data meetings I attended were interesting because they were centered on the math benchmark that was administered in February and because the grade level team waited for the district math coach to review this particular data, they reviewed it in April and it was not clear what they would do with the data that they collected and reviewed. Additionally, it was concerning to hear that the unit benchmark did not have the lessons in sequential order and if the teachers did not know that prior, then the students would not have received the information they needed to be successful on the benchmark. Further, the math coach indicated that the Assistant Superintendent for Math told teachers to shorten the length of the

benchmark test and teachers eliminated the spiraling pieces of the math benchmark which were the pieces needed to highlight which standards the students struggled with. Therefore, not only are the team meetings I observed discussing data that was two months old but the unit benchmarks were altered and made it difficult for the teachers and district coach to know which standards needed to be retaught.

Next, I began to examine the data collection and discussions that happen centered on ELA. While I did not see any data team meetings that were ELA focused, I did ask the principal, AIS specialists and teachers about the data used to determine student's reading services and how often data discussions happen throughout the school year. I gathered a lot of data centered on the tier identification process that takes place at West Bridge Elementary.

Tier Identification

The tier identification process begins with the AIMSweb benchmark for both math and ELA, which is administered three times a year by the AIS specialists in September, January and June. After the AIS specialists identify the students who score below the twentieth percentile on the benchmark, they then have a data day with teachers to discuss which students they believe need to receive intervention support with the AIS staff. Once the student groupings are formed, they typically are not altered again until the next AIMSweb benchmark. Since the third AIMSweb benchmark is administered in June, student groupings happen in September and January.

The principal and teachers told me that AIMSweb is used as the universal screening tool for both math and ELA and I asked the reading specialists if they use

any other data points when determining AIS student eligibility. One AIS specialist responded:

Yeah, we always use at least one other data point besides AIMS web. So what we do is, we test them. Really great reading program has all these different screeners, so they tell us where they are. So then I can look and exactly say, okay, this child doesn't know how to do this or is struggling with whatever. And then we decide based on that but typically all of our kids are in the red, or a lot of really low kids are identified. So then we take the bottom and go up and to the 20th percentile on AIMSweb. Some kids a teacher may say to us. Oh, they scored in the red, and we never have had them before in AIS, and they're like no, that child is fine, so we'll test them with the really great reading screener and just make sure that they're ok and that is like a phonics type screener. And if they're okay, we don't take them. You know, there are outliers and having had them since kindergarten, we pretty much know, except for new people that come in if they need AIS support. We only service students in AIS that are considered Tier 3 in ELA and students considered tier 2 for math.

I wanted to investigate how West Bridge determined a tier 2 or tier 3 student and the AIS specialists indicated that the AIS staff does not service Tier 2 students in ELA and the classroom teachers are supposed to give students in need of tier 2 instruction additional support. The classroom teachers that I talked to said that the CKLA program is whole group direct instruction and does not allot for small group reading support. Therefore, some do give small group reading support to their students during their WINN and Tier 3 block times but they do not keep a list of students who are identified as Tier 2. One classroom teacher I interviewed said she keeps detailed records of where all of her students are performing and if she has a student who she believes is not making adequate progress then she will begin collecting additional data on that student and possibly take that student to the student support team in the building for additional support.

Tier identification seems complicated and challenging to follow, as it is subjective and not explicitly tracked by staff. As discussed previously, three times a year, the AIS specialists use AIMSweb to identify the students who they think need reading services. They then meet with the classroom teachers during their data team day to determine which students out of the ones identified under the 20th percentile from AIMSweb need AIS services. The AIS specialist stated:

We meet with the teachers, and we talk with them, and they tell us. They'll say this-'these are the ones that need it over the others.' If they're reading a lot of words per minute and their reading fluency is ok but they fall down on something else like. Well, they know how to read. But if it's something else then we really try to like pick apart the data and say, this is what we're seeing. So if their Heggerty is low they'll say, 'No, this one needs it way more than the other child'. So we really and you know that being a teacher, I can go to you and say, okay, this is who I'm seeing we picked apart all of this and the teacher then says which child needs it more and we trust the professional.

After the teachers rule out some students, the AIS staff then will test the remaining students identified using the really great reading screener¹ and determine which students from those results need Tier 3 AIS reading support. The students who they could not service because they only allow three students to one teacher ratio and do not have the AIS staff to keep that ratio and service all the identified at risk, then go to the ITAs to be serviced but are called Tier 2 students because they are then with teaching assistants who do not have training in reading and can have group sizes larger than three students. The AIS specialist explained it this way:

If I say to you, come to you and say, 'Michelle, I have an opening but you know you say you have two students that need reading support then one might come to us, but the other one will go to ITAs. If I'm deciding between a child, one will come to us, and one will go to ITAs but that's not reflected

anywhere. They're counted nowhere. There's no progress report, no progress monitoring, there's no accountability for any of the ITA work. Nothing.

Therefore, students who work with ITAs are working with teaching assistants who have not been given proper training on how to intervene with students who are struggling with reading and math. The teaching assistants are not progress monitoring the students they are working with and therefore student groupings are stagnant. Further, the fact that students are missing instruction, being pulled out into another classroom, to receive intervention services from teaching assistants with little training on how to intervene with struggling students is what I believe a larger part of why so many students are being identified at risk at West Bridge Elementary.

The AIS specialists said they have to keep their group sizes at a maximum of three students per group because they are servicing tier 3 students. Any other students that may have been identified on the universal screening measure as at risk work with either their classroom teacher or the ITAs. Any students who are not identified as tier 3 do not have any records kept that they either work with an ITA or a classroom teacher. Also, there are not lists kept anywhere of which students are identified as tier 2. When I asked the teachers if they knew whom their tier 2 students were they all said no. The AIS specialist explained to me:

I can count 3 under the AIS teaching assistant. So then I asked the instructional coach if we could have the ITAs take a student so they have a big group of them. So they're Tier 2 getting this program, but 3 of them are counted with the AIS teaching assistant and then the rest for tier 2. So they're not technically on the books, but they're getting the intervention. Well, we don't really have a lot of tier 2 reading students it's mostly tier 3.... It's kind of I will say, fuzzy.

The fact that the AIS specialists think that the tier identification and interventions given are fuzzy speaks volumes as to West Bridge tier identification process and matched appropriate interventions with students. West Bridge staff knew that their tier identification, intervention matching, and student groupings are fuzzy. Additionally, they service students with teaching assistants that have not been given any formal training and do not progress monitor the students they are working with so I believe these are all contributing variables as to why West Bridge has such a high number of students identified in need of support services.

The AIS specialist said the ELA instructional coach and the assistant superintendent have addressed them for not servicing tier 2 students for reading services but that they cannot because they have to focus on math in addition to the reading services because of the NYS improvement plan. After I spoke with the classroom teachers, special education teachers, principal and AIS specialists on whether students with disabilities were included when identifying students that are in need of additional reading or math support and it was determined that the AIS staff only services one student with disabilities at West Bridge Elementary. A special education teacher said that her students do not get any reading or math support from AIS because they are receiving multiple other related services and they need to get their special education minutes in during the time that AIS is pulling other students out for support. I wanted to know what she works on at that time with her students and she said she does have her reading degree and has been given the same program the AIS specialists use so she can use that with them. An

AIS specialist responded, “They work with the Ctd teacher. We see some Ctd kids so I do know this legally we are supposed to provide weekly support and we do here”. I knew the special education teachers said their students were not being serviced because of having multiple services, I pushed the AIS specialist on it more and here is how they explained it further:

There's the caveat because if you are getting OT, PT, Speech and Resource I mean it's just impossible to schedule, and there's the caveat. But at the same time the Ctd teachers now have the exact same program that they're supposed to be using that we are using here in AIS. The training was garbage for the program. But okay, that being said, you could walk in right now and teach a lesson and not need training. It is literally that spelled out for you.

Therefore, even though the AIS specialists initially said they do service students with disabilities, it was revealed that they do not provide AIS support to students who receive additional services because it is impossible to work that into the schedule. I was curious about how many students with disabilities there were in the building and I was given the numbers that the AIS specialists had on file. They reported the building has 48 students identified as students with disabilities. The AIS staff said they do service one of those students. Their Special Education teacher supports the rest of the students with disabilities during their time. While the participants explained that students with disabilities cannot be serviced by AIS specialists due to scheduling conflicts between other supports that students with disabilities received and the AIS schedules, I questioned then why were these factors not considered when the master schedule was created. This data piece exemplified how students with disabilities fit into the academic component of the MTSS implementation at West Bridge and are not given academic support by AIS specialists if they received too many additional support services.

WINN and Tier 3 time have been put into the schedule to indicate when students should receive their support services. I observed over 40 tier 3 and WINN time sessions and examined what the classroom, special education and AIS teachers are working on during these scheduled blocks of time. I was able to chat with the teachers during my observations and ask questions about what they were not only working on with students but also what MTSS implementation looks like each day in their classrooms.

WINN/Tier 3 block

When the Tier 3 groups for Reading and Tier 2 groups for math are formed in each grade level, the AIS and ITAs begin to service students five times a week for thirty- minute sessions. The schedule they were given indicates when they should administer their services and the AIS services are all pull out. The ITAs pull out for reading support during the Tier 3 time but push in to classrooms for math support. The AIS teachers will pull out students for reading support during WINN blocks and pull out students for math support during Tier 3 blocks with the exception of fourth grade and Kindergarten. They push in for fourth grade math support and they do not provide math support to Kindergarten students.

When I observed the AIS teachers during each grade level's reading support blocks, Tier 3, they were separated into two classrooms. The AIS specialists explained:

The tier 3 students receive AIS reading services 5 days a week with AIS and we're typically in groups of 9, because there's 3 of us usually in a room, because we need the smartboard for this program....So usually it's 3 teachers for 9 children like, I said, we only have one smartboard so we have 9 at the one table.. We kind of do the lesson whole group, but sometimes we can break a little bit, and what happens is we usually rotate the teaching a lot, so

like I might sit in between 2 kids and another AIS teacher might be teaching, and then see we position ourselves with the students who have problems with behavior, so we help as we go

One AIS classroom has a smartboard with a larger conference table in front of it. The smartboard and the table are in half of the room. There are 12 seats around the table. There is a separate student desk behind the conference table, facing the smartboard with another chair at it. The space feels extremely cramped as they are using a small portion of the entire room and have large pieces of furniture in it. When I observed the WINN blocks of AIS giving reading support to students, there were at times 9-13 students in the space with three teachers. There would be one teacher at the smartboard talking and the other two would be sitting in between some students but all of them would be around the table. In some instances, there would be one student at the student desk behind the conference table and the AIS teacher would circulate to the student periodically. The AIS teachers would be giving a lesson and the students had books in their hands and expected to follow along with the AIS teacher who was teaching the lesson. If a student were off task, then an AIS teacher who wasn't teaching the whole group would go to them and redirect them quietly. This particular teaching setting was interesting because the AIS specialists discussed how they couldn't service all the students that are identified as at risk by the universal screening measure because they had to keep their group sizes to a total of three students per AIS specialist. Yet, since they are using a reading intervention program that requires them to use a smartboard and they only have access to two they are then forced to teach all of their students in a whole group setting. Therefore, it is not the 1:3 ratio that they

said they adhere to and the group size is larger than what it would be if the general education teacher were working with a small group of students. When I observed general education classrooms, the general education teachers were working with groups of 4-7 students.

The other AIS classroom is located across the hall from the main AIS classroom. In this classroom, they have smartboard, and individual student desks facing it. The desks are all separated. When I observed these lessons during the WINN blocks, there was one AIS specialist teaching at the smartboard and one AIS specialist circulating between students. Again, they were essentially teaching 6-9 students in a whole group and working in the same way that the other AIS specialists were in the other classroom. While they were giving their lessons during WINN time, I went into every grade level to see what was happening in each classroom.

Kindergarten had only 5-6 students in their classroom during their WINN time. The rest of the students were receiving support services and the Kindergarten teachers were working with the remaining students in a small group. Some teachers work with them on the rug, while others were working at a table. They were focusing on phonics and reading books. First grade had some students working on chrome books, while others were working on finishing writing, and the teacher had a group of students at a table to work on skills. Second grade had one classroom that had the entire class on chromebooks, with headphones, and it was silent in the room. The teacher was at their desk working on something. The students were on amplify, which is an extension of the CKLA program and designed for the students to

be on fifteen minutes each week. The students in this classroom were on their chromebooks for the entire thirty minutes of WINN time. Another second grade classroom, had a classroom teacher working on the rug with a group of 6 students in a circle and reading a story. The teacher was having the students read round robin style and alternate reading out loud one at a time. The other students were working on chromebooks and the special education teacher had their students with disabilities that were assigned to them at a table and was working on phonics skills. In third grade, teachers had students on chromebooks some students working on writing skills and others completing activities they didn't finish while the teacher was working with a group of students either on the rug or at a table. In fourth grade, students were on chromebooks, while some were finishing work and the some of the teachers had groups of students they were working with but some teachers were on their own computer working. The Special Education teachers assigned to each grade level had their designated students with disabilities working with them at a table and the work they were working on varied but a lot was focused on phonics lessons. With the exception of Kindergarten, each class had 5-9 students being pulled during their designated WINN time, which in some cases would leave the teachers with 8-12 students in the classroom. I observed similar things during the Tier 3 block that is designated for additional Math support.

Kindergarten does not receive additional support in Math. First grade teachers had students on chromebooks working on xtramath or another computer program. Some teachers were working with their tier 3 reading students and conducting guiding reading groups because they do not have another time in the

schedule to fit that in, and Special Education teachers had students at a table working on math facts. In second grade, students were working on review practice for their upcoming math test while other students were on their chromebooks. One second grade classroom had a teacher working with 9 students at a table on math review, while the Special Education teacher had students with disabilities working on phonics skills even though it was a designated math time. Third grade had some teachers working with students as a whole group and reviewing time with them while an ITA circulated the room, other classrooms had students being divided into groups to work with different adults on worksheets, and another classroom does smaller group instruction using the math homework book to review concepts with students on the rug. Fourth grade had some classrooms with students working in pairs and working on a math review book, while the teacher was working with 2 students at her desk and other fourth grade classrooms had students on chrome books the entire time.

Each class has anywhere between 5-9 students being pulled out during Tier 3/Math time. Not all students being pulled out during this time are receiving AIS support as some students are going to Speech, OT or PT. Therefore, the general education teachers were able to work with students in smaller group sizes than the AIS staff. The AIS staff was working in larger groups of 11-13 per two or three AIS specialists. Additionally, since the directive from the district office has not been clear, it varied significantly what the general education teachers were working on with the students that remained in the general education classroom.

After I witnessed how many students were being pulled out during these blocks in the schedule and what the interventions looked like that was being administered to the students being pulled out, I wanted to understand what the tier fluidity looked like at West Bridge Elementary. Since I knew that the data discussions lagged after data collection and the groupings were formed in September and January, I wondered if any changes were made to the groupings of students after January.

Tier Fluidity

The AIS specialist shared with me that groups are formed after the universal screening data is collected and analyzed and they do not use any of the unit assessments to alter the tier designation of students. The AIS explained the shifting between tiers for math and ELA:

The tier fluidity is better in math. Let's say a kid has tier 2 support, we don't have tier 3 for math, but we can test them out easier, and they go back to the classroom at tier one. We may see them again after we test again on AIMSweb so they may come back but we do have a little fluidity with math because there are other supports with the way we do the WINN and the way we work it when they go back to the classroom. But with reading nobody every really gets out. I don't know of anybody who has gotten out this year. They're not really leaving unless they go the special ed route or we can bump them up. If we have the ability like in that first grade, we take those 6 and push them up to the AIS higher group. If we have that ability to get somebody up, there are a couple of kids that were doing really well. So we move them into that group but even though they move groups in AIS they are still considered tier 3.

The principal explained the tier shifting in this way:

That's the regrouping piece I said that the remixing of the of the kids should happen more.....it should be more fluid and happen more often but again, because the problem is ultimately the time piece. So once we see a pattern emerge with kids that we'll talk about. Okay, maybe we need to switch them into this different group, or move them out of that group and move them from a tier 3 to a tier 2 type of a thing. It's not as fluid as it should be if that

makes sense... I think that's one of the things that we need to get better at and do more and I don't know how we do it strategically in the sense of the time that it takes to do it. That's our biggest struggle is, how do we do regroup kids efficiently?.....So we don't have kids that are lifers in tier 3. You know your life is in tier 3. You know, because it is happening in theory but it's not supposed to be that way. You have students come in and you want to move them out. We struggle with the ins and the outs of that. We always try to add more kids in. We find kids and say okay, God, they need more help now. So the ins come in but the outs don't seem to match.

It is clear that West Bridge is not shifting student groupings in reading. In fact, students identified in tier 3 are either staying in tier 3 or moving out to get a special education label. Therefore, I question why are these students being pulled out every day for thirty minutes for reading intervention services if they are not ever being released? MTSS is intended to be a preventative support system for students and not cause students to fall further behind (Castillo et al., 2022; Edirmanasinghe et al., 2022) Some of the staff at West Bridge Elementary believes that because the students are entering Kindergarten so far behind they will never catch up to grade level expectations. This deficit thinking has created an intervention system that tier 3 students are not being released from unless they receive a special education label and then at West Bridge only work with the special education teacher for all academic intervention services.

The AIS specialists are progress monitoring their Tier 3 reading students weekly using AIMSweb probes and while they may be seeing growth with the students, it is not enough growth for the students to move from Tier 3 to Tier 2. The principal acknowledges that the staff needs to get better at regrouping students so that students do not remain in Tier 3 for life but essentially that is what currently is happening to a large number of reading students being serviced in AIS. Additionally,

there is no documentation being kept for students that are considered Tier 2 because essentially what is happening is once the Tier 3 students are identified, they are the only ones who are receiving additional support. The students that ITAs are working with are Tier 3 students that were identified as being at risk but could not fit into the AIS groups so they then call them Tier 2 students to work with the ITAs but there is no documentation anywhere of what the ITAs are working on or their groups they are servicing.

The second AIS specialist explained to me why there was not much fluidity amongst tiers in their building and said that they cannot even service all the students identified in the highest risk category by the screeners. They said that other buildings are servicing students that would be considered on grade level in their building and when there is a transfer amongst buildings, they see a first grade is receiving AIS services coming from a more affluent elementary building in the district and when they get to their building they drop them from AIS because that student is way too high for their current reading groups they support. Additionally, she wanted to stress that they do not have a Tier 1 problem in the building. They have a problem with kids coming in so far behind and extremely behaviorally/social-emotionally challenged that it is impossible to catch them up to grade level. Here are her own words to describe what is happening in the building:

There's so many problems, Michelle. I mean we're not going to solve the real problem. It's not a Tier 1 problem. But what the real tier one problem is like you, said the consistency, and making sure that everybody is doing the same thing but even when you do there's going to be issues because of the student population coming in, never going to preschool, never being read to and there's so many variables and components of what is going on with the kids we still are not reaching all of our kids. The we have had a kid, maybe from you know, a different building like we've had kids walk in here from other

buildings that they're in AIS, and we have to put them in as because they're AIS identified in the other building, so let's just be in AIS here, and we look at them and think you we are in the group that fits you right like we could put you at a grade level up, maybe.

These is another example of how the staff at West Bridge maintains a deficit thinking perspective, and believe that the kids are the ones who need fixing. They think the best way to fix the kids is providing interventions, which then leads into a broken system at this school because nearly 40% of the student population is deficient or broken. West Bridge believes it is not the school that is not working; it is the kids who are lacking or deficient.

The principal and AIS specialists discussed the high needs of their student population and believe because of the students experiencing trauma and not attending preschools they are having great difficulty closing the gaps identified and bringing the students up to grade level. When looking over the data, I realized that the participants did not discuss the behavioral and socio-emotional components nearly as much as the academic piece of MTSS. Therefore, I did ask the principal for a fourth interview to discuss these components specifically.

Behavioral/Socio Emotional

The behavioral and socio emotional components of MTSS at West Bridge Elementary were not on the forefront of conversations or observations are when I was in the building. Moreover, the initial conversations and observations I had were all related to the academic components and when I pushed participants to discuss the other components they did not have as much to say. The fourth interview I had with the principal was solely focused on these components of the MTSS

implementation at West Bridge Elementary but the principal more listed the support pieces in place as opposed to describing in depth what each piece looked like or helped support students in West Bridge Elementary. Currently, West Bridge has restorative practice in place, a family engagement staff member, kid talks being implemented during team meetings, and they utilize some PBIS components.

The principal describes the pieces in more detail:

Okay. This is the second year now that we've started to be a part of like a restorative practice type of a school. A few years ago, when we first were identified as on a state improvement plan one of the things that we put down, as one of our goals is to try to explore restorative practices in a way to change some of the discipline stuff. I mean the old model of whatever just wasn't working you know again what's the definition of insanity? We went down the road, to figure out what some of this restorative practice stuff might feel and look like here at the school. So we've got a restorative practice person and we also have a family engagement specialist whose job is to hopefully engage families and kind of find some of those barriers to school success or attendance or family. We haven't really gone far down that road yet but this was our first effort at it. You know some of the Covid monies and stuff allowed us to expand and try, you know, dip our toe into that that pool, so to speak, a little bit. I haven't found those positions has given us as much as we were hoping for and wanting because we have seen mixed results."

The principal described what he felt the socio emotional and behavioral components looked like in the building but it was clear that he believed the previous practices were not working and they were not implementing new programs and using Covid monies to hire new staff to help support students and staff. The principal said West Bridge has seen mixed results but later what he discussed was how even with the additional support and new programs in place, the suspension rate is higher this year than previous years. I will discuss that information in greater detail later on.

During my interview with one of the AIS specialists, they talked a lot about people who were hired to specifically help students and connect families with resources but that the people who were hired are not doing anything and that the AIS specialist is the one who has to organize everything for the families. I questioned the principal why they thought the restorative practice and family engagement programs were not as successful as they had hoped and here is how he responded:

So the restorative practice person is supposed to be there to help develop the staff in terms of building that model and mindset within the classroom and we've made some progress in that area. I think if you were to take an honest poll of the staff, I don't know that they would feel that it's been as effective and impactful as we want it to be. I think it has more to do with personality. As far as the family engagement piece it's 100% the person that we've hired. They are not necessarily the best person for the job, even though they have a big heart and want to do well, but they themselves struggle with anxiety, and, in my opinion, executive functioning skills. So how do we get somebody that's uncomfortable initiating interactions with people to be a family engagement person?

The teachers, AIS specialists and principal believe there has been an issue with the staff that was hired to help support families. One AIS specialist is considered the main liaison between community resources and families in the building. They reach out to the local food pantry, pick up food, schedule deliveries to the families and deliver it all to them. The AIS specialist connects with the diaper bank and gets the families the diapers needed for their younger children and delivers those to them as well. This specialist asks for donations from their family to provide students with necessary resources that they are lacking and after shopping for things delivers it all to the families. The AIS specialist and principal have brought their concerns to the superintendent and socio emotional district

leader. The principal discussed, "I don't say this because I mean to disparage anybody. I love our socio-emotional director but these are her, you know, her programs or babies, so to speak and there's a certain level of blinders." I wanted to look at the data that has been collected but the principal did not have that data to show me. He did say:

Have the programs changed any of the behaviors and the outcomes? I don't know that it really has to be honest with you. The data will probably suggest no. I haven't done a whole lot of mid-year looking at things, but from year to year overall I've had more suspensions this year than ever.

While the principal discussed the data not indicating these programs being effective for students, he could not provide any data to me and just spoke about how the suspensions were the highest they have ever been. It was clear that the principal examined suspension data infrequently but knew this year had more already than last year and the principal said that teachers do keep data on students' behavior issues. They said teachers are great at discussing whatever issues they encounter with a student during their team time meetings and refer to those as kid talks. They will seek out advice from the school psychologist, occupational therapist, and others that they think may be able to help give more support to the student. The principal believes that the teachers are great at implementing behavior plans in their classrooms and all set up cozy corners in their classroom to help with student deregulation. The principal said that the school psychologist helps the teachers graph data they collect after they decide which behavior interventions they will utilize but they don't have a system of tracking behavior tiers of students. The principal explains:

There are calm corners in the classroom so that the student has access to different strategies to help the de-regulate. They may have fidgets, some cube chairs, or you know we buy a bunch of those different things each year to expand our concept, so that if some of our tier one things are just not being responsive, the teacher would put that on the agenda for their weekly meeting. That's like a standing item at each grade level, or it's supposed to be, anyway, at each grade level. They will say things like 'I've tried these 5 different interventions with no real change in anything so what else can I try? What am I missing? And you know we put it up for the team to discuss and talk about. We may at that point decide to bring in someone else you know that may offer some different pieces or take it to the next level, depending on what the needs are and what's been tried.

The principal discussed how cozy corners are set up in the classrooms for students to use to deregulate. I did not see any students utilizing these while I observed but did see them in the classrooms. He believed that teachers are efficient with behavioral plans and keep track of the data on them but he did not provide me with any of that data when asked. The principal discussed how there are times when they will call in the district behavior coach to help assist them with students and that the behavior coach knows that the teachers in the building exhaust all of their resources before calling on them and a lot of times the behavior coach can escalate the route for the child to receive an alternative placement in the district.

The principal explains:

The upside to the behavior coach is she's got the ear of some folks in the Special Ed department. So, in her opinion, if something is really escalating, or needs to be if you pardon the term, fast tracked, then she has the ear of some folks that can kind of make some of that happen sooner rather than later. So it's good to have her on our side in terms of some of those different things.

Since the principal said that he and the behavioral coach believe the teachers implement interventions with fidelity I asked what interventions are they implementing and how often are they progressing monitoring and then what do they do with that data? The principal said that they have a plan that allows staff to

reference when they see different behaviors and what interventions to try but did not show me what the plan looked like or provide it for me. When I asked him about the increase in suspensions and why that was happening if the teachers have access to so many resources and supports for the students he responded that the issue with the larger behaviors far exceeds any support that can be given or any resources in place. He believes it extends much further into mental health issues and they currently do not have a social worker in the building. I pressed him more on the behavior coach being used in essence as a fast track to an alternative placement and he responded that the coach is shared with the entire district and that what they really need is a coach that can show the teachers what the interventions are supposed to look like in the classrooms. Here is his response:

The number of suicide assessments that we've done at this level this year is over 30 and it is scary the trauma these kids have been exposed to but the staff needs helps with modeling how to implement the behavior interventions. It's easy to come up with an intervention of okay, 'Let Michelle take a break every so many minutes, and this, then another...Here's your break cards, or here's your whatever but how does the teacher manage those different pieces? So I think if there's a way to help either model how to manage it and do it, or how to help implement it.

After hearing again the deficit mindset that the principal had about the students and their mental health issues reaching far beyond their resources and capacity, I recognized that the staff did not believe that their role in the system in place at West Bridge Elementary was a contributing source to why the students were not responding to the resources in place. Additionally, the principal believed that the teachers had an in depth understanding of what the behavior interventions should look like and he stated he knew his teachers were actually trying multiple things prior to sending students to his office. Yet, he went on to say how West

Bridge needs a behavior coach full time to show the staff how the behavior interventions should look like throughout an instructional day. Again, a larger piece as to why the students are not responding to the resources that West Bridge has in place is largely due to the lack of understanding by staff and the deficit thinking perception they hold.

MTSS Equity Issue at West Bridge

There are several things that came across in the data analysis that raised concerns with equity. I plan on discussing in my final chapter these equity concerns in greater detail and relate them back to the literature that I have reviewed. Yet, I think it is important to note at the end of each data chapter the concerns that I have identified within each building. The deficit thinking of staff and the principal about the student population is something that needs to be discussed further. For example, the AIS specialists, teachers and principals believed that the students are coming to them so far behind and have encountered so much trauma that once identified as a tier 3 reading student they will need to stay there or need a special identification label. Additionally, the principal and staff believed the added programs in place for the socio emotional and behavior supports for students was ineffective because of either the staffing for the programs. Yet, even though the principal stated that the teachers needed help from the behavior coach to understand what behavioral interventions look like and do not have a clear understanding on how to appropriately intervene with students, when the principal commented that the suspension rate was the highest it has ever been he correlated that with his belief that the programs and staffing in place was ineffective for their

students as opposed to his teachers not having the tools necessary to successfully work with their student population. At West Bridge, they serviced nearly 40% of the student population in reading and considered all of those students at a Tier 3 when the MTSS model recommends that 5-7% of the total student population should be in a tier 3. The fact that AIS specialists did not service students with disabilities because they had too many other related services is an equity concern because both NYS and the MTSS model state that all students should be included when receiving additional intervention support. The lack of tier fluidity and regular data dissemination, along with the directive to service students for math that are not in need of reading services creates an issue of access to services but also highlights that the MTSS model at West Bridge is not being implemented in accordance to the MTSS framework guidelines. Moreover, students not leaving AIS reading support and becoming lifers in AIS reading is problematic. Additionally, students are not receiving Science or Social Studies instruction independent from the embedded CKLA programming.

The principal indicated that the staff could benefit from a behavior coach that can model the behavior interventions for teachers because just knowing which ones to implement is not enough for staff. Additionally, even though the principal stated that he knew his staff needed more guidance on how to effectively implement behavior interventions with students, he stated that the district behavioral coach escalated certain student's cases at a faster rate to place them in alternative educational settings. Additionally, while I was in the building, a student had an emotional outburst in lunch that required the school resource officer to intervene. I

saw ten adults circling to try to problem solve how to best calm the student down and the principal went to get the AIS specialist as she has a relationship with the student. The AIS specialist calmed him down, helped pack his bag and sat with him to be picked up. After this incident, I asked the AIS specialist how often she is called on when students have behavior issues and she said only when they are so bad no one else is able to calm them down. Additionally, she told me she recently took a personal day to drive this student and their mother to the doctor's office to help get this student mental health care.

Throughout my interviews and observations, participants would discuss at great length the high needs of the students at West Bridge. During my time spent in the building, I felt they were connected to the students, formed relationships with them and cared for them; which is why I gave an example of the AIS specialist who took a personal day to drive a student and their mother to an important appointment. Despite the love they had for their students, many of the participants believed that because of the high needs the students came in with, the tier 3 students identified for reading support would never reach grade level expectations. One AIS specialist discussed how two students that received math support outperformed other students in the district that was in buildings that the needs of the students were much less. This specialist attributed these student's successes due to the staff's knowledge and capacity on how to support students with math interventions. Yet, they never made the connection it was a possibility they lacked content knowledge centered on reading interventions or their teachers lacked

knowledge on how to support students as to why their tier 3 students, in their eyes, would never reach grade level expectations.

Discussion

The staff at West Bridge Elementary did not implement all of the MTSS components or have a clear understanding of what each component entailed but it is not because they did not adhere to a well-planned implementation system. Moreover, the way in which the staff at West Bridge implemented the MTSS system was in part due to a lack of clear guidance, expectations and training from the district office. Prior to implementing the MTSS framework, the district staff needed to examine the need of their students, identify an EBP to address the need by incorporating various stakeholders in these initial conversations to help create buy-in (McColskey-Leary & Garman-McClaine, 2021). While the assistant superintendent created a guidance document for the staff, there was no training behind what any of it meant. MTSS is intended to support larger systems within a school district by collaborating with multiple stakeholders and provide support to not only the students but the teachers and staff as well using data to improve the systems (McColskey-Leary & Garman-McClaine, 2021). Unfortunately, both the staff and principal did not feel supported by the district.

Once the district established the needs they wanted to focus on and determined that the MTSS framework would be the best EBP to use, then they needed to have a clear description and components defined prior to the implementation phase. The National Implementation Research Network (NIRN) defines an EBP as usable with the following components: clear description of the

program, clear program components that define the program, operational definitions of program components and practical fidelity assessment. There was not one participant at West Bridge that could clearly describe each of the components of MTSS. Moreover, the goal of the installation phase of implementation science is to install the implementation infrastructure: training, coaching, data systems, etc. by making necessary organizational changes to policies, procedures, changing schedules and providing supports needed to begin the work so staff feel confident in using the innovation (Blase et al., 2015). The assistant superintendent changed the schedule and added additional staffing at West Bridge but did not provide the staff at West Bridge with training, coaching, clear data systems, etc. to help build the staffs' capacity centered on the MTSS components and its implementation.

Researchers have continuously cited educators' professional learning as critical to building educators' capacity for the implementation of MTSS (Castillo et al., 2016; Kratochwill et al., 2007). Some of the participants at West Bridge, did not have a clear understanding of how to collect data, disseminate data, use data to drive or alter their instruction or make informed decisions and the principal stated repeatedly that data was something they all struggled with. The staff's lack of knowledge centered on data, MTSS components and implementation could have contributed to the over identification of students in need of intervention services but there are other factors that possibly contributed to that as well. The fact that students received intervention support from professionals who were not highly trained (Batsche et al., 2005; Buffim et al., 2010; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006), while the students missed core instruction most likely created larger achievement gaps for

these students (Theoharis, 2010). Additionally, ecological and socio-political factors cannot be ignored when examining a student's performance.

Thorius & Maxcy (2015) discussed how no educational base is neutral and how MTSS cannot simply negate the socio-political factors that exist. Artiles et al., (2010) stated that MTSS or any other researched based program do not alone disrupt marginalizing systems. Therefore, while one may hypothesize the staff's lack of knowledge on MTSS and data correlated with the over identification of students in need of interventions services; I would also argue that ecological and socio-political factors contributed to students not performing at grade level expectations. Further, until the district and staff at West Bridge can dig deeper to address these contributing factors and disrupt marginalizing systems, these issues will continue to exist regardless of any EBP they try to implement.

Chapter 5: William Elementary - 'I can't imagine tier 3 students leaving tier 3'

William Elementary School has the 8:1:1 program and a principal who has been there for three years. William Elementary has the smallest total student population out of the six elementary buildings in the district. The principal believed that the resources given to them were based on the total student population and those from the 8:1:1 program in their building, which is a program that contains students who have significant disabilities and come from different elementary schools across the district.

The ITAs and TA provide intervention services to students identified in tier 2 and were provided training/tips by the AIS staff or the instructional coach. The instructional coach explained she watched a YouTube video on how to implement a reading program to struggling readers and discussed how to implement it with the ITAs. Additionally, the AIS TA is given lesson plans that the AIS specialists use and will ask them questions about the lessons if they have any but they were not given the same formal training as the AIS specialists. While the AIS specialists all have their reading degrees and NYS certificates, they have received additional formal training from the school district that entails lengthy seminars throughout the summer and graduate level courses. Additionally, it is important to note that some students at William Elementary received an hour of reading intervention services for five days a week, and I will provide more details later in this chapter.

The Assistant Superintendent created a master schedule for William Elementary to follow that includes a WINN block and Tier 3 block. The AIS staff has been directed by him to only pull students for intervention services during these

blocks in the schedule. Students are also pulled during these blocks in the schedule for additional services they may receive that could include occupational therapy (OT), physical therapy (PT), resource, and students with disabilities work on their IEP minutes.

I observed WINN time, team meetings, and Tier 3 blocks in grades 2-4. I was not allowed to enter classrooms that the classroom teacher did not give advanced permission so I was unable to see WINN and Tier 3 blocks in Kindergarten and First Grade. In grades 2-4, I talked with teachers when I went into classrooms to ask them questions about the MTSS implementation in their classrooms, grade levels and within the building. I observed 8 classrooms and spoke with the general education teachers and special education teachers in those classrooms.

Additionally, I interviewed the principal on three separate occasions for at least an hour each but sometimes longer. I interviewed two AIS staff members, the instructional coach, and a general education teacher for an hour each. I circled back with the instructional specialist and building principal several times to ask for more details or clarification on various MTSS components.

The data collection at William Elementary focused heavily on the academic and behavior components of the MTSS implementation with a smaller amount covering the socio-emotional component. In this chapter I discuss in detail the Academic component of MTSS implementation, followed by a brief description of the behavior/social-emotional implementation. I conclude the chapter with a presentation of equity issues that were part of MTSS implementation at William

Elementary. It is important to note that this data chapter is meant to paint a picture of what the MTSS implementation looked like at William Elementary.

Academic MTSS Implementation

William Elementary has the district's 8:1:1 program and a principal who is in their third year of leadership. The 8:1:1 program in this district consists heavily of students who have been identified as emotionally disturbed. Currently, the principal is on a plan for remediation and thinks she may lose her position at the end of the school year. The principal explained, 'I have not made a lot of friends fighting hard for what I believe should happen with students with disabilities in our building and sadly the few people I did think I could rely on turned out to relay information to the board of education that did not paint a great picture of the things I was trying to do here.' Therefore, she was concerned about me collecting data in the building because she believed the building was not implementing MTSS in the way it was intended and worried what I would be reporting back to the district office. The principal stated, 'I have had MTSS training and come from a district that I believe implemented it well but this building lacks the understanding of what MTSS is despite the meetings I have had centered on what the MTSS model looks like.' Additionally, she has been in heated discussions with the teacher's union president because the teachers reported to the union president they were upset with things the principal was doing. The principal described it this way, "There is a union representative in the building that is very close with the teacher's union president and is constantly reporting back to him about changes she is not happy with that I am trying to implement- things like not using the support team as a means for a

Special education label and telling the teaching staff what behaviors should constitute a code of conduct violation.”

Prior to implementing an EBP, it is necessary to have a clear understanding and sufficient details about the EBP to train staff to use it competently and measure the use of it with fidelity (National Implementation Research Network, 2017). Since the district did not train staff to use MTSS competently and measure the use of it with fidelity, it in turn caused issues amongst staff and the principal in the building. Further, after having a clear understanding of the EBP, it is necessary to determine its utility because just being deemed an evidence-based program is not enough (Fixsen et al., 2015). The principal indicated that they did have staff meetings centered on MTSS but many of the staff at William Elementary did not have a clear understanding of MTSS components, or the implementation of it.

Since she did not want to add to the turmoil and issues she encountered in the building, she was adamant that I could not enter classrooms without getting the teachers’ prior consent. Moreover, she asked for the instructional specialist to make contact with the teachers who would be willing to allow me to enter their classrooms. The first visit I made the instructional specialist said, “The principal said you wanted to observe some classrooms today but that cannot happen until we ask which teachers are ok with that since our union is very strong and gives us many headaches. I am not allowed to enter classrooms without teacher’s permission.” The instructional specialist met with each grade level and then gave me a list of classrooms and names of teachers that agreed for me to observe their classrooms and speak with them about MTSS in their building.

Many of the participants discussed the new English Language Arts (ELA) program called Core Knowledge Language Arts (CKLA) and the lack of clarity they had from the district office centered on how MTSS implementation should look like in their building and classrooms. Moreover, the principal and instructional specialist indicated that the district had given the directive that WINN and Tier 3 time could be optional this year as the teachers learn the new CKLA program but that they needed to pull students for academic support during those predetermined blocks in the schedule. The instructional specialist explained, "You know things are really tough this year because of the new CKLA program so the district said teachers can do whatever they want during the WINN and Tier 3 blocks as those are optional this year." Blase et al., (2015) discussed the importance of installing the implementation infrastructure: training, coaching, data systems, etc. by making necessary organizational changes to policies, procedures, changing schedules and providing supports needed to begin the work so staff feel confident in using the innovation. The teachers shared that they had not been given any guidance on what they should do during the designated WINN and Tier 3 blocks but they were given a master schedule they were expected to follow with those blocks in it. Without explicit training, coaching or clear guidelines about the MTSS components or the implementation of it, the teachers grappled with what to do during these blocks in the schedule.

I structured this section about key areas that I constructed during my data collection: Scheduling, Data Systems, Team Meetings, and WINN/Tier 3 block.

These subsection titles connected to not only the academic components of MTSS but also the way in which all three buildings are implementing MTSS within the district.

Scheduling

Scheduling was an important piece to the way in which William Elementary staff is implementing MTSS. The master schedule was predetermined by the Assistant Superintendent and was designed to show staff how to incorporate all the instructional blocks efficiently and also designate chunks of time for the academic component of MTSS. The staff at William Elementary has a (WINN) block for thirty minutes a day in each grade level where they work on math intervention support and a Tier 3 block for thirty minutes a day where they work on reading support. The staff believed the schedule is difficult to adhere to and has encountered challenges with it.

The assistant superintendent provided the staff at William Elementary with a master schedule that was designed to fit all of the daily components the district identified necessary in an instructional day while also providing the AIS staff blocks of time to pull students for both reading and math intervention services. The schedule indicates when each subject area should be taught in every grade level and how many minutes should be spent on each. When looking at the master schedule academic components, there are blocks of time for the district's new ELA program, CKLA, and each grade level has a different amount of time dedicated for the different CKLA components, but they all total 120 minutes throughout one instructional day. In addition to the 120 minutes dedicated to their CKLA program, there is also 10 minutes allotted for the Heggerty program in grades K-2, which is also focused on

teaching ELA skills. Every grade level has math scheduled for 60 minutes each day and all but fourth grade has it slotted for an uninterrupted 60 minutes of instructional time. Each grade level has WINN scheduled for 30 minutes each day and all grade levels except Kindergarten have Tier 3 blocks scheduled for 30 minutes each day. The rest of the day consists of 20 minutes for recess, 30 minutes for lunch and 40 minutes for special area classes. There is an additional block at the end of the schedule that indicates Science is taught biweekly for 70 minutes during their designated CKLA time. The principal indicated, "The schedule is very tight and is challenging for teachers to follow as they are just learning the CKLA program. I keep hearing from teaching staff how challenging the new program is and following the master schedule." The instructional specialist indicated that the schedule is nearly impossible to adhere to and describes it in this way:

The schedule makes the schedule, you know. It can't happen like that. So the schedule makes it look like there's time that's not there, you know. There are no transitions built in and the flextime doesn't really exist. That's the time when kids are still getting off the bus

The instructional coach believed that the schedule indicated there is enough time for all of the pieces teachers are expected to cover each day but that the reality indicated otherwise. The schedule is difficult for teachers to get all of the CKLA components, Math and recess in efficiently. During the installation phase, it is necessary for the implementation team to have ongoing professional learning and support for staff utilizing the EBP, and opportunities to coach the staff on how to use the program as it was intended. The staff at William Elementary did not receive professional learning support or have coaches to help them implement MTSS. Additionally, staff members need to have a system for collecting, analyzing, and

using data for decision making that includes measures of fidelity of the EBP in relation to implementation, capacity and outcome data (National Implementation Research Network, 2017). The teachers were not provided with the necessary coaching, training and professional learning in relation to the MTSS components or the implementation of it. In turn, one of the teachers that I spoke to shared, “ I continue to teach CKLA during WINN time to get it all the components in.” Since they are teaching CKLA during WINN, the students pulled for intervention services during WINN are missing core instruction. Theoharis (2010) discussed how when children are subjected to multiple pull out intervention sessions, it then causes them to miss out on core instruction and falling further behind. While these students are pulled from their core instruction, they work with either the AIS specialists, ITAs or TA. The 2.5 AIS specialists, 2 ITAs and 1 TA are expected to provide intervention services to students that William Elementary identified in need of them. Table 17 depicts a description of AIS and ITA/TA tier groups.

Table 17
Description of AIS and ITA/TA Tier Groups at William Elementary

AIS Tier 3 Groups	AIS Tier 2 Groups	TA/ITA Tier 2 Groups
30 minute interventions 5 days a week 3 students per 1 AIS specialist Files kept on SchoolTool Letter sent home to family Academic progress tracked and reported to families	30 minute interventions 5 days a week 6 students per 1 AIS specialist Files kept on SchoolTool Letter sent home to the family Academic progress tracked and reported to families	30 minute interventions 5 days a week 6 students per 1 TA/ITA No files or goals kept Do not notify parents No progress tracked or reported

Note: Data retrieved from AIS specialists

The AIS specialists discussed how they were given an additional .5 AIS staff

member but that because of the schedule, the .5 AIS staff member was not benefitting the students the building identified in need of reading support. Therefore, they believed that they are not working with all the students identified at risk at William Elementary due to lack of staffing and student need in the building.

At William Elementary, the staff uses a universal screening tool to identify students at risk that is administered in September, January and again in June. The universal screening tool that William Elementary uses is called AIMSweb and it is used for both math and reading. The AIS staff, which includes the specialists, AIS TA, and ITAs, administers AIMSweb. After the AIMSweb testing has been completed, the AIS staff identifies the students who scored below the twentieth percentile and then the AIS specialists hold a data day where the AIS staff meets with each grade level to then have further discussions with teachers on which students they believe need intervention services. Once the student groupings are formed, the AIS staff will pull those students out of the general education classroom to receive those intervention services in another location in the building.

I was curious about how it was determined William Elementary needed additional AIS staff and it was explained that the Assistant superintendent for instruction has a specified formula for determining staffing need and even though they believed they needed additional support with two grade levels the .5 staff member was not assigned to William Elementary for the blocks in the schedule that serviced those grade levels. The AIS specialist explained:

He has a formula of some sort that I truly don't remember, he brought out and explained to us a couple of years ago when we started Aimsweb and based on the building and the needs of the building and he said we needed

another .5 AIS specialist....However, I don't think it has benefited our building. I don't, in my opinion, think the .5 person has benefited the building because of the scheduling that person is here benefits one or two grade levels, and I'm not sure if they were the correct grade levels to be benefited

I found this piece of data interesting because the Assistant Superintendent added an additional AIS staff member but did not assign the person to the grade levels that had the highest number of students in need of intervention services. Instead, the .5 AIS staff member was added after the formula he created determined they had students in need of interventions services and then just split the person between William Elementary and another building without considering the grades that additional staff member would work with at William Elementary. This highlighted how the additional staff was not servicing the students that were identified in need of support services. Blase et al, (2015) discussed how it is necessary to develop an implementation team to use data to determine the students' need and while the assistant superintendent did determine there was a need to service more students at William Elementary, they did not address that need by simply adding another staff member. Moreover, issues are expected to surface during the implementation phase and that is why it is crucial to have teams in place to help address these issues. Blase et al, (2015) discussed how it is necessary for educators, leaders, and implementation teams to place an emphasis on coaching, and use data to make decisions. Since William Elementary did not have leaders or an implementation team in place, an additional staff member was added but did not service the student's that had the highest need.

After discovering William Elementary received a new .5 AIS staff member, and that the AIS specialists believed the staff member was not helping the students

they identified at risk, I tried to understand what the caseloads looked like for each grade level for the AIS and ITA staff. Tables 18, 19 and 20 indicate the caseload of both the AIS and ITA staff. The tables indicate that combined between the AIS and ITA staff they are servicing 127 students out of 334 total student population in the building for reading services. Therefore, they are servicing 38% of the total student population for reading services and it is important to note that these percentages include both the Tier 3 and Tier 2 students receiving services. The MTSS model is intended to service a total of 20% of the total student population. It is important to note that the William Elementary intervention staff is servicing double the recommended amount of students. Additionally, 40 students that were identified on their universal screening tool that are below the 20th percentile are not being serviced because of the group sizing and staffing. William Elementary staff is providing tier 2 Math support to 53 students out of the 334 total student population, which is 16% of the total population and a little less than the recommended 20%. The Assistant Superintendent has told staff at William Elementary he is considering providing them with additional staff to service more students but did not specify his expectation if they should focus more on additional reading or math intervention support.

William Elementary implements a “double dipping” approach to AIS/ITA reading services where they have seven students who are identified as Tier 3 receive services 5 days a week for 30 minute intervals with an AIS service provider and receive Tier 2 services from an ITA five days a week for 30 minute intervals. Therefore, these seven Tier 3 students received reading intervention services for a

total of 60 minutes each day. The recommended academic intervention support in the MTSS model for tier 3 students is 30-minute intervals for four to five days. Therefore, these seven tier 3 students received double the recommended MTSS model intervention support and one of the 30 minute intervals is with ITAs who again do not have their literacy degree or have been trained to implement reading intervention services to students. Since the master schedule accounts for 30 minute intervention blocks, these students are missing instruction in their general education classrooms. Tables 18, 19 and 20 indicate the caseloads for the intervention staff at William Elementary.

Table 18

William Elementary AIS staff caseload Tier 2 students

Grade Level	Subject	Number of students in AIS	Total students
Kindergarten	ELA	16	78
First	ELA	7	64
First	Math	6	64
Second	ELA	6	68
Second	Math	10	68
Third	ELA	0	71
Third	Math	13	71
Fourth	ELA	7	53
Fourth	Math	12	53

Note. Data retrieved from Instructional Specialist

Table 19*William Elementary AIS staff caseload Tier 3 students*

Grade Level	Subject	Number of students in AIS	Total students
Kindergarten	ELA	0	78
First	ELA	9	64
Second	ELA	10	68
Third	ELA	9	71
Fourth	ELA	7	53

Note. Data retrieved from Instructional Specialist**Table 20***William Elementary ITA staff caseload Tier 2 students*

Grade Level	Subject	Number of students in AIS	Total students
Kindergarten	ELA	8	78
First	ELA	17	64
Second	ELA	10	68
Third	ELA	11	71
Third	Math	12	71
Fourth	ELA	10	53

Note. Data retrieved from Instructional Specialist

It is clear that the staff at William Elementary provided nearly double the MTSS model recommendation amount of reading services to their students and some of the tier 3 students received double the recommended number of services

each day. Additionally, William Elementary staff administered services to tier 2 students five days a week as opposed to the three days a week the MTSS model recommendation. Further, it is recommended that students who are identified in need of additional support services receive that instruction with highly trained professionals, are progress monitored and have their instruction altered if needed, but tier 2 students are supported by ITAs who do not progress monitor, nor are they considered highly trained (Batsche, et al., 2005; Buffim & Mattos, 2010; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). Therefore, students missed core instruction falling further behind, Theoharis (2010), to receive instruction by support staff that is not properly trained.

When I questioned the staff why they thought that nearly half of their student population needed reading intervention services, they said the student population has a high need and is coming in so far behind grade level expectations. One way I interpreted this data, was that some of the staff and William Elementary held a deficit thinking perspective because they believed the students were so low they had to fix them with intervention services and when those intervention services were not successful then that meant the student needed a special education label. Since the staff believed that they implemented interventions and systems that were effective so if students did not make gains, then it was because the student had a deficit and needed to be fixed which is in line with the medical model in disability studies (Valle & Connor, 20011). Further, the staff at William Elementary did not have a clear understanding of MTSS components or how to implement it, no

guidance or coaching training centered on data, but did not reflect on how those systemic issues impacted student learning.

As I began to understand the caseload for the AIS specialists and ITAs at William Elementary, I became curious about the way in which the staff collects data, uses it to group students, and how they use data to progress monitor the students they have identified in need of services. I discussed with the principal, instructional coach and AIS specialists about their data systems to gain a more in depth understanding of what their data system entails.

Data System

The staff at William Elementary has different data systems in place for academic interventions. The principal, AIS specialists and instructional coach explained that AIMSweb is used as the universal screener for students to receive academic interventions three times a year in September, January and June for both reading and math. The building has three math data meetings in each grade level with the math instructional coach after the three math benchmarks given, that align to the district's math curriculum, and it is important to note that these benchmarks are in addition to the AIMSweb math testing. The math benchmarks were created by the district math committee to gauge how the students responded to the math content taught. The district wanted to have something similar to AIMSweb where the testing for these benchmarks were given in October, January and end of May. In addition to the three math data meetings, the building has a data day to discuss the data collected on AIMSweb. The AIS specialist describes what their data day looks like:

We have those data meetings after every benchmark and we have a full day that we call Data Day, where we meet with each grade level and discuss the data with them, how to find it in different ways. You can look at it in terms of each individual student, your class, the whole grade level itself to see how your students placed. So I feel like our communication with them is good in terms of classroom teachers discussing their data, especially since it's supposed to happen on a regular basis at their PLCs.

This illustrates that the staff at William Elementary dedicated a day to discuss the data results from their AISMweb benchmark. Even though the AIS specialist believed that their communication with staff is good in relation to data discussions. She also revealed that teachers are not proficient with data dissemination and needs professional development centered on it. While the staff discussed data collected from formative assessments and teacher observations, they all were in agreement that they need additional support to understand what to then do with the data that they have collected. The AIS specialist described the teacher data collection this way, "Alright, the teachers give all these assessments. They collect this data, but maybe that's the next step of understanding what to do with it. I feel like they need more direction and understanding of what that truly means."

The National Implementation Research Network (2017) described how staff members need to have a system for collecting, analyzing, and using data for their decision-making. Blase et al., (2015) described how the installation phase of implementation science requires coaching, training and monitoring to the staff by implementation teams in place that placed an emphasis on coaching and use data to make decisions. The district personnel did not provide coaching, training or monitoring to staff to help them use data to make decisions. In turn, teachers collected data and were not able to interpret what the data meant. This made me

question what this meant for the students at William Elementary and how the staffs' lack of data decision making impacted their learning and achievement.

Each grade level team of teachers, along with one AIS specialist, meet for an hour each week in the morning while the classroom teachers have other building staff covering their classrooms so they can have this time to together. These meetings are referred to as professional learning communities (PLCs) but the principal, instructional coach and AIS specialists say that the teachers use this time to mostly discuss grade level issues related to field trips, report cards, and possibly have kid talks. All of the teacher participants were in agreement that they need more guidance and direction on what these meetings should look like, as they do not have clear expectations on what they should be doing during this time. Since I was not allowed to observe the PLC meetings, I asked the AIS specialists to describe what these meetings typically look like in each grade level. Here is how she described them:

It truly varies between each grade level. Some do discuss assessments, but not necessarily how their students did in terms of success...even though I know that's what the goal of these meetings are. I would say the meetings are more informal. We discuss things like state testing that was coming up. Sometimes we discussed field trips. Sometimes we do discuss our kid talks for kids who are struggling behaviorally in the classroom. So it definitely has taken a turn from being about data.

The district provides coverage to classroom teachers in each grade level to meet each week for an hour. During these meetings, the district expectation is that the teams have regular data discussions about their students. Yet, the teachers and AIS specialists believe that the district has not given any clear guidelines on what that looks like and in turn the meetings are considered more like grade level

meetings and less like professional learning communities (PLCs). It appears that teachers at William Elementary do not use the data they collect to make decisions and inform their instruction but this is due largely to the fact they have not been given coaching, training and support in how to analyze data collected.

The principal discussed with me that these meetings were more geared toward grade level discussions and not data driven, so she had me observe the building support team meetings instead. The support team meetings are designed to support teachers with students they identify in need of additional academic or behavioral support.

Team Meetings

The principal and instructional coach discussed how the team meetings have been more related to academic support than anything else but that behavioral support is given in conjunction to academic support when needed. Additionally, they shared that teachers used the support team as a step toward getting a special education label for students, despite having spent the current school year training staff about the way in which support team meetings are intended to be utilized. The principal said the support team meetings are designed to help teachers and support staff better meet the needs of students. The meetings have a range of professionals present to problem solve and suggest interventions to use on students who are struggling with their daily activities.

The building support team meetings are designed to support teachers with students who are struggling both academically and behaviorally. Prior to the support team meeting, the classroom teacher is expected to fill out a referral form

for the support team to review. One of the support team meetings I observed was dedicated to revising the referral form. The principal said the some of the staff were upset at how cumbersome the referral form was and so the principal wanted to meet with the support team to change the form from a pdf to a Google document. The support team consisted of the principal, a social worker, a special education teacher, an AIS specialist and the instructional coach.

The special education teacher was concerned about the data being kept in a Google document and did not think that was a good idea to store sensitive student data there but the principal said in a previous district she worked in, they paid for a Google suite so they said it was ok to store sensitive data there but the principal never stated that the district William Elementary is in had paid for Google suite. Interestingly, the instructional specialist had difficulty navigating the form and they all laughed saying they are now understand why the teachers are having difficulty as well. They indicated teachers are finding it to be a long tedious process and even the instructional specialist shared as a classroom teacher she found the process very difficult as well and was reluctant to use it because of that.

They discussed a student that the social worker and instructional specialist were familiar with and they said that they were highly concerned that the teacher did not list any strengths about the student. The teacher only listed things that the student cannot do but listed nothing about what they can do. Additionally, they said they were seeing inconsistency on the reporting as the student did have kid talks but it was not listed on the paperwork and only academic interventions were checked. They commented on the behavioral section, every behavior that was

possible a student could have been checked off for this particular student and they again were concerned. The instructional specialist commented on how the student definitely did not have gross motor issues and did not go to the nurse frequently when she worked with this student.

The principal indicated the teacher was at their wit's end with the student and believed that was why the form was filled out without indicating any strengths and saying the student had every behavior indicator but I am wondering if the teacher would have reached that point if they had been given support sooner. Since the form is challenging to navigate, it deterred teachers from making referrals, which is caused teachers to become burned out. Additionally, the way the teacher only emphasized the student's weaknesses and did not list any strengths and checked every possible behavior off on the checklist is an example of both a medical model approach in education and deficit thinking perspective (Valle & Connor, 2011).

The team also discussed how no data was given to indicate any interventions that were in place or if they were working or not. No data was given on what the student does know and no data was given to support what the student does not know. The teacher just listed the student does not know their numbers or letters but did not provide any data to support these claims. Therefore, the team discussed how the teachers need to start bringing data to support their claims and how they need to fill out strengths/capabilities on each student. The instructional specialist was tasked to continue on working on the form to make it more user friendly and later present it at a staff meeting. It is interesting that this happened during the

month of April and this issue on data collection has just now surfaced - toward the end of the year. Moreover, the principal and instructional specialist shared how the expectations for teachers when they attended support team meetings were made clear but this meeting highlighted how at least 8 months of the school year passed and teachers still do not have a clear understanding on data or what they needed to fill out when they submit a referral form.

The next support team meeting I observed was centered on one student that did not have a special education placement or classification but was placed in a room that had a special education teacher in it throughout the instructional day. Therefore, the principal, instructional specialist, social worker, special education teacher from the classroom the student was in, the classroom teacher, AIS specialist, and special education teacher that is a member on the support team were present for this meeting.

Prior to the meeting, the principal told me that the classroom teacher who referred this student did not have a good understanding of the process on each tier and filled out a referral to the support team that said the student needed a one on one teaching assistant. The principal asked the classroom teacher to describe what was happening in the classroom with the student she was concerned about. The classroom teacher discussed that the student was having seizures and it impacted them academically. The seizures would happen and when the student came out of them, they would not know what was happening or what was going on. The teacher then went on to say there were many more instances where the student faked seizures to avoid work. She stated she could tell the difference between an actual

one versus a fake one based on how the student reacted after they came out of the seizure.

The principal asked what interventions have been in place and the teacher responded she had been thoughtful about seat placement and proximity to the student, she has given a name tag that has the alphabet and number line for the student to use and really she probably used 80 interventions in a day but cannot think of the rest. She said the student can attend for 15 out of 30 minutes during small group math instruction but that is the max and is really struggling with ELA. The classroom teacher did not have any data with her at all and just said the student was struggling academically and needed a one on one assistant during the day to help keep them on task. Again, I am puzzled by the fact that the teacher did not have any data to present. It is clear that the expectations of the support team meetings have not been as explicit as the principal believed.

The principal asked about Tier 2 supports and interventions and the AIS teacher began to discuss what she has done with the student. She corrected the principal and stated the student was tier 3 and that acted completely different with her than in the general education room. She said the student runs on a motor, talked excessively and falls out of their chair a lot. She has a behavior plan in place to help get each task completed when working with her. She does sometimes give an alternative seat to use as well.

The AIS teacher indicated the student has made progress towards meeting their goal. The principal questioned if within the next four weeks they meet their goal will they be moved out of tier 3 and the AIS teacher sharply replied, 'No, even if

they meet their target, we will not discontinue services until next year when we do the initial benchmark in the beginning of the year.' The principal did push back and told her when they get the data in four weeks they will reevaluate and decide what tier the student should be placed in then. This suggested that the AIS specialists do not utilize data in the way it is intended within the MTSS model. If a student has successfully attained the goal that was set for them, then they should be released to the previous tier (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). This data was a powerful example on how William Elementary staff does not understand how to use the data they collected appropriately, nor do they comprehend how to implement the MTSS model with fidelity.

Towards the end of the meeting, the principal suggested that the student 'double down' and the classroom teacher replied if this particular student was going to get extra services in tier 2, then she had another student that could benefit from tier 2 services as well. The instructional coach indicated there was space for two more students and the principal approved both students going with the ITAs for additional Tier 2 reading support.

After the meeting, I met with the instructional specialist about what doubling down meant and it was explained to me by the instructional coach that there is a tier 3 slot of time in the schedule where the students designated for that receive Tier 3 services with an AIS specialist in a smaller group size of 3 per one AIS specialist and then she has additional staff called instructional teaching assistants that service students during WINN time and those students are considered tier 2 and meet in a group size of 6 per each ITA. Therefore, double down meant a Tier 3 student

received AIS support five times a week for thirty minute intervals and also met with an ITA for additional ELA support five times a week for thirty minute intervals which equated to them receiving a total of 60 minutes of reading support in a different setting than their own classroom. This data piece was alarming to hear because it exemplified the fact that the William Elementary staff did not grasp what the tiers in MTSS are meant to be implemented and made me concerned for the students who were being pulled from core instruction to receive 30 minutes of reading instruction by someone who is not qualified to even be a teacher, let alone a reading specialist.

The support team seems to have mixed purposes as it is used by frustrated teachers who believed it was a part of the process on how to get their students who struggled a special education label, as opposed to using the support team as a way to help their struggling students succeed in their classroom. The principal discussed how teachers were still interested in getting their students a special education label when they found they were struggling more than their peers even though she has held numerous staff meetings that indicated this was not the purpose of the support team. Teachers still hold a deficit perspective thinking mentality and a medical model approach in education (Valle & Connor, 2011), when students struggle within their classroom in that they are doing all the possible things and support them every way possible so it must be that the student has a deficiency. Further, the support team was designed to help support staff with students who need additional support but there are barriers for staff to do that because the teachers come frustrated, the

form is cumbersome, and the only support is the ill- used MTSS interventions and the step towards a special education label.

After hearing about the double down approach, I knew it was essential to determine how the building identified their tier 2 and tier 3 students. When I chatted with the staff at William Elementary, they all indicated they did not understand MTSS or the tiers very well. Their responses resonated with me and I want to share them to highlight their lack of knowledge in relation to MTSS.

Tier Identification

The district created a guidance document for staff to follow when determining both academic and behavioral interventions for students in each tier. The principal of Elementary presented a PowerPoint to the staff that was centered on MTSS but all of the staff believed there had not been enough professional development given on MTSS and what it should look like when implemented. The district document and the principal's PowerPoint shared a consistent view of MTSS, but that understanding was not shared and implemented by the teachers and intervention specialists at William Elementary. Here is how the participants describe MTSS in their building and classrooms:

I think, in terms of communicating what that system is. I say it needs to happen a lot better. We had a staff meeting, and we were introduced to it, I would say, midway through the year. I luckily enough, I just finished my grad program like a year before I started teaching, and I was taught what it was, and I understood it, but I remember being in that staff meeting, and our principal asked us, who knows what MTSS is and only like a handful of people raised their hands, whereas the rest of our staff either had no idea, or just didn't even know there was access to the materials or what it any of it was so I think we need to have better understanding of what that system is if we're trying to implement it in this district, replied an AIS specialist.

Not really. I mean, we've been given like presentations on it but like not really. There's no guidelines really in terms of what we're doing, why, we're doing it and basically just use AIMSweb to group the students for AIS, responded a Fourth Grade general education teacher.

In terms of MTSS, in terms of that whole system, yeah, we're lacking. We need it badly. I don't think there is that foundational understanding of what this is, and everybody knows that if they have a concern they have that right but I think there is the big misunderstanding with what your role is as a teacher in that, I think, is where we where we fall short, and I think some teachers are very overwhelmed in really shy away from the extra work. I was on the MTSS district committee that had to be like 4 years old. Okay? So MTSS is not as new but yeah, there's a lot of work to do, replied the Instructional Coach.

A major issue that I observed and heard was that the staff at William Elementary does not have a clear understanding of what the MTSS model should look like or what it entails. It raises the question if the staff do not understand what MTSS looks like, then how can they possibly implement it? This impacted how they identify students in each tier for academic support. Here is how a Fourth grade teacher and AIS specialist responded:

They do the AIMSweb in the beginning of the year, and then based on that, the AIS teachers look at the scores and pick who they're gonna have," responded a Fourth Grade Teacher.

Yeah, so that's really based on the AIMSweb. So if kids are below the twentieth percentile, they qualify to be an AIS Tier 2 or Tier 3 student. It really depends on what their composite score was. If they're usually between the tenth and twentieth. that means they are most likely in a Tier 2. So the kids have to have a composite score 20th percentile or lower, in order to qualify for AIS services. From there we just try to group students based on their scores that are similar. Usually kids, who get below like the fifth percentile in every single category, are the ones we group together for Tier 3. So that process is very simple, in that because of the lowest scores go to Tier 3," replied AIS Specialist One.

Therefore, the way in which William Elementary staff identified students for each tier is utilizing the AIMSweb benchmark three times a year in September, January and June. The AIS specialist described in this way:

So the kids have to have a composite score, twentieth percentile or lower, in order to register and qualify for AIS services. From there we just try to group students based on their scores that are similar. Usually, kids who get below, like the fifth percentile in every single category, are the ones we group together for Tier 3. So that process is very simple. Unfortunately, some, and depending on the grade level, I know in first grade we had when a lot of kids placed lower than the twentieth percentile. So, unfortunately, then it becomes a numbers thing because we can only have so many kids per group and some of those students who scored that low did not get services

Tier 3 students are considered the most at risk students, that are performing well below grade level expectations, and the AIS staff does service a large portion of students that have been identified by AIMSweb but there are students in first grade that they cannot service due to staffing and group sizes. The AIS specialist said, "I want to say 30 to 40 kids all together throughout Kindergarten through 4th are identified in need of services but are not receiving them due to lack of staff." Therefore, students who may have received a tier 3 identification are serviced by ITAs and then considered Tier 2. While there are tier 2 students that are serviced by the AIS staff, the ITAs service tier 2 students along with the students who get the 'double down' dose for reading support.

Special Education students receive AIS services if they did not have additional services that conflicted with the schedule. Here is how one of the teacher's responded:

They'll take students with disabilities if they need AIS, and if they have room for them but if they don't have room for them, then they're more likely to not get AIS, because I think they see it as like they're already getting consultant

teacher services, which technically isn't supposed to be a thing, but that's what we're doing.

The staff did not provide any data on how many students with disabilities received interventions with AIS staff. The principal did state that students in the 8:1:1 program do not typically get AIS services but that they did have one student who did for a short time period and then transitioned to homeschool. The AIS specialist described students with disabilities and AIS services in this way, "I would say it really depends on the schedule they have because we have certain times of the day where we meet with certain grade levels. If students with disabilities have another meeting or another service at that point in the schedule. Then, unfortunately, it we cannot service them. Based on the responses from staff, it seemed that hardly any students with disabilities are receiving AIS or ITA services due to scheduling conflicts.

After determining how the staff groups the students into the three tiers of instruction, I wanted to dig deeper on what their WINN and Tier 3 blocks look like as these are the designated times in the schedule in which students are being pulled for services. All of the staff, including the principal, said that WINN was optional and that it would look different in each classroom because they have been given no guidance from the district office on what it should look like.

WINN/Tier 3 block

The principal indicated she does not have any authority to have evaluative conversations with staff centered on their WINN or Tier 3 blocks of instruction. Therefore, the principal does not believe she could question teachers if they put

their students on Chromebooks for the entire hour of instructional time because district staff will not support her.

WINN and Tier 3 time have been put into the schedule to indicate when students should receive their support services. I observed 15 tier 3 and WINN time sessions and examined what the classroom, special education and AIS teachers are working on during these scheduled blocks of time. I was able to chat with the teachers during my observations and ask questions about what they were not only working on with students but also what MTSS implementation looks like each day in their classrooms.

After groupings are made using the AIMSweb benchmarks, the AIS specialists pull students from their WINN block to administer math support to tier 2 students because the staff at William Elementary does not designate any students in math at a tier 3 so they can make their group sizes larger. The William Elementary staff administers their reading support during the tier 3 blocks in the schedule, which is different than their WINN time. WINN time is dedicated to support students who need additional math support and those students are all identified as tier 2 students. These support services are given in another location outside of the general education classroom. Since I was limited on the grade levels I observed, I discussed with the staff at William Elementary what these blocks in the schedule look like.

The instructional specialist indicated that there were no clear expectations given on what these blocks should like from the district off and described in this way:

When I think the biggest problem with WINN because I've been asking for direction on all year is that we don't have district direction on it for months and months. The message came out that says you can kind of do whatever.

The AIS specialists, instructional coach, teachers and principal indicated that because there has been no direction given by the district office on what teachers should do with students during these blocks in the schedule, it looks different in every grade level and every classroom. I asked the instructional coach if any core instruction was happening during WINN and tier 3 blocks in the schedule when students are being pulled out and she explained it all depended on the classroom teacher. Here is what she indicated:

The majority of classroom teachers have the students work on a computer program that is an extension of the CKLA program the district utilizes but that was only intended for students to receive 45 minutes total in a week and teachers had students utilize it for 30 minutes five days a week. Also, they give students access to other computer programs as well, in sum mostly the students that are not pulled out for additional services work on computer programs during that time.

In the schedule they have a tier 3 block where teachers have been told not to teach any new instruction but the instructional coach said, "The master schedule is deceiving because there is not enough time for the 90 minute ELA block and some teachers need to continue teaching those lessons during tier 3 time and decide what to teach when the students are being pulled out." She stated, "Teachers might work on a grammar worksheet while other teachers continue instructing another component of the CKLA program." This puzzled me to hear because the entire staff discussed how teachers, including the instructional coach, were not well versed in the CKLA program and they do not know how to utilize the unit assessments in the program to drive any instruction so how can they proficiently decide which pieces

of the program the tier 2 and tier 3 students are able to miss? It is important to note that students being pulled out during these blocks in the schedule at William Elementary are missing out on core instruction. To better understand this, I observed classrooms during these blocks in the schedule.

I observed in the both the intervention classrooms as well as in general education classroom where I had permission in order to understand what happened during those blocks of instructional time. It was eye opening to see what the AIS and ITAs did with their groups of students as well as what happened during the WINN/Tier 3 block in the general education classrooms.

When I observed AIS WINN time instruction, one AIS teacher was a long-term sub, she had a tier 3 group and four students at a table. Since there was a group larger than three (the maximum allowed by the district), I checked with the instructional coach if this was indeed a tier 3 group and she indicated it was and that ideally they try to keep group sizes of three but they want to service as many students as they can so sometimes it will be larger than three students in a tier 3 group. At the same time, another AIS teacher only had one student because the other students that typically fit into that group were absent.

The long term sub was working on a reading program that had one student read one line at a time while the other students followed along and passed a mini rocket between students to show which student's turn it was. One student did not want to wait for the rocket or listen as the other one read. The teacher redirected the student by telling them they needed to listen while the other one was reading

and asked the student to reread. However, the other student who struggled to wait read it for them.

In another room that was used by the ITAs and the ITAs had Tier 2 students at a table. There were 2 ITAs who worked with a group of 8 students and 1 AIS teaching assistant who worked with one student at another table using a smartboard. The 2 ITAs worked on reading passages from a reading program that the instructional coach trained them on. The instructional coach trained herself on the reading intervention program by looking at videos online to see how the program should be implemented and then explained it to the ITAs. This is important as it highlighted that first, the instructional coach was not well trained on the intervention and that assistants (not certified teachers) are delivering what is supposed to be important reading interventions with minimal training in the intervention of background in literacy.

I observed in second- fourth grade classrooms. It was intriguing to see what happened during these instructional blocks. In second grade, the teacher posted an agenda on the smartboard that was titled “skills center.” It gave a list of what students “must do’s” were before they could work on their “can do’s”. Their “must do’s” consisted of a writing task, reading on the computer program, and a worksheet. The “can do’s” were additional time on computer programs or silent reading. There were thirteen students in the classroom: nine students working on chromebooks and another four students worked on the rug with the teacher in a guided reading group. Seven students were pulled for support services from this classroom.

In the third grade, one teacher had students work on flower projects that looked like maybe they would be hung inside the classroom or outside in the hall when finished. Even though the teacher pulled all the students to the rug to talk about the NYS exam that was coming up, she told three students to continue to finish their flower project. Both third grade classrooms I entered spent their block on reviewing the NYS exam and asked the students to use their chrome books to take a practice test. One of the classrooms had a Special Education teacher with a group of seven students pulled to a back table to work on three digit math questions while the other students were on the rug.

In fourth grade, in one classroom there was a student who worked with an adult at a back table on vowel teams and seven other students were on the rug in guided reading group with the teacher. The smartboard listed must do work: one math packet of equivalent fractions, race packet, find the evidence packet and may do: happy numbers, read, amplify, math fluency book. Another fourth provided one of the most interesting classroom observations I had. It is important to note that this teacher welcomed me into the classroom but it was not a predetermined classroom by the instructional specialist.

In this fourth grade classroom, there were only nine students in the class. The teacher said, "Ten students were pulled for additional services during this time and fourth grade did not have tier 3 time in the schedule." The instructional coach told me that fourth grade does have tier 3 blocks and this teacher in particular was in their first year at the grade level and must be confused. This classroom teacher stated, "I use WINN time as a study hall once a week and then teach either Science or

Social Studies and alternate after each unit is completed.” When I asked this fourth grade teacher which students were identified as tier 2 and which were tier 3 he replied, “I have no idea and I do not know how they decide that.” I asked him if he found the intervention groups to be fluid and he responded, “The same ten students have been serviced all year so I do not know if they are fluid.” This teacher was passionate about how WINN was not happening in the school and that teachers were just teaching whatever they wanted when students were being pulled.

Have you been in each classroom witnessing if the teachers are actually doing WINN? We don’t have Tier 3 in Fourth Grade. I can guarantee you if anyone actually went in to see what half of the teachers were doing during WINN, and then you would see no one is doing it. I only have it once a week for a study hall for the kids to get caught up on work they have missed. The rest of the week I teach either Science or Social Studies during that time even though I only have 9 students in the classroom during it,

Through my observations and the interviews, it seemed like the teachers continued their instruction while students were pulled for these intervention services. This is in opposition to the district guidelines and the way MTSS is designed. This fourth grade classroom highlighted that even though there may be 9 students left in a general education classroom, teachers continued their instruction knowing that less than half the class was present. Additionally, this teacher believed that teachers taught what they felt the students needed and that no one monitored what happened in their classrooms. Additionally, this provided additional evidence that student groupings were stagnant as the same students are serviced the entire academic year.

The MTSS model suggests that 80% of students are successful in tier 1 for both math and reading, 15% may need additional intervention support in tier 2, and

5% may need tier 3 support. The AIS specialists indicated that tier 2 students in math received 30 minutes of support five days a week. The MTSS model indicates that students who are identified in tier 2 should receive intervention support 2-3 days a week for thirty minutes. The William Elementary staff serviced nearly 40% of the total student population in reading services and that is double what the MTSS model recommendation. Additionally, the students identified in tier 2 received AIS support five days a week for thirty minute intervals, which is nearly double what the MTSS pyramid recommendation for intervention frequency. Moreover, the MTSS model indicates that tier 2 interventions should be given by a highly trained professional but William Elementary staff has tier 2 interventions administered by teaching assistants who have little training on how to administer tier 2 support. Further, the MTSS model states that students in tie 2 need to have goals set and be progress monitored to determine if the intervention given is working but at William Elementary tier 2 students working with teaching assistants have no goals and are not progress monitored which led me to investigate what tier fluidity looked like at William Elementary.

Tier fluidity

One fourth grade teacher shared that their same ten students have been pulled and serviced for reading and math support. That raised the important issue that I needed to understand what the tier fluidity looked like at William Elementary. I wanted to determine how often the identified students in tier 2 and tier 3 are shifting and what, if any, tier fluidity looks like within the building. I asked the instructional coach and AIS specialists how they progress monitor students in the

tiers and how often changes in the groups are made.

The teachers said that AIMSweb is used for tier shifts but that their students who received services do not typically stop receiving them once they have been identified in need of services. The AIS specialists said they progress monitor the students they see each week using AIMSweb and then see if a student is making growth towards their goal. While one AIS specialist indicated that they would change interventions if they see a student is not making any growth, another one responded with:

I was gonna say, yeah, I feel like it's based every year at on our AIMSweb scoring, because if we're not meeting our goals with enough students, then I would feel that we would determine that we need to find a new intervention program that would better fit our kids.

This response resonated with me because of the team meeting I observed and the principal questioned the AIS specialist about the child making progress and meeting their goal if they would be discontinued from tier 3 services and the AIS specialist responded that they would not be dismissed. The same AIS specialist responded:

Tier 2 is moving out of AIS and being dismissed because they are reaching their goals, and they are successful with the intervention program....Our Tier 3 students are so so low, so I feel like even with the gains I've made with them it would be very hard to justify moving them to a Tier 2

This data emphasized how AIS specialists are not changing interventions with students until they review data the following year to see how the total population did with the beginning of the year AIMSweb benchmark. Additionally, it indicated how the AIS specialists maintain a deficit thinking perspective in that tier 3 students are so low, that their gains are low as well and it would not be justifiable

to move them from a tier 3 to a tier 2. Again, this highlighted how William Elementary staff does not have a clear understanding on how tiers in MTSS are supposed to work or how to effectively use data to create fluid groupings.

When I sat with the instructional specialist to determine what movement she witnessed between tiers, it was clear that there was not much movement. The instructional specialist explained:

No Tier 3 I can't imagine a tier 3 student going out of Tier 3. Yeah, I can't imagine when that would happen.....the ITAs do not progress monitor their Tier 2 students but last week I had a couple of kids come up where we wanted to kind of discontinue, so I'll pull them and kind of see where they are and check with the teacher to see if they're seeing the same thing in class, and if they agree with what I'm seeing then we may discontinue them from Tier 2.

The instructional specialist went on to say that even though the ITAs do not progress monitor students in their tier 2 groups that most of the time they will bring to her attention students they think may not need their services anymore. Yet, she described a recent issue she had, "I walked into the room and just happen to listen to students read with the ITAs and believed they should be dismissed and when I talked to them about this they said they did think for a few weeks that was the case and had a few other students they wanted me to take a look at to see if they could be discontinued as well." This data indicated that students received services by ITAs who did not need them. Additionally, since students are not progress monitored in tier 2, the ITAs and instructional specialist use their judgment to gauge if students should be released back to tier 1 and that is not the way in which the MTSS model recommends should be implemented. Additionally, it indicated how the

instructional specialist maintained a deficit thinking perspective about tier 3 students never leaving tier 3.

The principal indicated that the only time she witnesses tier 3 students being discontinued from services is when an AIS provider or parent advocate pushes for a special education label. Here is what the principal stated in her own words:

So I do look at it with more of a strict lens, because we have a parent population of a community that likes sometimes services when they're not justified.... So I do have one AIS provider who has been here for a very long time. She will openly admit that she does not believe in evidence-based research, and that she does not really believe at times that we're gonna move from Tier 3 to Tier 2 and she thinks that it should go straight to Special ED. So there is a lack of perseverance with some of my staff with respect to due process, at which point it can hinder the consistency based on who the provider is.

It became clear that although there may be some shifting of students from tier 2 to a tier 3 or from tier 2 back into the general education classroom, the only shifts that occur for tier 3 students is either possibly receiving a Special Education label or remaining in tier 3. The principal indicated that all of her staff sees the support team and referral form as a way to speed up the process for students to receive a Special Education label. Additionally, a former special education teacher that I interviewed who is now a general education teacher in the building discussed how badly one of her students needed a learning disability label but that since the testing did not indicate that they would not receive it. This aligns with the other teacher's views of rejecting evidence and research since she knew that this student had a learning disability even though the assessments did not show that. It is concerning that the entire staff indicated they need additional professional

development centered on MTSS, they do not have a clear understanding at all, but that so many are pushing students who are not performing at grade level into receiving Special Education labels. This data exemplified the deficit thinking perspective that staff at William Elementary maintain in that it is neither the school, nor the system in place that needs to be revamped but the students are so low they need a Special Education label.

Behavioral/Socio-emotional

Since this is the only building in the district with the 8:1:1 program, the behavioral and socio-emotional components were largely discussed in relation to this program as opposed to all of the students in the building. The principal did discuss these components throughout our discussions and interviews but the teachers centered their discussions on the academic component of MTSS. Therefore, a large portion of the data collected on these components was from the building principal. Additionally, when I interviewed the principal specifically about the socio-emotional and behavioral pieces at William Elementary in relation to the MTSS model components, I received very limited data.

The principal believes that the teachers and staff in the building are reporting behaviors that are not in line with the district's code of conduct and thinks that students are being reprimanded for behaviors that do not warrant the consequences they receive. Therefore, she keeps a spreadsheet for each semester of the school year to document the infractions she has to deal with in the main office when teachers send students to her. The behavioral infractions are kept in a Google

document and in SchoolTool. The principal uses this data to examine how often students missed instruction to spend time in the principal's office. She had discussions with staff about what behaviors should not constitute loss of instructional time. Additionally, the principal used the data to examine the behavioral interventions in place for a student that is missing instructional time.

She described it as follows:

So if myself or crisis response removes the student we try to collect it on a Google form to find out how much time out of class, if they have been able to double dip with different providers, and we haven't been able to catch up. So they're spending the whole day out of class....So we use that data to try to one decrease the removal from the class and to also match the intervention with the students. So every trimester I create a new sheet, so we can track trimester to trimester and I track my data on school tool, and that was part of our discussion at the faculty meeting today was in comparison we have a significant discrepancy between our building and other buildings, to which my staff said, 'you know, doesn't that reflect the need for a dean, and I push back and I said, 'Well, no, it doesn't because we are in a position where we're reporting things that are not a referral or in line with the district code of conduct.

The principal thinks that staff reported issues that are not behaviors in line with the code of conduct and that staff did not know how to implement behavior plans effectively. The principal discussed that the staff has difficulty with implementing behavioral plans and will often confuse the students by the behavioral plans they put into place. She gave an example of how one teacher implemented a behavioral plan and it had three smiley faces next to each task the student had to complete. If the student completed the task, then they were asked to color it green. If the student did not complete the task, then the student was asked to color it red. The principal and instructional specialist said the behavior chart confused to them and the student found it confusing as well. When I asked the

principal what her next steps were with the teacher, she said she would let the behavioral coach step in to work with the teacher.

The principal said that the teachers had a difficult time with creating behavioral interventions and do not always follow through with the plan they put in place after a support team meeting. Therefore, she will ask the district's behavioral coach to come and work with the teacher to give them more tools to use with the student and help them with implementing a behavioral plan. The principal explained:

When we talked about a visual schedule where I can find that if I'm a student, or if you're helping another student, how can I help redirect in your absence? So some of those probing questions can do that kind of soft handed stuff and say, hey, 'we said we were gonna do a sticker chart for reinforcement but I don't see any stickers.' I do hate feeling like that but I will ask for teachers to submit weekly data if I suspect that there is a concern. And one thing I recognize, too, is teachers will often change the goal and you can't do that until we've met the first goal. So there's a lot of growing pains because we want to work on 5 things but when you refer to that Tier 2 you're really only ready to focus on one. In a really polite way I more often bring a behavior specialist in when I suspect that there is a lack of compliance with the actual plan. We recognize that our building is not rich in interventions. We are sometimes spending more time admiring the problem than really offering different solutions.

Acknowledging the staff has issues with behavior tier identification and interventions to match the tiers, I asked the principal what professional development have they had to increase their understanding of how to appropriately implement behavioral interventions? There are two half days she is allowed each year and she has focused her time on trauma education. She indicated her staff are used to getting coach purses for gifts from parents and having \$600 donated by the HSA to cater teacher appreciation day and they are ill equipped to deal with the change in population with receiving the 8:1:1 students. The principal shared these

as examples to exemplify the change in the population of students at the school and how she did not feel the staff was equipped to handle those changes. In addition to this training, the 8:1:1 staff has received TCIS training but in smaller 30 minute increments because the staff is not willing to come in after hours and she needs to work it in their day time schedules. The principal explained:

We have more students who are economically disadvantaged. There's a higher level of need, because there is some data to suggest that issues come with students who are economically disadvantaged. Right? So if you're a teacher who's really only received coach wallets for Christmas, and you've supported parents who can donate you know, \$600 to get the whole building glaze and confused and you're coming to students who are trying to attack you with scissors, and you know pencils because they have access to things at home, or they are a witness to domestic violence. We're not equipped to manage that. What I would perceive be Tier 1 was a Tier 3 for them, just based on their life experience. It's trying to help everybody understand. You know I had a couple of staff members tell me I appreciate the information, but I'm not a therapist. So it's really about shifting that mindset that we do educate the whole child.

This data highlighted again how the staff at William Elementary maintained deficit perspective and that they are not trained in how to identify appropriate levels of tiered support to students. The principal recognized the need for staff to receive additional professional development in relation to students who have experienced trauma and how to appropriately provide tiered behavioral support to students. The principal believed that the mindset shift and clarity around behavioral infractions needs to extend throughout the entire district because they are getting referrals constantly from other buildings to put students into their 8:1:1 program and she does not think it is an appropriate placement. She gave an example of one student being placed into the program and they did not have an FBA completed. The student that was placed into the 8:1:1 was quickly integrated into

the general education classroom without any supports and the principal believes will return to their homeschool in the general education classroom in another year.

The socio-emotional components at William Elementary consist of an onsite Liberty clinic, partnering with access and helio health, an embedded social worker, kid talks, 2 by 10s and a school psychologist. The principal described these supports in this way:

So this year is our first year of having a Liberty clinic onsite. We tried to match some of the needs of the families that we suspect do not have equal consistent access to outside providers to have them receive it in school so we now partner with access. So if we suspect that there are needs that we are able to meet, we'll pair up with access, and we will refer things to, you know, Helio health for evaluation. One thing I recognize is that those are building supports, but that's where a lot of our 8:1:1 absorb the slots. It's not a bad thing, but we recognize that for a lot of that Tier 3 support, it does typically go towards a lot of the 8:1:1 because right now, being a smaller school, we share liberty with another building. So with respect to the 8:1:1 we also have an embedded social worker this year. We have monthly behavior progress monitoring data meetings for the 8:1:1. Everybody should have a BIT if you are in the 8:1:1. If you are a student who has left the building without permission or is a little bit concerning, then we have a crisis management plan from TCIS and we try to adhere to the TCIS model.

In addition to these resources, all of the students are receiving second step lessons from the social worker in the building. The principal believed these lessons have been successful. The principal also discussed that they implemented 2 by 10 and kid talks within the building and that these have been successful as well. The principal did say that the 8:1:1 K-1 program would be moving to BOCES next year as the district believed the students need to complete the program there before they entered back into the school district since they have had so many incidents with staff members being injured. This data piece exemplified the beliefs and practices that the district upheld in that not all students are allowed to be included in their

system. Moreover, the district indirectly sent a message to their staff that if students are unable to adhere to the systems they have in place, then they are not allowed to attend the same schools as the abled cohorts until they can prove they are 'normal' and only then will they be allowed to attend. Instead of examining the system in place, how ecological and socio-political factors are impacting these students (Thorius & Maxcy, 2017; Artiles et al., 2010), the district and some staff believed the students needed fixing and that typical abilities were superior which resonated with (Hehir, 2002; Parekh, 2023; Timberlake, 2020) in how ableism viewpoints exist in education, especially towards students with disabilities. The principal indicated she can not get substitutes into the building with the fear they will be placed in the 8:1:1 room so she has to pull staff from other areas and typically it is the AIS staff. The principal does not believe that all the students are getting their needs met with AIS and stated it this way:

They're not getting all of their needs are met. No, no, because one major building deficit with being the smallest is those individuals are the first line of substitutes. So I disrupt services weekly because I have absent staff, so that impacts our ability to be consistent with AIS services.

This data highlighted how students do not receive regular AIS intervention services and the principal believed it happened so frequently that the students are not getting their needs met. This is an important piece of data because staff at William Elementary want to give students who they believe are incapable of making large academics gain into a Special Education label but these students do not receive their AIS support frequently enough to have their needs met based on the principal's viewpoint. Social-emotional aspects appear to be another example of how the MTSS model is not being implemented in the way in which it was intended.

Equity Issue at William Elementary

There are a lot of equity concerns that have surfaced at William Elementary. The lack of data knowledge by staff and the groupings of students into tiers using one data point caused student groupings that are stagnant. Additionally, some tier 3 students received pullout intervention for an hour each day and thirty of those minutes was with teaching assistants who do not have proper training to give these supports. The MTSS model indicates that roughly 20% of the student population may need additional support but the staff at William Elementary serviced nearly 40% of the student population for reading services, which is nearly double the recommended percentage. Further, the fact that the AIS specialists collect data on students but did not change a student's tier based on the data collected and that the ITAs worked with students without progress monitoring them are clear examples of the way in which staff at William Elementary interpret how the MTSS model should be implemented. Additionally, the principal stated her staff used the support team as a way to get students labeled in Special Education and that the staff at William Elementary believed that the students were the ones with the problem needing to be fixed.

The intentionality behind the MTSS model is to have a multi tiered support system in place to help support students but the way in which it is being implemented at William Elementary is the same antiquated way that students were identified for Special Education in the past. Moreover, the staff lacked knowledge for both academic and behavioral support and interventions, maintained deficit thinking perspectives that caused students to be reprimanded for infractions that

are not consistent with the district code and caused students to lose additional instructional time.

Discussion

The staff at William Elementary did not have a clear understanding of what MTSS entailed, nor did they understand how to interpret data. When the district office determined the student needs that they wanted to address and that MTSS would address those needs, then they needed to set up an infrastructure that not only supported staff throughout the implementation process but also provide clear guidance and expectations on how to implement MTSS (McCloskey-Leary & Garman-McClaine, 2021). While the assistant superintendent created a guidance document for the staff, there was little training behind what any of it meant.

The principal at William Elementary did try to give some education centered on MTSS at staff meetings but admitted that staff struggled tremendously understanding the components and implementation process. It is crucial that implementation teams are set up during the installation phase to provide staff with support (McCloskey-Leary & Garman-McClaine, 2021) but because the district did not set up any implementation teams, the principal alone was not able to coach, train, and support staff on the MTSS components or the implementation of it. Additionally, the principal felt she was most likely going to be fired at the end of the year from what she believed was because of a handful of teachers who did not like the changes she made to better support students. Moreover, if the district had clear expectations and guidelines for staff to follow, then it would have created less

misinterpretation from staff on how to best support students. Yet, this is only factor that possibly contributed to the over-identification of students.

The principal discussed how most teachers used their support team as a means to get students identified for special education. Some of the teachers viewed their students as having a problem that needed to be fixed (Coiser & Ashby, 2016; Valle & Connor, 2011) and they would then become someone else's responsibility (Hehir, 2002; Parekh, 2023; Timberlake, 2020). This mentality is not something that is new in education, especially in relation to students with disabilities, and this thinking reflects a medical model perspective. The system in place at William Elementary set up staff to first identify the problem within the student, then come up with a remedy on how to treat that problem in hopes it would fix the student and reflected how staff were looking for a cure (Cosier & Ashby, 2016; Valle & Connor, 2011). Moreover, the principal stated that teachers used the support system as a means to get students a special education label and came to the support team meetings without any data but said things that emphasized the student's weaknesses, rather than their strengths. While it is evident that some teachers maintained medical model viewpoints towards their students, it is important to dissect some possible reasons as to why they did and recognize it is multi-faceted.

Historically, marginalized students have continued to be subjected to systemic problems that despite years of research and numerous scholars' pleas are not disrupted. At William Elementary, they are labeling students and then MTSS is like special education where students are taken out of the general education classroom and receive instruction somewhere else because those students need to

be fixed. Professional learning is crucial to build educators' capacity when understanding MTSS components and implementation (Castillo et al., 2016; Kratochwill et al., 2007). A lot of the participants at William Elementary did not have a clear understanding of how to collect data, disseminate data, use data to drive or alter their instruction or make informed decisions and the principal stated repeatedly that the staff used the support team as a means to get students identified for a special education label. Further, the beliefs and ideologies of staff at William Elementary need to be further examined and the system itself needs to be disrupted prior to implementing any intervention support framework.

Chapter 6: Perez Elementary-“I feel like the district has spent a lot of time telling us what we are doing wrong without telling us what to do...”

It was extremely challenging collecting data at Perez Elementary, thus I have a less full picture of Perez. At my initial interview with the building principal she disclosed that she knew the staff did not implement the MTSS model the way in which it was intended. She served on the district MTSS committee for four years and recognized that they did not implement the components of MTSS anywhere close to the fidelity in which she knew schools should. She was reluctant for me to observe what was happening at Perez Elementary because of what may be reported back to the district staff. The assistant superintendent for elementary instruction began his administrative career at Perez Elementary and had the staff implementing a WINN model that the entire district believed was successful. At that time, I was told the staff at Perez Elementary would have regular data discussions, regroup students every 6-8 weeks and have a new focus skill or goal to work on. The current principal at Perez Elementary said that she was on the data committee at that time and remembered vividly what used to happen in the building. She shared that over the last four years she encountered too many challenges to sustain the previous MTSS model. The principal described her challenges with WINN in this way:

I'm having a really hard time pushing my staff to do these things, which I know is what we should be doing when other buildings aren't doing that, and the district is not doing that, and the district isn't pushing it. I do feel confident now we're starting to move that way, but I've had to pull away the last 2 years, because it was starting to become really difficult to continue to push the staff when we were the only ones doing it.

She believed that the staff was not compliant with her directives but since she did not have back up from the district office, the cycle continued, and she essentially gave up the fight. I had my initial interview with the principal in the first week of March 2023. After our interview, I called and emailed her 6 times to gain access into the building to observe team meetings, WINN and tier 3 blocks. The principal either did not respond or stated how busy she was and hoped things would die down in her schedule soon. After I finished my data collection in the other two buildings, I reached out a final time and told her if she did not wish to participate in the study then that was fine and I could ask the superintendent to find another building in the district willing to participate. She did write me back immediately and said she wanted me to come but to know what I would observe would be subpar. I believe the principal spent the eight weeks trying to prep her staff on what team meetings and WINN should look like and tried to get them to have data discussions, but my observations will reflect what I observed.

I was allowed to observe two days of WINN time and only Kindergarten classrooms. I was also allowed to observe only 2 team meetings. I was not allowed to enter classrooms that the classroom teacher did not give advanced permission so I was unable to see WINN and Tier 3 blocks in grades 1-4. In Kindergarten, I talked with teachers when I went into classrooms, and we discussed MTSS implementation in their classrooms, grade levels, and within the building. I observed 4 classrooms and spoke with the general education teachers and special education teachers in those classrooms. Additionally, I interviewed the principal on three separate occasions for between hour and 90 minutes each. I interviewed one AIS staff

member, the instructional coach twice for over an hour each, and two general education teachers for an hour each. I circled back with the instructional specialist several times to ask for more details or clarification on various MTSS components being implemented at Perez Elementary.

The MTSS framework suggests that 80% of students should be successful in tier 1 for both math and reading, 15% may need additional intervention support in tier 2, and 5% may need tier 3 support. The AIS specialist at Perez Elementary indicated that tier 2 students in math received 30 minutes of support five days a week. The MTSS model indicates that students who are identified in tier 2 should receive intervention support 2-3 days a week for thirty minutes. Although I did not have exact numbers given to me by the staff at Perez Elementary, it was clear they serviced nearly 50% of the total student population in reading services and that is double what the MTSS model recommendation. Additionally, the students identified in tier 2 received AIS support five days a week for thirty minute intervals, which is nearly double what the MTSS model recommendation for intervention frequency and some students received reading intervention support for an hour five days a week. Moreover, the MTSS model indicates that tier 2 and tier 3 interventions should be given by a highly trained professional but Perez Elementary staff has tier 2 interventions administered by teaching assistants who have little training on how to administer tier 2 support and sit in on their tier 3 groups with an AIS specialist so they can rationalize larger group sizes when they provided tier 3 support. Further, the MTSS model indicates that students in tier 2 need to have goals set and be progress monitored to determine if the intervention given is working but the staff at

Perez Elementary puts tier 2 students with teaching assistants with no goals set and are not progress monitored. Therefore, the staff at Perez Elementary did not use timely collected data to inform their instruction or decision making for students who are in need of intervention services.

The data collection at Perez Elementary focused heavily on the academic and behavior components of the MTSS implementation with a smaller amount covering the socio-emotional component. In this chapter I discuss in detail the Academic component of MTSS implementation, followed by a brief description of the behavior/social-emotional implementation. I conclude the chapter with a presentation of equity issues that were part of MTSS implementation at Perez Elementary.

Academic MTSS Implementation

Perez Elementary has the district's 15:1:1 and ELL programs and a principal who is in their fourth year of leadership. The school climate at Perez Elementary was much different than the other two elementary buildings in this study. The teaching staff at Perez Elementary was reluctant to talk to me and feared what would be reported back to administration. Luckily, I was able to chat with the teachers after team meetings I observed and WINN time.

The Assistant Superintendent created a master schedule for teachers and support staff to utilize at Perez Elementary that includes a WINN block and Tier 3 block. The AIS staff has been directed by him to only pull students for intervention services during these blocks in the schedule. Students are also pulled during these blocks in the schedule for additional services they may receive that could include

occupational therapy (OT), physical therapy (PT), resource, and students with disabilities typically work on their IEP minutes during this time.

Many participants discussed the new English Language Arts (ELA) program called Core Knowledge Language Arts (CKLA) and the lack of clarity they had from the district office centered on how MTSS implementation should look like in their building and classrooms. Moreover, the principal and instructional specialist indicated that the district had given the directive that WINN and Tier 3 time could be optional this year as the teachers learn the new CKLA program but that they needed to pull students for academic support during those predetermined blocks in the schedule. The teachers shared that they had not been given any guidance on what they should do during the designated WINN and Tier 3 blocks but they were given a master schedule they were expected to follow with those blocks in it.

Like I did with the other schools, I structured this section around key areas from my data collection/MTSS model: Scheduling, Data Systems, Team Meetings, and WINN/Tier 3 block. These subsection titles connected to not only the academic components of MTSS but also the way in which all three buildings are implementing MTSS within the district.

Scheduling

Scheduling was an important piece to the way in which the staff at Perez Elementary is implementing MTSS. The master schedule was predetermined by the Assistant Superintendent and was designed to show staff how to incorporate all the instructional blocks efficiently and also designate chunks of time for the academic component of MTSS. The WINN block is for thirty minutes a day in each grade level

where they work on math intervention support and a Tier 3 block for thirty minutes a day where they work on reading support. The staff believed the schedule is difficult to adhere to and has encountered challenges with it.

Perez Elementary staff was given a master schedule from the assistant superintendent that was designed to help classroom teachers fit all of the daily components the district identified necessary in an instructional day while also providing the AIS staff blocks of time to pull students for both reading and math intervention services. The schedule indicates when each subject area should be taught in every grade level and how many minutes should be spent on each. When looking at the master schedule academic components, there are blocks of time for the district's new ELA program, CKLA, and each grade level has a different amount of time dedicated for the different CKLA components but they all total 120 minutes throughout one instructional day. In addition to the 120 minutes dedicated to their CKLA program, there is also 10 minutes allotted for the Heggerty program in grades K-2, which is also focused on teaching ELA skills. Every grade level has math scheduled for 60 minutes each day that is uninterrupted with the exception of first grade. First grade has math for 20 minutes in the morning and again in the afternoon for forty minutes. Each grade level has WINN scheduled for 30 minutes each day and all grade levels except Kindergarten have Tier 3 blocks scheduled for 30 minutes each day. During Tier 3 and WINN blocks, the AIS staff worked with students in need of additional support in either math or reading. Table 21 describes the intervention groups at Perez Elementary.

Table 21*Description of AIS and ITA/TA Tier Groups at Perez*

AIS Tier 3 Groups	AIS Tier 2 Groups	TA/ITA Tier 2 Groups
30 minute interventions 5 days a week 3 students per 1 AIS specialist	30 minute interventions 5 days a week 6 students per 1 AIS specialist	30 minute interventions 5 days a week 6 students per 1 TA/ITA
Files kept on SchoolTool	Files kept on SchoolTool	No files or goals kept
Letter sent home to family	Letter sent home to the family	Do not notify parents
Academic progress tracked and reported to families	Academic progress tracked and reported to families	No progress tracked or reported

Note: Data retrieved from AIS specialists

At Perez Elementary, the AIS staff and ITAs administer a universal screening tool to identify students at risk, which is administered in September, January and again in June. The universal screening tool that is used is called AIMSweb and it is used for both math and reading. After the AIMSweb testing has been completed, the AIS staff identifies the students who scored below the twentieth percentile and then the staff at Perez Elementary has a data day where the AIS staff meets with each grade level to then have further discussions with teachers on which students they believe need intervention services. Once the student groupings are formed, the AIS staff will pull those students out of the general education classroom to receive those intervention services in another location in the building.

The rest of the day consists of 20 minutes for recess, 30 minutes for lunch and 40 minutes for special area classes. There is an additional block at the end of the schedule that indicates Science is taught biweekly for 70 minutes during their designated CKLA time. The teachers indicated the schedule is very tight and is challenging to follow as they are just learning the CKLA program.

A Kindergarten teacher explained in detail how difficult it was for her to keep up with the pacing of the schedule and fit in all the components throughout the day. She has the ELL classroom in Kindergarten with 10 students designated as ELL out of 19 total students. Initially, she had issues with the ELL teacher because the ELL teacher wanted to push in during the time that she was supposed to teach math. They went to the principal and worked it out where the ELL teacher would push into her room in the afternoon but that would mean the designated schedule given to all of Kindergarten had to be altered to accommodate this change. This kindergarten teacher had great difficulty all year finding ways to incorporate all of the content she was expected to cover. She shared that many days she could not teach math and would only have the students play a quick math game because she was so pressed for time and spent the a large portion of their day on the new CKLA program. The Kindergarten teacher explained it in this way:

I am still working that out for the math part of my day, because sometimes it's really fast, like we'll just do a math game or a quick practice or something. There is sometimes only 10-15 minutes for math left in the day and sometime none at all. We are lucky if we have 15 minutes for recess each day because sometimes it is more like 10

The schedule is difficult for teachers to get all of the CKLA components, Math and recess in efficiently. This teacher highlighted how students are missing math instruction and receive a very limited time for recess in this Kindergarten classroom. Kindergarten students in some classrooms spent only ten minutes for recess, which is not a lot of time and researchers (Blackwell, 2004; Massey et al., 2021; Tsai et al., 2013) indicate how important recess is for elementary students. Additionally, the principal stated repeatedly how nice it is to have a viable reading

curriculum to even the playing field for all students to have equal access but in some classrooms math is only being taught for ten minutes a day. The schedule allots for sixty minutes a day so if some classrooms are teaching sixty minutes of math, while others are teaching only ten minutes of math or not at all, then this creates an equity issue in relation to access to the math curriculum for all students.

Two of the teachers shared that they continue to teach CKLA during WINN time to teach all the CKLA components. Since they are teaching CKLA during WINN, the students pulled for intervention services during WINN are missing this core instruction. Two of the Kindergarten teachers asked for the instructional coach to model different CKLA components for them and how to get better at fitting them all into their schedule. The instructional specialist shared that she does not think teachers are adhering to the schedule and even though the schedule is very tight they make changes constantly. She described it in this way:

Sometimes... I am scheduled to go into a classroom and I go, and the teacher is walking [the class] outside, and they were like oh, I stopped reading, and there is some sun so we are going to squeeze in our recess.

The instructional specialist believed that a lot of the teachers have poor time management skills. While she often hears from teachers how tight the master schedule is and how challenging it is for them to fit in all the content they are expected to cover, she thinks that teachers also struggle with time and classroom management skills. She discussed how she entered one classroom where the teacher allowed the students to take ten minutes to get their books out of their desks. She went on to say how she was trying to get teachers to use their clock more

efficiently. Some of the Kindergarten teachers found the instructional coach to be helpful in modeling how to teach the various CKLA components.

A first grade teacher felt that there is a major disconnect between administration and their understanding of what teachers can do in a day. The first grade teacher explained how she believed the many teachers did not feel administration has a solid understanding of the daily struggles they have as classroom teachers and that the expectations that are set for teachers are just unattainable. She described this in greater detail:

I think there's also like a bit of a disconnect where sometimes it feels like people do not understand what it is like on the ground level. You are asking us to do things that are unreasonable or unachievable, or cannot be done within the confines that they have currently set

The first grade teacher explained how teaching staff is burned out and not being supported by administration. She described how the district had a listening session with staff to hear what the staff had major issues with but that nothing came from the listening session as nothing happened after it. She explained how she believes teaching staff are told that they are doing things wrong constantly by the administrative staff but not given resources to help them navigate on how to make the necessary changes they are not happy with. Moreover, this teacher explained that she wanted an intervention book to help the students who struggled with different skills in her classroom. Therefore, if one student struggled with subtraction, then she believed it would be helpful to have an intervention book to refer to on what steps she could do next to help deepen the students understanding. This teacher explained that when teachers ask for help with students that are struggling in their classrooms, the principal will have either the instructional coach

or a district staff member visit the classroom to help provide support to the teacher but after the support staff visits the classroom the teachers believed it creates more headaches for them so the teachers then do not want the support staff to come into their classrooms. I definitely felt this climate in the building where teachers had a fear of talking to me, and a few teachers said that although they would love to discuss what their struggles are with MTSS in their classroom, they do not feel it would be something the administration staff would like.

While it was definitely difficult to get access to classrooms, it was equally difficult to access data information. When I interviewed the AIS specialist, she indicated that 50% of the total student population, received intervention support services. Yet, when I asked her about number breakdowns, she said she would have to get back to me but never did. When I asked the instructional specialist about the number of tier 2, tier 3 students in each grade level, she said that would be a better question for the AIS department. I did reach back out to the AIS Specialist in September to gain the information and she did finally give me what she calls an estimate of numbers in each tier. Tables 22, 23 and 24 indicate the caseload of both the AIS and ITA staff.

The tables indicate that combined between the AIS and ITA staff there are servicing 209 students out of 554 total population of students in the building for reading intervention support. Therefore, they are servicing 38% of the total student population for reading services and it is important to note that 12 students received reading intervention support for a total of sixty minutes five days a week. The MTSS framework suggests that only 20% of students should require intervention services

but at Perez Elementary they serviced an additional 18% of students. Also, the teachers at Perez Elementary shared they are not servicing an additional 40 students who qualify for tier 3 because of the group sizing and staffing. The AIS specialist indicated that 43 out of 90 students identified with disabilities received AIS intervention services but the remaining students who qualified for services were in the 15:1:1 classrooms and they did not receive AIS intervention support.

The AIS staff at Perez Elementary does not provide math intervention support services for students in Kindergarten and first grade. Therefore, combined between the AIS specialists and the ITAs, they serviced 9% of the total student population for math intervention services, which is below the MTSS framework recommended 20%.

Table 22

Perez Elementary AIS staff caseload Tier 2 students

Grade Level	Subject	Number of students in AIS	Total students
Kindergarten	ELA	25	110
First	ELA	15	115
Second	ELA	14	104
Second	Math	6	104
Third	ELA	15	110
Third	Math	18	110
Fourth	ELA	15	115
Fourth	Math	15	115

Note. Data retrieved from AIS Specialist

Table 23*Perez Elementary AIS staff caseload Tier 3 students*

Grade Level	Subject	Number of students in AIS	Total students
Kindergarten	ELA	0	110
First	ELA	15	115
Second	ELA	10	104
Third	ELA	10	110
Fourth	ELA	15	115

Note. Data retrieved from AIS Specialist**Table 24***Perez Elementary ITA staff caseload Tier 2 students*

Grade Level	Subject	Number of students in AIS	Total students
Kindergarten	ELA	15	110
First	ELA	20	115
Second	ELA	10	104
Second	Math	6	104
Third	ELA	15	110
Third	Math	6	110
Fourth	ELA	15	115
Fourth	Math	0	115

Note. Data retrieved from AIS Specialist

During our interview, the AIS specialist stated that she believed they serviced roughly 50% of their total student population in reading support services. Since the AIS specialist said that they are servicing roughly 50% of the total student population, I tried to understand their data systems.

Since nearly 40 percent of the total student population are given reading academic support, I became curious about the way in which the staff collects data, used it to group students, and how they use data to progress monitor the students they have identified in need of services. I discussed with the principal, instructional coach and AIS specialists about their data systems to gain a more in depth understanding of what their data system entails.

Data System

Perez Elementary staff has different data systems in place for academic interventions. The principal, AIS specialists and instructional coach explained that AIMSweb is used as the universal screener for students to receive academic intervention and it is administered three times a year in September, January and June for both reading and math. The building has three math data meetings in each grade level with the math instructional coach after the three math benchmarks given, that align to the district's math curriculum, and it is important to note that these benchmarks are in addition to the AIMSweb math testing. The math benchmarks were created by the district math committee to gauge how students responded to the math content taught. The district wanted to have something similar to AIMSweb where the testing for these benchmarks were given in October, January and the end of May. In addition to the three math data meetings, the

building has a data day to discuss the data collected from AIMSweb. The AIS specialist described what their data day looks like:

We have a data day after we administer AIMSweb with grade levels to determine who qualifies for intervention services. So we'll tell them our list who qualifies, and then a lot of times they can have more information based on different tests they've done because the kid might just have had a bad day or test so we discuss who qualifies

This illustrated that the staff at Perez Elementary dedicated a day to discuss the data results from their AIMSweb benchmark. The AIS specialist discussed how AIMSweb would identify over 50% of the total student population as at risk and they then rely on additional tests to determine which students should be given intervention services. Yet, she stated more than once that 50% of the total student population received intervention services. She discussed how teachers will administer additional testing but emphasized how teachers lack the understanding of how to collect and interpret data. Although she has some teachers who ask her to show them how to examine the data collected, she believed that a lot of the staff thought that it is not useful or helpful information for them so they do not care to engage further. The AIS specialist, instructional coach, principal and teachers all discussed how staff needs additional professional development on how to collect and disseminate data.

Many people on the Perez Elementary staff believed that data collection and interpretation are areas they need help with. The principal described it this way:

We have data meetings for grade levels that are by trimester where we dig into Aimsweb, you know, data stuff like that but we're not good at looking at data. We struggle with that. We are not used to it because we have never had common assessments up until this year, so they are not used to looking at those assessments looking at the data and then knowing what to do with that data.

A first grade teacher described their lack of understanding in this way:

It just feels like a like a lack of resources and a lack of clarity. They tell you you have to do WINN time and then they say that so and so wants us to be switching kids. They then will say so and so wants us to be doing this but they just don't give us the materials or the Who's Who's. They're telling us you have to be discussing data at PLCs, and you should be closing the gaps but do not show us how.

Perez Elementary's principal believed the teachers are not following district directives and discussing data at their team meetings or as the principal refers to them as professional learning community (PLC) meetings but the teachers stated that they are not given the tools necessary to discuss the data and interpret it. Even though the principal discussed how the staff is not educated on how to collect and interpret data, she discussed at great length about how they are not following the directives on what they should be discussing during their PLC time and are not implementing MTSS appropriately. There is a distinct disconnect between what the expectations are for teachers and then the administrative guidance given to them to achieve those goals because the principal stated that the staff does not follow district directives about data discussions during PLC time but teachers indicated they have not been given guidance on how to collect, interpret and make decisions about data. Moreover, the principal and district want Perez Elementary teachers to meet weekly to discuss data, close educational gaps, but know the teachers are incapable of adequately collecting and interpreting data and have not discussed how they plan to address it. Meanwhile, some of the teachers felt that the district is repeatedly telling them that they are not doing their jobs effectively but are not

providing them with the tools or the professional development for them to change their practice.

Each grade level team of teachers, along with one AIS specialist, meet for an hour each week in the morning while the classroom teachers have other building staff covering their classrooms so they can have this time to together. These meetings are referred to as PLCs or team time meetings but the principal, instructional coach and AIS specialists say that the teachers use this time to mostly discuss grade level issues related to field trips, report cards, and possibly have kid talks. The teacher participants are in agreement that they need more guidance and direction on what these meetings should look like, as they do not have clear expectations on what they should be doing during this time. Since I was only allowed to observe 2 PLC/team time meetings, I asked the instructional coach to describe what the rest of the meetings typically look like in each grade level. Here is how she described them:

Our building does like one out of the month can be a grade level meeting where they talk about these housekeeping items, and then I went to the principal after you came to observe those two team meetings, and I go both meetings were grade level ones, because that's all they were in talking about

She went on to say how she felt torn constantly and walked a thin line because her current position is the ELA instructional coach in the morning and the dean of students in the afternoon and she walks a fine line between being a listening ear for teachers and an authoritative figure. She explained that a lot of team meetings are more like grade level meetings because the teachers lack guidance on what the PLC meetings should look like but also do not have a clear understanding

on how to interpret data. She discussed how she sat in on a second grade team meeting and the teachers' graphed data according to the results of a recent unit test they administered. The conversation turned very quickly to how the teachers believed the unit test was too difficult, did not accurately portray the skills of the students and even though they made a really pretty graph they then did nothing with the data they collected because they believed it was invalid. Therefore, she said even when some grade levels try to discuss data and make data informed decisions, they are not typically successful and need better guidance on how to look at data.

The district provided coverage to classroom teachers in each grade level to meet each week for an hour. During these meetings, the district expectation is that the teams have regular data discussions about their students. Yet, the teachers, AIS specialists and instructional coach believe that the district has not given any clear guidelines on what these meetings should look like and in turn the meetings are considered more like grade level meetings and less like PLCs. It is clearly evident that Perez Elementary staff needs additional training on how to collect data, use it to inform their instruction and make decisions based on the data they have collected. The two PLC/team meetings that I observed highlighted that no data discussions took place and shed light on how the instructional specialist reported back to the principal, which added to the tension in the building amongst the staff.

Team Meetings

The principal described the building support team as a group of professionals that meet to help teachers or support staff with students who are

struggling either academically or behaviorally. She indicated that these meetings are viewed as tier 2 interventions for students who are in need of those additional support services. I asked repeatedly for months if I could observe these meetings but she said she did not have any on the agenda for a while, even though she described the team meetings in this way:

We meet bi-weekly, and that consists of myself, my dean, the school psych, and the school counselor. We always make sure an AIS teacher is present and usually special ED, and the Gen Ed teacher. So we have a school support team at that tier 2 level for academic and behavior, and I am really working on. I think in the past that it used to be called the instructional support team and I switched it to school support team because I wanted to get them to understand that it was academic and behavioral, and also that it's not a stepping stone to Special ED, because I think that's what that committee was seen as it's like. Okay, Well, we gotta to go to IST to get the Special Ed label

The principal explained that she did a lot of work over the last two years shifting teacher's mindsets that the support team is used for a special education identification label but the first grade teacher I interviewed indicated that teachers do still see these protocols in place as a check the boxes mentality so they can finally get help for their student that is struggling. The principal did indicate that she believed teachers struggled admitting they had challenges with a student and described it this way:

I don't think SST was utilized as much this year. We've gotten a little bit better, but I think teachers also have a hard time admitting that they're having challenges like they don't want to admit that they don't know what to do like. I've got this kid who's struggling with this, and I don't know what to do

The principal believed that teachers were not utilizing the school support team meetings this year because of the possibility of teachers grappled with the fact

that they did not have the tools to help their students succeed but then later in her interview she revealed:

It's the same with like SST. I find certain grade levels utilizing that team a little more than others or kid talks is the same thing. They're not happening as often as I think they should be and I do think some teachers think certain things are just like a check, the box type thing.

The first grade teacher I interviewed described in detail that when teachers ask for help with students then things will get much more difficult for the teachers and in turn the teachers decide to not utilize these supports. Yet, when teachers are frustrated they will do a kid talk to just check the box.

The team meetings I was allowed to observe were grade level meetings. The principal referred to them as professional learning communities (PLCs) but the instructional coach and teaching staff referred to them as team meetings. The principal explained that the PLCs were designed for teachers to meet to discuss their student data and make informed decisions about their instruction after they examined the data as a grade level. Yet, she explained that the PLCs have consisted of teachers discussions centered on grade level items such as field trips. She described it in this way:

The goal of team time was to have them focus on the curriculum, dive in together, look over the lessons, the assessments and they're kind of getting away from that turning into like 'Let's talk about the field trip'.

The first meeting I attended was with the Kindergarten staff. There were 9 staff members present and the meeting took place in the cafeteria. They used a computer that connected to a large projector where they posted the meeting norms

and roles and agenda. The roles consisted of a note taker, timekeeper, peacekeeper and facilitator. There were 6 Kindergarten teachers, 1 Special education teacher, 1 AIS specialist and the instructional coach. The Instructional coach discussed the report card and standards based grading in comparison to the new CKLA program.

The grade level teachers were not happy with standardized expectations and where the students are currently performing. The Instructional Coach displayed the report card and went through each standard that would be altered or which standard will remain the same. The teachers discussed writing in “not assessed (N/A)” on various standards in each marking period and how it should be same across grade level. Yet, they did not discuss the consistency the grade level needs to have within the district. The teachers discussed how they were not happy with the writing portion in the CKLA program and that it was nearly impossible to assess their students on writing standards based on the way in which they were currently teaching writing using the new CKLA program. The instructional coach said that she was researching other writing programs that they can use to supplement the CKLA program. If the premise behind the district newly adopted CKLA program was to create consistency across the district and equal access, then would the district approve of the team supplementing the CKLA writing program and would the staff at Perez Elementary even inform the district of what they had planned?

The AIS specialist explained there would be no services for students during the state testing because the specialists are pulled to help proctor the tests. Additionally, there would be no intervention services for two weeks at the end of May, as they would be testing students on their third AIMSweb assessment. She

stated that AIS support would most likely end on May 30th, as they needed to go over the data once the AIMSweb tests were administered. This made me realize that intervention services for reading and math support would end one month prior to the end of the school year because the academic school year ends the last week of June. Since the intervention groups are not formed until late September, this means that students are not receiving intervention support for two months in the school year. After the AIS specialist reported out, the meeting ended and the instructional coach apologized to me for observing more of a grade level meeting as opposed to a data dissemination meeting.

The next PLC/team meeting I observed was with the first grade team. There were 6 first grade teachers, 1 special education teacher, 2 AIS specialists and the curriculum coach in attendance. They had an agenda posted with norms and agenda items on it. They began the meeting talking about field trips and tie dye t-shirts for the end of the year celebration.

The teachers wanted to create an ABC calendar with fun things for the students to do each day at the end of the school year. They also discussed field trip items and the AIS specialist asked if she could report out on end of the year grouping. She told the teachers to group their students using the behavior codes and academic concerns to form next year's classes. The facilitator interrupted her and said that they did not have consistency of behavior and management issues amongst the grade level and have been waiting on clarification from the principal for the codes.

The teacher then discussed one student in particular and the issues she had

with this student based on their behaviors. The instructional coach said to fill out a referral on the student but the teacher said she does not want to and thinks that the counselor should chat with the student instead. The instructional coach asked if the teacher has done any kid talks about the child but the teacher believed it is parents of other kids who are talking amongst the other parents in the class and specifically targeting this child. The teacher said that child is getting bullied on the bus but believed it is the child of the vocal parent that is doing the bullying. The instructional coach stated they will talk to the child and discuss a behavior chart with stamps but the teacher is worried because she does not find out about what the child has done until the day after the sticker chart may not be helpful.

The school secretary came on the loud speaker to say there was no teacher coverage in a classroom so students came in with no teacher. The instructional specialist went to cover the room. After the meeting, I had three teachers approach me and asked if I wanted to know the real things that happened in the building. Only one teacher would agree to interview with me as the other two said they did not want to go on record with any information given. They were concerned that they would be penalized in some way by administration and although they thought they were not supported by the administration, they did not want any trouble to come their way.

After the meeting, I met with the instructional specialist and she explained to me that first grade was a hostile group to work with and apologized for their aggression. She said she let the principal know and the principal was not happy to hear that yet again first grade had a grade level meeting and had no data. The

principal explained to me that the facilitator teacher of the first grade meeting was a thorn in her side and constantly caused problems for the principal. Moreover, she said that this teacher in particular always complained about everything and the principal has tried to get her out of the building for a few years now. The principal was not happy to hear that this first grade teacher in particular volunteered to be interviewed by me but I assured her it was best for me to gain as many perspectives as possible.

Recognizing that the PLC/team meetings were being held weekly without discussing data, I knew it was essential to determine how the building identified their tier 2 and tier 3 students. When I chatted with the staff at Perez Elementary, they all indicated they did not understand MTSS or the tiers very well. During my interviews, I discovered how the staff at Perez Elementary identified their students in each tier and how they support them.

Lack of MTSS understanding

A theme that came across in the data was a lack of shared understanding of the MTSS model. The district created a guidance document for staff to follow when determining both academic and behavioral interventions for students in each tier. The principal at Perez Elementary presented a PowerPoint to the staff that was centered on the MTSS model and stated she had numerous discussions at staff meetings about the MTSS model but the staff believed there had not been enough professional development given on the MTSS model and what it should look like when implemented. Here is how a first grade teacher described her understanding of the MTSS model:

So I'll be honest that I feel like I don't have like a super good understanding of MTSS. Typically, the district will just like, send out like this one paper that I can get to if you've haven't seen it. they basically like, hand it to you, and then they're like that's it. But they don't really talk that much about it. So my understanding is based basically on, like the Rti triangle

A major issue that I observed and heard was the staff at Perez Elementary does not have a clear understanding of what the MTSS model should look like. This dissertation is focused on understanding how these schools implement the MTSS model, but I realized that part of what is happening is if the staff at Perez Elementary do not know what the MTSS model should look like or what it entails, then how can they possibly implement it? It was evident that the staff did not have a clear understanding of what the MTSS model is or how it should look like in their building or classrooms; this impacted how they identify students in each tier for academic support believed that the district has not given them enough resources or guidance in relation to the MTSS model. A kindergarten teacher that was interviewed stated that she did not think the MTSS model applied to Kindergarten as technically AIS staff did not need to service Kindergarten students. Additionally, the instructional coach believed that because the district did not give clear expectations or guidelines on what the MTSS model is and how it should be implemented that it was not the teacher's fault for not implementing the MTSS model with fidelity.

I wanted to know how the staff at Perez Elementary provide intervention services to students without a full comprehension of the MTSS model and since it was evident that the staff did not have a clear understanding of what the MTSS model is or how it should look like in their building or classrooms, I was curious

then how they identify students in each tier for academic support. Here is how the AIS specialist responded:

We do a screener at the beginning of the year, and students below the fifteenth percentile qualify for tier 3. So those are the kids that are the lowest all around for reading. We do some second assessments, too, and we talk to teachers, but we group them based on them, being below that percentile

Tier Identification

Perez Elementary staff identified students for each tier utilizing the AIMSweb benchmark three times a year in September, January and June. Tier 3 students are considered the most at risk students and the AIS staff did service nearly all of the students that have been identified by AIMSweb but there are some students that the AIS specialist said they cannot service due to staffing but are in need of intervention services. The AIS specialist said that the way they get around the 3 students per one adult ratio when they serviced tier 3 students is they add an ITA to a group of six to seven students while the AIS specialist worked with the group of students. Therefore, tier 3 students who are expected to work in a group size of three per AIS specialist will sometimes work in a group of 6-7 students because the ITA is there with the group. The ITAs groups of students are considered tier 2 students and the AIS specialist do service some tier 2 students but overall the principal and instructional coach said that the staff at Perez Elementary are not doing a great job with servicing tier 2 students and need to have a better system in place to service each tier. The AIS specialist described it this way:

If I have 6 kids who are tier 3 kids in my group. I have the ITA support my group. So it's one to 3, because we have two adults supporting a group of 6. She is always in the room with us.

This data piece was important to discuss because the district has given the directive that tier 3 students should be in a group of 3 students per each AIS specialist but the AIS staff decided to service larger tier 3 group sizes. This is particularly interesting when discussing how many students they have identified in need of intervention services. The staff at Perez Elementary does not consider their implementation of intervention services as a possible contributing factor as to why the students identified at the highest risk are not responding to intervention services given. Additionally, this data supports the ongoing issue that the staff at Perez Elementary does not have a clear understanding of MTSS and how to implement it with fidelity.

After hearing how students are identified for tier 2 and tier 3 intervention services, I wanted to determine which students were included in those intervention services given. When I asked if special education students received intervention services from AIS staff or ITAs the responses indicated that only a few students would if they do not have numerous additional supporting services given to them. Special Education students received AIS services if they did not have additional services that conflicted with the schedule. Here is how one of the AIS specialist responded:

There are a lot. Yeah, first grade we've seen a ton who qualify for AIS services, but we also have a lot of kids who receive Ctd services within their classroom, and sometimes based on scheduling the special education teacher will say, oh, I'm just going to do the tier 3 intervention myself in the classroom

When I asked the AIS specialist if the special education teachers had the same training as they did to provide specialized reading services she stated they do use

similar programs that the AIS staff utilized but they have not been given formal training on how to implement the supplemental curriculum. I tried to determine exact numbers of students that were in the building designated with a special education label and how many were serviced by AIS staff but those were not provided to me. Next, I wanted to determine if students given an ELL label received AIS intervention services. These numbers were equally difficult to get and no one would provide them to me. The Kindergarten teacher who had the classroom designated as the ELL classroom indicated that only one out of her ten ELL students was recently picked up for AIS intervention services in April due to both her and the ELL teacher's concern they were not progressing at an adequate rate as their peers. Yet, this student in particular was taken out for these reading services when the general education teacher is teaching portions of the CKLA program.

When I asked the teachers if they knew how many of their students receiving intervention services were considered tier 2 or tier 3, only the first grade teacher was able to provide that information. Here is how she described how many tier 2 and tier 3 students she had in her classroom, "So I have 5 identified tier 2 students and 4 identified tier 3 students out of 16 total students." I asked her if she had 9 out of her 16 students being serviced all year and she said yes. Additionally, I asked her if the rest of the grade level had a similar number of students given intervention services and she said yes. Therefore, in this particular classroom almost 60% of the students are given intervention services and it is important to note that this first grade teacher started in the district as a reading teacher and has her reading certification.

After determining how the staff groups the students into the tiers of instruction, I wanted to dig deeper on what their WINN and Tier 3 blocks look like as these are the designated times in the schedule in which students are being pulled for services. All of the staff, including the principal, said that WINN was optional and that it looked different in each classroom because they have been given no guidance from the district office on what it should look like nor does the principal have any authority to have evaluative conversations with staff centered on their WINN or Tier 3 blocks of instruction. Therefore, the principal stated that she laughs hysterically when anyone questions her authority over teachers in her building, as she believed she has none. She also stated that her opinion of the superintendent is that he does not have a clear understanding of what the MTSS model is or how it should be implemented.

WINN and Tier 3 time have been put into the schedule to indicate when students should receive their support services. I observed 2 tier 3 and 6 WINN time sessions in Kindergarten only and examined what the classroom, special education and AIS teachers are working on during these scheduled blocks of time. I was able to chat with the teachers during my observations and ask questions about what they were not only working on with students but also what MTSS implementation looks like each day in their classrooms.

WINN/Tier 3 block

The principal and instructional coach indicated they do not have any authority to have evaluative conversations with staff centered on their WINN or Tier 3 blocks of instruction. Moreover, the teacher's union president and superintendent

have informed the principals that they are not allowed to have evaluative discussions with teachers outside teacher's evaluations. Additionally, the assistant superintendent told the instructional specialists they are not allowed to enter any classrooms that teacher's do not want them to be in and cannot have evaluative conversations with teachers. Therefore, they do not believe they could question teachers if they put their students on chromebooks for the entire hour of instructional time because district staff will not support them. WINN and Tier 3 time have been put into the schedule to indicate when students should receive their support services.

After groupings are made using the AIMSweb benchmarks, the AIS specialists pull students from their WINN block to administer math support to tier 2 students. It is important to note that the AIS staff does not designate any students in math in tier 3 so they can make their group sizes larger. The AIS staff administered their reading support during the tier 3 blocks in the schedule. These support services are given in another location outside of the general education classroom. The principal described WINN time in this way:

So I'll be honest WINN time right now is kind of a hot mess. And the reason why is because we didn't have a guaranteed and viable curriculum. They weren't teaching the same thing, they weren't pacing at the same time they had no common assessments, and then they were having to develop these WINN groups. So what I've done the last 2 years is, I've told teams to kind of back off on WINN for the now. How can I force you guys to develop WINN groups when we don't have common assessments, and this year we're just learning the curriculum. So the district has kind of allowed it to be more of a choice I guess.

Since I was limited on the grade levels I observed to only Kindergarten, I discussed with the staff at Perez Elementary what these blocks in the schedule look like. The principal described these blocks in the schedule in this way:

The one thing that this building gets and understand is the idea that because I have a master schedule that has tier 2 time and tier 3 time blocked out, that no new instruction is to happen during those tier 2 and 2 or 3 times and that is one thing I can confidently say doesn't happen

The first grade teacher indicated what she does in her classroom during these blocks in the schedule:

So one of the things that they told us that we could be doing or should be doing is we don't actually have enough time to teach our entire CKLA program. So with the knowledge piece there's like the story, and then there's an application portion where sometimes you do writing or word work, so a lot of times when my tier 3s are gone I do the application portion. Yeah, which breaks my heart because it's like sometimes that's writing or word work, and that's where the fun is where we like act it out and where the vocabulary building is. That's where they learn to write. But there's just not enough time in the day. So then you have to keep going and they just have to miss it

A Kindergarten teacher described it this way:

That's kind of when we are doing something writing wise but then there's days when my ELL's are pulled for it or we're finishing up knowledge because it's always a time crunch too. Sometimes I can challenge my higher kids and put them on amplify or we do fun crafts during that time

These data pieces indicated that while the principal vehemently believed her staff understands no new instruction is to be taught during these blocks in the schedule, the teachers are saying they do teach new instruction and that the students who are pulled during WINN and Tier 3 blocks missed core instruction. The teachers continue to teach their ELA instruction and students miss their core instruction five days a week. If they do not miss core instruction, then they miss extension activities or crafts that the other students left in the classrooms work on.

The principal indicated that the expectation for WINN and Tier 3 blocks in the schedule is teachers do not teach new content or core instruction and that they work on tier 2 interventions with students that are in their classroom. Yet, the principal described what happened during these blocks in the schedule in this way:

The classroom teachers are telling me, you know I do small group instruction. I'll pull a group of kids over that I know need this, you know skill and I'll pull them over while the other kids are independently reading or working on amplify on their computers. That's kind of what I think is happening but I can say there's a lot of kids in this building that just aren't getting tier 2 because it's not happening.

The principal indicated that classroom teachers tell her that they pull students in need of additional support into a smaller group and work on a particular skill with them and while she thinks it occur in some classrooms that as a building students do not receive tier 2 support from classroom teachers. Therefore, the classroom teachers who do not pull students for additional support have students work on computers independently and these blocks in the schedule are utilized more for independent work for students.

The principal and instructional coach stated that the teachers have been told that they are not to introduce new instruction during the WINN and Tier 3 blocks but both of them also stated that they have no authority to challenge what teachers may be doing during those blocks either. In some cases, tier 2, tier 3 and ELL students are being pulled from CKLA instruction to work with ITAs or receive ELL instruction.

When I asked the AIS specialist and instructional coach what they have observed happened during these blocks in the schedule they indicated that a lot of

teachers put students on computer programs or continue their CKLA instruction since they do not have time to get all the pieces of it in during the day. Since I was only able to observe 3 Kindergarten classrooms, on two separate days, the data collected is limited but will highlight what happened in these Kindergarten classrooms during Tier 3 and WINN block times in the schedule.

I began my classroom observations in the classrooms I was allowed to observe in to examine what happened during those blocks of instructional time in Kindergarten. It was interesting to see what the classrooms worked on during these blocks and what the AIS and ITAs did with their groups of students as well. I observed AIS WINN time instruction and Tier 3 blocks.

One AIS classroom had two smartboards in it on opposite sides of the room and a divider put in the middle. One AIS specialist had 6 students with her and was so loud, it was challenging for even me to concentrate on what the other groups were working on. The other AIS specialist had a group of 6 students as well and worked on reading in a round robin format. In the back of the room, the AIS ITA was located with 6 students and they were worked on reading a round robin style as well. The AIS specialist told me that they developed their lesson plans and then give a copy to the AIS ITA so they can do the same lesson. I asked if the group of students were all at the same level and worked on the same skills and she said that they do not progress monitor students who work with the ITAs but are responsible for the AIS TA so they give her their lessons plans to make it easier for all the adults. This information puzzled me as no one monitors the students to see which skills they

need to focus on or if they make any progress. Why are these students being pulled from core instruction to receive instruction that is not tailored to meet their needs?

I wanted to gain a deeper understanding of what the Kindergarten classrooms worked on when the students were pulled from their classrooms. One Kindergarten classroom had 9 students on a rug with the classroom teacher reading a book that was extremely difficult for each student to read. The teacher had each student read a page out of the book one at a time and none of the children could read any words on the pages so the teacher helped each one. The next classroom I went into had 8 students at their desks and the teacher said the instructional specialist was running late but that they planned on co-teaching a writing lesson with the 8 students. After ten minutes passed, I decided to move to another classroom and told her I would head back to check in on them shortly. When I went back into the classroom, the teacher had the students work on a worksheet and explained the instructional specialist got busy with something else and did not make it in. The next classroom I observed was the designated ELL classroom and only 8 students were in it. The classroom teacher had the students on their computer devices and said they were just finishing up.

During one of my observation days of the Kindergarten classrooms, the first Kindergarten classroom students worked on a worksheet and the students were extremely quiet. The Kindergarten teacher began to tell me how she was sorry she could not interview with me but that she did not want any backlash from the administration. She said even though they have been given no guidance on what they should be doing during these two blocks in the schedule, the administration did

not like it if the teachers questioned them about it. I did ask her what her WINN and tier 3 blocks look like and she stated:

I've done like extra activities because some of these kids are higher students. So we've done like some extra activities like reading author studies, and we've done like little writing or crafts to go with those. So its kind of where I feel like I'm squeezing extra things in during that time.

From my observations, that even though WINN times was not supposed to be new materials, it was clear that the classroom teacher worked on activities that were new to students and in some cases were extension activities. Additionally, she stated that she does fun crafts with the students left in her classroom or writing activities that the other students do not work on or complete when they return to her classroom. This added to other data previously discussed that teachers are in fact introducing new material to students in the classroom while the other students are given intervention services and in some cases missed out on fun crafts.

The next classroom I went into the students worked on their computer devices and the Kindergarten teacher said that she just finished some of the CKLA program and had the students start their computer devices. We chatted about what these blocks typically looked like and she stated that she had to continue to teach the CKLA program even though students were pulled to get in all the components.

After hearing from the teachers that the same students in their classroom are being serviced for reading and math support, I wanted to investigate what the tier fluidity looked like for the students at Perez Elementary. I wanted to determine how often the identified students in tier 2 and tier 3 are shifting and what, if any, tier fluidity looks like within the building. I asked the instructional coach and AIS specialist how they progress monitor students in the tiers and how often changes in

the groups are made.

Tier Fluidity

The teachers said that AIMSweb is used for tier shifts but that their students who received tier 3 services do not typically stop receiving them once they have been identified in need of services. The AIS specialists said they progress monitor the students they see each week using AIMSweb and then see if a student has made growth towards their goal. Yet, the principal said the students who are identified as tier 2 who are not serviced by the AIS staff are supposed to receive tier 2 interventions with the classroom teacher and she indicated that is not what happens. She described it this way:

I mean, like I said, I feel like we're kind of a mess at tier 2 like with the WINN and stuff it's kind of all over the place. It's really just about taking those kids that didn't qualify for AIS support but still need interventions. I mean my own daughter, for example, is in another elementary in the building and I'm dealing with that as a parent where that they want to get her tested for special ed services. You know they were going to bring her to SST to get tested. And I said, 'Well, I've never received anything indicating that she's qualified for Tier 3 support, and they're telling me she doesn't qualify for tier 3, but she's getting tier 2 with an AIS teacher who is progress monitoring but she doesn't qualify for tier 3 because they want to get her tested for special ed. So that that kind of is what happens in this building too. So tier 2 is messy.

The principal described how the tier 2 is the most 'messy' tier in both her building and her daughter's building. She gave the example about her daughter that is in another elementary building within the school district and said that she was contacted by the AIS provider to bring her daughter to the SST team to request special education testing. Yet, the principal never received notification that her daughter moved to the next tier, which would be tier 3, and see how she responded in that tier. The MTSS model suggests children, who do not respond in tier 2, would

then move to tier 3 because it would provide support in a smaller setting and higher frequency. However, this example the principal used about her daughter indicated that some students who do not respond at the tier 2 level are brought to the SST for special education testing, which is another example of how teachers and support staff utilized the SST for a special education label as opposed to additional intervention support suggestions. Further, the principal indicated that she believed this is what happens in her building as well.

The AIS specialists stated they do make changes and release tier 2 students and pick new ones up but the classroom teachers said their same students are being serviced all year. Additionally, the AIS specialist said it is difficult to pick up students throughout the year because their groups are so far along in the intervention program that placing a new student into the group and starting the intervention program midway would not be successful for the new student. The AIS specialist described the lack of shift in tiers this way:

We had a lot in the winter of our tier 2 kids getting dismissed I usually take the lowest group, so I don't see as much movement in my groups because I tend to take the ones who are the lowest and make the slowest progress. I would say it would be maybe out of a caseload of 40 students I think I was able to dismiss 2 or 3 of my math kids. I know 2 or 3 out of 40 is not a lot but I know my coworker AIS specialist had 45 kids on her caseload and I think she was able to dismiss 4 or 5 of her tier 2 kids. Our kids are so low it's hard for it to be as fluid

The AIS specialist initially described the movement between tiers as a lot and a lot were dismissed in the winter but as she continued she stated how only 2 or 3 students were dismissed from her tier 2 math groups and only 4 or 5 students in tier 2 were dismissed from her coworker's caseload. She did not specify if her coworkers tier 2 students were for math or reading. She said she could not provide

me with exact numbers but I was not sure if that was because they did not keep that data or if she was worried to release that information knowing that they do not release students from their groups. This highlighted how the AIS specialist maintained a deficit thinking perspective that it is because of the students being so low as to why there are minimal shifts in the tiers and because she worked with the lowest students in the building, they would not be released.

When I asked the AIS specialist if any tier 3 students were released or moved back into tier 2 groups she indicated that the only time she saw tier 3 students released is to receive a special education label. Typically, this happens after they have had tier 3 supports for a few years and they have that data to support they need academic testing and typically they will receive a special education label. She stated that she knew that the MTSS model was not intended to be this way but that their students were so low, whether it is due to Covid or lack of support at home, that they can just not catch up to grade level.

It became clear that although there may be some shifting of students from tier 2 back into the general education classroom, the only shifts that occurred for tier 3 students is either possibly receiving a Special Education label or remaining in tier 3. Further, even though the AIS specialist indicated that they are not giving the interventions in the recommended way of a smaller group size, the ITAS are not progress monitoring their case load, and teachers are not proficient when examining data, it is the students who are lacking and the reason why little growth is made with them. This data confirms that too many students are identified and serviced in the MTSS system at Perez Elementary and that their MTSS system is not

fluid. This raises the question of effectiveness of the interventions, especially if those interventions are not helping students leave the intervention support.

Since it was clear that there were issues with academic component of the MTSS implementation at Perez Elementary, I wanted to examine the behavior and socio emotional components in place. The instructional coach did discuss these components throughout our discussions and interviews but the teachers centered their discussions on the academic component of the MTSS model. Therefore, a large portion of the data collected on these components was from the instructional coach who is also the part time dean at Perez Elementary.

Behavioral/Socio-emotional

A large portion of the data collected on the behavioral components was from the dean of students. Additionally, when I interviewed the principal specifically about the socio-emotional and behavioral pieces at Perez Elementary in relation to the MTSS model components, I received very limited data. Therefore, I interviewed the dean for a second time to just gain more information about these components in relation to the MTSS model at Perez Elementary. While the dean was able to tell me the supports in place for the behavioral and social emotional components of MTSS at Perez Elementary, they really just listed the support services in place and do not follow a tiered intervention system approach for support of students in need.

When discussing the behavioral supports in place for students and the different tiers, the dean of students described how their crisis management team works. She described it in this way:

So if there's like a current crisis going on, or something that teachers can't manage, they call down to the office and myself, the principal, our promise zone specialists or even our school psychologist will go down and we'll try to diffuse that situation. We are all TCIS trained so we're familiar with emotional first aid, and all those procedures as well as life, space, interviews and things like that for crisis situations, when it's not like in the moment. A teacher will bring it to team time, and it'll go on the agenda as a kid talk, and so there's a talk protocol

The dean described the crisis team as extremely knowledgeable in how to deescalate situations and that they have been provided with training on how to intervene appropriately when a crisis arises. She discussed how their training was centered on preventative measures and how they try to teach their teachers how to utilize preventative measures. She described programs like responsive classroom and mentors throughout the building to help make connections with students.

When I asked her what happens if a teacher is having difficulty with a student and their behavior she said that tier 1 is when a teacher should discuss a student for a kid talk at their team time meeting. The dean indicated that kid talks were meant for the grade level to provide suggestions to a teacher that may be experiencing behavior difficulties with a student in their classroom. The principal described tier 1 behavioral interventions in this way:

We provide a lot of instruction around behavior with every single student. So at the beginning of the year we do like a bus thing. You know we do a bus lesson with every kid we do a cafeteria lesson with every kid, so we do a lot of explicit teaching around behavior at the tier one level that everyone gets. If teachers are having any behavioral concerns, the teachers do a kid talk. We have a kid talk protocol where they'll bring it to their team time and discuss as a team around behavior.

When I asked her if teachers utilize this strategy, she said some do but mostly the ones who need to the most often do not. When I asked the first grade teacher about behavior support with students she described kid talks in this way:

Sometimes it's just like the teachers kind of like spit balling ideas like, oh, have you tried a sticker chart? Oh, have you tried taking away recess time? Have you talked to their parents? Have you referred them to the office? And a lot of times you're just kind of writing down the things that you have tried, because when you go to SST, they want you to provide that. So really it's a box to be checked

The teacher went on to say how the referral process for behaviors and academic concerns is so cumbersome that many teachers just do not do it. She said that they just deal with the issues in their classroom because if they bring things up to the principal or the SST team then it can get a lot more difficult for them in their classroom. The first grade teacher believed that the teachers are all professionals and already try the things that are meant to be suggestions at the kid talks and believed the kid talks to just be a formality and not helpful.

The principal stated that they are working on cleaning up this process for teachers and described it this way:

We're trying to be a little better about creating concrete plans that we can give to the teachers to walk out the door and say, 'okay. Here's who's in charge of this and here's what you're gonna do, and how long to progress monitor and then set a date to come back and revisit.' So we're trying to clean that up a little bit

The principal indicated that the support team was still actively working on how to best support the teachers that bring students to the support team in need of additional support. While the support team can offer suggestions, it is not often clear what the interventions should be for the student and who will progress

monitor if those interventions work. Additionally, the length of time in between the start of the intervention and when the support team should reconvene is not always explicit for staff.

The dean stated that when teachers refer students for behaviors at their student support team, they typically defer them to the behavior coach in the district and have that teacher work with them. Also, she indicated that the timeframe in which they reconvene to see how that student is progressing with their behaviors is challenging to put a number on as it varies with every student. They find that sometimes the behavior ceases and they never have to reconvene but other times they may meet again in 6-10 weeks depending on the severity of the behavior. The dean stated it is difficult for teachers to track behaviors and keep any data as they are not trained in doing that and are inundated with so many other things throughout their day.

When a classroom teacher has a student that exhibits challenging behaviors, then they will contact their parents and bring them in to have a conversation about what challenges the student has had throughout their school day. Additionally, they will connect the families to liberty resources and access to help provide families with additional supports they may need. When I was in the building, I noticed there were a lot of students in the office just sitting around. At one point, I counted twelve students and I asked the dean why were so many students just sitting in the office. The dean indicated that some students have the office listed as a designated break area from their instructional day but that the students I saw at the end of the day were there for loss of recess. The dean

indicated the students mostly lose recess for using profanity, hitting, kicking other students and/or threatening others. Additionally, the dean believed that the behavior infractions are always severe enough to lose recess and not issues like a student was not listening to the teacher. I asked the dean if they kept track of the students that kept coming to the office and lost their recess and she said they do have a referral form and sometimes use Schooltool but it is not always documented. Next, I asked her about the socio-emotional supports they had in place for students.

The socio-emotional MTSS components at Perez Elementary consist of partnering with access and liberty resources, an embedded social worker, kid talks, a school psychologist and a mentor program. The staff administers the BIMAS to determine what the need of the students are and then discuss which students would be a good fit for their mentor program. The dean described the mentor program in this way:

The mentor program that we have in our building which is another tier 2 support. What we do with that is, we take students who maybe aren't currently in counseling, but need another connection with a like a positive adult relationship in the building and all the volunteer adults who are interested in participating, and then all the teacher recommendations for students, and we match them up. The mentor then has a responsibility like every week they try to touch base with one or two times a week, whether that's having lunch together, playing a game together, doing, you know they find their own creative ways to kind of make a connection with that student.

The dean described the mentor program as another preventative measure they have in place for students to help them with socio emotional support they might need. The students enjoy connecting with their mentors and look forward to the time they spend with them. The dean believed this was an effective tier 2 intervention that the students really benefitted from. When I asked the dean how

they keep track of the different tiers of students both behaviorally and socio-emotionally she said they will meet as a support team and the students are on everyone's radar but did not indicate that specific tier information was given to them.

In addition to these resources, all of the students receive second step lessons from the social worker in the building. The kindergarten teachers believed these lessons have been successful but again there is no data kept in relation to the additional support services given. After reviewing all of the data, it was clear that the staff at Perez Elementary lacked the knowledge of MTSS and how to effectively implement it in their building. Additionally, there were some equity concerns that surfaced throughout the data.

Equity Issue at Perez Elementary

There are a number of equity concerns that have surfaced at Perez Elementary. The lack of data knowledge by staff and the groupings of students into tiers and student groupings that is stagnant. The MTSS model indicates that roughly 20% of the student population may need additional intervention support but the staff at Perez Elementary serviced nearly 50% of the student population for reading services, which is nearly double the recommended percentage. Further, the fact that the ITAs work with students without progress monitoring them are clear examples of the way in which staff at Perez Elementary interpret how the MTSS model should be implemented. Another issue that needs to be examined further is the staff's deficit thinking perspective that the students are the ones who are the problem and not the system or the staff. Lastly, the fact that some students in Kindergarten are

only receiving 10 minutes of math instruction or none at all and 10 minutes of recess needs to be examined further.

It is concerning that the entire staff indicated they need additional professional development centered on the MTSS model, they do not have a clear understanding at all, are not implementing the components of MTSS with fidelity but still pursue a special education label for students who are not responding to their interventions. Additionally, the principal and instructional specialist are unable to discuss with teacher's ways in which they believe teachers can improve upon their instruction and data decision making which in turn has made the principal and instructional coach believe they cannot intervene if they observed teachers utilizing WINN or Tier 3 blocks in ways they did not believe were beneficial for students.

Discussion

It was clearly evident that the staff at Perez Elementary did not know what the MTSS components were or how to implement it. Yet, the district did not coach, train, and support their staff throughout the implementation process as suggested in Implementation Science in the installation and implementation stages (McColskey-Leary & Garman-McClaine, 2021). The district did not set clear guidelines or provide training or coaching on how to collect data, interpret it and then utilize it to drive instruction and there were no implementation teams of support for staff at Perez Elementary as suggested by implementation science during the installation and initial phases (McColskey-Leary & Garman-McClaine, 2021), which is one plausible reason as to why their grade level team meetings were centered on agenda items

that were not related to data. Moreover, I believe the school culture also contributed to staff not knowing how to work with data.

The building culture dynamics at Perez Elementary were toxic as many participants did not want to be on record for fear of retribution from administration as there was definitely a lack of trust between the staff and the principal. Moreover, the many of the participants had a low morale and were categorized as negative by the principal but I think the toxic culture contributed to their lack of trust and low morale. Additionally, teacher participants were frustrated that they did not have the tools to help their struggling learners.

One teacher described how she did not find value in kid talks or the student support team as a support for her or her students in need but rather all boxes that needed to be checked in order to get help for her students. It became clear that some of the teachers did not know how to support their students and thought abiding by the system in place they would help their struggling learners by first diagnosing the problem and then provide them with a cure (Cosier & Ashby, 2016; Valle & Connor, 2011). Further, the AIS specialists indicated that nearly 40% of their total student population received reading intervention support and that they believed more students needed support because they were identifying the problems within the students and trying to fix them. The fact that students received intervention support from professionals who were not highly trained (Batsche et al., 2005; Buffim et al., 2010; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006), while the students missed core instruction most likely created larger achievement gaps for these students (Theoharis, 2010).

Researchers have continuously cited educators' professional learning as critical to building educators' capacity for the implementation of MTSS (Castillo et al., 2016; Kratochwill et al., 2007). Additionally, ecological and socio-political factors cannot be ignored when examining a student's performance. Thorius & Maxcy (2015) discussed how no educational base is neutral and how MTSS cannot simply negate the socio-political factors that exist. Artiles et al., (2010) stated that MTSS or any other researched based program do not alone disrupt marginalizing systems. Further, until the district and staff at Perez Elementary can dig deeper to address these contributing factors and disrupt the marginalizing systems they have in place, these issues will continue to exist regardless of any EBP they try to implement.

Chapter 7: Antiquated System masked as MTSS

When examining the data collected from each elementary building, I noticed issues that were prevalent within each building. While each building had differences with their MTSS implementation, there were similarities across them that provided an important picture of the daily implementation and staff struggles across the three elementary buildings. I structured this chapter around key areas I found while writing the first three data chapters. These issues include: teacher sense making/efficacy, administrative sense making/efficacy, a deficit thinking perspective, misaligned system, and pullout academic support.

Some participants in each building maintained a deficit thinking perspective that can also be described as a medical model approach in education (Coiser & Ashby, 2016; Valle & Connor, 2011). The participants discussed that students who were placed in tier 3 would not leave tier 3 unless they were given a special education label. They believed that there was something wrong with the students, that the students came to them grade levels behind and that nothing they did would be able to help them go from a tier 3 to a tier 2 so a special education label was the only next step for tier 3 students. The misaligned system is something that happened within each elementary building. Unfortunately, the medical model approach created one systemic barrier for marginalized students that started at the district level and carried through each of the buildings as the district sent clear messages that not all students belonged in the classroom if they could not adhere to their 'normal' ideologies (Hehir, 2002; Parekh, 2023; Timberlake, 2020). It was evident from the data collection that each elementary building struggled with their

understanding of the MTSS model and how to implement each tier for each component of the MTSS model. Moreover, each building struggled with not only their knowledge base of the MTSS model but the necessary steps needed in order to implement the MTSS model at even the initial phase of the implementation process.

Teacher Sense Making and Efficacy

Many of the teacher participants in each building struggled with beliefs about their efficacy as teachers. Moreover, they did not believe there was something they could be doing better, they struggled with how to help their students and did not think that they could do what is best for their students. Many teachers did not know what to do to help their students and believed without support the students could not learn. Additionally, many of the teachers believed that a way to get their students the help they needed was to assign them a tier for intervention support and if that student continued to fall further behind grade level expectations, then that was an indication that the student may need special education testing. While some of the teachers grappled with this sense of efficacy, many came to a conclusion that their students came to them so far behind grade level that receiving a special education label would be the only way to meet their needs as they would not be able to have these students attain grade level expectations.

A lot of teachers were not critical of the system in place or critical of other people like their leaders, other teachers, and did not think they had a voice in shaping their work or MTSS. Further, Perez Elementary had a toxic culture where many of the teachers distrusted the administration and were fearful to participate in the study. The principal at Perez Elementary believed that a lot of the teachers

should know how to examine data and have data discussions and was frustrated that they were not but did not discuss how teachers were trained or any professional development that was given that would make them proficient in this area.

Administrative Sense Making and Efficacy

The principal at West Bridge Elementary did not feel that the district staff believed their teachers and support staff were effective with the MTSS implementation because the assistant superintendent wanted the staff to service more students for reading support. Additionally, the principal at West Bridge discussed that even though there were supports in place for students to receive emotional support throughout their school day, he did not feel confident that the supports in place were efficient of helped the students enough. Further, he discussed how the students came to them from backgrounds where they were exposed to so many traumas and had so much access to inappropriate content that their suspension rates were at an all time high. The principal did not feel the staff had enough professional development on how to deal with behaviors or appropriate behavioral plans and hoped the staff could receive more support. Further, this lack of district support was also evident at William Elementary.

The principal at William Elementary did not feel supported by the district staff and was in jeopardy of losing their job. She did not believe she had the authority to address issues she saw with teachers and the way they used the support team as a means for special education identification or how they used their intervention blocks as study halls for students. The principal knew that the staff did

not have enough professional development on MTSS or its implementation but was not able to educate her staff by herself and needed the district's support to help build staff's capacity. Additionally, she needed the district's support to not allow teachers to bring deficit-based data to the support team and receive special education testing for students. This deficit-based data was also evident at Perez Elementary as well. The principal at Perez Elementary felt frustrated that her staff did not use data or the support team appropriately. She believed that the staff used the support team as a means to get students identified for special education and she did describe ways in which she tried to shift teacher's away from using the support team in that way but felt it was a slow process.

All of the principals did not believe they had the capability to do something better or have a voice in shaping their work with MTSS because they did not feel supported by the district. The principals believed the flaws in their system were due to the teachers lack of knowledge centered on various components of MTSS and lack of district support but they did not reflect on how their own roles contributed to the flaws within their MTSS system in place. None of the principals discussed the need for being a social justice leader and saw themselves as more of a manager of daily issues that arose. The lack of introspective thoughts and actions from some of the participants came across in the data as deficit thinking and although this was evident in much of the data collected, it is important to note that their sense making and efficacy played a role.

Deficit Thinking Perspective

Many educators I talked with believed that a deficit with the students was why they were underperforming academically. The staff believed that the students started school too low, did not have access to books, did not have parents that discussed math concepts with them, and they all discussed how COVID had caused the students to be grade levels behind their cohorts. When I talked with the principals and dean of students, they discussed how students were exposed to so much at home and experienced such chaotic trauma that the staff was incapable of helping some students emotionally. The principal at West Bridge described it this way:

Have the programs changed any of the behaviors and the outcomes? I don't know that it really has to be honest with you. The data will probably suggest no. I haven't done a whole lot of mid-year looking at things, but from year to year overall I've had more suspensions this year than ever. The number of suicide assessments that we've done at this level this year is over 30 and it is scary the trauma these kids have been exposed to but the staff needs help with modeling how to implement the behavior interventions.

The West Bridge Elementary principal discussed at great length his perspective that some students were exposed to such inconceivable trauma that they do not care about anything. Because of this, he felt their current social-emotional resources in place at West Bridge are not only ineffective but their suspension rate is the highest it's ever been. The principal at West Bridge believed it was the level of trauma the students were exposed to, coupled with the lack of understanding by staff in how to respond that led to higher suspension rates and the ineffective social-emotional supports. Yet, he clearly stated that the staff needs additional training on how to implement behavioral interventions. Therefore, even

though the principal acknowledged that the staff at West Bridge needed additional training to better support the students, his perspective as to why their suspension rates were at an all time high was because the programs they had in place were ineffective or the trauma the students experiences were too severe for the staff to support those students.

When I interviewed the Dean at Perez Elementary, she commented on how students were exposed to so many explicit things from the Internet or lack of parental supervision that the staff at Perez Elementary had a lot of behavioral and socio-emotional concerns with students that were difficult to address. Yet, she did not relate student behaviors or social-emotional concerns back to the fact that staff at Perez Elementary lacked the skills and knowledge needed to better help the students. This deficit thinking perspective extended throughout the staff at each building. I think it is important to highlight some of the participant's voices from each building. The AIS specialist at West Bridge Elementary described their perceived issues with students in this way:

There's so many problems, Michelle. I mean we're not going to solve the real problem. It's not a Tier 1 problem. But what the real tier one problem is like you said the consistency, and making sure that everybody is doing the same thing but even when you do there's going to be issues because of the student population coming in, never going to preschool, never being read to and there's so many variables and components of what is going on with the kids we still are not reaching all of our kids. Then we have had a kid, maybe from you know, a different building like we've had kids walk in here from other buildings that they're in AIS, and we have to put them in AIS because they're AIS identified in the other building, so let's just be in AIS here, and we look at them and think you we are in the group that fits you right like we could put you at a grade level up, maybe

The staff members at each elementary school discussed how low their students come to school and how little access they have to resources they believe

students need in order to be successful that their students will never catch up to their cohorts who are on grade level. Moreover, some staff members believed that students who are so far behind grade level would continue to remain there until the district allowed the students to be placed in a special education program. Yet, when I asked the staff what happened to the students that did receive a special education label they responded that the child then works with the special education teacher and still does not make enough gains to be on grade level academically. Therefore, a lot of staff believed that their population of students come to them so far behind that nothing they did would help students make enough academic gains to help them catch up but believed they should be placed into a special education program where they would still continue to not make enough academic gains to be on grade level with their cohorts. Some of the teachers viewed their students as having a problem that needed to be fixed (Coiser & Ashby, 2016; Valle & Connor, 2011) and they would then become someone else's responsibility (Hehir, 2002; Parekh, 2023; Timberlake, 2020). Some staff held these beliefs even though in each building the staff recognized and admitted that they do not have a clear understanding of the MTSS components or implementation, or how to use data collected. Therefore, they do not know how to alter their instruction, provide an evidence based intervention, progress monitor the student to see if the intervention is right but they think the next steps for their students should be to skip all of that and get a special education label. An AIS specialist at William Elementary described their team meetings in this way:

It truly varies between each grade level. Some do discuss assessments, but not necessarily how their students did in terms of success...even

though I know that's what the goal of these meetings are. I would say the meetings are more informal. We discuss things like state testing that was coming up. Sometimes we discussed field trips. Sometimes we do discuss our kid talks for kids who are struggling behaviorally in the classroom. So it definitely has taken a turn from being about data.

This quote highlights how the staff recognized that their data meetings do not discuss data and teachers did not utilize data to make informed decisions about their instruction. The staff and principals in each building discussed how they all struggled with making informed data decisions and did not have systems in place that centered on data but yet they still maintained the perspective that it is the students who are the ones with the problems that needed fixing (Coiser & Ashby, 2016; Valle & Connor, 2011).

I became curious why the staff would want students who struggled to receive a special education label if that was not what would help them meet grade level expectations and some believed that was what the student needed. I asked many of those I spoke with why they thought the student needed special education programming if it did not help the student in need reach grade level expectations. A teacher from William Elementary discussed at great length the challenges they encountered with the lack of clarity on what they should do with students who struggled in their classroom and described her struggles in this way, "What should I be doing with them, like what program? And then they're like, 'Well, it's not about the program, right? It's about the intervention and I am like, whatever, I heard this 1,000 times. What do you want me to do with this kid? And then I end up doing my own thing with them.'" Spillane et al. (2002) discusses the need to examine research in cognitive and social psychology and dig deeper to understand human nature and the

complexity of the sense making process when examining teacher's decision making. Further, teachers' positionalities play a large role in how they make sense of their world, and their existing knowledge/experiences play a large role in how they make sense on how to interpret what their students' may need as scholars believe that underlying teacher behavior are complex processes (Barko & Shavelson, 2013; Spillane et al., 2002). This classroom teacher at William Elementary clearly stated that she did not know what to do with her students that struggled with the instruction she taught and just ended up doing her own thing with those students. This same classroom teacher is the one who discussed at great length that even though her students did not qualify for special education services, they desperately needed to receive them so they could have the necessary supports in place to help those students not struggle as much during her lessons. Moreover, she stated that some students painfully struggled without the added special education supports and believed they could benefit from the additional support services. Further, the teachers interviewed believed the students needed testing for special education services when they did not respond to their intervention support but the intervention support they utilized was not always evidence based, nor did they progress monitor how students responded to their instruction. These data points exemplify the deficit thinking and medical model perspectives the staff at each elementary building maintained in relation to their students because it is the students who need to be fixed, rather than their instruction or their intervention support.

It was mind boggling for me to know the staff in each building repeatedly stated that they did not have a clear understanding of the MTSS model; they did not

know how to disseminate data; they did not have a clear understanding of the new CKLA program the district adopted; they did not have the background knowledge about evidence based interventions when students struggled with various curriculum standards; they sometimes did not teach math; their students did not always have more than ten minutes for recess; they did not have social-emotional or behavioral support needed to meet the needs of their students, etc.; despite all of these clear issues with teacher knowledge, pedagogy, programs, lack of understanding of the MTSS model and the implementation of it, a great many staff believed it is the students who are the problem and the reason as to why they will never catch up to grade level expectations. The staff never discussed how all these issues within the building impacted student learning. I believe it was because the staff maintained a medical model approach and started with identifying the problem within the student that needed to be fixed as opposed to recognizing systemic barriers that may be in place and problem solving how to best support their students to keep them in the classroom (Valle & Connor, 2011).

The principals at William and Perez Elementary buildings discussed at great length the lack of knowledge their staff had and they believed their buildings had a tier one issue with instruction but that they could not address it because of the lack of help they had from the district administration. Yet, both principals discussed how they also have an issue with teachers trying to use their current MTSS model as a means for a special education label. The fact that the buildings struggled with data collection, dissemination of the data, progress monitoring, intervention supports, and pulled students out of class while core instruction is taught but pushed to get

students special education labels is another example of how staff at these elementary buildings believed it is the student who has the problem that needs to be fixed. Moreover, there was no discussion by any participant centered on how the missed instruction that happened while students were pulled out and received intervention support during the WINN and Tier 3 blocks impacted the learning of those students impacted.

Misaligned MTSS System

The classroom teachers and AIS providers did not believe anything they did would ever get students in tier 3 to achieve grade level goals. While some teachers believed that students who received special education services would then get the support services they needed, they still did not believe even with special education services that the students would catch up to grade level expectations. These beliefs seemed like a self-fulfilling cycle that made their initial belief 'these kids cannot learn at grade level' come true. Yet, the staff's lack of MTSS model knowledge was clearly evident throughout each elementary building. These quotes from participants shed light on staff's lack of understanding in relation to the MTSS model:

The West Bridge AIS specialist described their tier support:

I can count 3 under the AIS teaching assistant. So then I asked the instructional coach if we could have the ITAs take a student so they have a big group of them. So they're Tier 2 getting this program, but 3 of them are counted with the AIS teaching assistant and then the rest for tier 2. So they're not technically on the books, but they're getting the intervention. Well, we don't really have a lot of tier 2 reading students it's mostly tier 3.... It's kind of I will say, fuzzy.

The West Bridge AIS specialist described how they designate students between tiers 2 and 3 but discussed how their tier designation and tier support is 'fuzzy'. Moreover, she also stated that even though tier 2 students received an intervention for support, those students 'are not on the books,' which indicated that students who received intervention support were not on record anywhere. Therefore, at West Bridge, the way in which they determine tier support for students varies and not all students who received intervention support are reported or accounted.

A William Elementary Instructional Coach described their MTSS understanding in this way:

In terms of MTSS, in terms of that whole system, yeah, we're lacking. We need it badly. I don't think there is that foundational understanding of what this is, and everybody knows that if they have a concern they have that right but I think there is the big misunderstanding with what your role is as a teacher in that, I think, is where we where we fall short, and I think some teachers are very overwhelmed and really shy away from the extra work. I was on the MTSS district committee that had to be like 4 years old. Okay? So MTSS is not as new but yeah, there's a lot of work to do

The instructional coach discussed how the teachers at William Elementary lacked a 'foundational understanding' of what the MTSS model is and what their roles are in relation to it. Moreover, she described that teachers are overwhelmed and while they may see their students struggle within their classroom, they are not aware what next steps they should take in order to best support the students. Additionally, she indicated that even though the district has had an MTSS district committee for at least four years that she has been a part of during that time,

teachers and staff are still lacking the foundational understanding of what the MTSS model entails and how to implement it with fidelity.

The principal at William Elementary stated, “I have had MTSS training and come from a district that I believe implemented it well but this building lacks the understanding of what MTSS is despite the meetings I have had centered on what the MTSS model looks like.” She believed that the staff at William Elementary lacked the necessary knowledge of what the MTSS model is and what it looks like when implemented with fidelity. Additionally, she indicated that she has held multiple staff meetings to inform her staff about the MTSS model but her staff lacked the necessary knowledge needed to implement the MTSS model with fidelity.

A first grade teacher at Perez Elementary described her lack of understanding of the MTSS model in this way:

It just feels like a like a lack of resources and a lack of clarity. They tell you you have to do WINN time and then they say that so and so wants us to be switching kids so and so wants us to be doing this but they just don't give us the materials or the Who's Who's and then they're telling you you have to be discussing data at PLCs, and you should be closing the gaps but do not show us how

These participant’s voices are examples of how some staff members in each building who were part of this study did not have a clear understanding of the MTSS model or how to implement it with fidelity. In each building, I talked with participants that said they needed more clarification, were not sure which students were in each tier, nor did they have any knowledge about the interventions given to students that were pulled from their classrooms. The principals at West Bridge and Perez Elementary discussed at length the lack of knowledge their staff possessed in

relation to the MTSS model and how they believed the MTSS model was not implemented well based on their background knowledge of the MTSS model.

The staff at both West Bridge and Perez Elementary do not record or establish tier 2 interventions in place that work with ITAs. The AIS staff at William Elementary had tier 2 interventions in place for some students identified but they had a double dipping approach that caused some students to be pulled from their instruction for an hour each day for reading services. These data points reflect how the MTSS model in place in each elementary building do not align with the intentionality of the MTSS components or implementation. The staff at both William Elementary and Perez Elementary buildings discussed that they did not have a clear understanding of what the MTSS model was and could not define its components, nor identify which components were utilized within their building. The staff lacked an understanding of data dissemination and how to use data to make informed decisions about their instruction. The AIS specialist at William Elementary described the teacher data collection this way, "Alright, the teachers give all these assessments. They collect this data, but maybe that's the next step of understanding what to do with it. I feel like they need more direction and understanding of what that truly means."

Additionally, each participant discussed at great length that WINN was optional this school year and because of that each teacher was doing something different in his or her classroom while nearly half of his or her students were pulled out for intervention support. Further, even though the principals knew that teachers struggled with behavior and academic supports for their students, they did

not feel they had the authority to discuss with teachers any identified areas in need of improvement within their teaching skills because of the strong teacher's union in place. The principal of William Elementary described it this way, "There is a union representative in the building that is very close with the teacher's union president and is constantly reporting back to him about changes she is not happy with that I am trying to implement- things like not using the support team as a means for a Special education label and telling the teaching staff what behaviors should constitute a code of conduct violation."

The principals at these two buildings strongly believed they had a solid understanding of what the MTSS model implementation should look like within their buildings but that their current implementation was not close to the appropriate implementation because their staff lacked the knowledge necessary and they did not have the district's help to educate or enforce staff to implement the MTSS model with fidelity.

Interestingly, the West Bridge Elementary principal and some staff believed they had a clear understanding of how the MTSS model should be implemented but indicated that they were not able to implement the MTSS model with fidelity. Moreover, the principal stated the staff did not have a deep understanding of behavioral plans or interventions and they needed to improve their data system to create more fluidity amongst the tiers. Additionally, the AIS staff stated they were only able to provide reading intervention support to tier 3 students and tier 2 students were expected to receive that support from their classroom teachers. While the staff at West Bridge Elementary were familiar with the NYS improvement

plan for Math and had some knowledge about how to gather data and use it to make informed decision making about their teaching, the staff serviced nearly half of the student population for reading services and many held the perspective that none of their tier 3 students would be released unless the students received a Special Education label. Moreover, the data indicated that each building had staff that maintained a deficit thinking perspective in relation to their students.

The staff in each building repeatedly stated that they did not have a clear understanding of the MTSS model; they did not know how to disseminate data effectively; they did not have a clear understanding of the new CKLA program the district adopted; they did not have the background knowledge for effective interventions when students struggled with various curriculum standards; they sometimes did not teach math, their students did not always have more than ten minutes for recess; they did not have socio-emotional or behavioral support needed to meet the needs of their students and the list could go on; despite all of these clear issues with teacher knowledge, pedagogy, programs, lack of understanding of the MTSS model and the implementation of it, the staff believed it is the students who are the problem and the reason why they will never catch up to grade level expectations. The staff never discussed how all these issues within the building impacted student learning.

The principals at William and Perez Elementary buildings discussed at great length the lack of knowledge their staff had and they believed their buildings had a tier one issue with instruction but that they could not address it because of the lack of help they had from the district administration. Yet, both principals discussed how

they also have an issue with teachers trying to use their current MTSS model as a means for a special education label. The fact that the buildings struggled with data collection, dissemination of the data, progress monitoring, intervention supports, and pulled students out of class while core instruction is taught but pushed to get students special education labels is another example of how staff at these elementary buildings believed it is the student who has the problem that needs to be fixed. Moreover, there was no discussion by any participant about how the missed instruction that happened while students were pulled out and received intervention support during the WINN and Tier 3 blocks impacted the learning of those students impacted. Some participants did discuss how no new instruction should be taught while students were pulled for intervention services but they knew some teachers continued on with their instruction.

I became curious about students who were in tier 3 for a long period of time, without making gains, and then being tested for Special Education services. I learned that in each building, some students are fast tracked to special education, even without data points from tier 3 intervention support and some teachers use the building support team as a stepping stone to get their students special education testing. In fact, each building principal shared their perspective on what happened to students who either parents, specialists or teachers believed should be fast tracked into Special Education services.

Special Education Route

Each building discussed how the old system, the system prior to the MTSS model, was used as a way to get students identified for special education services.

The principals and staff at both William and Perez Elementary buildings discussed how the current system that they refer to as their MTSS model operated similarly to their previous model in moving students into special education. Staff at each school discussed how the student support team (SST), is viewed by staff as a way to expedite or check the boxes to get special education testing for their students who are in need of additional support. The principal at William Elementary described how her staff expedited special education testing on students:

So I do look at it with more of a strict lens, because we have a parent population of a community that likes sometimes services when they're not justified.... So I do have one AIS provider who has been here for a very long time. She will openly admit that she does not believe in evidence-based research, and that she does not really believe at times that we're gonna move from Tier 3 to Tier 2 and she thinks that it should go straight to Special ED. So there is a lack of perseverance with some of my staff with respect to due process, at which point it can hinder the consistency based on who the provider is.

The principal at Perez Elementary described her building and personal experience with her child in the district this way:

I mean, like I said, I feel like we're kind of a mess at tier 2 like with the WINN and stuff it's kind of all over the place. It's really just about taking those kids that didn't qualify for AIS support but still need interventions. I mean my own daughter, for example, is in another elementary in the building and I'm dealing with that as a parent where that they want to get her tested for special ed services. You know they were going to bring her to SST to get tested. And I said, 'Well, I've never received anything indicating that she's qualified for Tier 3 support, and they're telling me she doesn't qualify for tier 3, but she's getting tier 2 with an AIS teacher who is progress monitoring but she doesn't qualify for tier 3 because they want to get her tested for special ed. So that that kind of is what happens in this building too. So tier 2 is messy.

The AIS specialist from West Bridge described students getting out of Tier 3 in this way, "But with reading nobody every really gets out. I don't know of anybody

who has gotten out this year. They're not really leaving unless they go the special ed route.”

As I reported previously, the data showed that staff in each elementary building held deficit thinking perspectives and they did not have a clear understanding of the MTSS model. Those realities must be seen alongside this one as the staffs still move forward with special education testing without having authentic and necessary steps in place prior to indicate what support the student has been given. Additionally, at West Bridge, if students exhibit behaviors in the classroom that the district behavioral coach deemed dangerous to others, then those students would be fast tracked into another special education program within the district that was more restrictive. The West Bridge Principal described fast tracking a student into a more restrictive Special Education program using the district behavioral coach:

The upside to the behavior coach is she's got the ear of some folks in the Special Ed department. So, in her opinion, if something is really escalating, or needs to be if you pardon the term, fast tracked, then she has the ear of some folks that can kind of make some of that happen sooner rather than later. So it's good to have her on our side in terms of some of those different things

These data pieces indicated how staff in each elementary building utilized their SSTs or behavior coach to move students into a special education and a more restrictive environment. Two of the buildings indicated that they do not have tier 2 intervention support for their students and the students serviced by either the AIS specialists or ITAs were what they considered to be tier 3 but gave them a tier 2 label to be able to have higher group sizes. The large issue in each building is that the staff sees their highest need students as incapable of reaching grade level

expectations, which is coupled with a system that does not provide students with actual targeted instruction and in turn sentences students with a more restrictive placements. The model in place is built on the idea that they will just keep removing students, pullout from general education for AIS that does not help them as a means to remove them into a segregated Special Education placement.

Pullout academic support

Each building over identified students in need of academic support services by providing academic intervention services to nearly 40% of their total student population, nearly double the MTSS model recommended percentage for reading support services. After the buildings had their data day, they then pulled students from the general education classroom to receive additional academic support in either reading or math. The students are pulled during their WINN for reading intervention services and Tier 3 for math intervention services within the academic schedule. The students who were pulled from the general education classroom during these blocks in the schedule work with either the AIS specialists or ITAs. Whether students are given a tier 2 or tier 3 identification, they received thirty-sixty minute intervention support five days a week outside of their general education classroom. When these students worked with the ITAs, they did not have any goals set and in most cases were not given evidence based intervention support. All classroom teachers indicated students who are pulled during these blocks either missed core instruction or new instruction in their general education classrooms.

The students who were identified as the highest need were placed with AIS specialists who maintained NYS reading certificates. The rest of the students

identified in need of intervention services were placed with teaching assistants who had very little training on how to intervene with students who struggle academically. Additionally, the tier identification given to these students who worked with both the reading specialists and teaching assistants were a tier 2 in order to have larger intervention group sizes but the participants indicated many of those students were what they considered a tier 3. Further, the teaching assistants did not keep any record of what they worked on with the students or how the students responded to the interventions they utilized which lead to the further investigation of what instruction happened during these pull out times. Additionally, in each building the students who remained in the general education classroom are expected by the district to work with their general education teacher on skills they need additional support with.

While the students that were identified in need of intervention support left the classroom, some of the students who remained in the classroom either received continued core instruction, additional extension instruction or given new instruction on writing, Science or Social Studies. Since there was no clarification given by the district on what classroom teachers needed to work on with students left in their classrooms, each classroom teacher worked on something they wanted to with their students that remained in their classroom during these intervention blocks. Here is what the instructional coach at William Elementary described what happened during these blocks of the schedule with the students who are left in the general education classroom:

The majority of classroom teachers have the students work on a computer program that is an extension of the CKLA program the district utilizes but

that was only intended for students to receive 45 minutes total in a week and teachers had students utilize it for 30 minutes five days a week. Also, they give students access to other computer programs as well, in sum mostly the students that are not pulled out for additional services work on computer programs during that time

A first grade teacher at Perez Elementary indicated what she does in her classroom during these blocks in the schedule:

So one of the things that they told us that we could be doing or should be doing is we don't actually have enough time to teach our entire CKLA program. So with the knowledge piece there's like the story, and then there's an application portion where sometimes you do writing or word work, so a lot of times when my tier 3s are gone I do the application portion. Yeah, which breaks my heart because it's like sometimes that's writing or word work, and that's where the fun is where we like act it out and where the vocabulary building is. That's where they learn to write. But there's just not enough time in the day. So then you have to keep going and they just have to miss it

A Kindergarten teacher at Perez Elementary described it this way:

That's kind of when we are doing something writing wise but then there's days when my ELL's are pulled for it or we're finishing up knowledge because it's always a time crunch too. Sometimes I can challenge my higher kids and put them on amplify or we do fun crafts during that time

The Instructional coach at William Elementary described these blocks in the schedule in this way:

When I think the biggest problem with WINN because I've been asking for direction on all year is that we don't have district direction on it for months and months. The message came out that says you can kind of do whatever.

These participant's voices exemplified that when students identified with the highest need of intervention services leave the classroom, they missed core instruction or writing and vocabulary lessons. In one example, the classroom with the ELL students missed their knowledge lesson from the CKLA program, writing or

fun crafts in Kindergarten. Since there was no clarification on what teachers should do or work on with students that were left in their classroom, teachers were left to determine what activities they would work on with students.

The students who were pulled from the general education classroom during these blocks in the schedule work with either the AIS specialists or ITAs. Whether students are given a tier 2 or tier 3 identification, they received thirty-sixty minute intervention support five days a week outside of their general education classroom. When these students worked with the ITAs, they did not have any goals set and in most cases were not given evidence based intervention support. Two realities of the pullout model across three schools were sub par instruction and stagnant tier groups.

Sub par instruction

Nearly half of the student population in each elementary building was pulled from their general education classroom to receive additional reading support services. Even though the reading specialists are trained to help support the students who struggle in this academic area, many reported that they had larger group sizes for the highest risk population of students so they could service more students at once. The MTSS model recommended group sizes for tier three instruction is a group no larger than 3 students per adult but many AIS specialists indicated they had either double or triple that amount in order to service more students. Additionally, the interventions they utilized with the students required a smartboard but since they only had access to one smartboard at West Bridge Elementary, they had between 9-11 students in a small area of their room working

together that were tier 3. Further, the reading specialists said they gave their instructional plans to their teaching assistant to keep it consistent amongst the AIS groups but when I observed the teaching assistants did not always have access to a smartboard when they worked with their group of students. It was not clear how they effectively administered the intervention if it required a smartboard that they did not have. Additionally, only the AIS TA was given the lesson plans the AIS specialists used but the ITAs devised their own lessons when they worked with their groups of students. This led me to question the caliber of instruction that happened with the teaching assistants groups.

The teaching assistants had no formal training on how to administer reading or math intervention services and scholars suggest the need for highly trained professionals to provide intervention services to students identified in need (Batsche, et al., 2005; Buffim & Mattos, 2010; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). At West Bridge and William Elementary buildings, the ITAs monitored by the instructional coaches and they discussed with them what they should utilize when they worked with their groups of students. Yet, the instructional coach at William Elementary discussed how she chose the intervention program the ITAs used and that she taught herself how to use it after she watched a short YouTube video online. In addition to no formal training, the ITAs did not progress monitor the groups of students they worked with so they did not have a formal way of knowing the students' response rate to the intervention. Therefore, the ITA groups of students were pulled from core instruction to work with adults who have no formal training on how to intervene with students who struggled academically and are not progress

monitored to determine their response rate to the intervention. The MTSS model guidelines suggests that when students are identified in need for additional academic support services that they should work with highly trained professionals with evidence based interventions and progress monitored to determine their response rate to the intervention and if the intervention needs to be changed. The AIS specialist at William Elementary described how and when they change interventions for students that they think did not make progress:

I was gonna say, yeah, I feel like it's based every year at on our AIMSweb scoring, because if we're not meeting our goals with enough students, then I would feel that we would determine that we need to find a new intervention program that would better fit our kids

The AIS specialists at William Elementary made it clear that they did not change the interventions they used to support their students until the next school year. Moreover, the AIS staff waited until the next school year to determine how the students scored on AIMSweb and if they did not do well, then it would be an indication for them to alter their interventions when they pulled those same group of students. The AIS specialists at West Bridge did say that they will move students between groups based on their response to interventions and do progress monitor their students. Since each group works on a different intervention, when they move the students between groups the student does receive a new intervention. The MTSS model suggests that students are progress monitored for 6-10 weeks with an intervention to determine their rate of improvement and if a student is not making appropriate gains, then the intervention should be changed. Since the staff in the buildings did not use data to inform their instruction, or progress monitor their

students to determine if they needed a new intervention, it did not surprise me to learn that the tier fluidity within the buildings is nearly nonexistent.

Stagnant Tier Groups

It was clear that the staff in each building did not utilize data to inform their instruction or change their instruction based on progress monitoring of their students. In some cases, the lack of progress monitoring contributed to stagnant tier groups. The instructional coach at William Elementary described it this way: “I walked into the room and just happen to listen to students read with the ITAs and believed they should be dismissed and when I talked to [the ITAs? Or who?] about this they said they did think for a few weeks that was the case and had a few other students they wanted me to take a look at to see if they could be discontinued as well.”

The students who worked with ITAs are not given goals or progress monitored and this data piece adds to the issues that can arise for students who worked with ITAs. In this particular case at William Elementary, the instructional coach happened to listen to students who read with the ITAs and believed they could possibly be dismissed from their groups. When she talked with the ITAs about it after the students left, they then told her there were a few more students they believed could be dismissed and felt that way for a few weeks. Therefore, there were multiple students who worked with the ITAs that could have been dismissed from services and missed additional weeks in their general education classroom because of the lack of progress monitoring and system in place. Yet, the lack of a systemic way to create tier fluidity is not unique to William Elementary as this is an

issue that each elementary building encountered. Here is how some of the participants described the lack of tier fluidity in their buildings:

An AIS specialist at Perez Elementary described the lack of fluidity amongst groups in this way:

We had a lot in the winter of our tier 2 kids getting dismissed I usually take the lowest group, so I don't see as much movement in my groups because I tend to take the ones who are the lowest and make the slowest progress. I would say it would be maybe out of a caseload of 40 students I think I was able to dismiss 2 or 3 of my math kids. I know 2 or 3 out of 40 is not a lot but I know my coworker AIS specialist had 45 kids on her caseload and I think she was able to dismiss 4 or 5 of her tier 2 kids. Our kids are so low it's hard for it to be as fluid

An AIS specialist at William Elementary described the lack of tier movement in this way:

Tier 2 is moving out of AIS and being dismissed because they are reaching their goals, and they are successful with the intervention program....Our Tier 3 students are so so low, so I feel like even with the gains I've made with them it would be very hard to justify moving them to a Tier 2

The Instructional Coach at William Elementary described the lack of tier fluidity:

No Tier 3 I can't imagine a tier 3 student going out of Tier 3. Yeah, I can't imagine when that would happen.....the ITAs do not progress monitor their Tier 2 students but last week I had a couple of kids come up where we wanted to kind of discontinue, so I'll pull them and kind of see where they are and check with the teacher to see if they're seeing the same thing in class, and if they agree with what I'm seeing then we may discontinue them from Tier 2.

An AIS specialist at West Bridge Elementary described their lack of tier fluidity in this way:

The tier fluidity is better in math. Let's say a kid has tier 2 support, we don't have tier 3 for math, but we can test them out easier, and they go back to the classroom at tier one. We may see them again after we test again on AIMSweb so they may come back but we do have a little fluidity with math because there are other supports with the way we do the WINN and the way we work it when they go back to the classroom. But with reading nobody every really gets out. I don't know of anybody who has gotten out this year. They're not really leaving unless they go the special ed route or we can bump them up. If we have the ability like in that first grade, we take those 6 and

push them up to the AIS higher group. If we have that ability to get somebody up, there are a couple of kids that were doing really well. So we move them into that group but even though they move groups in AIS they are still considered tier 3.

The West Bridge Elementary principal described the lack of fluidity:

I think that's one of the things that we need to get better at and do more and I don't know how we do it strategically in the sense of the time that it takes to do it. That's our biggest struggle is, how do we do regroup kids efficiently?.....So we don't have kids that are lifers in tier 3. You know your life is in tier 3. You know, because it is happening in theory but it's not supposed to be that way. You have students come in and you want to move them out. We struggle with the ins and the outs of that. We always try to add more kids in. We find kids and say okay, God, they need more help now. So the ins come in but the outs don't seem to match.

These data pieces shed light on how the staff in the three buildings maintained a perspective that the students are too far behind or too low to make any real gains or potentially even moved to a tier 2 after the students have been in tier 3 intervention reading support for a significant amount of time. There was not one participant who believed that students who were given tier 3 identification would be moved to a tier 2. Moreover, they all held the same beliefs that if a tier 3 student was moved from tier 3 reading intervention support, then it would be because they received a Special Education label.

Conclusion

In each elementary building, the staff lacked a basic understanding of what the MTSS model should entail and in turn was not able to implement it even at the basic level. The staff in each building did not have the knowledge needed to collect data, disseminate it, and in turn adjust their instruction accordingly. The district expectations were teachers could work on whatever they wanted during the WINN and Tier 3 blocks in the schedule but wanted teachers to support the students left in

the classroom in areas they identified in need of support. Yet, the students who were left in the general education classroom worked on new instruction and in most cases core instruction. Additionally, the students who were pulled from their general education classrooms received sub par instruction, while they missed either core or new instruction, and in many instances received this intervention support by staff that did not hold literacy degrees or were provided with appropriate training. Further, while they worked with these intervention support staff members, many students were not assigned any goals, not provided with evidence-based interventions, and not progress monitored on the intervention they received.

Despite staff's lack of knowledge centered on the MTSS model, an antiquated system still in place, many participants in each elementary building held deficit-thinking perspectives in relation to the students they serviced. Moreover, a lot of staff believed it was the student's lack of resources, exposure to trauma or failed academic gains that equated to students were the ones who needed to be fixed and they wanted to fix them by fast tracking them to special education services. Every participant indicated that tier 3 reading students do not leave tier 3 unless they received a special education label. Even though some staff members indicated that special education services would not mean that those students would achieve grade level expectations, a special education label was still the best option for students who struggled academically.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

This research study was developed to gain a deeper understanding of what the MTSS model implementation looks like in elementary schools. In this study, I examined three elementary buildings in one district that utilized the MTSS model by conducting interviews and field observations. I learned the challenges that staff encountered throughout the implementation process of the MTSS model. As previously noted in Chapters 1 and 2, a gap in the literature necessitated my desire to expand and enhance the literature that exists centered on what the realities are at the elementary level when trying to implement the MTSS framework. Through analysis of interviews and field observations, it became clear that the staff in each elementary building did not have a clear understanding of what the MTSS components were or how to implement it. In this concluding chapter, I summarize the findings as well as discuss implications, recommendations, and limitations of this study. At the conclusion, I argue that when school districts do not disrupt the systemic barriers in place prior to implementing MTSS, then MTSS will not meet the needs of all students even when implemented through a social justice lens. Further, while it is necessary to build educators' capacity centered on MTSS components and its implementation, it is even more crucial to challenge the assumptions and beliefs that are held by all staff and ensure that both the district and staff believe in inclusive educational practices through social justice education.

Discussion

This section describes and summarizes key findings that emerged from each data chapter. In this dissertation study, I examined the implementation of the MTSS model at the elementary level. Each data chapter revealed findings related to my research question:

1. How are elementary schools implementing the MTSS framework?

MTSS as a systemic barrier

Implementation Science indicates that the leadership team needs to provide staff with a clear description of an EBP, clear program components that define the program, operational definitions of program components and practical fidelity assessment (NIRN, 2017). Even though the Assistant Superintendent provided staff with an MTSS guidance document, many participants did not know what the MTSS components or implementation were. Moreover, many participants were unclear about what exactly they should be doing with students during these blocks in the schedule. Further, communication protocols, guidance documents, and data routines articulated for monitoring student outcomes are all elements that need to happen during the installation phase (Blase et al., 2015) but did not in this district. Further, the district did not create implementation teams to train and coach staff on how to collect data, disseminate it, and in turn adjust instruction accordingly despite being a necessary step in the implementation process (McColskey-Leary & Garman-McClaine, 2021) which left teachers to make sense of how to support their students and their sense making was complex (Barko & Shavelson, 2013; Spillane et al., 2002). The district expectations were teachers could work on whatever they wanted

during the WINN and Tier 3 blocks in the schedule but wanted teachers to support the students left in the classroom in areas they identified in need of support. Again, the district approach reflected a medical model approach in education where they wanted teachers to identify the problem within the student and fix it (Valle & Connor, 2011) but teachers struggled with how to best support them (Barko & Shavelson, 2013; Spillane et al., 2002). Additionally, the students who were left in the general education classroom worked on new instruction and in most cases core instruction. Therefore, the students who were pulled from their general education classrooms received sub par instruction even though scholars suggest the importance of highly trained professionals should be the ones who provide interventions to students (Batsche et al., 2005; Buffim et al., 2010; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006), while they missed either core or new instruction, and most likely fell further behind (Theoharis, 2010). Further, while they worked with these intervention support staff members, many students were not assigned any goals, not provided with evidence-based interventions, not progress monitored on the intervention they received which is the complete opposite of what the many authors indicate is needed when supporting students in a RTI or MTSS model (Alahmari, A. 2019; Avant, D. W. 2016; Barnes & Harlacher, 2008; Buffim et al., 2010; Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2011; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007; Sugai & Horner, 2009).

Despite staff's lack of knowledge centered on the MTSS model, systemic barriers still in place, a lot of staff in each elementary building held deficit-thinking perspectives in relation to the students they serviced that aligned with the medical model perspective by following the ideology that there was a problem within the

student that needed to be fixed (Valle & Connor, 2011). Moreover, some of the staff believed it was the student's lack of resources, exposure to trauma or failed academic gains that equated to students were the ones who needed to be fixed and they wanted to fix them by fast tracking them to special education services. Every participant indicated that tier 3 reading students do not leave tier 3 unless they received a special education label. Even though the some staff indicated that special education services would not mean that those students would achieve grade level expectations, a special education label was still the best option for students who struggled academically. Additionally, it is clear that the tier 3 interventions were not effective in supporting students' academic growth. Further, there is a lot of literature pertaining to the need for early intervention services for struggling readers in grades K-2 (Buffim et al., 2010; Foorman, Herrera, & Dombeck, 2017; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007; Gersten & Dimino, 2006; Lipsky & Gartner, 1996).

While scholars support early literacy intervention to reduce the number of students who fail to meet grade level expectations (Foorman, Herrera, & Dombeck, 2017) and indicate early literacy intervention can be a direct correlation with students' academic achievement (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Dowdall et al., 2020; Partanen et al., 2019), providing pull out interventions to struggling readers can cause them to miss out on core instruction and fall further behind (Theoharis, 2010) which is exactly what happened in each elementary building in this district. Thus, this study adds to the literature on why students should not be pulled out for instruction as they fall further behind (Fernandez & Hynes, 2016; Hurt, 2012; Rothstein, 2004; Theoharis, 2010). While the staff in each building in this study

utilized a universal screener to identify students in need of interventions, the support system they had in place did not follow the recommended suggestions for the MTSS components or implementation (Alahmari, A. 2019; Avant, D. W. 2016; Barnes & Harlacher, 2008; Buffim et al., 2010; Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2011; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007; Sugai & Horner, 2009). Moreover, the students were pulled from core instruction, received instruction by adults that were not properly trained to intervene with students that struggled academically, not all of the students who received interventions were progress monitored and students were pulled for either thirty to sixty minutes five days a week for intervention support which was a much higher frequency than what the researchers recommend (Alahmari, A. 2019; Avant, D. W. 2016; Barnes & Harlacher, 2008; Buffim et al., 2010; Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2011; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007; Sugai & Horner, 2009)..

MTSS framework components

In each building, the staff utilized interventions to try to meet the needs of the students they identified in need of academic support but very few students were released from their intervention support. Additionally, there was an over identification of students in need of support in each building. In the MTSS framework, the first tier is considered Tier 1 where instruction is provided to all students, and like RtI 80% of students should respond with mastery to the content taught in this first tier level of instruction. Tier 2 is designated for 15% of the student population that did not demonstrate mastery and need additional instruction/re-teaching of the content taught in Tier 1. Tier 2 interventions should be given in a smaller group size, with individualized content strategies and typically

three times a week. Tier 3 is meant to support the students with a more intense. Tier 3 should be in a group of 2-3 students, four to five times a week, with an intense level of support from specialized trained professionals (Jimerson, Burns, & VanDerHeyden, 2016). Yet, in each building nearly half of the total student population received intervention support in larger group sizes and the students were not progress monitored. These practices clearly did not align with the intention behind the MTSS components and implementation (Alahmari, A. 2019; Avant, D. W. 2016; Barnes & Harlacher, 2008; Buffim et al., 2010; Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2011; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007; Sugai & Horner, 2009). Thus, the data suggests that in each building, there was a lack of understanding of what the MTSS framework entails. This data adds to previous studies that indicated educators' capacities need to be examined when implementing the MTSS framework and professional learning centered on the MTSS components and implementation is crucial for educators' prior to its implementation (Castillo et al., 2016; Kratochwill et al., 2007).

Multi tiered in MTSS refers to different levels of support for students academically, socially, emotionally, and behaviorally but some of the participants did not discuss much of the social or emotional pieces of the MTSS framework. Bender (2009) discusses how the a multi tiered support system (MTSS) integrates a continuum of practices, strategies, resources, structures, that includes a responsive and comprehensive framework that addresses barriers to student learning. Yet, none of the systemic barriers in place in each elementary were addressed using the MTSS framework, which adds to the literature that discusses the need of social

justice intentionality within every MTSS component in order to disrupt systemic barriers (Ferri, 2006; Sullivan et al., 2022). Futher, Batsche, et al. (2005) discusses the multi tier approach includes interventions that are categorized into three tiers. Tier 1 includes differentiated core instruction; Tiers 2 and 3 provide intensive individualized interventions. The screening and monitoring procedures vary between academic and behavior but the three -tier concepts is similar (Batsche et al., 2005). Educators use a problem-solving model that includes evaluating the data collected to continuously inform their decision-making about evidence-based instruction and the needed interventions (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). In each building, I found that the staff did not use data to continuously inform their instruction. At William and Perez Elementary buildings, the staff repeatedly indicated that they did not know how to effectively collect or examine data. Further, even though that staff in each building did not have a clear understanding of what the MTSS framework entails, they believed that students who did not respond to the system the staff put in place failed because of the student's lack of knowledge and capabilities.

MTSS used with a deficit-thinking lens

In theory, MTSS is built on the idea that instruction and/or other issues, rather than student ability, may be the reasons why a student is not learning. Therefore, the MTSS framework integrates a continuum of supports to students. The principals and some staff grappled with their sense making of MTSS and their efficacy. They did not dive deeper into the systems in place and their role within the system. Further, they did not believe they can do something better or have a voice in shaping their work or MTSS. It was clear that a lot of staff in each elementary building maintained deficit-thinking

perspectives. Educators assume that the system is equitable and it's the students, parents and community that need to change (Yosso, 2005). The blame of a student's lack of academic achievement is often placed on parents, lack of funding, the kids, and/or society (Buffim et al., 2010). Disproportionality issues have occurred in RTI models because RTI ignores ecological factors such as classroom management, classroom instruction, and issues with the curriculum that could cause low student achievement (Stuart et al., 2011). Moreover, even though participants discussed at great lengths their lack of understanding of the new CKLA curriculum and some admitted they lacked the skills to help intervene with students who struggled in their classrooms, some staff believed the student's lack of progress was due to the student's deficiencies; resonating with the work and adding to the existing literature of Buffin et al., (2010); Sabnis et al., (2020); Valle & Connor, (2011) and Yosso (2005).

In each elementary building, students who were identified in need of intervention support that were serviced by the ITAs did not receive instruction that was based on how the student learns but rather how they responded to the universal screening. Ferri (2016) critically examined RTI and found numerous issues with the service model, screening procedures, and implementation process. Ferri discussed that students should receive instruction based on how they learn rather than how they respond to tests. Although schools across the U.S. have widely adopted RTI, there is lack of research indicating improved academic or behavioral student outcomes or a decrease in special education referrals (O'Connor & Freeman, 2012). The current system in place in each elementary building and the way, in which the staff implemented the MTSS framework, resembled the RTI model that

many authors have determined to be ineffective for students. Despite calling their system MTSS, each elementary operated an intervention model similar to the RTI model because they did not truly incorporate the behavioral and social emotional components into their system. Moreover, Ferri (2016) argued that RTI 'retains a deficit-orientation associated with traditional special education practice' and believes the focus needs to be centered on the way a student learns, not how they respond to EBPs. Interestingly, there is no clear guidance on what EBPs amongst the ITAs should be utilized or what the next steps should be when a student is not responding to Tier 3 instruction. Additionally, the implementation of the RTI model often has students receiving more intense instruction by educators other than the classroom teacher often in another room and outside the general education classroom (Ferri, 2016). Further, each elementary building had students pulled out of their general education classroom and received instruction by adults other than their classroom teacher and in some cases by adults who did not have as much training or education as their classroom teachers.

Some scholars argue MTSS addresses systemic barriers for marginalized students (Jackson et al., 2016; Sullivan & Osher, 2019) but this study showed that many participants believed that the reason students did not respond to their intervention support or classroom instruction was due to a deficiency within the student. The issues with this line of thought process is the ecological variables such as instruction, classroom environment, curriculum are being completely ignored and the Tier 1 instruction that is given to all students is not enough alone to disrupt the oppression of minority students (Artiles et al., 2010). Therefore, this study adds

to the literature that indicates MTSS needs to be implemented with an equity-centered framework in order to disrupt the systemic barriers in place for marginalized students (Sullivan et al., 2022).

Since concerns arise in school systems related to deficit-thinking perspectives, disproportionality and equity issues, implementation science can be utilized to help practitioners in schools actively examine the systems in place to determine what changes need to be made. Moreover, implementation science is a framework that helps guide districts and teaching staff through the implementation of evidence based programs by providing steps and components that are in need of constant review. It is imperative that schools have cyclical data systems in place to examine the implementation of any evidence-based program.

Implementation science discusses the implementation infrastructure: training, coaching, data systems, etc. by making necessary organizational changes to policies, procedures, changing schedules and providing supports needed to begin the work so staff feel confident in using the innovation (Blase et al., 2015). During the installation phase, it is necessary for the implementation team to have ongoing professional learning and support for staff utilizing the evidence based program (EBP), and opportunities to coach the staff on how to use the program as it was intended. Additionally, staff members need to have a system for collecting, analyzing, and using data for decision making that includes measures of fidelity of the EBP in relation to implementation, capacity and outcome data (National Implementation Research Network, 2017).

The educators in this study did not feel they had supports needed to be

confident when they implemented the MTSS framework in their buildings.

Moreover, the staff did not have a clear understanding of what the MTSS framework entailed and the steps needed in order to ensure fidelity. Additionally, the staff was not provided with ongoing professional learning on how to implement the MTSS framework, nor did they understand how to collect data and analyze it for decision-making. This suggested a misalignment with the installation phase of the implementation science literature.

During the third stage, the initial implementation phase, a group of practitioners begin to use the new EBP, and data and feedback are used regularly to inform decision-making and improve the implementation of the EBP. The implementation team will develop strategies that promote continuous learning with rapid cycle problem solving by using data to assess the implementation, identify problems and solutions, and inform decision-making (National Implementation Research Network, 2017). When issues arise, it is important that the implementation team addresses the barriers quickly so they do not continue to surface and reoccur. Additionally, it is crucial that implementation teams center on equity-based implementation to create equitable outcomes for all (National Implementation Research Network, 2017).

In this study, the district did not develop a team to support staff in each elementary building that promoted continuous learning or rapid cycle problem solving when problems occurred. In turn, without the support team in place, issues kept reoccurring and the lack of data use created stagnant tiers for students. This helped me recognize that the third implementation science stage also did not

happen.

Implications

This research study suggests that district leaders need to examine the implementation science framework prior to implementing the MTSS model to ensure that the necessary steps are taken prior to the implementation phase or the system created may likely resemble previous antiquated RTI models. Additionally, this research study suggests the need to fully understand the MTSS components and implementation prior to implementing it and adds to the plea (Castillo et al., 2016; Kratochwill et al., 2007) have made to build educators' capacity centered on MTSS components and implementation. Moreover, school officials would need to have a clear understanding of the tiers for each component under the MTSS model and a thorough understanding on how to utilize data. Further, when implementing the MTSS model it is necessary to have regular data discussions and progress monitor students. If the rate of improvement or response for students identified in need of intervention support is not adequate, then a new intervention may be needed. Yet, it is also crucial that staff providing the intervention support is highly trained and follows the recommended frequency and group sizing in accordance with the MTSS model because these are all factors that could impact a student's response rate to an intervention. The MTSS model should not involve pull out instruction, nor should students miss core instruction to receive intervention support. Most importantly, the MTSS model is meant to have fluidity between tiers so students who are identified as tier 3 should not become lifers in that tier unless they receive a special

education label. In this section I propose implications for district leaders, principals, teachers and educational policies.

Implications for District Leaders

District leaders need to have teams in place to support staff and a system that incorporates data collection and analyzes that data in a way that drives changes within teacher instruction to best support students. District leaders need to develop plans and support teams that create a safe space for staff to discuss their concerns and issues they encounter in their classrooms and problem solve together on how to best meet the needs of the students. Additionally, if district leaders do not utilize a framework like implementation science prior to beginning the MTSS model, then the system in place could resemble previous RTI models that primarily focused on academic student concerns. Moreover, district leaders need to examine their current RTI and MTSS frameworks to determine if their models have created stagnant tier groups. District leaders need to carefully inspect their systems in place to see if the systems are utilized more heavily to fast track students into special education and reflect on possible deficit thinking perspectives that could be happening with their staff. District leaders need to have systems in place that provide regular communication about the MTSS models in their schools that provides support to principals. Additionally, district leaders need to provide principals with clear guidelines and expectations for the MTSS implementation and framework utilized in their schools. Further, if more than 11-20% of the total student population is identified in need of additional interventions, then this

indicates there is an issue with tier 1 and all of the money, time and energy need to be focused on resolving tier 1 issues.

Implications for principals

Principals need to have clear guidelines and expectations for teachers and support staff when implementing the MTSS framework. Principals need to have ongoing conversations with their staff about data, specifically, using data to determine if a student is making progress towards their goal and if they are not then what will be the next steps taken. Further, principals need to hold their staff accountable if they observe teachers or support staff are not implementing the MTSS framework with fidelity and have conversations with their staff about how to alter their practices to better meet the needs of the students. Additionally, principals need to examine their own personal beliefs about their students and determine if they maintain a deficit thinking perspective. Moreover, principals need to circulate regularly to observe what is happening during intervention support and in general education classrooms to have a pulse on the realities of what their MTSS model implementation looks like daily. Principals need to be cognizant that if more than 11-20% of their total student population is identified in need of additional interventions, then that is an indication that there are issues with their tier 1 instruction. Moreover, they need to focus their time, energy and monies resolving tier 1 issues.

Implications for teachers

Teachers and additional staff that work with students who are in need of intervention services need to study their current systems in place and determine if

they are best meeting the needs of the students. Moreover, teachers and additional support staff members need to have a clear understanding of what the MTSS framework requires in order to determine if they are implementing it with fidelity. Further, teachers and support staff need to become proficient at analyzing multiple data points and then changing their instruction or intervention support to better meet the needs of their students based on the way their students learn and not just how they score on tests. It is crucial that teachers and staff members also understand their own bias and the deficit thinking perspective so a student's lack of progress is not blamed on the student but rather causes them to investigate the current system in place and their instructional practices to determine what the real issues are behind their students' lack of progress. Teachers and support staff need to understand that conversations centered on their teaching practices and their proficiency of making data based decisions is not a personal attack but rather an opportunity to critically analyze alternative ways to best meet the needs of their students.

Implications for Educational Policies

Educational policy makers need to provide more clarity to district leaders when they attempt to implement the MTSS framework in schools. These policy makers should have a concise handbook created on the necessary knowledge, components and steps needed to ensure that the MTSS framework will be implemented with fidelity and not create another antiquated RTI system. Additionally, education policy makers need to develop a way to hold district leaders accountable when they are not implementing the MTSS or RTI frameworks with fidelity. Moreover, districts in New York State receive

hundreds of millions of dollars in federal and state aid to implement the MTSS and RTI frameworks in order to best support students who are in need of additional support. Yet, there are very few data systems in place that monitor these frameworks and the level of implementation that district leaders and school staff are operating at and these monies are being wasted as numerous school systems continue with antiquated systems.

Further, policy makers need to determine which districts in the United States are implementing MTSS with fidelity and students have high success rates in all components of the MTSS model. There needs to be more policies on wide scale implementation evaluation of the MTSS model and interventions utilized. If it is determined that there are not many school districts that are able to successfully implement the MTSS model, then policy makers need to reconsider alternative models that can be implemented successfully to help all students. Additionally, there needs to be policies focused on tier 1 instruction and what school districts should do when they discover their tier 1 instruction is not helping all of their students.

Limitations

This study focused on three K-4 elementary buildings in one school district. The backgrounds, experiences and beliefs centered on the MTSS framework implementation were unique to each participant. Since this study included such a small sample size, then transferability of this study is limited.

As a former teacher and intern in this school district studied, my own status as an insider and familiarity had the potential to influence participants' responses. Additionally, my personal journey as an adult with ADHD and Dyslexia, my time

spent teaching in the elementary classroom and my time spent as an intern centered on the issues with RTI could be considered a limitation of the study.

Implementation Science used as a framework to examine the MTSS implementation in this study was a limitation as this district did not get past the initial phase and made it difficult to examine their MTSS system through that lens. Further, choosing a more critical framework when examining MTSS implementation could have brought other things to light.

Future Research

Conducting future research related to the implementation realities encountered at the elementary level by using a larger sample size could expand upon this topic. Further, examining an urban and rural school district in addition to a suburban district could expand on future research. Additionally, examining grades 5-8 MTSS framework implementation could expand this research as well.

Since this study was solely qualitative in nature, examining the effectiveness of the MTSS framework in elementary buildings using a quantitative approach could expand upon this topic. The study could focus on students in grades 1-4 in multiple school districts across the United States that implement the MTSS framework and determine if the MTSS models in place are improving student's success academically, behaviorally and socio-emotionally.

A follow up study to this research study could be a longitudinal one that examines what happens to students who are identified at risk and are put into tiers 2 and 3. The study could examine which students received intervention support in

grades 1-6 to determine how many students moved through the tiers, remained stagnant, and how many students reached grade level expectations.

Significance

This study contributes to the K-8 teaching and leadership fields because it highlights the realities encountered when implementing the MTSS framework. Additionally, this study provides clarity regarding the necessary measures needed prior to implementing the MTSS framework and the need for a system of checks and balances for teachers, district leaders, and educational policy makers. Most importantly, this qualitative dissertation study provides the K-8 teaching and leadership fields with a deeper understanding of how complicated the MTSS framework can be to implement within school districts and when not implemented with fidelity, students do not receive the intervention support that they need.

Concluding Reflections

As an educator, researcher, and neurodiverse learner, I was deeply involved and engaged in this research to better understand and learn more about the realities encountered at the elementary level when schools implement the MTSS framework to best meet the needs of all learners. It was difficult to see and hear the way in which the staff in each elementary building implemented the MTSS framework and how the staff provided reading intervention services to nearly half their student population. Moreover, the staff in each building, including each principal, indicated that they did not have the knowledge needed to implement the MTSS framework, to best meet the needs of their students, nor did they know how to collect or analyze data but that some of staff believed it was the students' deficiencies as to why they

would never leave tier 3 unless they received a special education label. While I recognize the small sample size used in this study, from my experience as a teacher, leader, and mother, I am confident that these issues are not unique to just these three elementary buildings. I have spent time in numerous districts locally where staff have all encountered similar issues related to the MTSS framework implementation and stagnant tier groups.

In this research study, each elementary building identified nearly 40% of their total student population to receive reading intervention support and the MTSS model indicates only 11-20% of the total student population may be in need of additional support. Further, each elementary building utilized ITAs to provide intervention support to students who are not highly trained to give that support to students and each elementary building had higher group sizes and frequency than what the MTSS model recommends. All three elementary buildings had challenges with data collection, data dissemination, regular data discussions that altered teacher's instruction which all contributed to stagnant student tier groups.

Additionally, when students were not responding to the interventions in place, the staff in each elementary building did not believe that they could help students reach grade level expectations. Therefore, all of the time and resources spent on the MTSS model they had in place could have been used more efficiently to better meet the needs of students. The data suggests that there is a tier 1 problem in each elementary building since they have identified 40% of their total student population for reading intervention support. MTSS will likely not be successful when there is a tier 1 issue. A tier 1 problem is when the systems in place maintain social injustices,

where district and staff maintain a medical model approach to student's learning and think students need to adhere to a set of 'normalcy' in order to be educated together. Further, a tier 1 issue is where ecological and socio-political factors are ignored and not disrupted. I believe that these issues are not unique to just these three buildings, Even though the MTSS model is complicated when implemented at the ground level, instead of continuing the model of increased intense intervention support, especially in a pull out manner, school districts should focus their monies and efforts on increasing tier 1 instruction and support to teachers who struggle with intervening with students that do not respond to their instruction. Further, there needs to be an emphasis on inclusive social justice practices throughout all school systems and if MTSS is implemented then it needs to be equity centered.

My hope is that this study will shed light on current intervention systems in place that are an antiquated RTI model being masked under the name of the MTSS framework, and that practitioners and policy makers closely examine how to critically evaluate these intervention support service systems regardless of the name they give them. I know firsthand the gut wrenching pain a child feels when they are unable to learn at the same rate of their cohorts. Educational policy makers, district leaders and educators have a moral obligation to ensure that additional barriers and obstacles are not created for children who struggle to learn at the same rate as their peers. Adults need to do better when working with students who struggle because their voices are rarely heard. I am hoping that this study implores adults who directly impact student's learning to critically examine their current

practices and systems in place to determine where the real deficits lie because I know it is not within the child.

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Appendix A- Principal Interview Questions

1. Please tell me about your professional experience that led you to being a principal here.
2. Please describe a few of the overarching values or beliefs that drive your leadership.
3. How long have you been a principal at this elementary?
4. Can you walk me through how MTSS is implemented in your building? How it is staffed? How the students are selected? What interventions are given? What data is kept? How do you measure or keep track of progress?

Exploration phase questions: (related to identifying a need, picking EBPs, setting up data teams, determining which staff will be a part of the each process, how they will assess the effectiveness of the ebp and how they will train all staff involved)

1. How did the district determine which academic and social needs of the students needed to be addressed or met?
2. How did the district determine what evidence based practices would best meet the needs of the students that they wanted to address?
3. How was this MTSS framework implementation model selected?
4. What criteria do you use to determine if the evidence base practices being implemented are successful?

Installation Phase (Infrastructure) (Competency Drivers selection, coaching, training and assessing)

1. Were there any changes that needed to happen in order to prepare for the MTSS framework implementation at the your building? (i.e. new policies, procedures, changes to schedules)
2. Did the entire building start implementing MTSS at the same time or was it a staggered implementation? If it was staggered, then how was it determine which teachers would begin the implementation process?
3. What training was involved for you as a principal, the reading specialists, teachers and any other support staff involved in the implementation process?
4. What communication protocols are in place?
5. Are there guidance documents you follow?
6. How are data routines articulated and monitoring for student outcomes? What system is in place for collecting, analyzing and using data for decision making that determines if the EBP is being implemented with fidelity and meeting the needs of the students?

Initial Implementation

1. Please describe the initial implementation phase of the MTSS framework.
2. Since everyone was new to their roles and the EBPs, what challenges did you

- encounter as building, principal?
3. Was there an implementation team that helped develop strategies to problem solve issues that came up to create a rapid cycle ongoing problem solving to help practitioners during this phase?
 4. What ongoing coaching was happening during this phase and did it involve how to use data to make decisions?

Full Implementation

1. How long did it take before it felt like the entire staff operated with a understanding that the MTSS framework implementation was a way of work?
2. How are new staff trained when they begin working in the building?
3. How do you continuously assess the fidelity of the framework?

Leadership drivers

1. What do you feel is needed by a principal in order to replicate the MTSS framework implementation you have in your building?
2. What challenges have you encountered as a principal throughout the process?
3. What feedback do you have for other principals that are at the different stages of implementation of the MTSS framework in other districts?
4. Are there any things you wish you could have changed?
5. What challenges did you encounter with staff? Any resistance? If so, then how did you handle it?

Organization drivers: (Data systems, systems interventions)

1. What data systems are utilized to determine which students are in each tier of academic and behavioral support?
2. What data is collected and how often? What is the data reporting process?
3. How is it determined which students need to transition between tiers? How many students shift between tiers? Do you keep track of the demographics of the students in each tier and how often they move between tiers?
4. How often are students transitioning between Tiers?
5. How is it recorded when students move between Tiers?
6. How do you determine if an EBP isn't working?
7. What criteria do you have for each student to be in each Tier?
8. How is each student monitored in each Tier?
9. What do you do when the data indicates an EBP isn't working?

Appendix B- Teacher Interview Protocol

1. Please tell me about your professional experience that led you to your current position and how long you have been in this building.
2. How do you define MTSS? What does it mean in your job?
3. Please describe a few of the overarching values or beliefs that drive your teaching.
4. Can you walk me through how MTSS is implemented in your building? How it is staffed? How the students are selected? What interventions are given? What data is kept? How do you measure or keep track of progress?

Installation Phase (Infrastructure) (Competency Drivers selection, coaching, training and assessing)

7. What training was involved for you as a teacher?
8. What communication protocols are in place?
9. Are there guidance documents you follow?
10. How are data routines articulated and monitoring for student outcomes? What system is in place for collecting, analyzing and using data for decision making that determines if the EBP is being implemented with fidelity and meeting the needs of the students?

Initial Implementation

5. Please describe the initial implementation phase of the MTSS framework.
6. Since everyone was new to their roles and the EBPs, what challenges did you encounter as a teacher?
7. Was there an implementation team that helped develop strategies to problem solve issues that came up to create a rapid cycle ongoing problem solving to help practitioners during this phase?
8. What ongoing coaching was happening during this phase and did it involve how to use data to make decisions?

Full Implementation

4. How long did it take before it felt like the entire staff operated with an understanding that the MTSS framework implementation was a way of work?
5. How are new staff trained when they begin working in the building?
6. How do you continuously assess the fidelity of the framework?

Leadership drivers

6. What do you feel is needed by a principal in order to replicate the MTSS framework implementation you have in your building?
7. What role do you think your principal has played in the MTSS implementation framework? How involved are they?

8. How has your principal handled any issues that have surfaced within the implementation process and within the MTSS framework?

Organization drivers: (Data systems, systems interventions)

10. What data systems are utilized to determine which students are in each tier of academic and behavioral support?
11. What data is collected and how often? What is the data reporting process?
12. How is it determined which students need to transition between tiers? How many students shift between tiers? Do you keep track of the demographics of the students in each tier and how often they move between tiers?
13. How often are students transitioning between Tiers?
14. How is it recorded when students move between Tiers?
15. How do you determine if an EBP isn't working?
16. What criteria do you have for each student to be in each Tier?
17. How is each student monitored in each Tier?
18. What do you do when the data indicates an EBP isn't working?

Appendix C- William Elementary Initial Codes

11 students being pulled
8:1:1 AIS support
8:1:1 AIS support
8:1:1 BOCES
8:1:1 program
8:1:1 students not included
8:1:1 students not included in MTSS academic support
8:1:1 support
8:1:1 support and behavioral programs
8:1:1 support programs
9 students being pulled
Additional staff
Administration isn't enforcing WINN time
Admiring problem
Advice seeking
Advice seeking
Advice seeking
AIMSweb
AIS intervention
AIS only progress monitors
AIS progress monitor
AIS provider decides placement
AIS pushing for Spec Ed
AIS services pulled weekly
AIS staff pushing for Spec Ed
AIS teacher said he was a Tier 3 student
AIS tier 3 group of 4
AIS won't move student even if goal met
Alternative seating
Another data point for ITA
Assessments given
Behavior intervention
Behavior not matching consequence
Behavior plan in AIS
Behavior referrals
Behavioral form all indicators checked
Behavioral section had every behavior checked
Behavioral specialist
Behavioral supports
Behavioral tiers
Beliefs of Participant
Benchmarks
Building changes
Burnt out teachers

Buy-In
Challenges
Challenges for WINN groups
Chronic Absenteeism
CKLA
CKLA do not know assessments
CKLA program assessments
CKLA rep says not to worry about SS
CKLA training
Closing the Gaps
Collaborative teams
Competency Driver
Computer for WINN
Concerns about punitive repercussions
Confused by MTSS
Confusion around referral process
Confusion on progress monitoring Tier 2 students
Confusion on Referral team process
Connecting with students
Consequence for behavior
CTD students
Culture shock for teachers
Cutting sections based on students
Data discussions
Data for identification
Data systems
Data Tier Identification
Data Tier identification
Day treatment
Different in AIS room
Discontinuing services has to agree with teacher
District behavioral specialist
District Clarity
District guidance document
District guidance document not used
District inconsistency
District Inequities
District protocol
District protocol on google doc
Do not know how to use data
Doesn't qualify for servies
Don't know how to use data
Double down
EBPs
ELA trainings
Embarrassed

Entry Plan
Exploration Phase
Faking seizures
Family Support
Flowchart
Frequency
Gen Ed Assessments given
Gen Ed progress monitor
Goal setting changes
Goal setting changes
Google classroom
Google doc form being used
Google docs
Google drive
Guessing when reporting grades
I corrective statement
Inconsistency
Inconsistency across district
Inconsistency on what is taught
Inconsistent data reporting
Inconsistent Data tools
Inconsistent implementation
Initial Implementation
Instructional Coach
Instructional coach trained by videos
Instructional specialist had difficulty navigating the form
Instructional specialist staff meeting
Intervention changes
Intervention confusion
Intervention follow through
Intervention support
Interventions
Interventions
Interventions for Tier 2
Interventions in place
Interventions in place not listed
Interventions used for ITAS
ITA groups
ITA lack training
ITA time
ITA trained by instructional coach
ITAs not progress monitoring
K-1 BOCES
K-1 going to boces
Kid talk first
Lack of clarity

Lack of clarity by district
Lack of data being used
Lack of district communication
Lack of leadership
Lack of MTSS understanding
Lack of principal and DO guidance
Lack of progress monitoring
Lack of teacher compliance with behavioral interventions
Leadership
Leadership
Leadership drivers
Leadership impact on MTSS
Leadership skills
Lifers
Lots of work for teachers
Math during WINN
Math groups for WINN
Missing Core instruction
Modeling
More tier 2 referrals
MTSS challenges
MTSS clarification needed
MTSS expectations are vague
MTSS experience
MTSS explanation
MTSS implementation
MTSS misunderstanding
MTSS Special Ed route
MTSS to avoid Special Ed services
MTSS training needed
MTSS visual
Name tag
Need movement break
Need to invite more specialists to the meeting
New clientele and new principal after 20 years
New ELA program
No clear guidelines
No Data discussions
No data presented on referral form
No data presented on referral form
No data provided
No Fidelity checks
No fluidity within ELA groups
No intervention flow chart
No making gains
No parent notification

No student capabilities listed
No student strengths listed
Not clear on how to group students for ELA
Not clear on how to use ELA data
Not concerned with mastery
Not every building doing it
Not implementing with fidelity
Not knowing what intervention to use
Not sure how to use data
Not teaching social studies
Not until next year's benchmark assessment
Not using guidance document
NSCSD does not have clear protocols
Only 6 kids for science
Only ten students in the classroom
Organizational
Overall Beliefs
Overidentification
Parental Push for Label
Participant Background
Participant Philosophy
Participant understanding of MTSS
PBIS not having real infractions
PD
PD for CKLA
PD for staff
PD on trauma
Potraying teacher incompetent
Powerpoint
Principal as a resource teacher
Principal behavioral support
Principal communication
Principal distraught
Principal distraught
Principal distraught
Principal interviewing elsewhere
Principal issues with directors
Principal newsletter
Principal not convinced form is an issue
Principal observed
Principal possible termination
Principal possible termination
Principal reinforcing and being visible
Principal said Liverpool paid for google suite
Principal thinks it's a union/district issue
Principal wanted additional training but staff declined

Prior district experience with MTSS
Prior district had clear protocols
Prodded for advice
Professional Development
Progress Monitor
Progress monitoring
Progress Monitoring behavior
Progress monitoring issues
Progress monitoring of EBP
Progress monitoring Tier 1
Project for the hall
Proximity
Pulled out during instruction
Quiet corners
Recording data for removals
Referral data
Referral form being too cumbersome
Referral form cumbersome
Referral form deterring teacher use
Referral form too cumbersome
Referral form too cumbersome
Referral form too tedious
Referral not teacher friendly
Referral one on one
Referral paperwork changes
Referral paperwork changes
Referral process
Referral process academic vs behavioral
Referral process confusing to instructional coach
Referral process for behavior
Referral team process
Referral team support for teachers
Removal because they called a teacher a loser
Removals
Reporting behaviors that aren't infractions
Reteach math concepts for WINN
Reteach math concepts for WINN
Runs on a motor
Scaffolding in CKLA missed
Scheduling issues
Seizures
Seizures impacting learning
Social Emotional Learning
Spec Ed teacher concerned about data being stored on google suite
Special Ed
Special ED and MTSS

Special Ed identification
Special Ed numbers
Special ed referral
Special Ed route
Special Ed services
Special ed services when MTSS doesn't work
Special Education students at back table
Special Education students working on math
Special education teacher sensitive data
Sped teacher intervention
Staff communication
Staff present
Staffing
Strategic Plan
Student data on google doc
Student uses TA as a one on one to stay on task
Student will receive both AIS tier 3 and ITA time
Students abilities
Students being pulled
Students can receive both AIS tier 3 and ITA time
Students going on devices during WINN
Students on chromebooks
Students working during WINN
Support Team
Support team academic based
Switched interventions
Taught Science to 6 students
Teacher burn out
Teacher burn out
Teacher burn out
Teacher Driven
Teacher is left with 6-7 students in classroom but has 8:1:1 kids push in
Teacher left SPED
Teacher misinterpretation
Teacher only does WINN once a week
Teacher report inconsistent on what student can do
Teacher trying to get CTD services
Teacher unsure on tiers
Teacher using referral form not listing student strengths at all
Teacher wanting more PD
Teacher wants more PD
Teacher's union
Teachers can do whatever they want
Teachers decide what instruction Tier 3 students miss
Teachers doesn't want to give up services
Teachers don't have mastery of CKLA

Team time no data
Third grade assessment practice
Tier 1 behavioral intervention
Tier 2 and classroom removals
Tier 2 behavioral issues are due to teacher compliance with interventions determined
Tier 2 students
Tier 2 supports
Tier 3 behavioral issues
Tier 3 identification
Tier 3 instruction is being given
Tier 3 missing out on core instruction
Tier 3 pulled out during WINN time and possibly missing more instruction
Tier 3 Sped not getting AIS
Tier 3 students missing core instruction
Tier criteria
Tier fluidity
Tier identification
Tier Identification
Tier misinterpretation
Tier selection
Title 1 school
Too much autonomy
Tracking things using google docs and not schooltool
Transition meetings
Trust issues
Trust issues with other teachers
Two teachers who taught CKLA
Union Challenges
Unrealistic Schedule
WINN easier for Math
WINN is a study hall to catch up
WINN or Tier 3 time
WINN time
WINN walkthrough challenges
Years of being Principal
Yellow on AIMSweb

Appendix D- Predetermined Codes

Academic
Behavioral
Challenges
Competency
CKLA
Data
Data Systems
Equity
Exploration
Fidelity Checks
Frequency
Initial
Installation
Interventions
Leadership
MTSS components
Organizational
PM- Progress Monitoring
Special Education
Socio-emotional
Tiers
Tier Identification

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Experience

2018- present Doctoral Candidate in the Teaching and Curriculum Ph.D. program at Syracuse University

2016-2017 Administrative Intern

- Fulfilled principal duties
- Revised and evaluated school curriculum
- Monitored and gave professional development to entire reading department in district
- Developed criterion for identification of reading services to students in grades K-7
- Developed a district reporting system within schooltool to streamline data collection
- Worked diligently on moving district from an AIS to an RTI model
- Worked with district leadership team to create district RTI guidance document and protocols
- Worked with district leadership team to create a master schedule for all six elementary buildings
- Evaluated professional learning communities and WIN time within district to develop district wide protocols
- Worked and monitored professional learning communities within district
- Worked with a district committee to develop district vision

2007-2018 Kindergarten, First, and Second Grade Teacher

- Taught 24 second grade students for one year. Co-taught 48 second grade students by combining two general ed classrooms with special education teacher for one large inclusion setting
- Taught 25 morning students and 24 afternoon kindergarten students for one year with push in special education students
- Taught 24 general education to first grade students with push in special education students
- Implemented Daily 5 literacy instruction
- Implemented Lucy Calkins writing program
- Implemented Responsive Classroom strategies and emphasized positive based reinforcements
- Responsible for differentiated instruction, individualized behavior plans, daily integrated plans, administered district assessments and performed group analysis of data
- Committees: RTI, District Advisory, Vision/Mission, Building Leadership Team, Technology, Character Education, Spotlight, Health and Safety

Certifications

NYS Professional Childhood Prek-2, NYS Professional Special Education Childhood Prek-2, NYS Professional Grades 1-6, NYS Professional Special Education Grades 1-6, NYS Initial District Leader, NYS Initial Building Leader

Education**Syracuse University May 2017**

CAS degree in Educational Leadership; Maintain NYS Permanent District certification, NYS Initial Building Leader Certification

Le Moyne College 2007-2009

Master of Science in Education with GPA 3.9. Maintain four NYS professional certifications: General Education 1-6, General Education PreK-2, Special Education 1-6, Special Education PreK-2

Le Moyne College 2004-2007

Bachelor of Science in Psychology with a concentration in Education. Graduated cum laude. Dually certified in grades 1-6 and preK-2

OCC 2002-2004

Associates in Arts