Batesburg-Leesville High School, South Carolina

Batesburg-Leesville High School is a small, rural high school in Lexington School District 3 in central South Carolina. In 2021-22 the school had a student population of 561, with 100% eligible for free school lunches,[1] 7% Limited English Proficiency, and 14% students with a disability. The school's graduation rate was 91%.[2]

Interview Date: January 2023

[1] Enrollment and free/reduced-price lunch data: https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/schoolsearch/index.asp
[2] Graduation rate, LEP, and SWD data: Batesburg-Leesville High School

Background and Catalyst

This school's district participated in two state pilots that helped guide and support the school's efforts, one for MTSS and one for personalized learning. Interviewees reported that participating in the state's MTSS pilot was "an intentional effort" because the district recognized a need to make changes to better serve students. Before the pilot the high school had already been providing individualized assistance to students, but without the name and structure of MTSS. Interviewees felt that the MTSS and personalized learning initiatives aligned well with each other and with the district's priorities and saw MTSS as part of providing personalized instruction, including working toward mastery-based learning. The COVID-19 pandemic was also described as a time of reflection and rebuilding in the direction of a stronger MTSS program.

The school's current leaders came on board in 2017 with a goal of carving out time within the school day to meet the needs of students who were struggling in their classes. As the only high school in a small, rural, "kids first" district with a large economically disadvantaged population, school leaders both needed and felt they had the freedom to serve students "where they are." They began by experimenting with scheduling a lunchtime opportunity for support into the school day (called "Half-Time") because they realized that many students could not consistently participate in supports outside of the school day.

The Present: What Does MTSS Look Like Now?

Leadership: Vision, Teams, Structures, and Processes

The district's Chief Academic Officer and Director of Special Services coordinate MTSS efforts at the district level and work closely with high school leaders. The Assistant Principal for Instruction coordinates MTSS efforts at the high school, and the school's building leadership team (BLT)—administrators, department heads, and the lead counselor—meets weekly to examine student data and discuss students who are experiencing difficulties. The school describes a focus on shared leadership, with other teachers being pulled into these conversations as needed. This BLT also ensures that the support provided to students during Half-Time aligns with the school's overall instructional goals and vision.

The Assistant Principal for Instruction monitors students' academic progress and regularly pulls data on struggling students to discuss with department heads. She keeps a file on each entering freshman class and checks on students' attendance and progress towards graduation at least once per semester, using a color-coded system to identify students who need extra supports and follow up with other staff to create plans for those students. Student discipline data is also tracked, and the guidance staff keeps a Google Sheet on attendance. When the BLT meets to discuss student progress, members bring data on students who are falling

behind on one or more indicators, which helps facilitate an understanding of the bigger picture of a student's need for supports. Interviewees noted, "So while MTSS starts with an academic focus, because we are all sharing the data and working with it, we are able to serve all kinds of student needs."

Student Supports

The "Half-Time" approach to engaging students in supports beyond the classroom was envisioned as an opportunity to meet the academic, engagement, guidance, and other needs of students. However, the primary focus is on academic supports. The school's 50-minute lunch period is divided into two 25-minute halves four days per week, with one half for lunch and the other for support. Every teacher is involved in either lunch duty or office hours during the first half, then they switch for the second half. On the fifth day the school runs a two-lunch schedule.

> "So many of our high school kids work to help support their family and put food on their tables … it was essential that we found some way to do something during the school day because that's when we had them."

The school has cultivated a culture that encourages students to ask for help when they need it. As a result, students often use Half-Time to get the support they need on their assignments. However, some students are required to report to certain teachers for support during this time based on their academic needs. Over time, the school observed that the reason most students reported to Half-Time has shifted from completing makeup work to seeking extra help, which is viewed as a positive change and an important life skill the school wants to build in students. Half-Time has also become an opportunity for students to develop relationships with teachers and for teachers to get to know the students.

While the school started with an academic focus for supports, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed a need to provide more support for mental health, attendance, and behavior as well. The district recently made the commitment to have mental health counselors in schools at least part time, and the high school now has a certified mental health counselor 2-3 days per week. School counselors are also supporting students' needs.

Impacts of MTSS on the School

The goal of the school's overall work, including MTSS, is "to see [students] college-ready with a diploma in their hand." School leaders feel they have done a good job of monitoring student data closely and have seen graduation rates and college and career ready statistics rise, which to them is the biggest measure of success. In addition, the school's culture has evolved over time as a result of the MTSS and personalized learning initiatives and related district efforts to train staff on encouraging a growth mindset. Now, interviewees relate that the school culture is more focused on achieving mastery and encouraging a growth mindset in students. They noted that making additional time in the school day for support aligns well with a school culture that pushes for mastery of content and competencies, rather than a teach, test, and move on approach.

What Challenges Did the School Encounter with MTSS Implementation?

Empowering Students

Interviewees observed that academic skill gaps are often intertwined with other challenges, such as disengagement, attendance, or behavior problems, and that one of the biggest challenges to implementing supports through an MTSS framework at the high school level is helping students believe in themselves as learners and learn how to persist in school. Students have to be willing to take advantage of the opportunities for additional support available to them. At times, all three administrators at this school had to walk the cafeteria during lunch with a roster of students who needed support and remind those students to go to Half-Time. Building a culture in which students are more proactive at getting the help they need has been an ongoing effort.

Addressing Significant Academic Deficiencies

Another challenge is that students with the most significant academic skill gaps have often struggled in reading, math, or writing for years—sometimes since they were in the primary grades. This high school does not have an interventionist on staff, but still has the challenge of trying to fill in the gaps and get all students working on grade level. While the schoolwide approach to providing support during lunch is working for most students, there is a small group of students at the top of the MTSS pyramid who need more intensive support. Meeting these students' needs is an area for future growth.

Advice for Other Schools

Just Jump In

The interviewees described their approach to implementing MTSS as just "jumping in" and getting started, then assessing and tweaking along the way. Making a move towards an MTSS framework, according to those interviewed, is "the right thing to do for kids," and the more a school tries to meet the needs of individual students who are not progressing towards graduation, the more they will see individual student growth, which in turn will lead to school growth.

> "We aren't super masterminds where we've just got this. We just believe in growing kids and responding to them and trying to help them be the best that they can be when they leave us."

Expect Some Challenges to the Philosophy of MTSS

The idea of allowing students opportunities for "redos" or second chances on assignments or tests as a way of encouraging mastery of content and skills can be an unfamiliar and difficult concept for some teachers and parents at the high school level. For example, some parents may feel that allowing students to redo assignments may provide them with some type of advantage over others in the race for class rank. But the interviewees were firm in their belief that MTSS and mastery-based learning are the right things to do for their students and suggest that high schools commit to a vision for the profile of their graduates (as many states, including South Carolina, have articulated) and work towards that vision for their students.