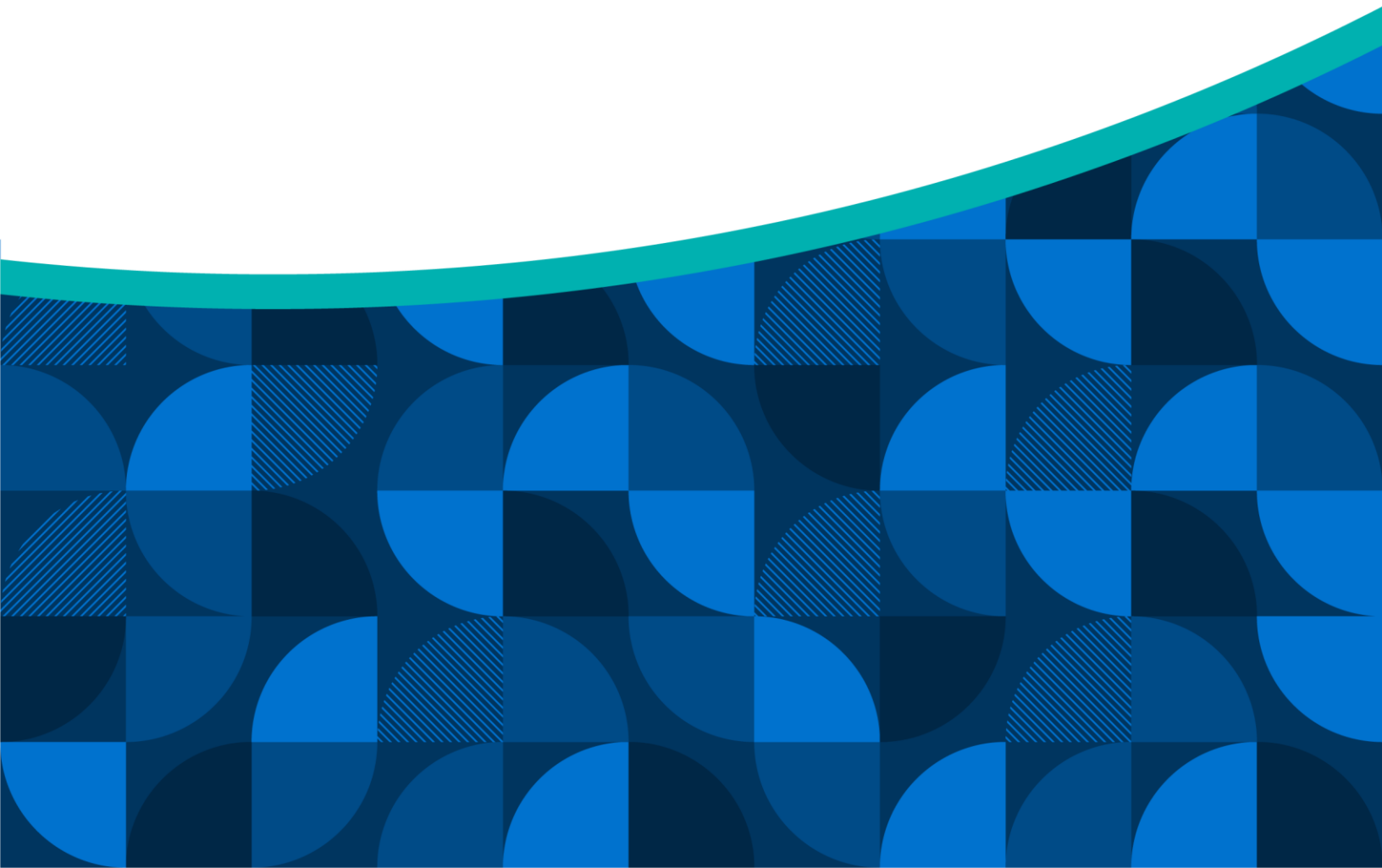# Approaches to Tier II Support in High Schools

# District Leadership Forum

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# 1) Executive Summary

## Key Observations

**Consider a flexible approach when defining Tier II interventions.** All profiled districts report challenges with the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) model at a high school level due to scheduling complexities, the imperative to get students to graduation, and the need to address their academic skill gaps. At District C, a district that uses a more structured intervention framework, administrators still allow teachers to implement evidence-based interventions of their choosing. Though the MTSS model traditionally treats each tier as a distinct grouping of students, the high school environment **requires an open-minded approach and potentially broadening the guidelines of each tier to most effectively provide support to as many students as possible**. Profiled districts seek inventive ways to work with the barriers in place to reach their students and meet both their academic and behavioral needs.

**Target specific skill deficits and use small groups to accurately supplement student need.** Profiled districts report a strong focus on skill remediation despite variation in subject matter at the high school level. Universal screeners and other assessments, used to classify students in need of support, gather data on particular skills students have not mastered at target performance levels. **Small group instruction also provides an opportunity for teachers and interventionists to work closely with groupings of students and target specific skills**. District A interventionists use small groups in reading and math supplementary courses. Similarly, District B's Learning Center instructor seeks opportunities to group students together to work on assignments targeting the same skills.

**1:1 relationships with trusted adults help bolster student engagement.** At all profiled districts, strong relationships with staff play an integral role in the support infrastructure. More specifically, **1:1 interactions between students and adults allow students to have their needs validated and feel they have an educator genuinely invested in their success.** District B operates Liberty Partnerships, a mentorship program that pairs at-risk students with community mentors who guide and encourage students. At District A, designated behavior interventionists meet with students 1:1 to discuss any challenges that may be leading to disruptive behavior. District D's student success coordinators often meet individually with students to provide encouragement and motivation.

**Consider hiring additional staff to support MTSS-related efforts.** All profiled districts employ additional staff to expand their capacity for implementation of academic and behavioral supports. **While hiring additional staff can prove costly, it ensures teachers may focus on instruction and students are adequately and holistically supported to participate actively in learning.** District A employs behavior, reading and math interventionists. District D has a student success coordinator. Similarly, District C staffs MTSS coordinators at each school. District B assigns a full-time staff member to its Learning Center all day. Finally, at District D, teachers receive an additional stipend for participating in mentorship programs that require additional time before and after school.

# 2) MTSS and Intervention Identification

## Defining Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) in High Schools

### Consider a Flexible Approach when Defining Tier II Interventions

Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) typically refers to a framework of academic and behavioral instructional practices and interventions aimed at supporting students with varying needs and skill levels so they may achieve success. The term encompasses Response to Intervention (RTI) and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), two tiered frameworks also used widely. Within the literature, the MTSS model has been researched and implemented most widely at the elementary level, where educators can target specific skill deficits as students develop literacy and math knowledge. MTSS includes three "tiers" of support: Tier I, supports implemented universally to benefit all students, Tier II, supports that target groups of students not achieving success in Tier I, and Tier III, intensive supports for students.

Often at the elementary level, identification for movement between tiers depends on universal screener data, specific evidence-based interventions for a prescribed length of time, and frequent progress monitoring. However, contacts at profiled districts note **implementing an MTSS framework at the high school level proves more challenging due to factors such as scheduling complexities and increased variety in subject matter**. Researcher Julie Daye echoes this notion in the study "MTSS Implementation in High Schools: Expert and Stakeholder Perspectives", citing these barriers in addition to challenges with teacher caseloads, lack of evidence-based interventions specific to high school, and teacher attitudes.[1]

Some profiled districts in this report use a more formalized intervention structure than others and some definitions of MTSS involve more defined procedures, but all profiled districts **use the framework for the same goal of increasing student success in the regular classroom setting and promoting graduation for high school students.** Thus, this report loosely defines Tier II supports as any intervention, program, or instructional practice aimed at serving students, fitting somewhere between the traditional classroom setting and highly intensive support.

## Identifying Students in Need of Tier II Support

### Administer Universal Screeners Where Possible to Cast a Wide Net of Assessments

Several profiled districts gather data on students through universal screeners (i.e., assessments taken by all students) to assess their academic and behavioral needs. District A uses data from the [NWEA Map Growth](#) assessment to measure achievement in eighth grade students entering high school as ninth graders. The district also collects writing samples and math diagnostic results to evaluate skill deficits in incoming high schoolers. District C has three universal screeners: The Reading Inventory, SWIS behavioral data, and attendance data. These three screeners allow District C's administrators and MTSS team to identify students performing below expected targets and initiate interventions. District D administers a survey each summer which functions as a mental health universal screener to gather data on

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1) [1] Julie Daye, "MTSS Implementation in High Schools: Expert and Stakeholder Perspectives" University of South Florida Scholar Commons, July 2019.

which students may be struggling with mental wellness or experiencing other challenges.

**Benefits of Universal Screeners**

EAB's researchers have explored implementation and benefits of universal screeners as a tool for mental health management, Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), and RTI frameworks. Pages 7-10 of EAB's **Guide for Meeting the Rising Demand for Mental Health Care in Schools** study describe how universal screeners can help districts reduce costs and resource constraints by providing scaled care before a crisis occurs. Additionally, see EAB's brief **Response to Intervention** for more examples of universal screeners.

## Use Various Academic and Behavioral Data Sources to Identify Students in Need of Intervention

In addition to universal screeners, profiled districts use other measures of performance to identify students with behavioral or academic skill concerns. For academics, District B allows teachers to submit referrals for students performing below expected targets in their course. The district also analyzes students' end of year performance on state examinations each year. Likewise, District D explores data on students' course grades and attendance.

For behavioral identification, District A examines major and minor behavioral referrals submitted by teachers to pinpoint students that may benefit from behavioral interventions. District D uses discipline data to identify these students in their district.

Based on profiled districts' reported measures of academic and behavioral assessment, it is evident **no singular superior method exists for gathering the desired data most effectively.** Though universal screeners likely cast the widest net, student needs may change throughout the school year, and it is not possible for these assessments to capture all possible data points associated with student needs. Districts **utilizing multiple sources of data and engaging in meaningful discussions around student needs and progress can supplement the personal component of academic and behavioral success** which examinations and assessments may fail to capture.

# 3) Academic and Behavioral Support Services

## Academic Support Services

### Provide Avenues for Alternative Coursework to Bolster Student Achievement

Several profiled districts offer alternative coursework in attempt to either **supplement instruction in core subject areas or diversify the manner in which students can build core skills**. At District A's high school, ninth-grade students identified for Tier II academic intervention may be enrolled in Math 1 Prep or Reading 1 Prep. These double-blocked courses, run by math and reading interventionists, allow students to receive small group support on the curriculum they study simultaneously in Math 1 and Reading 1.

High school students in District B who do not meet state standards in literacy (as evidenced by exam performance) take designated Academic Intervention Services (AIS) courses for English. AIS is a state-mandated program districts follow for students struggling to perform on target. Specialized AIS instructors teach these courses at District B. The district also offers a variety of English literature course options for students in 10th-12th grade and reports higher student engagement as students may choose topics of interest while still working toward standard skills. Options include courses on banned books, horror novels, and coming-of-age stories.

District D operates an Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program. Designed for potential first-generation college students, this course focuses on effective study skills, involves tutoring, and teaches other cultural capital to help students learn what they need to know to prepare for college.

### Target Specific Skill Deficits and Use Small Groups to Accurately Supplement Student Need

EAB's research supports the use of a skills-based grouping approach for reading and math instruction. Implement skills-based grouping using our **toolkit** and its **addendum**.

Profiled districts' report implementing academic interventions targeting specific skills students need to refine. District C uses five academic focus areas established by its state to implement interventions and measure student progress. Categorizing interventions and progress monitoring in this manner allows for **specificity in matching students with resources for their unique academic needs.**

**Academic Skill Focus Areas and Interventions at District C**

### 1. Reading

- Differentiated Phonics
- Exact Path
- Explode the Code
- Heggerty's Phonological and Phonemic Awareness
- Guided Reading
- Orton-Gillingham

### 2. Math

- Exact Path
- Connecting Math Concepts
- Do the Math
- Happy Numbers
- i-Ready Math
- IXL Math
- The Numeracy Project
- Skills Navigator

### 3. Social-Emotional Learning

### 4. Communication

### 5. Written Language

Several profiled districts incorporate small group instruction into their academic support regimen. At District A, math and reading interventionists facilitate small group instruction during Math 1 Prep and Reading 1 Prep to work with students on skills such as number fluency and two-step equations. District B's high school operates a Learning Center staffed by one full-time instructor. Students may be assigned to the Learning Center for extra support where the staff member often helps small groups of students working on similar skills or assignments for a class.

## Use Tutoring to Secure Extra Time for Support

Students at District A and District D **benefit from various tutoring programs designed to provide extra instructional time and fill skill gaps**. District A's evening tutoring program allows students to access teaching staff between 5:30pm and 7:30pm on select weekdays. While all students can access this service, some Tier II students may be assigned to the tutoring hours for targeted support.

> Please note EAB does not vet or endorse vendors.

District D also partners with Tutor.com, an online tutoring service offering students 24/7 access to one-to-one sessions with subject matter experts, where students may receive homework help or skill development resources. While this service is available to all students, the district classifies it with Tier II since the service is not a regular part of classroom instruction.

## Offer Flexible Course Options for Students in Need of Alternative Pathways to Graduation

Several profiled districts note the challenge of balancing the need to address credit deficiencies in high school students with the need to address academic skill gaps.

Many districts' high school communities contain a population of students with constraints in their home life that make a traditional school schedule difficult to manage. Factors such as work, pregnancy, or ill relatives can create challenges in attending school full-time during normal hours. Therefore, many students under these circumstances become credit deficient, which hinders their progress toward graduating in four years.

To accommodate its non-traditional student population, District C has a learning community of students that complete their schooling in a more expedited and online format to provide these students with a pathway to graduation. Students in this program are assigned to courses they need for graduation and complete virtual coursework onsite with some live instruction from teachers. An application opens for this program each winter for the following year. The program currently includes around 50 students in grades 9-12.

It is important to note the **community structure and teacher support as key drivers in the success of this program at District C**. Simply offering an online course to a student without an engaging environment may cause students to fall further behind. District C works to create a sense of community among students participating in this program so they feel connected to the overall school community.

# Behavioral Support Services

## Check In Check Out Routines Provide Structure and Behavioral Incentives

Check In Check Out (CICO) is a commonly used Tier II behavioral support intervention based on the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) framework. This intervention involves students meeting with a mentor at the beginning and end of the day to discuss challenges, set daily goals, and communicate behavioral progress. Often, teachers provide feedback on students' behavior that the CICO mentor reviews each day. **This practice incentivizes students to self-regulate disruptive behaviors throughout their time in class so they may earn praise from a trusted adult when they meet their goals**.

Two profiled districts report use of CICO as part of their overall behavior management strategy. At District A, full-time behavior interventionists serve as CICO mentors. At District D, teachers may incorporate CICO mentor responsibilities into their full-time duties and receive a stipend for these additional hours.

**Example Check In and Check Out Process**

| Check In | During Day | Check Out |
|---|---|---|

- Mentor and student meet at beginning of day.
- Review expectations and set goals.

- Teachers provide feedback on student behavior in each class.
- Districts may choose to use a formal point system for monitoring behavior.

- Mentor and student meet at end of day.
- Review behavioral feedback from teachers.
- Student receives praise for good behavior.
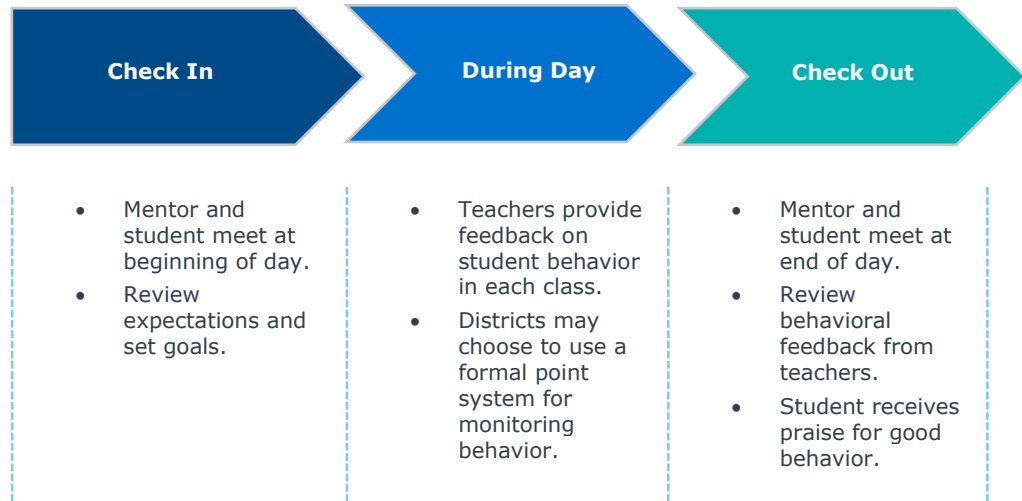
## 1:1 Relationships with Trustworthy Adults Help Strengthen Student Engagement

Despite the challenges the high school environment presents on providing supports to meet student need, quality relationships can make a substantial difference for a struggling student. Contacts at District D state:

> "A good, powerful adult relationship can really help kids on a lot of different fronts."

Many of the profiled districts in this report therefore rely on various forms of 1:1 interactions between staff and students to foster trust, support, and implement specific interventions. District A's behavior interventionists incorporate 1:1 meetings with students to discuss behavioral concerns and how they might help students with challenges in their home life and school. At District D, high school student success coordinators often meet with students individually to gain insight into their lack of engagement and provide encouragement. One of the main features of District C's homeroom program is that students have the same homeroom leader for all four years of high school.

### Homeroom at District C's High School

At District C's high school, students participate in homeroom, a daily period of time students may use to complete assignments, work on college applications, and seek academic assistance. District C will often invite counseling staff or representatives from the school's health clinic to work with students during this time.

## Group Work and Conversations Facilitate a Sense of Community and Allow Staff to Address Needs Simultaneously

Several profiled districts incorporate a variety of group work into their behavioral support system.

### Examples of Behavioral and SEL-Based Groups at Profiled Districts

| District A | District C | District B |
|---|---|---|
| Behavior interventionists run small groups during students' lunch time to discuss challenges and work on SEL skills. | Wellness counselors run groups to encourage conversations on mental and physical health.<br><br>Student success coordinators facilitate groups to promote engagement and sense of community. | District has "Not in Our School" program, a student-led discussion based forum where students engage in conversations around respect, tolerance, and fostering a sense of belonging among students. |

Group interventions provide several benefits to school behavioral management and social-emotional learning (SEL) staff. **By pulling students together into a group, staff members have more capacity to assist students as they can engage with several students simultaneously**. Groups also create a sense of community for student struggling with similar challenges. District B's "Not in Our School" program creates a foundation of respect and tolerance in the high school community.

> **Not in Our School**
>
> **Not in Our School** (NIOS), an anti-bullying movement, intends to create safe schools free from stereotypes, intolerance, and hate. The NIOS page provides videos, activities, and other resources students and teachers may use to engage their school community in meaningful conversations and action against hate and discrimination.

## Create an Overall Culture of Wellness and Safety to Mitigate Individual Challenges

Several profiled districts report use of partnerships, practices, and trainings to address Tier II behavioral difficulties, foster widespread SEL education, and make wellness resources more accessible to students. District C partners with a local sexual assault center which provides intermittent safety trainings to students. District C also operates a health clinic in partnership with a local primary care group students can visit. District D has several wellness counselors certified in marriage and family therapy who provide mental health and wellness resources including 1:1 meetings with students.

Contacts at District D also report the district's efforts to foster a culture of restorative practices and techniques to address behavioral disruptions. District A partners with

Calm Classroom to deliver school-wide mindfulness training with the goal of empowering teachers and students to initiate mindfulness techniques independently and in classroom settings.

## Facilitate Re-Entry Meetings to Ease Transition Back from Period of Absence

Students transitioning back to full-time school after a significant period of absence face unique challenges related to academics and behavior. To mitigate difficulties in this transition, three profiled districts describe conducting "re-entry" meetings involving the student and other administrators and staff. At District B, District C, and District D, the goal of these meetings is to foster easier transitions from long periods of absence whether due to suspension, outpatient care, or serious illness, and often include parents, social workers, administrators, and other wellness staff to determine the best path forward. These **meetings typically occur shortly before the student is slated to return to school and can include topics such as formulating a plan** for students to make up lost learning time and behavioral expectations.

### Re-Entry Meeting Participants at District B



Student

School Social Worker

Parent

School Psychologist

Guidance Staff

High School Administrator
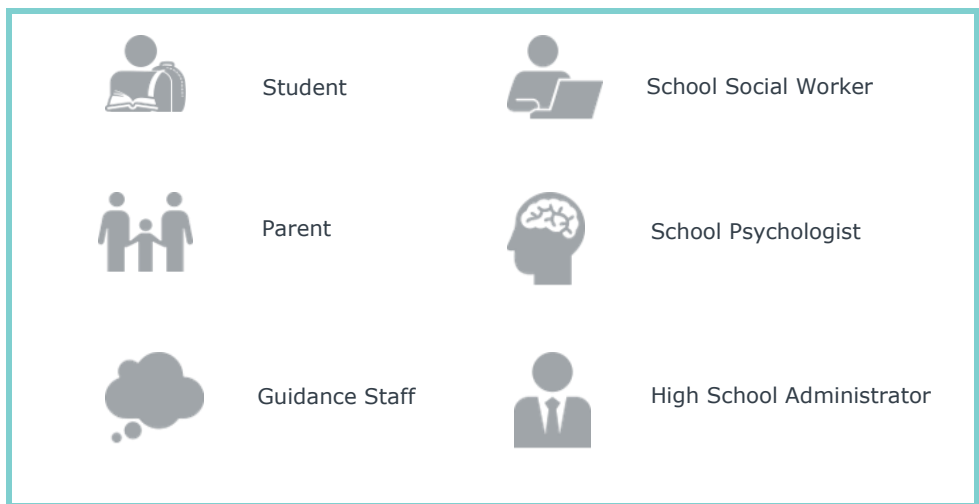
## Emphasize SEL Skill-Building Through Surveys and Selected Curriculum

In order to evaluate SEL progress within the student population, District A and District D use SEL surveys from Panorama Education. These surveys assess students' personal social and emotional challenges in addition to soliciting feedback from students on the overall climate of their school. Administrators from profiled districts use survey results to gauge district SEL performance and gather data on student success factors such as sense of belonging.

District D also reports use of School Connect, a virtual SEL platform with learning modules designed to bolster high school students' self-management, self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making.

# Career Development Resources

EAB's **Career and Technical Education (CTE) Focused High Schools** report profiles several schools focused specifically on providing CTE education in addition to core academic curriculum. This report contains strategies helpful to any district looking to expand CTE.

## Integrate Career Development Pathways into the Academic Support Infrastructure

Providing career development resources and community college partnerships for students can **empower them to pioneer a path forward to graduation and enter the workforce prepared for success.** District D reports two primary career resources for students. First, the district partners with Naviance, a college and career readiness technology solution. This platform features self-discovery assessments, career exploration modules, and other tools to help staff and students discover careers of interest. Second, the district offers a career counseling class specially designed for tenth grade students from historically underserved communities. District C offers several dual enrollment courses with their local community college, where students enrolled at District C's high school may take college-level classes.

> **Dual Enrollment as a Tool for Equity and Student Achievement**
>
> EAB's report **Expanding Access to Dual Enrollment** explores the relationship between dual enrollment and student achievement, describes how districts negotiate partnerships with higher education institutions, and offers strategies to increase student participation in dual enrollment courses.

**eab.com**

# 4) Staffing and Logistics

## Staffing Considerations

### Consider Hiring Additional Staff to Support MTSS–Related Efforts for Capacity Expansion

All profiled districts hired staff outside of classroom teachers and general administrators to provide student support services. **While hiring additional staff can prove costly, it ensures teachers may focus on instruction and students are adequately and holistically supported to participate actively in learning**.

**Specialized MTSS Staff at Profiled Districts**

| District | | Additional Staff |
|---|---|---|
| District A | ⬌ | 2 behavior, 2 reading, and 2 math interventionists for high school |
| District B | ⬌ | 1 full-time staff member for Learning Center |
| District C | ⬌ | MTSS coordinator for high school |
| District D | ⬌ | 35 wellness counselors throughout district as well as student success coordinators |

District A employs behavior, reading and math interventionists. District D has a student success coordinator. Similarly, District C staffs MTSS coordinators at each school. District B assigns a full-time staff member to its Learning Center all day. Finally, at District D, teachers receive an additional stipend for participating in the school mentorship programs that require additional time before and after school.

Some profiled districts hire student support staff with specific qualifications, while others provide training and professional development to ensure staff are prepared for their role. For example, at District A, all reading interventionists are state-certified reading specialists and all math interventionists are former math teachers. On the behavioral side, contacts at District A describe a more lenient approach to specified qualifications for behavior interventionists, choosing to **focus more on relational qualities and interpersonal values**.

## Professional Development

### Thoughtful Professional Development Strengthens District MTSS Leadership

Providing adequate training and development for teachers and other interventionists helps staff feel prepared to manage new expectations and aspects of their role.

**Having well-trained MTSS staff in a district leads to teachers feeling supported** and more likely to approach intervention methods enthusiastically.

District A's behavior interventionists attend trainings on restorative practices, mindfulness, mediation, communication strategies, relationship strategies, executive function strategies, and other techniques to support positive behavior and students' self-management. Teachers may also attend these trainings though they are not required; however, over 300 staff in the district have completed this content voluntarily.

At District C, MTSS coordinators participate in an MTSS training series offered by the state. These coordinators then share information with their teams that they learn at the sessions. Coordinators also receive training on methods for data reporting and progress monitoring through the district's student information system. Contacts at District C also describe a system of reporting use cases of successful interventions for particular skills through a Google form so administrators can gather data on how to best meet students' needs.

## Scheduling Considerations

### Consider Opportunities for Flex Time Within the School Day to Provide Interventions and Support

As mentioned previously, the **complexity of high school schedules presents a major roadblock to providing adequate student support cited by nearly all profiled districts.** Pulling students out of regular instructional time is often an undesirable option, so to combat this challenge districts must find ways to build time into the school day for interventions.

For resources on optimizing school schedules and sample schedules that incorporate flex time, see **The Unlocking Time Project**.

District D builds "flex" time into the school day twice a week, where students have 40 minutes of time to visit any classroom and seek help on assignments and challenging curriculum from their teachers. District B's high school operates a math lab every period to which students are either assigned or may voluntarily attend for extra math support. At District C's high school, the daily homeroom time provides an opportunity for student support. Finally, District A operates double-blocked reading and math prep courses to build in extra time for students. Additionally, behavioral interventionists use lunch time to meet with groups of students.

# 5) Research Methodology

## Project Challenges

Leadership at a partner district approached the Forum with the following questions:

- What circumstances or factors influence a student's need for intensive support beyond the traditional classroom setting?

- How do contact districts identify students in need of Tier II support (i.e., not achieving personal academic success in the traditional classroom setting)?

  – How early do contact districts intervene once a student is identified for Tier II services?

- What specific Tier II *academic* support services do contact districts provide to high school students when needed?

  – What are the structures of these services or programs (e.g., offsite/in-house, temporary/permanent, gradual)?

- What specific Tier II *behavioral* support services do contact districts provide to high school students when needed?

  – What are the structures of these services or programs (e.g., offsite/in-house, temporary/permanent, gradual)?

- How do contact districts provide these Tier II resources and programs to ensure high school students with various reasons for needing support can achieve personal academic success?

- What support systems are in place at contact districts to assist high school students transitioning back to school from an extended period of absence (e.g., intensive outpatient setting, suspension)?

- What academic curricula do contact districts utilize and find effective for high school students struggling to find personal academic success in the traditional classroom?

- What behavioral or Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) curricula do contact districts provide high school students to support their sense of belonging?

- What resources (e.g., space, staffing) do contact districts need to provide for Tier II programming and interventions?

  – Do staff members possess any additional training or certifications?

- How do contact districts incorporate career development and career tracking resources (e.g., partnerships with community colleges, partnerships with community organizations) into their Tier II support systems?

## Project Sources

The Forum consulted the following sources for this report:

- EAB's internal and online research library (eab.com).

- Julie Daye, "MTSS Implementation in High Schools: Expert and Stakeholder Perspectives" University of South Florida Scholar Commons, July 2019.

- Not in Our School homepage. *Not in Our Town*. https://www.niot.org/ Accessed March 3, 2022.

- District C's MTSS webpage. Accessed March 3, 2022.

- District A's MTSS webpage. Accessed March 3, 2022.
- Unlocking Time homepage. *Ablschools*. https://unlockingtime.org/ Accessed March 3, 2022.

# Research Parameters

The Forum interviewed district administrators at districts with MTSS programs at the high school level.

**A Guide to Institutions Profiled in this Brief**

| Institution | Location | Approximate Enrollment |
|---|---|---|
| **District A** | Midwest | 6,500 |
| **District B** | Northeast | 4,000 |
| **District C** | South | 6,000 |
| **District D** | Pacific West | 8,000 |

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