



## Executive Summary

### CA MTSS School-Site Implementation: Pilot Phase 2A

# PARTICIPATION YEAR 2 SUMMARY

2020-2021 School Year

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In this report, we share findings from the CA MTSS Phase 2A pilot project's Year 2 of participation qualitative data collection and analysis.

The purpose is to shed light on California Multi-tiered System of Support (CA MTSS) implementation processes, successes, and challenges from the 14 schools participating in the CA MTSS Phase 2A pilot. This report builds on the Baseline Data Summary (Farkas et al., 2021), in which we presented data from Year 1 of participation, the 2019-20 school year.<sup>1</sup>

The CA MTSS Phase 2A pilot project follows 14 schools (6 elementary schools, 7 middle or junior high schools, and 1 high school) from 7 districts across California as they implement the CA MTSS framework at the school level with a focus on school climate, positive behavioral supports, and social-emotional learning. The project is co-led by Orange County Department of Education, Butte County Office of Education, and the University of California, Los Angeles Center for the Transformation of Schools (UCLA-CTS).

<sup>1</sup> In the present report, and all subsequent reports, participating school names will be anonymized.

## INTERVIEWS

Researchers from the UCLA-CTS conducted interviews with participating Pilot Phase 2A school principals and coaches in May and June 2021 to understand CA MTSS implementation, schools' focus on race-based disparities, the coaching process, and the influence of the pandemic on implementation efforts. Specifically, the research questions guiding these interviews were the following:

1. **In what ways did school sites engage in CA MTSS implementation? (i.e., what processes, procedures, structures did they introduce or reinforce?)**
  - a. **What benefits did school sites attribute to CA MTSS pilot participation?**
  - b. **What challenges did school sites experience in implementing the CA MTSS framework?**
2. **How, if at all, did schools engage with the pilot project's focus of addressing ethnic/racial or cultural diversity and reducing discipline disparities?**
3. **In what ways did schools engage in the coaching process?**
4. **How did the COVID-19 pandemic influence the coach-school site collaboration specifically and the MTSS implementation more broadly?**

Results are presented below, organized by the first three research questions. Results of the fourth research question regarding the influence of the pandemic are embedded throughout the other results. The influence of the pandemic pervaded all aspects of project participation for school sites and coaches, and was, therefore, most coherently understood within the context of our other questions.

### RESEARCH QUESTION 1

#### **In what ways did school sites engage in MTSS implementation? (i.e., what processes, procedures, structures did they introduce or reinforce?)**

##### **Finding 1: Consistent coaching was an important resource for implementation efforts.**

The processes and procedures for coaching varied across school sites as a result of the pandemic, coach and staff turnovers, and, at times, unclear visions of CA MTSS implementation. In general, principals who reported consistent and positive collaboration with their coaches also reported more understanding and benefits of CA MTSS implementation. In contrast, at school sites where the relationship between administrators and coaches was inconsistent, challenges in MTSS implementation were present.

##### **Finding 2: School site implementation teams played an important role in the CA MTSS pilot.**

However, the prioritization of implementation teams varied across school sites. A noticeable benefit of the implementation teams was that teams tended to have a clear understanding of the needs of the school community, and they were able to participate in the collaboration with the CA MTSS coach.

##### **Finding 3: PBIS supported the use of data and tiered student supports, but needed complementary programs.**

Not only was PBIS used as a tool for data collection, but a few principals reported that their schools utilized PBIS matrices as the foundation for tier one and two interventions and supports for CA MTSS implementation. Principals and coaches recognized that PBIS alone is insufficient to support the diverse behavior needs of students, and more comprehensive support and interventions are needed (e.g., professional development to address staff mis/understandings of race, culture, and equity; social and emotional learning; restorative practices).

**RESEARCH QUESTION 1A****What benefits did school sites attribute to CA MTSS pilot participation?**

**Finding 4: Principals reported gaining a sense of focus for their MTSS-related work.** Many principals reported that the most important gain resulting from CA MTSS pilot program participation was a sense of focus and direction for their work related to student supports and school climate. In addition, participation lent various initiatives legitimacy as part of the larger CA MTSS framework (instead of, as one principal put it, “sneaking in” new initiatives), resulting in greater teacher buy-in.

**Finding 5: Principals reported becoming aware of the need for a wider equity lens.**

Some principals reported that CA MTSS helped raise their awareness of the need to adopt a new, wider lens on equity, as well as the need to focus on culturally responsive instruction and addressing discipline disparities.

**Finding 6: Principals reported valuing resources provided by coaches.** Some principals reported that their implementation was greatly supported by the resources provided by their coaches. For example, some coaches supported principals with data monitoring, specific implementation strategies, and sometimes even with teacher professional development.

**RESEARCH QUESTION 1B****What challenges did school sites experience in implementing the CA MTSS framework?**

**Finding 7: Inconsistent coach-school relationships posed a challenge to implementation.** For many principals, a challenge arose from not having a consistent relationship with a coach, especially during the first year. In many cases, principals conjectured that this inconsistency stemmed from the upheaval the pandemic caused in the education system, placing more demands on coaches in their other roles.

**Finding 8: A lack of time to prioritize CA MTSS was an important challenge for principals.**

This included time to meet with coaches and with MTSS-

related implementation teams (e.g., MTSS leadership team, PBIS team); and time to engage with and understand CA MTSS well enough to share with staff and to implement. Some principals reported that having a coach who consistently supported them to keep their focus on MTSS or who helped provide clear direction for engaging in implementation was (or would have been) helpful for overcoming this challenge.

**Finding 9: School staff burnout from the pandemic posed an important challenge for implementation.**

Principals and coaches described teachers, specifically, as “drowning,” “traumatized,” and “running on adrenaline” the entire year as a result of the pandemic. Some schools struggled with teacher shortages, at times because teachers were so exhausted that they could not make it to the virtual classroom. Within this context, principals reported a lack of time for prioritizing MTSS, including not being able to ask teachers to engage in activities additional to their focus on curriculum and instruction.

**Finding 10: Gaining teacher buy-in for CA MTSS posed a challenge at some schools.** At some schools, principals and coaches reported that they were mindful of gaining teacher buy-in for CA MTSS-related work. According to interviewees some factors helped increase teacher buy-in for MTSS during this difficult school year: (1) strong leadership from principals; (2) directly involving teachers in implementation efforts (e.g., including teachers in MTSS meetings to discuss culturally responsive pedagogy; teachers meeting one-on-one with a coach over zoom); and (3) highlighting the big-picture nature of MTSS as a framework for organizing various initiatives.

**RESEARCH QUESTION 2****How, if at all, did schools engage with the pilot project’s focus of addressing ethnic/racial or cultural diversity and reducing discipline disparities?**

**Finding 11: The use of data was a step towards addressing discipline disparities, according to principals and coaches.** Specifically, respondents discussed “looking deeply at data,” and asking the question, “what is the data telling us?” Additionally, respondents discussed the use of discipline referrals, attendance, and suspension as sources of data that

were used to engage conversation amongst staff about disparities. However, principals and coaches provided limited information regarding what these conversations looked like or how data were disaggregated to gain an understanding of disparities.

**Finding 12: Schools focused on ethnic/racial or cultural diversity and reducing discipline disparities through professional development.** Respondents discussed engaging in schoolwide and districtwide professional development training centered around cultural responsiveness, restorative practices, and additional alternative discipline frameworks. However, at certain sites administrators reported a delicate balance between staff buy-in and discussing racial or ethnic disparities.

**Finding 13: Covid posed a barrier to discussions around ethnic/racial or cultural diversity and reducing discipline disparities.** Principals reported placing their discussions around discipline disparities “on hold” during the past year due to the pandemic and discussed a lack of discipline data during the past year. They also shared that they refocused their attention on issues related to rurality or poverty during the past year due to the increased need for access to technology resources at home. By shifting their attention to addressing equity issues related to access, sites were limited in their capacity to have meaningful conversations around ethnic/racial or cultural diversity and did not seem to discuss the intersections between poverty/access and race.

### RESEARCH QUESTION 3

## In what ways did schools engage in the coaching process?

**Finding 14: Coaches and principals had to adapt their communication as a result of the pandemic.** COVID-19 impacted how coaches and principals communicated during the academic year. Virtual methods of communication were essential during this time. Many coaches and principals managed to create a working schedule that held them accountable for maintaining a consistent, communicative relationship. Consistent communication allowed for a sustained system of accountability between the coach and principal, leading to implementation progress.

**Finding 15: Expressions of care from coaches were central for trust and collaboration.** Many coaches and principals highlighted the importance of coaches expressing care, listening, and understanding before more practical support such as providing resources or skills. Additionally, an essential component of coach-school site collaboration was a non-hierarchical relationship in which coaches met school sites’ needs rather than imposing their approaches. All of this bred trust and provided much-needed emotional support during an especially stressful year.

**Finding 16: Coach familiarity with geographic area was important for the coaching relationship.** Coaches brought a variety of experiences and expertise to their work with school sites. An important aspect of this background was familiarity with a geographic area/community. Both coaches and principals reported on the value of coaches being able to provide personalized support to their designated school sites when they held prior experience working with schools situated in similar geographical regions and communities.

## TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES: SUPPLEMENTAL RETROSPECTIVE FOCUS GROUP ANALYSES

Given the strong theme we observed around teacher buy-in, we wanted to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges teachers faced from the perspective of teachers themselves, not just those of administrators and coaches.

Because of the challenges of the 2020-21 school year due to the pandemic, we were not able to interview teachers. Thus, we decided to re-analyze in depth some of our data from the first year of the pilot program (2019-20), which included school staff (including teachers) focus groups conducted in Winter 2020, attending to challenges around student behavior and discipline reported by teachers.

**Finding 1: According to teachers, collaborative support staff were essential for MTSS implementation.** Many teachers reported that school support personnel, such as student aides, mentors, teachers on special assignment (TOSAs), or school counselors, are an essential part of successful MTSS implementation. Schools without consistent support staff frequently shared challenges of MTSS implementation for teachers, stating that the program is overwhelming for teachers to carry out on their own. Often, it seemed as

though teacher buy-in to MTSS implementation was not related to teachers' personal perceptions of the program, but rather due to burnout from consistent lack of staffing, time constraints, and overwhelming content. Teachers shared that MTSS protocols are time-consuming, and often all for naught, when they refer students for additional supports, yet no supports or support staff are available.

**Finding 2: Teachers reported being overwhelmed with out-of-school factors affecting student behavior.** Many teachers expressed beliefs that external factors such as family, social inequity, and social media created challenging student behaviors. Several teachers reported believing that their students did not receive adequate support in the home, either because parents were not attentive because of their own struggles or because parenting had become too permissive. Some teachers saw challenging student behaviors as exacerbated by students' exposure to social media. A few teachers spoke to the work educators could engage in to better understand their students' lives outside of school and to better support their students.

## CONCLUSIONS

**Working consistently with an outside coach, while establishing school site teams, can aid implementation efforts.** Coaches helped schools stay engaged in the implementation process, even when that process was slowed by pandemic-related challenges. Coaches provided a sense of focus and direction, resources, and often a caring and collaborative relationship. *Coaches familiar with the geographic and cultural context of the school were especially helpful to school administrators.* In addition, establishing school site teams composed of staff members who were intimately familiar with the school was an important complement to administrators' work with outside coaches.

**Having support staff and team collaboration across the school site can support successful MTSS implementation.** Schools with ample support staff — counselors, behavior specialists, instructional aides, TOSAs, and more — consistently reported feeling more successful with MTSS implementation. In addition, schools with implementation teams that were inclusive of support staff, and with delegated time for implementation teams to meet, reported higher levels of understanding of MTSS and implementation. *A key factor to this success is the delegation of roles and responsibilities, consistent meeting times, and assigning a staff member(s) to disseminate summaries of team findings and discussions to other non-attending staff members in the school community.*

**Attending to school staff's social-emotional and practical needs may help lessen staff burnout and support schoolwide adoption of components of the CA MTSS framework.** Administrators and coaches reported that teachers experienced high burnout and that teacher buy-in was a barrier for CA MTSS implementation. Our re-analysis of Participation Year 1 teacher focus group data suggested that teachers struggled with MTSS implementation when their schools lacked the support staff necessary to provide students with necessary supports. Teachers also expressed that they appreciated opportunities to collaborate with colleagues, including support staff, to find solutions to challenges with students. *Creating opportunities for collaboration, mutual support, and explicit social-emotional support could help teachers as their schools work to implement the CA MTSS framework.* Social-emotional support may be especially important as schools transition back to in-person instruction and continue to experience pandemic-related challenges and burnout.

**Bringing an explicit focus to ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity at the school could help schools address race-based inequities.** School administrators credited participating in the CA MTSS pilot project with helping them gain an awareness of a need to bring a racial/ethnic and cultural lens to their work. Yet, most sites did not seem to engage consistently in work to address inequities that were present in their pre-CA MTSS pilot participation (2018-19) suspension and achievement data (see Figures 2, 3, 6, and 7). Coaching and professional development aimed at inspecting data to understand disparities and adopting *approaches that explicitly address such disparities (e.g., bias-aware classrooms; data-based inquiry for equity; culturally relevant and responsive teaching; inclusion of student and family voice on behavior causes and solutions)* are essential components of culturally conscious implementation of MTSS (Gregory et al, 2017; Welsh & Little, 2018).

**Supporting teachers' approach to student behavior through professional development may help teacher engagement with alternative discipline approaches, and with MTSS more broadly.** In our re-analysis of Participation Year 1 teacher focus group data, many teachers expressed beliefs that external factors such as family, social inequity, and social media created challenging student behaviors. Such beliefs may pose a barrier to adopting alternative approaches to discipline. *Professional development opportunities to support teachers in building positive relationships with students and families and an asset-based mindset may aid in school-wide MTSS adoption.*

**Attending to the continuing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on students and teachers will be imperative as schools continue to pursue CA MTSS implementation.** The pandemic posed a number of barriers to school staff as they worked to implement CA MTSS, including a lack of time and teacher burnout. *Awareness of these barriers should help contextualize the pace of implementing a school-level multi-tiered system of support, which even during more typical times is a years-long process* (Fixsen et al., 2005). In addition, implementing an MTSS inclusive of tiered social-emotional, behavioral, and academic supports may be vital as schools navigate a return to in-person instruction after a long hiatus and a time of stress and trauma for many students.