

Hickory Ridge High School, Harrisburg, NC

Hickory Ridge High School is one of 14 high schools in Cabarrus County Schools near Charlotte, North Carolina. In 2022-23 the school had a student population of 1,720, with 19% eligible for free or reduced-price lunches,¹ 9% multilingual learners, and 8% students with a disability. The school's graduation rate was greater than 95%.²

Interview Date: January 2024

¹ Enrollment and FRL data: <https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/schoolsearch/index.asp>

² Graduation rate, ML, and SWD data: Hickory Ridge High School

Background and Catalyst

Cabarrus County Schools began implementing MTSS districtwide prior to 2018 with an initial focus on elementary and middle school implementation. At Hickory Ridge High School, MTSS was originally led by a staff member who played several different roles. The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and additional funds available through the federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Grant led the district to hire dedicated MTSS coaches for its high schools from 2021-22 to 2023-24 to help support implementation. These coaches initially met monthly to collaborate on their schools' MTSS structures and processes and began meeting quarterly in 2023-24.

The district's goal was for its high schools to use the MTSS framework to identify and provide support to students after extended periods of remote instruction due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Hickory Ridge High School's specific starting goal for MTSS was to support all areas of student need, but especially social and emotional skills. The school reasoned that supporting social and emotional skills would also impact student attendance, behavior, and achievement.

The Present: What Does MTSS Look Like Now?

Leadership: Vision, Teams, Structures, and Processes

Hickory Ridge High School's MTSS coach indicated that prior to 2021 there was a limited understanding of MTSS among teachers at the school. The coach began strengthening MTSS implementation by providing staff with ongoing professional development on the MTSS framework and school resources and procedures related to MTSS. The coach also developed a group of staff that meets monthly as the school's core MTSS leadership team. This group is composed of the MTSS coach, an administrator, school counselors, the school social worker, and the school psychologist.

Originally the MTSS leadership team was in charge of all focus areas for MTSS supports, but the school found that it was too big of a lift for one team. As a result, the MTSS coach established five separate teams for attendance, grade review, discipline, student wellness, and [Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports \(PBIS\)](#). Membership on these teams varies, but the MTSS coach, school counselors, and the social worker are usually included. The overlap of members across the teams supports collaborative efforts when students experience difficulties in multiple areas. The core MTSS team's monthly meetings now consist of updates on the status of the other teams' work and overseeing schoolwide initiatives that impact student success, such as social and emotional supports and [The Positivity Project](#), a character education program.

The MTSS teams at Hickory Ridge use data on attendance, grades, and discipline to identify students in need of support, though teachers can also refer students to the teams for discussion. The school also uses the Panorama Student Well-Being Survey to identify areas of student wellness that they can better support on a schoolwide basis. Teachers play an active role in implementing PBIS and in supporting students in their coursework. They are also involved in problem-solving team meetings to discuss the progress of students who receive Tier 3 academic or behavioral supports.

Student Supports

Hickory Ridge decided that a dedicated intervention block did not meet its needs as a school because few students need academic intervention beyond what their teachers can provide in the classroom. Instead, the MTSS coach describes academic supports as “fluid.” Teachers are expected to provide small group support within the classroom on an ongoing basis and provide tutoring either before or after school or during their planning periods. They work to identify areas in which multiple students need reteaching in their weekly professional learning communities.

Students in need of more intensive academic support are provided at least 30 minutes of pull-out intervention two to three times per week. Intervention is scheduled individually for each student at times that minimize disruption to the student’s academic courses. This Tier 3 intervention is overseen by the MTSS coach using resources provided by the student’s teachers and programs such as i-Ready and Delta Math, with AimswebPlus for progress monitoring. The MTSS coach also uses peer tutoring as a way to support students, particularly for English learners. There are about 20-30 students who require Tier 3 academic intervention each year.

Core support for students’ social and emotional needs at Hickory Ridge begins with weekly 15-minute Positivity Project lessons to help students develop [character strengths and mindsets](#) such as teamwork, integrity, self-control, and recognition that each person’s words and actions affect others. Student and teacher feedback at Hickory Ridge indicates that these lessons have helped students socially reacclimate from the effects of remote learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Additional support is based on the current focus of the MTSS team for student wellness. The school’s wellbeing focus changes according to identified student needs and is selected based on the results of the Panorama Student Well-Being Survey, which is administered three times per year. For example, the school involved teachers in doing regular check-ins with students to strengthen their sense of belonging and connection to school. For a focus on social awareness, the school counselors provided support to students.

Hickory Ridge recently started implementing PBIS to increase students’ attendance, interest in school, and motivation to complete their schoolwork. The school’s PBIS team analyzed the most common behavioral incidents and created a matrix to help teach students behavioral expectations, conducting celebrations throughout the year when those expectations were met. Check-ins with a trusted staff member are the most common intervention for students who need behavior support. Students with multiple offenses may receive counseling from school support staff and/or licensed private therapists. When students experience frequent absences from school, the attendance MTSS team at Hickory Ridge works with the students and their families to identify barriers and develop a plan to improve attendance.

Impacts of MTSS on the School

The creation of a school-level position dedicated to managing MTSS implementation and the subsequent development of teams focused on specific aspects of MTSS supports have helped Hickory Ridge improve its use of data to identify students in need of support. Data-based problem-solving, identified using the state’s [FAM-S MTSS self-assessment tool](#), was described as a strength for the school. The school also reports that students receiving Tier 3 academic intervention have shown improvements on progress monitoring measures and have

completed more work and earned higher scores on exams due to the support they received. Disruptive behavior and fights were common when students first returned to school after COVID, but overall discipline referrals decreased by about 40% from 2022-23 to 2023-24, which the MTSS coach attributes to PBIS and the school's focus on supporting students' social and emotional needs.

What Challenges Did the School Encounter with MTSS Implementation?

Motivating High School Students

Hickory Ridge reports that student motivation is the biggest challenge it currently faces. Motivation touches all aspects of student success: students who are not motivated to attend school and complete assignments are also more likely to fall behind in their courses and engage in disruptive behaviors. The school's supports for social and emotional skills and initiatives like PBIS and the Positivity Project are designed to help improve student motivation. The school also works with families to identify goals that might help motivate a student to improve, such as the desire to earn a driver's license or achieve certain outcomes after graduation.

Supporting English Learners

Many of the students in need of intensive academic intervention at Hickory Ridge are multilingual learners who are relatively new to the country. While they receive supports from a multilingual learner teacher and accommodations in their classes, mastering academic content and completing classwork and exams in English at the same time they are learning the language is very challenging. The school tries to support these students by providing peer tutoring from a peer who can speak the same primary language. However, finding ways to provide multilingual learners with the tools they need to be academically successful—and ready to graduate from high school—in an English immersion environment remains a significant challenge.

Advice for Other Schools

Ensure that All Staff Understand MTSS

Hickory Ridge feels that all staff in the school—from custodians to support staff to administrators—must understand their role in MTSS implementation because they all affect school culture and the success of student supports. The MTSS coach works to educate school staff on the MTSS framework and ensure that they know who to reach out to when a student needs additional help. The school reports that teachers used to feel like they were on their own when it came to identifying and supporting students. Now, teachers have a better understanding of what MTSS is and how the school provides support to students who need it.

Reflect and Solicit Feedback on MTSS

The MTSS coach believes that soliciting feedback on MTSS implementation from staff has helped the MTSS leadership teams improve how MTSS works at Hickory Ridge. While school leaders recognize that MTSS implementation is not perfect or in its final form, they value opportunities to improve implementation and better support students and the school's overall needs.

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