Morgan County Middle School, Madison, GA

Morgan County Middle School is the only school serving students in grades 6-8 in the rural Morgan County Charter School System. In 2022-23 the school had a student population of 844, with 43% economically disadvantaged, 4% English learners, and 15% students with a disability.

Interview Date: October 2023

School data: https://ccrpi.gadoe.org/

Background and Catalyst

MTSS has been in place at Morgan County Middle School for more than a decade, with various school MTSS leaders "tweaking and refining things along the way." The school is part of a charter school system located in a small, rural town which has a primary school, elementary school, middle school, and high school all located on the same campus. Interviewees report that this physically close setting facilitates better communication across feeder schools than a typical district might experience.

A unique aspect of Morgan County Middle's MTSS implementation efforts is Operation Graduation, which is a specialized core ELA class for 6th and 7th graders in need of intensive support in reading and writing. In 2015, the primary school speech language pathologist and a middle school special education teacher who focused on reading remediation cooperated to win an Innovative Teaching Grant offered by the district. Their collaboration was born out of each of their experiences co-teaching classes focused on students at risk of reading and writing difficulties. They also shared a desire to support at-risk students' reading achievement in middle school in preparation for the demands of content courses in high school. They named their co-taught classes "Operation Graduation" in recognition of the need for the middle school to fulfill an important role in improving the system's graduation rate.

The Present: What Does MTSS Look Like Now?

Leadership: Vision, Teams, Structures, and Processes

The school's academic coach serves as the school's MTSS leader (and is also the district's K-12 math content specialist). Time is set aside on Tuesdays and Thursdays for teacher teams to discuss student data and interventions. Each Tuesday, the academic coach joins one team of core content teachers on a rotating basis to help them review students' data and progress. The school keeps a slide for every student with their three most recent NWEA MAP scores and percentiles in math and reading. The slide also shows their three most recent state Milestones assessment scale scores. Teachers discuss students' progress toward their intervention goals (if they already receive interventions), which is tracked using spreadsheets. The expectation for these Tuesday Talks is for teachers to identify specific skills with which a student needs additional support, set goals for the student, and examine their progress toward mastering those skills, rather than just identifying that a student struggles with a given subject in general.

Interviewees report that the school tries to work with all stakeholders to support students; therefore, they consider the school's MTSS team to be large and diverse. For example, when meeting to discuss a specific student in detail, the team may include an administrator, the academic coach, the student's four core academic teachers and elective teachers, extracurricular activity coaches/sponsors as necessary, and parents or guardians.

Student Supports

Five components of student support that are part of the school's implementation of MTSS are described below.

1) Operation Graduation currently consists of two 6th grade and two 7th grade ELA classes, each co-taught by the two teachers who wrote the Operation Graduation grant. Both teachers have dyslexia endorsements and experience teaching special education. These teachers each work with half the class at a time to reduce class size, one focusing on reading and the other on writing. Operation Graduation classes are the students' regular ELA class of record, but with extra support built in. The teachers designed the classes with the goal of creating "a specialty school-quality education in a public school setting" to better support students who enter middle school not reading and writing on grade level. Sixth and seventh grade students are selected for Operation Graduation classes using a rubric based on data that includes students' prior tier of intervention support, DIBELS results, state Milestones scores, Lexile levels, and whether or not the students have IEPs. Most 8th graders who were in Operation Graduation in 7th grade are assigned to one ELA class that focuses on preparing them for high school but also continues to support them through modified pacing and assignments, as well as regular push-in support.

2) In addition to the Operation Graduation teachers, there are two part-time math and ELA support teachers and an ESOL teacher. These teachers work with groups of students in regular classroom settings to provide supports based on needs (as discussed in the Tuesday Talk conversations).

3) There is a recent schoolwide focus on increasing support for reading and writing, both in core instruction and through intervention. All teachers have been trained in incorporating explicit writing instruction into their content areas using The Writing Revolution. Monthly professional learning sessions focus on specific strategies teachers can incorporate into their classrooms. For example, teachers of any course—even electives like PE—may do warmup activities that focus on building writing skills, like unscrambling a sentence to practice word order and grammar. Interviewees reported that teachers across the school are recognizing that regardless of their content area, they all have a role to play in teaching reading and writing skills.

4) The school has a 45-minute Extended Learning Time (ELT) block at the end of each school day. Every teacher has a group of students during ELT, with the time used differently across subject areas. Every math and ELA teacher in the school teaches a small group of students during ELT, while science and social studies teachers help students develop better study skills. Enrichment is also offered, and includes jazz band, advanced PE, and art. For students who need intensive support in writing, there is an ELT writing intervention class with 8-12 students. Enrollment in this class is fluid and based on students' specific skill needs and progress. Students who need intensive support in reading may also be enrolled in a very small reading remediation class during ELT time, which is taught by one of the two Operation Graduation teachers and uses the Wilson Reading System.

5) The school also uses PBIS to improve student behavior—including academic behaviors—and to encourage high attendance. For example, students can earn incentives for turning in all assignments, demonstrating good behavior, or meeting attendance targets.

Impacts of MTSS on the School

Interviewees reported that students' reading and writing skills have improved over time. More students are passing the state's Milestones exams, and anecdotally, teachers feel that students are more confident in their academic work. The district's graduation rate has also improved in recent years, and interviewees said that students who required extra support in middle school (e.g., through Operation Graduation) have been able to stay on track to graduate—and in some cases, even take AP courses—in high school.

What Challenges Did the School Encounter with MTSS Implementation?

Tracking and Managing Data

The MTSS Leader reported that developing a system for efficiently collecting, storing, and analyzing student data for meaningful decision-making was challenging. They reached out to district staff, one of whom knew of a tool that could be used to help pull the appropriate pieces of data. This tool has helped, but managing student data is still time-intensive.

Supporting and Growing New Staff

Every school has teacher turnover, and Morgan County Middle School is no exception. Interviewees reported that supporting teachers who are new to the school with the implementation of existing MTSS efforts and other initiatives is something the school continues to address.

Advice for Other Schools

Build A Team That Buys Into the Idea of MTSS

Building a schoolwide sense that all teachers are on the same team and working toward the same goal of helping students be successful was "huge" for Morgan County Middle. The interviewees felt that the school's recent reading and writing efforts, especially schoolwide training from The

> "We can't say, 'They can't read' or 'They can't write.' We are past that. We have to figure out how to make that happen."

Writing Revolution, helped to promote this sense of teamwork for staff. They also noted that it was powerful for teachers across the school to see their work having an impact on student success. There is a school culture of teachers sharing strategies that work well for students—"Nobody's hoarding secrets," said one interviewee.

Support Sustainability by Providing Leadership Opportunities and Making MTSS a Group Effort

Interviewees recognized that responsibilities associated with MTSS need to be spread beyond a core group of staff. Making sure that the school's current approach to student supports is sustainable, requires providing many teachers with the opportunity to take leadership roles within the MTSS implementation process "so they can grow and learn." Additionally, in a small school system where staff may change roles within the same school or within the district, when a leadership change occurs, it is important that the new MTSS leaders come in with a mindset to refine what is already in place for MTSS—rather than overhauling it—in order to promote the idea that MTSS implementation in the school is a group effort and part of a sustainable culture of success.

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