

Royal Live Oaks Academy of the Arts & Sciences Charter School, Hardeeville, South Carolina

Royal Live Oaks Academy is a K-12 charter school serving students in Beaufort and Jasper Counties near the southeast coast of South Carolina. In 2022-23 the school had a student population of 655, with 87% eligible for free or reduced-price school lunches,¹ 56% multilingual learners, and 8% students with a disability.² The school's graduation rate was 96%.³

Interview Date: October 2023

¹ Enrollment data: [NCES School Directory Information](#)

² ML and SWD data: Royal Oaks Academy of the Arts & Sciences Charter School

³ Graduation rate: [SC School Report Cards](#)

Background and Catalyst

Royal Live Oaks Academy opened as a Title I, K-12 charter school in 2012 in a region of South Carolina that has historically had many families with low median household incomes and many students who come to school performing below grade level. The school also has a large population of Spanish-speaking students. Response to Intervention was implemented early on with two interventionists who pushed into the K-3 classrooms and worked with small groups of students based on their test scores. Interviewees reported that these first RTI efforts were “pretty disorganized.” Student supports were organized into what the school now knows as MTSS when the current Chief Academic Officer, who is also the MTSS and Title I Director, came on board in July 2019. The school now has an extensive array of academic, social, emotional, and behavioral supports for students.

The Present: What Does MTSS Look Like Now?

Leadership: Vision, Teams, Structures, and Processes

Royal Live Oaks Academy is heavily focused on ensuring that Tier 1 instruction is strong. It provides a significant amount of push-in support to fill in students' skill gaps and prevent them from falling behind academically. As part of the school's efforts to strengthen core reading instruction, all K-3 teachers, interventionists, and paraprofessionals are in their second year of the two-year Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling ([LETRS](#)) Science of Reading training program. They are among many teachers [across the state](#) who are learning how to implement the Science of Reading in their classrooms. Interviewees reported that teachers are implementing what they learn with fidelity and are seeing students make progress in reading as a result.

In addition, Royal Live Oaks requires all K-12 teachers to complete 15 hours of Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol ([SIOP](#)) training (with a 3-hour refresher each year) to help them teach English learners more effectively. To meet the needs of the school's large population of multilingual learners (ML), Spanish-speaking paraprofessionals are assigned to classrooms with the most Spanish-speaking students. Finally, all teachers complete 18 hours of training in teaching children of poverty through Francis Marion University's [Center of Excellence for Teaching Children of Poverty](#). These training requirements help to ensure that all K-12 teachers at the school are equipped to provide Tier 1 instruction that meets the needs of the student population.

The Chief Academic Officer/Director of MTSS and the three principals in the K-12 school (elementary, middle, and high) serve on the school's MTSS team, which also includes a total of five academic interventionists, two

mental health counselors, the school counselor, and the school nurse. This team meets monthly to review student data and make decisions about student intervention.

Every two weeks the reading interventionists meet to review progress monitoring data and discuss any new students identified from assessment data or by teachers as being in need of support. A variety of assessments are used to identify and target the skills with which students need reading support and monitor student progress, including i-Ready, the LETRS Phonemic Survey for phonics, the PASS test for phonemic awareness, and DIBELS. All of this data is put together and used to form small groups for reading intervention that addresses specific skills. “Breaking them down into small groups and having everybody, all hands on deck, to help those kids in areas of need has been a huge game changer this year,” said the school’s elementary reading coach.

Parent engagement is a key component of Royal Live Oak’s MTSS efforts. The school holds book fairs, literacy nights, and “make-it, take-it” family game nights during which families learn math and reading games they can play at home with their children. Staff meet with parents four times per year to discuss students’ progress and needs and have been successful at including almost all families in these meetings. The school focuses on building a sense of partnership with families. All communications—including the school’s website, parent events, and any robocalls with school announcements—are available in both English and Spanish.

Student Supports

Academic Supports. Royal Live Oak’s focus is on “preventative practices” to keep students from falling behind. Every K-3 class has a paraprofessional to help the teacher, which allows for extensive use of small group instruction to provide additional support to students during core instruction. Teachers review their students’ progress on a continuous basis and provide as much support within the classroom as they can. The school also dedicates time in the master schedule for K-5 students to complete individualized, teacher-assigned lessons in i-Ready based on their skill gaps.

Three ML teachers and one bilingual paraprofessional provide push-in and pull-out support to multilingual learners through the high school level. Two bilingual paraprofessionals are assigned to elementary classes that have the highest numbers of the school’s Spanish-speaking students. For students who need more intensive academic support than can be provided in the classroom, five interventionists—three elementary, one middle school, and one high school—provide pull-out small group intervention in reading and math.

Behavior and Well-being Supports. The school is pleased with the plan they recently put in place to address student attendance issues in a more intense and targeted way. Teachers monitor attendance closely and reach out to the school counselor when students experience consecutive absences. Students and families in need of support are referred to the school’s mental health counselors.

For behavior challenges, approaches such as [CHAMPS](#) and restorative justice are used to proactively manage and reteach, rather than punish problem behaviors. The school focuses on helping students understand why certain behaviors are not allowed and involving the students in problem-solving to keep those behaviors from happening again. They also stress the importance of relationships by partnering with Real Champions to match K-2 students with mentors, who remain those students’ mentors all the way through 12th grade when possible. The school works together with families and uses the Fastbridge SAEBRS (Social, Academic, and Emotional Behavior Risk Screener) tool to help identify areas of student social, emotional, or behavioral need. Students who need intensive support are referred to the school’s guidance counselors or two mental health counselors (hired with the help of ESSER funding).

Impacts of MTSS on the School

The elementary and middle programs at Royal Live Oaks have received Palmetto Silver Awards for students’ performance and growth on state tests (SC READY). Interviewees reported that the percentage of students performing at the lowest level on SC READY has decreased in recent years and that the achievement of the

lowest-performing students is improving. The school is also seeing students exit the ML program and reports that multilingual learners have especially benefited from Tier 1 reading instruction that is informed by LETRS training. Anecdotally, school leaders have increasingly seen evidence of growth in “the love of reading” among students and report hearing students excitedly talk to each other about books they are reading. They attribute this excitement about reading to the improvement in students’ reading abilities.

What Challenges Did the School Encounter with MTSS Implementation?

Scheduling to Maximize Learning

Interviewees expressed that it can be difficult to find time to pull students out for extra support while protecting core classroom instruction and services for multilingual students and students with IEPs. They recognize that Tier 2 or 3 support should supplement, not supplant, Tier 1 instruction and aim to use scheduling “to maximize the learning of the student.” This requires that the school be strategic when placing students in classes and flexible with schedules.

It Takes Time to See Growth

Royal Live Oaks acknowledges that implementing MTSS well takes a consistent focus over years, and it takes time to see student growth. The school meets regularly and uses data to examine its instructional programs and MTSS practices, noting that “monitoring and adjusting” is part of the process. They also keep an open mind in looking for ways to solve implementation problems when they arise. As a team, they see themselves as problem-solvers, which is a characteristic they also want to foster in their students.

Advice for Other Schools

Create a Culture of Collaboration and Celebration

Administrators at Royal Live Oaks Academy have harnessed the “competitive spirit” of teachers to help create buy-in for MTSS and other new programs and initiatives. As teachers saw their colleagues have success with these initiatives and saw students’ data improve, they became motivated to try them, too. Staff also celebrate students’ success by posting pictures of students in action, holding award ceremonies, and informally honoring students with “shoutouts” and small rewards from a treasure box.

“Whatever it takes to motivate them and get them hyped up about learning and succeeding is what we do.”

Have the Right People in the Right Positions

Interviewees said that “having the right people in the right spot makes a big difference.” They reported that the intervention staff at the school are passionate and dedicated to making students successful. The interventionists consider students’ difficulties as symptoms of a larger problem and go beyond the symptoms to try and determine the root of a student’s issues and what they can do to help. Students have responded positively to this approach and “still come knocking at their doors... because kids can tell when you are [there] for them.”

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This document was prepared by the Region 6 Comprehensive Center under Award #S283B190055 for the Office of Program and Grantee Support Services (PGSS) within the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE) of the U.S. Department of Education and is administered by the SERVE Center at UNC Greensboro. The contents of this document do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the PGSS or OESE or the U.S. Department of Education, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.
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