

## **ABSTRACT**

Elizabeth F. Murray, A PROGRAM EVALUATION OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF A MULTI-TIERED SYSTEM OF SUPPORT STRUCTURE (Under the direction of Dr. R. Martin Reardon). Department of Educational Leadership, March 2017.

The purpose of this project was to evaluate the implementation of the North Carolina Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) model in terms of its potential to positively impact student achievement and to identify barriers to implementation at Downtown Elementary School, Southeastern District's lowest achieving school. The North Carolina State Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) has identified six critical components necessary for the successful implementation of the MTSS model including leadership, building capacity/infrastructure for implementation, communication and collaboration, data-based problem solving, three-tiered instruction, and data evaluation. The analysis of data for this study, collected primarily through observations of MTSS meetings and interviews of teachers and administrators at the school, revealed that there is a strong need to empower teachers in the data-based problem solving process allowing for deeper engagement in the planning and delivery of the three-tiered instructional model. Results also indicated there was no shared understanding of core instruction or common definition of student achievement. Recommendations included developing a systemic plan for orientation to the MTSS process for new staff members and developing a stronger support collaboration between the district and the school.



A PROGRAM EVALUATION OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF A  
MULTI-TIERED SYSTEM OF SUPPORT STRUCTURE

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

by

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MULTI-TIERED SYSTEM OF SUPPORT STRUCTURE

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## **DEDICATION**

This work is dedicated to my parents, Mrs. Tempie B. Fuller and the late Dr. Hartwell H. Fuller, Jr., both inspiring role models of leaders in public education.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to express my sincerest appreciation to my committee chair Dr. R. Martin Reardon, for providing constant support and encouragement throughout my journey in the Educational Leadership doctoral program of study. Without his persistent help and guidance the completion of this dissertation would not have been possible.

I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Matthew Militello and Dr. Karen Jones, for the time they dedicated to helping me improve my work and for encouraging me to narrow my study focus. A special thank you goes to Dr. Julie Duclos-Greenwood, my practitioner committee member, for not only being my cheerleader, but for being a true model of a passionate educational leader.

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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

### **Problem of Practice**

This dissertation is presented in the format of a Problem Statement Paper understood in the context of the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) initiative. CPED redefines the education doctorate as a “dissertation in practice,” the first stage of which is the development and defense of a Problem Statement Paper. One of the guiding principles of a professional doctorate in education aligned to the CPED model includes that it is framed around equity, ethical, and social justice issues that might bring about solutions to complex problems of practice. According to the CPED website (<http://cpedinitiative.org/>), a problem of practice is “a persistent, contextualized, and specific issue embedded in the work of a professional practitioner, the addressing of which has the potential to result in improved understanding, experience, and outcomes.”

Presented in this Problem Statement Paper are the first five components of the dissertation in practice which are entitled: The Problem Statement, Purpose of Study, Improvement Goal, Questions and Tasks, and Study Plan. Upon approval of my proposal I undertook the necessary tasks and actions that allowed me to complete the final two sections (Data Collection and Analysis, and Significance and Reflection) that expand my Problem Statement Proposal into a complete dissertation in practice.

An affluent school district in southeastern North Carolina consistently posts student achievement scores above the state average, averages of surrounding district, and averages of comparably sized districts across the state on mandated state end-of-year standardized assessments. However, the averages mask the underlying demographic reality of the grossly inequitable outcomes across the student body that are confounded with the de facto segregation

of this school district. Despite mandates and laws to integrate schools, segregated schools are still prevalent in the United States and have been steadily on the increase for the past decade (Blanchett, Klingner, & Harry, 2009). The problem of practice in Southeastern District (a pseudonym that will be used subsequently to refer to the school district that is the focus of this study) is that Black students are not performing at acceptable rates of academic achievement regardless of the demographic make-up and location of the schools they attend. The impact of student failure in school is far-reaching. Students who are not successful are at an increased risk of dropping out of school, poor health, unemployment, poverty, and incarceration (Buffum, Mattos, & Weber, 2010; Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2012). In view of the dire consequences for unsuccessful students, the inequitable educational outcomes in Southeastern District must be addressed. A well-respected overall measure of student achievement is known as the College and Career Readiness measure. The College and Career Readiness benchmark originated at the national level (Achieve, 2016) where it was proposed that a high school graduate must have the English and math knowledge and skills needed to qualify for and succeed in the postsecondary job training and/or education necessary for their chosen career. Each state defines what College and Career Readiness means in its own context. In North Carolina,

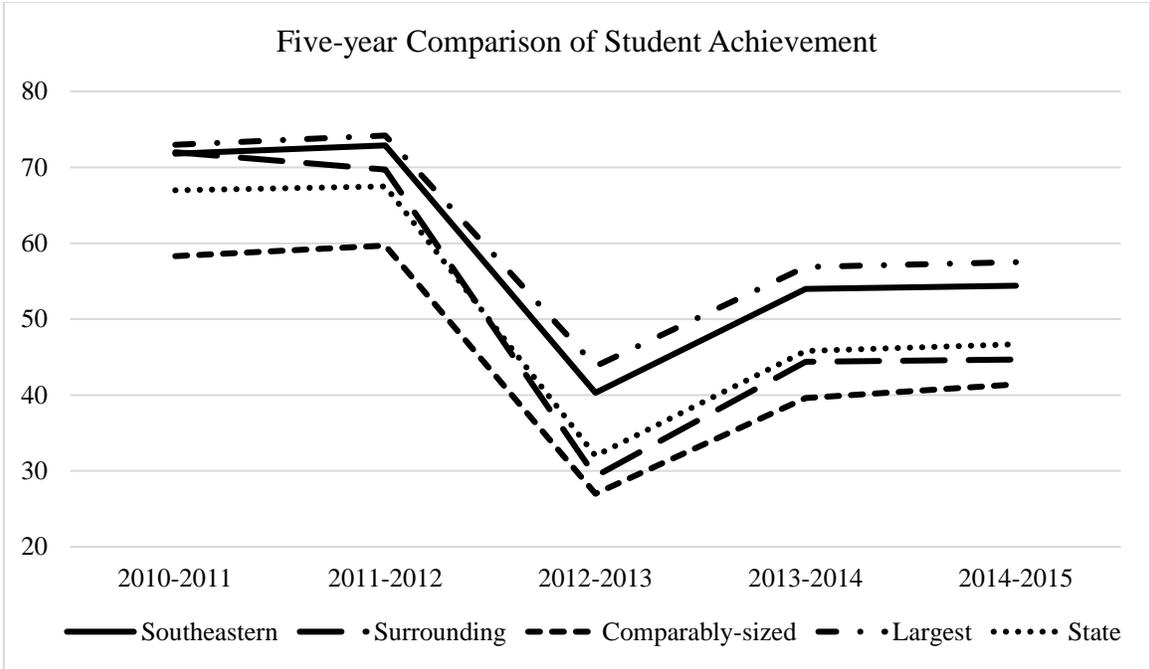
Students are considered career and college ready when they have the knowledge and academic preparation needed to enroll and succeed, without the need for remediation, in introductory college credit-bearing courses in English language arts and mathematics within an associate or baccalaureate degree program. These same attributes and levels of achievement are needed for entry into and success in postsecondary workforce education, the military, or directly into a job that offers gainful employment and career advancement (Hunt Institute, 2015).

Specifically related to state assessments, students who attain scores in “achievement level of 4 or 5 on these assessments indicates the student has a solid (level 4) or superior (level 5) command of grade-level knowledge and skills assessed by the test and has met the college and

career readiness standard” (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2016). As Table 1 illustrates, in regards to College and Career Readiness (CCR) rates in grades three through eight, the scores in Southeastern District rival those of the largest public school district in the state and surpass performance of surrounding and comparably-sized districts (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2015).

Figure 1 illustrates the close alignment of the 2010-2011 and 2011-2012 CCR rates (the top two lines) across the five comparison groups and highlights Southeastern District’s prominence as a high-achieving school district. Figure 1 also illustrates the precipitous drop in CCR rates associated with a change in achievement standards and testing regime in 2012-2013, and the rebounding of the student achievement scores in 2013-2014 as the overall educational system began to acclimate to the new standards and assessments. Throughout this five-year time period, Southeastern District has maintained its relative prominence.

The problem of practice cloaked by this overall prominent performance in Southeastern District is the discrepancy between the CCR rates of Black students when compared to their peers in other districts and at the state level. For example, taking one component of the CCR rates, comparing end-of-year standardized reading achievement test results of all students tested in grades three through eight to Black students tested, state level data show an average difference of just under 20 percentage points, while Southeastern District’s data show the difference is more than 30 percentage points. Table 2 shows five-year longitudinal reading proficiency data for all students tested in third through eighth grade compared to Black students tested at the same grade levels at the state and district level (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2015). While the achievement gap at the state level is stagnant it is not as large as the achievement gap in Southeastern District where the gap continues to widen.



*Figure 1.* Five-year longitudinal data illustrating Southeastern District’s relative prominence as a high-achieving district.

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Table 1

*Overall College and Career Readiness Rates on State Standardized End-of-Year-Tests*

District	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015
Southeastern	71.8%	72.9%	40.3%	54.0%	54.4%
Surrounding	72.0%	69.7%	29.3%	44.4%	44.7%
Comparably-sized	58.3%	59.7%	27.0%	39.6%	41.4%
Largest	73.0%	74.2%	43.8%	56.9%	57.5%
State	67.0%	67.5%	32.0%	45.8%	46.7%

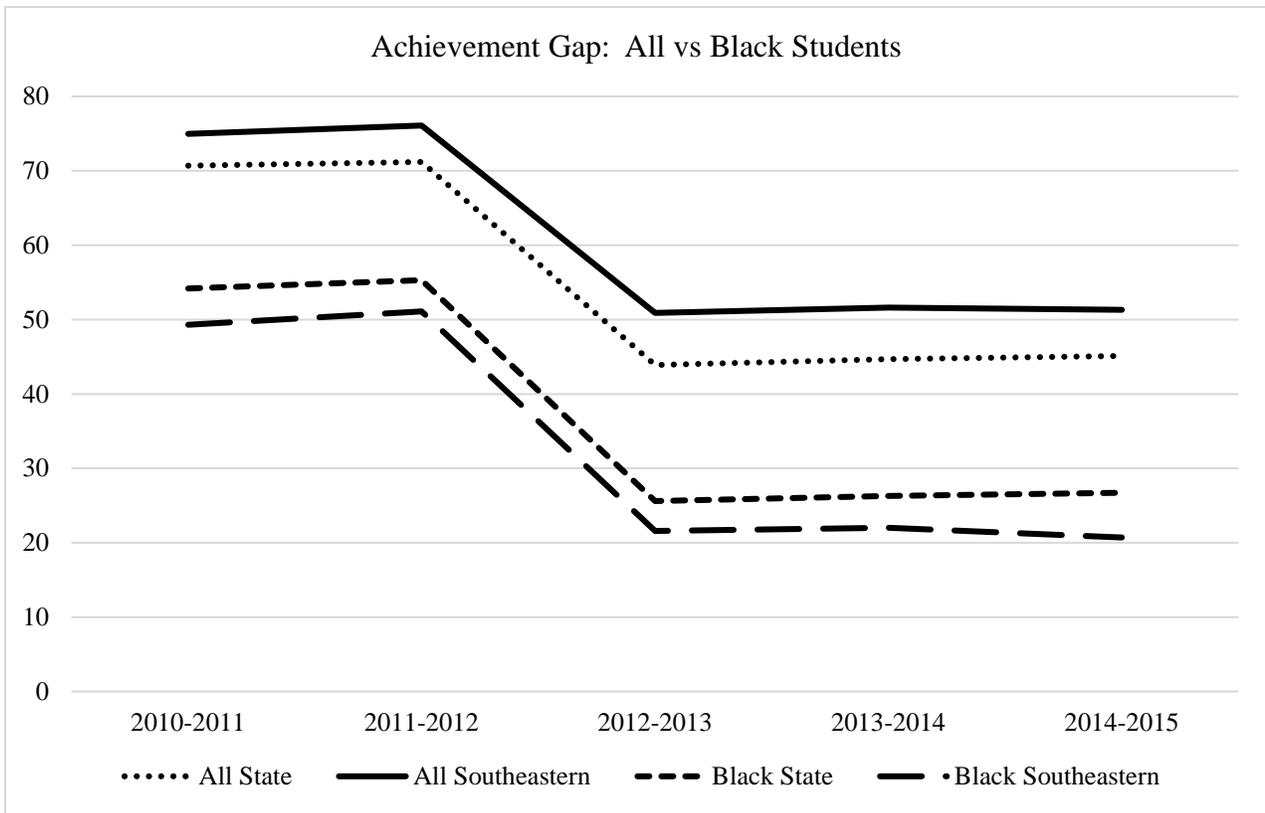
Table 2

*Reading Proficiency Rates on State Standardized End-of-Year Tests*

School Name	Total Number of Students	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015
All Students	State	70.7%	71.2%	43.9%	44.7%	45.1%
	Southeastern	75.0%	76.1%	50.9%	51.6%	51.3%
Black Students	State	54.2%	55.3%	25.6%	26.3%	26.7%
	Southeastern	49.3%	51.1%	21.6%	22.0%	20.7%
State	All Students	70.7%	71.2%	43.9%	44.7%	45.1%
	Black Students	54.2%	55.3%	25.6%	26.3%	26.7%
	Gap	16.5	15.9	18.3	18.4	18.4
Southeastern District	All Students	75.0%	76.1%	50.9%	51.6%	51.3%
	Black Students	49.3%	51.1%	21.6%	22.0%	20.7%
	Gap	25.7	25.0	29.3	29.6	30.6

Again, Figure 2 illustrates the discrepancy (conventionally referred to as the achievement gap) across these five years of data between the reading achievement of the Black students in Southeastern District and the reading achievement of all students in Southeastern District. The consistency of this discrepancy is indicated by the parallel orientation of the lines in the graph. The precipitous drop from 2012 to 2013 is again evident, but the rebound, prominent in Figure 1 for overall student achievement, is entirely absent. While the standard by which reading proficiency is determined has changed twice in the past three years, the results have not. The data in Table 2 show that the achievement gap in reading between all students tested and Black students tested has continued to widen in Southeastern District.

Potentially associated with the persistent achievement gaps, Southeastern District has, over the past ten years, shifted from school attendance zone policies that tended to balance the schools both racially and in terms of the percent of students considered economically disadvantaged to policies that favor a neighborhood schools approach. A direct result of this decision by Southeastern Board of Education are a few schools—one of which is the focus of this project--disproportionately filled with economically disadvantaged, minority students. These de facto segregated schools are centrally located in the downtown area of the largest city in Southeastern, and they have experienced a decline in student achievement as well as an increase in teacher and administrative turnover. Table 3 highlights the situation at Downtown Elementary School (DES) by comparing its data on end-of-year reading assessments to corresponding data from other selected schools in Southeastern in terms of number of students tested, percentage of Black students tested, reading proficiency of “all” compared to “Black” students, and the reading achievement gap.



*Figure 2. Consistent achievement gap across five years of data.*

Table 3

*Enrollment, Demographic, and Achievement Gap within Southeastern District*

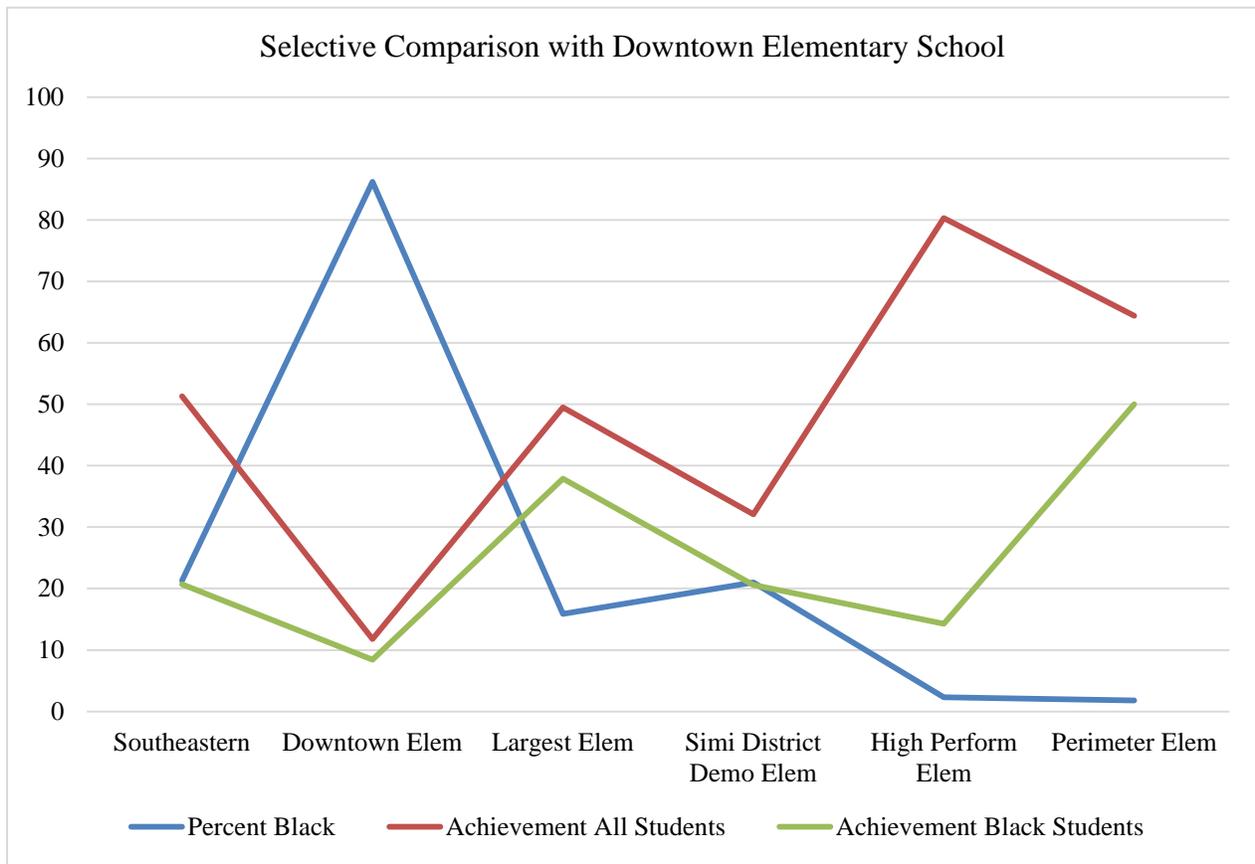
School Name	Number Tested	Percent Black	Achievement All Students	Achievement Black Students	Gap
Southeastern District	11,527	21.3%	51.3%	20.7%	30.6
Downtown Elem	152	86.2%	11.8%	8.4%	3.4
Largest Elem	364	15.9%	49.5%	37.9%	11.6
Similar District Demographics Elem	162	21.0%	32.1%	20.6%	11.5
High Performing Elem	304	2.3%	80.3%	14.3%	66.0
Perimeter Elem	219	1.8%	64.4%	50.0%	14.4

Figure 3 graphs the data in the second, third, and fourth columns of Table 3 to illustrate the association between the percentage of Black students in Southeastern District, Downtown Elementary, and the selected comparison schools (identified by meaningful pseudonyms) listed in Table 3, and student achievement. The negative association between percentage of Black students and student achievement is starkly illustrated across the peaks and troughs of the lines in the graph.

The data clearly indicate that Southeastern District is home to a persistent achievement gap which is arguably confounded by the 10-year old change in school attendance zones. This achievement gap is intertwined with the neighborhood schools policy or, put more starkly, the creation of an educational environment system characterized by “haves” and “have nots.” Because the political climate of the school board is not likely to change, the school attendance zones are likely to remain the same. With the anticipated opening of another elementary school in the 2017-2018 school year in the eastern perimeter of Southeastern District, the discrepancies highlighted above are likely to become even more pronounced, given that the location of the new school near one of the elite golf communities in the district. School attendance zones will shift somewhat to fill the new school, however, the attendance zones for the “have not” downtown schools are likely to remain unchanged.

### **Instructional Context**

The intricacy of the instructional context in Southeastern District provides an essential backdrop to the intervention and the study design that I will propose. Consequently, in this section I provide a fine-grained picture of the instructional context, particularly as it relates to the situation of those underachieving students on whose educational outcomes I am hoping to make a positive impact.



*Figure 3. Negative association between percentage of Black students and student achievement.*

Southeastern District has a rich history of efforts to implement an educational model that addresses increasing academic achievement and simultaneously decreasing the number of students admitted into the special education program. Sparked by the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (United States Department of Education, 2004), approaches that entail the use of data collection and early academic interventions prior to special education identification began to evolve. These approaches were known collectively as Response to Intervention (RtI), and were considered to be just one component of a larger problem-solving model (PSM). Canter (2004) defined the PSM as a cycle of identifying areas of weakness, identifying and implementing evidence-based interventions, and collecting data on student progress as a result of the intervention to assess the effectiveness of the intervention. The aim of RtI is to provide academic, social, and emotional assistance to all students as soon as they demonstrate a need, rather than waiting to provide support until a student fails, and is at-risk of never catching up to peers (Buffum et al., 2010; Samuels, 2011; Sawchuk, 2011; Trotter, 2013).

As a result of the emphasis on the PSM, Southeastern District developed its own process for identifying areas of academic weaknesses, and for providing and monitoring interventions—distinct from Canter (2004)—which was called the Southeastern District Problem Solving Model. While Southeastern District also referred to its process as PSM, it was essentially RtI. One distinction that Southeastern District saw as making its model more effective was the use of its own universal screening tools with the results normed at the district level, instead of nationally normed screening tools. The rationale for norming at the district level was that because students as a whole in Southeastern District were outperforming students at the state and national levels, the tools used to identify areas of weakness and the corresponding norms for determining which students should be assessed further to investigate the potential need for

special education should reflect the local population. This notion is actually supported by researchers (Linan-Thompson, Cirino, & Vaughn, 2007; Klingner & Edwards, 2006; Hernandez Finch, 2012) who contended that certain groups such as English Language Learners are often left out of sample groups, thereby resulting in norms that are not reflective of all students. However, in the case of Southeastern District, with its traditionally high achieving students, norms created at the local level reflected the demographics of the district which is primarily White, suburban, and middle- to upper-class.

Although a well-intentioned process, the Southeastern District PSM soon lost credibility, and was even challenged legally both because of the “home grown” probes and norms, and because the process for identifying students potentially in need of special education services was taking well over the mandated 90-day time limit. Daves and Walker (2012) discussed the difficulty inherent in using RtI solely to identify specific learning disabilities (SLD) in the context of the requirements of IDEA, stating “to insist that RtI be used only for SLD identification would significantly alter services rendered in a timely manner, as is required of school districts” (p. 70). From the discredited Southeastern District PSM process, the district then moved to a more state-supported model of RtI using nationally recognized probes for identifying reading weakness, but continued to norm the results locally, still insisting that the norms should reflect the data from the population locally as this was the student group that would be impacted.

The most recent iteration of implementing an intervention model came on the heels of the hiring of a new director of special education in Southeastern District--which coincided with the North Carolina’s most recent revision of the RtI process, resulting in the current model known as the North Carolina Multi-Tiered System of Support (NC MTSS). The North Carolina (NC)

definition of MTSS is “a framework which supports school improvement through engaging, research-based academic and behavioral practices” (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2014). NC MTSS employs a systems approach using data-driven problem solving to maximize growth for all” (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2014). Other authors, including Berhardt and Hebert (2011), Ehren (2013), O’Connor and Freeman (2012), who refer to RtI as a framework for continuous school improvement, note the importance of district level leadership as a critical issue in implementing and sustaining a process such as RtI. In this respect, Southeastern District views the MTSS model as a general education process, and supports one staff position at the district level dedicated to its implementation. The MTSS Coordinator position is currently housed in the Instructional Services Division, but funded by special education dollars from the Student Support Services Division.

RtI is considered by Marston, Muyskens, Lau, and Canter (2003) and others to be an effective process for addressing issues of equity and the overrepresentation of Ethnically and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse students (CLD) in special education categories such learning disabled (LD). Marston et al. (2003) contended that analyzing how students respond to core instruction, and documenting the outcomes of interventions can help educators differentiate between potential learning disabilities and disabilities that can be attributed to other factors such as lack of access to quality instruction, or culture, race/ethnicity or social class issues. Others, however, argue that RtI models are achievement barriers to the populations of students they purport to benefit because scientifically-based research on interventions with diverse populations is minimal (García & Ortiz, 2004; Harris-Murri, King, & Rostenberg, 2006; Klingner & Edwards, 2006; Ortiz, Wilkinson, Robertson-Courtney, & Kushner, 2006).

## **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this project was to evaluate the implementation of the North Carolina Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) model in terms of its potential to positively impact student achievement and to identify barriers to implementation at Downtown Elementary School, Southeastern District's lowest achieving school. Results, considerations, and suggestions from this study will be reported to district leadership so that they may be used to revise the NC MTSS implementation process in order to create more successful implementations at schools that are as challenged as Downtown Elementary School.

As stated above, this program evaluation will focus on Downtown Elementary School (DES) which is the lowest performing school in Southeastern District. DES was selected because of its rank as the lowest performing school in the district and its demographic profile of having greater than 90% minority students and nearly 100% economically disadvantaged students. The students at DES are considered to be ethnically and culturally and linguistically diverse students (CLD). In the next section, I outline the educational experiences of these students and further emphasize the critical need for the successful implementation of the NC MTSS at DES.

### **Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students**

In the context of this study, Cramer's (2015) definition of Culturally and Linguistically diverse students will be used. Her definition of CLD includes students of color, English language learners (ELLs), and students living in poverty. CLD students have traditionally experienced inequalities in the educational system including overrepresentation in disability categories, and unequal access to general education classes and curricula. Students with disabilities, especially CLD students, tend to demonstrate academic achievement below that of their peers (Cramer, 2015). Blanchett and Shealey (2013, p. 1) proposed that, even in the diverse society in which we

now live, schools are struggling to meet the needs of ethnically and culturally diverse students.

In Blanchett's own words,

This is due to the fact that despite many years of knowing that one size really does not fit the learning needs, characteristics, and preferences of ALL students, we continue to largely ignore the complexity of the intersection of race/ethnicity, language, social class and perceived disability.

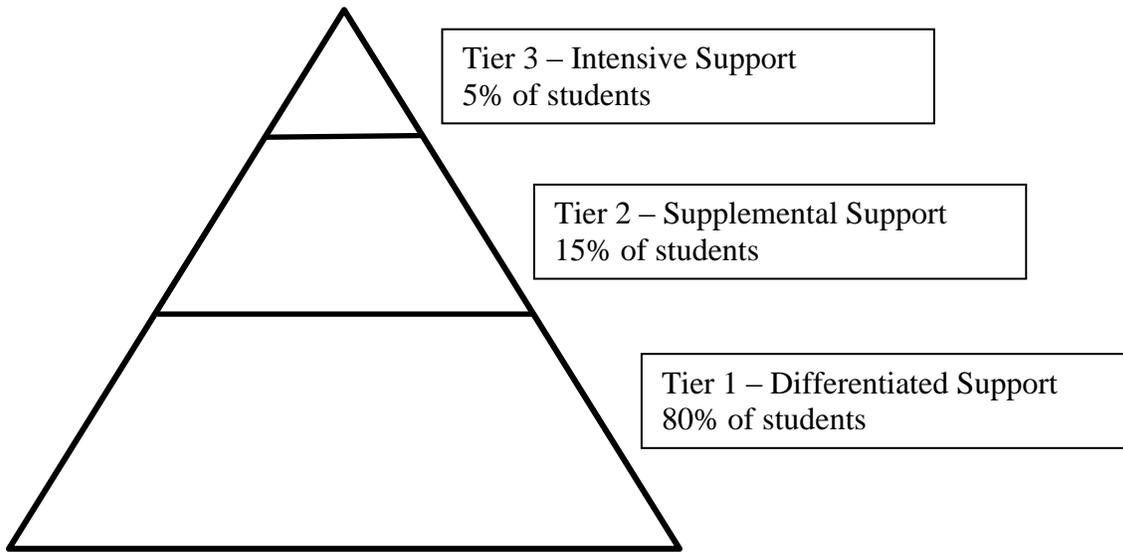
Large percentages of students of color attend schools that are primarily made up of students of color, and the quality of their educational experience seems to be affected by issues of race, culture, language, and disability (Blanchett, Klingner, & Harry, 2009). Further, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), race and ethnicity are two factors that determine the likelihood that a student will attend a school with high-poverty concentrations. In a 2005 study, NCES reported that African-American students are more likely than White students to attend schools where more than 75% of the students live in poverty (United States Department of Education, 2016). As Kozol (1991) compellingly documented, the overall quality of education in terms of resources and staffing experienced by students who attend high-poverty schools is drastically different from schools that serve predominately White, middle class students.

Ethnically diverse and CLD students are considered by Blanchett, Mumford, and Beachum (2005), and Fierros and Conroy (2002) to experience what they describe as "double jeopardy," meaning that not only do these students experience the educational inequalities of living in poverty and attending schools that are insufficiently resourced, but also that many of them are students with disabilities and are subjected to the inequities that are inherently associated with the special education system, including limited access to the general education setting and its accompanying curriculum offerings.

Along with the inequities experienced by students such as the CLD students at DES, the implications for the future of these students are far reaching. The Annie E Casey Foundation's 2010 report entitled *Early Warning! Why reading by the end of third grade matters* paints a grim picture. The report includes data such as 16% of students who do not read proficiently by the end of Grade 3 will not graduate on time, 26% of students who experience at least one year of poverty and are not proficient readers by the end of Grade 3 will not graduate, and 35% of students who are poor, live in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty, and do not read proficiently by the end of Grade 3 will drop out. Knowing that the students at DES are the students outlined in the previous statement increases the sense of urgency for these students to receive the help as soon as a need is identified—which is the goal of the NC MTSS model.

### **NC MTSS Framework**

Similar to RtI frameworks, in the NC MTSS model academic and/or behavioral support is provided through a three-tiered approach. The traditional diagram used to represent the three tiers of instruction is a triangle sectioned into three parts. Figure 4 is an illustration of a layers of support defined in the NC MTSS model. All students receive Tier 1 instruction, also known as core instruction, which is provided by classroom teachers. Tier 2 interventions are provided for students who need additional support to be successful in targeted areas. These interventions may be delivered by classroom teachers or other instructional support personnel. The third tier of instruction is reserved for students who need intensive interventions, which may include participation in replacement curriculum programs, to address deficits in remedial skill areas.



*Figure 4.* NC MTSS layers of support.

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## **CHAPTER 2: IMPROVEMENT GOALS**

Southeastern District leadership believes- that the NC MTSS model addresses the following three academic improvement goals.

Academic Improvement Goal 1(AIG1): Decrease the gap in proficiency between the lowest and highest performing schools,

Academic Improvement Goal 2 (AIG2): Bridge the academic achievement gap evidenced by data in Black/White student academic performance, and

Academic Improvement Goal 3 (AIG3): Increase awareness of personalized learning systems that maximize student achievement, including data rich learning profiles, customized learning paths, and proficiency-based progress.

If, in fact, Southeastern District overall accomplished these goals, it would result in a direct positive impact on student achievement scores at DES.

The percentage of Black students at DES in grades three through five scoring at the standard for CCR on end-of-year state reading tests declined from 21.2% in 2012-2013 to 15.9% in 2013-2014, with an even sharper decline in 2014-2015 to 8.4%. With the implementation of the five-level achievement system to reflect CCR (discussed in the context of the opening Problem of Practice section), North Carolina counts students who score a level 3 on any state-mandated test as being proficient. This measure of proficiency, that includes achievement levels 3 through 5, is known as Grade Level Proficiency (GLP) in North Carolina. In other words, an achievement level of 3 indicates that students have a sufficient command of the grade-level knowledge and skills assessed by the test, but have not yet met the college and career readiness standard (achievement levels 4 and 5, NCDPI, 2015).

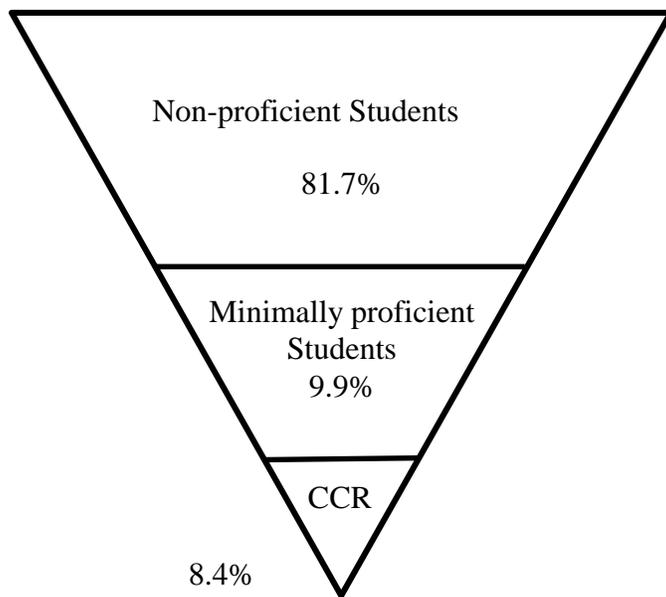
Table 4 contains a two-year comparison of the CCR proficiency data on the end-of-year reading test to the GLP data. The data show a decrease in the number of students deemed college and career ready as well as a decrease in the number of students considered minimally proficient (achievement level 3). The difference in these two measures for two consecutive school years indicates that, of the students considered to be proficient, approximately half were only minimally proficient.

The data in Table 4 show the critical need for the successful implementation of a multi-tiered system of support for the students at DES. Placing these data into the RtI triangle framework provides a visual representation of just how desperate the situation is at DES. Using the 2014-2015 data from Table 4, Figure 5 shows that the percentage of students successful with core instruction is only 8.4%. These students are considered to be on track for college and careers upon high school graduation. At a school meeting typical expectations, approximately 80% of students are successful with core instruction. To repeat, as Table 4 shows, 8.4% of students were considered proficient at the CCR level at DES in 2014-2015, and a further 9.9% of the students scored an achievement level of three indicating that they are only minimally prepared to move to the next grade level. Students achieving at level 3 are those students that can be successful with supplemental support (see Tier 2, Figure 5), expected to be about 15% at a school meeting typical expectations. When core instruction with differentiated supports is delivered effectively and combined with additional supports for some students, it is anticipated that approximately 80% of students would be on track to meet grade level requirements. However, as Figure 5 shows, at DES the typical NC MTSS triangle diagram illustrating layers of support (illustrated in Figure 4) is inverted, with approximately 80% of students not successful; not even minimally proficient on the state end-of-year assessment.

Table 4

*CCR Proficiency vs GLP in Reading at DES for Black Students in Grades 3-5*

	2013-2014			2014-2015		
	n Tested	n Proficient	% Proficient	n Tested	n Proficient	% Proficient
Grade Level Proficiency (achievement levels 3-5)	132	41	31.8	131	24	18.3
College and Career Readiness Proficiency (achievement levels 4-5)	132	21	15.9	131	11	8.4
Students Minimally Proficient		20	48.8		13	54.2



*Figure 5. Inverted NC MTSS layers of support triangle at DES.*

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In this study, I am proposing three improvement goals for my project at DES. These arise directly from Southeastern District’s vision for the NC MTSS implementation, the data outlined thus far, and the research on the factors that are implicated in students’ not being able to read by the end of grade three.

In proposing three improvement goals, I am in accord with current thinking in program evaluation which harshly critiques

non-evaluative description and data analysis, which a mainstream social scientist can do, or merely doing conditional program evaluation, that is, telling the client, “If your values (or at least the values you wish to support for the purpose of implementing this program) are so-and-so, then the program is mostly good; if not, it’s not.” (Scriven, 2016, pp. 12-13)

Scriven (2016) went to some lengths to assert and then convincingly defend his assertion that what he termed “conditional buck-passing back to the client” (p. 13) was “well short of what a professional evaluator *is obliged to cover*” (p.13, emphasis in original). Greene (2016) placed foremost amongst the tasks of evaluation the imperative “to ask how well the program’s resources are reaching those least well served, [and] to ask if the program is affording equity in access, experience, and accomplishments to all” (p. 49). Finally, Schwandt and Gates (2016) concurred with Scriven and Greene, and envisioned program evaluation as contributing to “hard-nosed questioning” (p. 68) of whether the program was well founded. A fuller discussion of the literature is included when I further explore the questions and tasks related to my study, however, in this context, the following Study Improvement Goals—closely aligned with Southeastern District’s Academic Improvement Goals—serve to delineate the scope of my hard-nosed questioning:

- Study Improvement Goal 1 (SIG1): Teachers at DES will increase their knowledge of (or understanding of, or comfort in using) Southeastern District's data-based problem solving process to make decisions about core instructional practices.
- Study Improvement Goal 2 (SIG2): Eighty percent of Grade 3 students at DES not demonstrating proficiency on either the Beginning of Grade 3 (BOG) state reading assessment or the Text Reading and Comprehension (TRC) assessment during the beginning of year (BOY) benchmarking period will show a two level increase at the middle of year benchmark (MOY) TRC assessment administration.
- Study Improvement Goal 3 (SIG3): DES will show an increase in the readiness to implement the six critical components identified by the NCDPI's department of Integrated Academic and Behavior Systems as being essential to the successful implementation of the NC MTSS model.

### **CHAPTER 3: QUESTIONS AND TASKS**

The evaluation of the effectiveness of the NC MTSS implementation at DES will ask hard-nosed questions related to the three Study Improvement Goals (SIGs). To better understand the issues that may impact the achievement of SIGs, I conducted a review of relevant literature. The literature map displayed in Figure 6 illustrates the literature I accessed to inform the research questions.

The most important issue of this study is to address the academic needs of CLD students (discussed in the Purpose section) at DES through the successful implementation of the NC MTSS models therefore the triangle, the traditional symbol used to represent the tiers of interventions in the RtI process, was placed at the very center of the map. The three circles include the topics of leadership, teachers, and professional development, which I contend are fundamental to the successful implementation of the NC MTSS model. The triangle and circles lay on a field surrounded by the components necessary to understand the RtI and MTSS model, which include the history, pursuant policies, framework or tiers of interventions, and the use of assessment and data for the model.

Beginning with the center of the map, the body of research that most influenced my study is that of CLD students. This research is at the heart of the study; it is these students who stand to lose the most if early interventions are not in place. Having taught and been an administrator at the middle school into which the students from DES feed, I have seen the impact of the institutionalized inequalities experienced by CLD students attending schools with high concentrations of poverty about which Artiles (2015), Blanchett (2013), Cramer (2015), Darlin-Hammond (2000), Klinger (2006), and so many others have written. The NCES reported that,

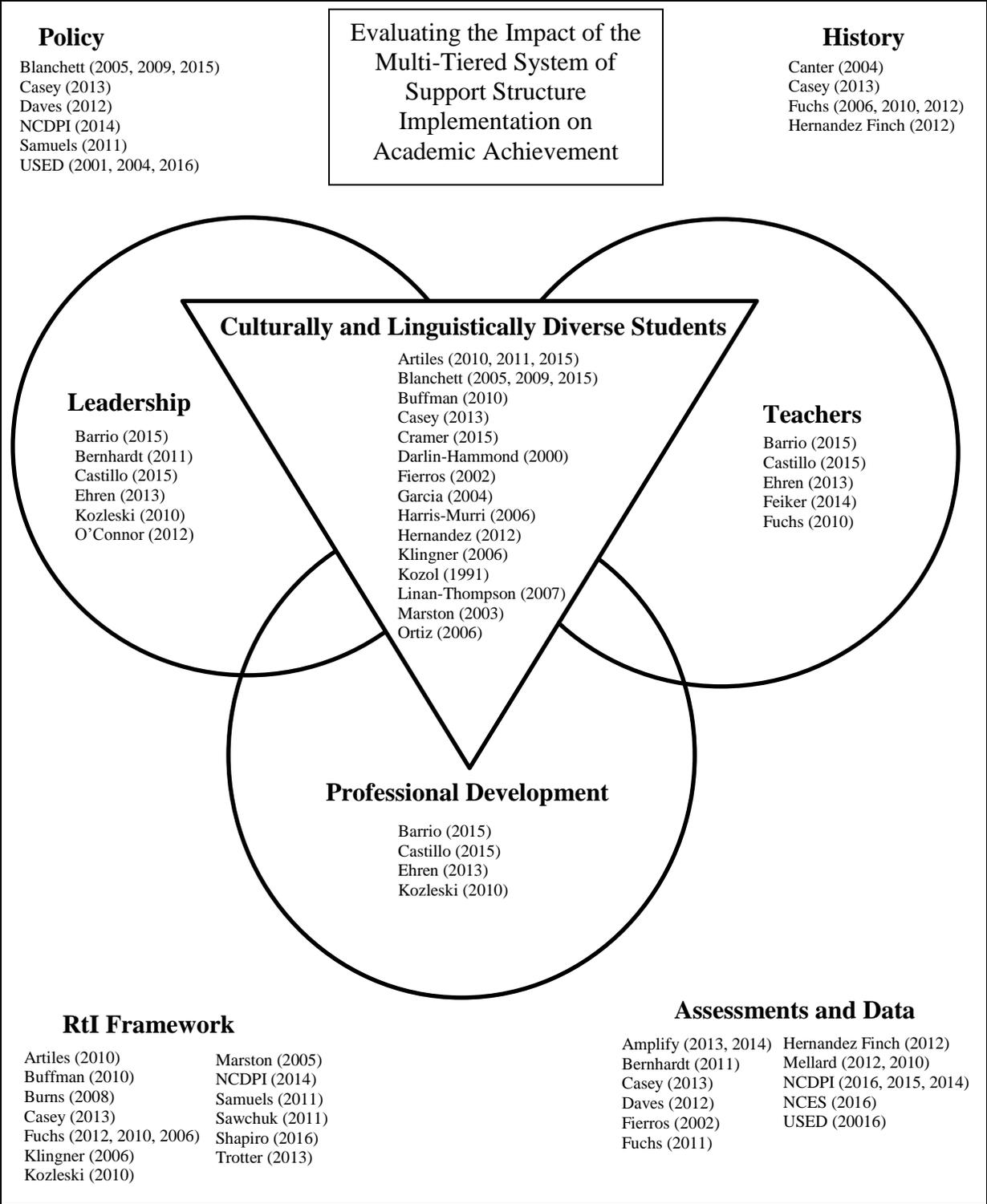


Figure 6. Literature map.

nationally, about two-thirds of students with specific learning disabilities spend more than eighty percent. Broken down by race, only twenty-nine percent of Black students spend the majority of their school day accessing general education classes and curriculum compared to sixty-five percent of their White peers (United States Department of Education, 2016).

Coupled with Southeastern District and DES achievement data presented throughout the Problem of Practice, Instructional Context, Purpose, and Improvement Goals sections, the research surrounding the plight of CLD students, and my own experiences as a teacher and an administrator working with CLD students naturally led me to question the supports and strategies Southeastern District has in place to assist these students in being as successful as their White peers in the general education setting. In seeking answers, I reviewed the history of efforts to provide interventions in Southeastern District (presented in the Instructional Context) as well as the national mandates such as IDEA, ESEA, NCLB, and ESSA. At the convergence of national, state, and local efforts was the Response to Intervention (RtI) initiative. With prominent researchers such as Fuchs and Fuchs leading the way, there is a large body of research explaining the purpose, implementation of, and intended outcomes of the RtI process. Their contention is that with targeted instruction and consistent monitoring of instruction and interventions through data-based problem solving, deficits can be addressed early preventing an over identification of students with specific learning disabilities (SLD).

Notably missing from research, however, are specific studies on RtI as it relates to CLD students (Artiles, Bal, & Thorius, 2010; Cramer, 2015; Garcia & Ortiz, 2004; Harris-Murri et al., 2006; Hernandez Finch, 2012). These researchers agree with the merits of the RtI process and the success with certain populations, but question the continued poor results for CLD students. Research recommendations include the areas of culturally responsive instruction, teacher

preparation for working with CLD students, and specific studies on interventions and results focused on the populations that are included in Cramer's (2015) definition of CLD students. The lack of specific research in this area led me seek information that might possibly be related to the lack of achievement for students at DES. My hypothesis is that there are critical components of and specific barriers to implementation of the NC MTSS model related to professional development, leadership, and teachers. My research questions are derived from this hypothesis.

### **Research Question 1 (RQ1)**

How do teachers and administrators define the core instructional program and determine its success? Beginning with the 1994 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), continuing with the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation in 2001, and remaining as a part of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) signed into legislation in 2015, a standards-driven approach to instruction in which all students—including most students with disabilities—are taught and assessed on a uniform set of rigorous standards has been mandated. The results from these assessments are used to set state, district, and school level bases for academic accountability. The standards-based approach is intended to decrease the achievement gap between enfranchised groups and disenfranchised groups of students. RtI requires that all students receive high-quality, scientifically-based instruction focused on their individual needs and deficiencies. The rationale is that, with the right general education strategies and support in place, the high incidence of disabilities will decrease (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Stecker, 2010).

Of critical importance to the right general education strategies and support is the intentional selection, delivery, and assessment of Tier 1 or core instruction. Tier 1 instruction is

designed to support approximately eighty percent students in achieving pre-determined benchmarks (Artiles et al., 2010; Cramer, 2015; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Hernandez Finch, 2012; Shapiro, 2016). As explained earlier CLD students overwhelming attend high-poverty, low-performing schools where they encounter a poor quality of instruction from teachers that are often inadequately prepared to work with CLD students (Darling-Hammond, 2000). A significant concern raised by Klingner and Edwards (2006) is that core instruction is not always fully implemented or analyzed at the classroom level. Burns, Jacob, and Wagner (2008) assert that when schools fail to provide quality instruction for at least eighty percent of their students, rather than questioning students' failure to respond to instruction, the area to explore should be the inadequacies of Tier 1 instruction.

Primary prevention (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2012) refers to the instruction all students receive in the general education classroom. The components they identify in this first level of support are the core instructional program, classroom routines that provide instructional differentiation, accommodations that allow most students access to the core program, and problem solving strategies that address students' motivation and behavior. In NC, Tier 1 or core instruction includes general academic, behavioral, and social-emotional components, and is differentiated to support all students. The essential elements of core instruction include the physical and instructional environment, the academic and behavioral curriculum, academic and behavioral instruction, and data-evaluation (NCDPI, 2015).

This body of research guides the investigation of RQ1 as well as the measurement of SIG1. The relationship between RQ1 and SIG1 is, in my view, the essence of a problem of practice investigation. It is the use of research in combination with day-to-day school operations to influence change. In other words, investigating the literature, using it to guide questions

related to a problem, and observing what is really happening at the school level to make recommendations for change to enhance student success. Specific tasks include conducting interviews with a representative group of stakeholders from the district regarding the core instructional program. This group will include the assistant superintendent of instruction and academic accountability, the district MTSS coordinator, the school level MTSS coordinator, the school instructional coach, the school administrators, and a group of 5-8 teachers. The interviews will focus on essential elements of the core instruction such as classroom routines and instructional strategies, curriculum, opportunities for differentiation in the classroom, and the use of the problem-solving model to make decisions. The results will be shared with the interview participants and the MTSS leadership team to raise awareness of possible inconsistencies in the understanding and implementation of the core instructional program. The intention is that this formative feedback will be made available to the appropriate administrators who will then adjust plans as needed to lead the MTSS team to strengthen its foundational understandings and practices.

While the interviews with stakeholders will inform RQ1 and the analysis of the information and insight gained will be carefully crafted into recommendations shared in the final section of the study, SIG1, will be measured by surveys administered to teachers at the beginning of the research project, and again near the culmination of the study period. The surveys will be designed using a Likert scale and the data will be analyzed to determine the degree to which knowledge, understanding, and/or use of core instruction has changed.

### **Research Question 2 (RQ2)**

Does the implementation of the NC MTSS have the potential to positively impact student achievement? One aspect of a tiered system of support is that students' needs are identified early

through the use of reliable screening tools (Mellard, McKnight, & Jordan, 2010). North Carolina and Southeastern district utilizes the Text Reading and Comprehension (TRC) assessments as one component of its universal screening probes. According to Amplify Education (2014)

In a TRC is a running record assessment (alternately known as a reading record) of reading performance that allows teachers to evaluate a student's foundational skills, which are necessary to become a fluent reader, and the ability to apply those skills to increasingly complex texts. TRC assesses oral reading accuracy and comprehension using a set of calibrated benchmark books. Using TRC, a teacher determines each student's instructional reading level at three benchmark administration periods during the school year and monitors student reading performance between those periods.

In a study conducted by Amplify Education (2013) to “investigate the validity evidence of the TRC in concurrence with student outcomes on the North Carolina End-of-Grade Reading Comprehension Test (NC EOG)” (p. 1), results concluded that TRC is an effective indicator of NC EOG performance. The majority of students (96%) who were not proficient on the TRC were also not proficient on the NC EOG.

RQ2, correlated to SIG2, calls for an investigation of achievement data. Throughout this paper, end-of-year assessment data has been presented to underscore the need for a multi-tiered system of support to provide academic interventions for CLD students with increased risks of failure compounded by issues of educational inequalities, race, and socioeconomic factors. Highlighted in the research is the need to provide early support that is based on results from universal screenings and consistent monitoring of chosen interventions.

Based on results of the validation study, Beginning of Grade 3 (BOG 3) data, Beginning of Year (BOY) TRC data, and Middle of Year (MOY) benchmark data will be used to predict the likelihood that students in grade 3 at DES are on track to be proficient on the NC EOG.

### **Research Question 3 (RQ3)**

What specific factors necessary for the successful implementation of the NC MTSS model are securely established or barriers to implementation? Barrio and Combes (2015) reported as challenges to implementing RtI the blurring of lines of special education and general education, increased responsibilities and pressures general education teachers feel as a result of federal and state mandates for RtI and teachers' feelings of inadequacies regarding knowledge of key RtI components and abilities to implement assessments, progress monitoring, and appropriate instruction and interventions. Based on results of pre-service teachers, the authors recommend that teacher preparation programs redesign curricula to include practices consistent with current education policy.

With all the many day-to-day tasks teachers participate in, adding one more item to the plate seems like a daunting task. However, in an article discussing teachers' overall impact on successful implementation of RtI, Ehren (2013) contends that teachers need to think and act beyond their own classrooms. It is they who may potentially have the most impact on the success of RtI. She goes on to discuss five actions that teachers must take during RtI implementation; functioning as a leader, creating critical mass, focusing on the intent of RtI, challenging myths about RtI, and cultivating collaboration.

In an effort to assess educators' beliefs about RtI Castillo, Dedrick, Stockslager, March, Hines and Tan (2015) developed the RtI Beliefs Scale, a sixteen-item instrument, designed to provide data about educators' beliefs on components of RtI such as functions of core and supplemental instruction, data-based decision making, and academic abilities of students with disabilities (SWD). Conclusions from their work include that "data derived from the tool could

be used to inform school readiness for implementation, target professional development and discussion among staff, and evaluate the effect of professional learning activities.”

Described as an activity system nested in a larger system of influences and practices, Kozleski and Huber (2010), highlight three shifts that must take place for RtI to be a sustainable improvement process. The first shift, “From Tinkering to Transformation” emphasizes the importance of state agencies and local school districts helping to build teachers’ capacity as they translate research on RtI into practice. Shift Two: Context Matters cautions against the disregard for careful consideration of the cultural context and its implications for education professionals. Reform is often derailed by neglecting the ways in cultural and policy intersect and the implications for the success and sustainability of change. The third shift, “Changing Systems Means Changing Landscapes” indicates that for RtI implementation to be successful the views and roles of general and special educators must change. To initiate this change there must be experts willing to demonstrate the practices in classroom situation, followed by respected practitioners to engage in and promote the practices, and finally the communities in which the respected practitioners work must value and embrace change and improvement. This may require shifts in how schools create schedules, discuss and interpret data, and utilize resources and personnel. In conclusion, all of these shifts and the propensity for the sustainability must cultivated by leadership through a top-down and bottom-up approaches.

North Carolina Department of Public Instruction’s (NCDPI) department of Integrated Academic and Behavior Systems has identified six critical components essential for successful implementation of the NC MTSS model. They include leadership, building the capacity/infrastructure for implementation, communication and collaboration, data-based problem solving, three-tiered instructional/intervention model, and data-evaluation.

Before initial implementation of NC MTSS, schools were encouraged to complete the North Carolina MTSS Readiness Instrument. The directions ask teams to have honest deliberations regarding each element before choosing a level of readiness. To gain insight into potential barriers still present at DES in regards to the implementation of the NC MTSS model (RQ3), I will conduct interviews with the same stakeholder group outlined in RQ1 with questions focused on the elements of the readiness instrument. Near the completion of the study, as the measurement for SIG3, I will ask the school MTSS team to complete the readiness survey to serve as an indicator as to which components appear to have been implemented successfully and which components may be barriers to complete implementation.

After giving careful consideration to the discussions that took place during the proposal hearing for my study, I decided to focus my study on RQ2 and RQ3. The proposed topic in RQ1 of core instruction will be addressed in the semi-structured questions answered by participants during interviews. I maintain that the scope of my study is optimal for explicating the problem of practice as I have conceptualized it in setting the context of the problem of practice and in laying out the purpose of my study.

### **Study Plan**

The study plan for this responsive evaluation approach to this problem of practice will evaluate the implementation of the NC MTSS model in terms of its potential to positively impact student achievement at Southeastern District's Downtown Elementary School. In keeping with the responsive evaluation approach, formative findings and recommendations will be made periodically throughout the duration of the study, with summative findings and recommendations made at the conclusion of the study. The summative findings and recommendations will be provided to the appropriate educational leaders so that they will be used to revise the NC MTSS

implementation in order to create a more successful implementation at schools that are as challenged as Downtown Elementary School.

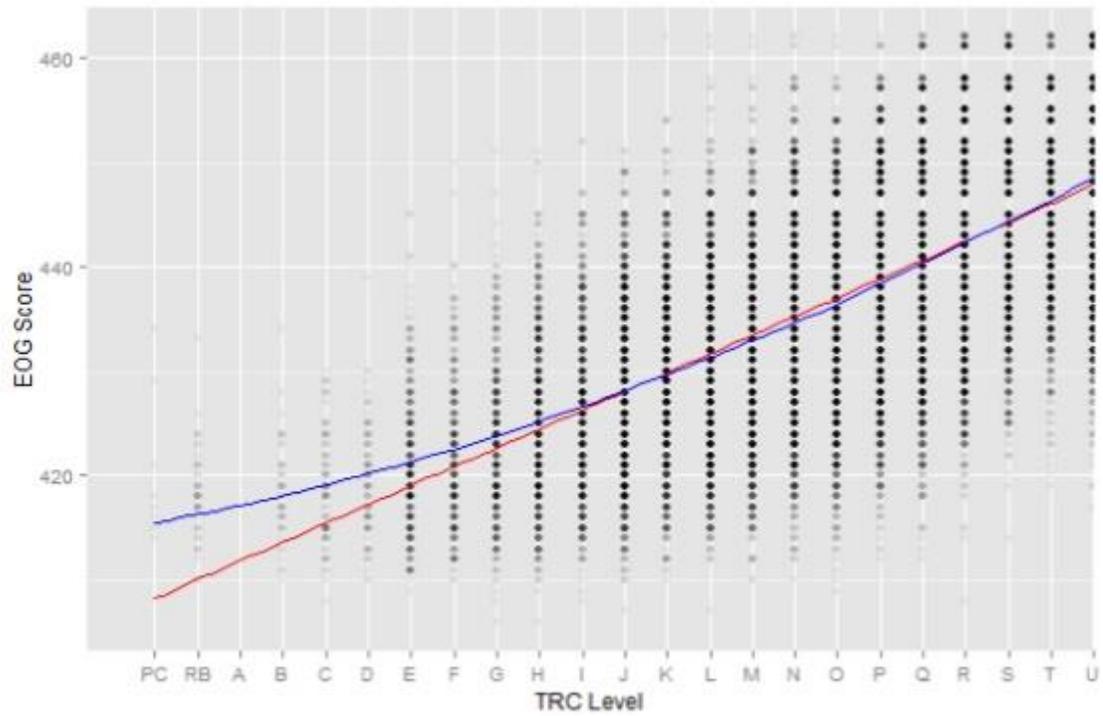
Activities to be completed include gathering baseline data, establishing a positive working relationship with stakeholders, and reviewing appropriate state, district, and school level MTSS documents. Examples of baseline data include state end-of-year assessment scores in reading, benchmark data collected from universal screeners in reading, and demographic data.

Additional data will include data analysis coupled with periodic formative feedback of progress reports of the evaluation process. Data that might be examined include the percentage of students moving between TRC benchmark levels, numbers of students involved in specific research-based interventions, and the fidelity with which MTSS meeting protocols are followed.

The study plan will continue to develop and evolve during the implementation timeframe based on input from stakeholders.

## CHAPTER 4: DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Throughout this paper, end-of-year assessment data has been presented to underscore the need for a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) to provide academic interventions for culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students who are at potentially increased risks of failure frequently associated with issues of educational inequalities, race, and socioeconomic factors. Highlighted in the existing research is the need to provide early support that is based on results from universal screenings and consistent monitoring of chosen interventions. Based on results of the Amplify validation study (Amplify Education, 2013) which, citing correlations of slightly more than 0.7, concluded that TRC is, in fact, a viable predictor of proficiency on the Grade 3 End Of Grade (EOG) reading assessment, I initially set out to use Middle of Year (MOY) benchmark data to predict the likelihood that students in Grade 3 at DES are on track to be proficient on the EOG reading test administered during the last ten days of the school year based on their MOY TRC book level. However, I recently acquired Amplify Education's scatterplot of EOG scores across TRC EOY book levels (screenshot from Amplify Education (2013) is displayed in Figure 7) which highlights the extreme ranges of EOG scores associated with each TRC book level. It appears that, particularly with the lower alphabetically labeled (more demanding) book levels, there is the potential for a large range of predicted EOG scores. For example, TRC levels M and N (two key levels in terms of competency) the range of EOG scores is greater than 40 points. Because of the wide variation of EOG scores associated with multiple book levels, I abandoned my original intention and opted to use data from the TRC Beginning of Year (BOY) benchmark administration and the TRC MOY benchmark administration as measures of reading attainment.



Source: Amplify Education (2013).

*Figure 7.* Scatterplot of EOG scores against TRC levels.

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Results from the BOG 3 administered between the eleventh and fifteenth day of the school year, as displayed in Table 5, showed that, of the 41 students tested at DES, two students scored at the level of proficiency on Grade 3 reading standards (Level III). One student scored at the minimum proficient level of Level III or, as defined by the state, exhibited sufficient command of grade level standards. The second student scored at proficiency Level IV indicating that student has a solid command of grade level standards (NC DPI, 2016).

Although students are not expected to be proficient on grade level standards at the beginning of the school year, Figure 8 shows that, in comparison to district data showing that over one-third of the students are proficient on grade level English Language Arts (ELA) standards prior to grade level instruction, only five percent of Grade 3 students at DES were proficient.

To convey a more accurate understanding of the students' abilities at the beginning of the school year, a finer-grained perspective on the BOY TRC data is displayed in Table 6. The TRC uses four levels to describe student's abilities on the assessment ranging from "Far below Proficient" to "Above Proficient." Grade 3 students are considered to be on track to be proficient readers if they are reading at book level M at the beginning of the school year. Three students at DES were reading at a book level of M or more challenging at the BOY TRC assessment. Two of these students were also proficient on the BOG 3. The number of students in each TRC achievement level and the book levels included at each level for the BOY TRC administration is displayed in Table 6 (Amplify Education, 2014).

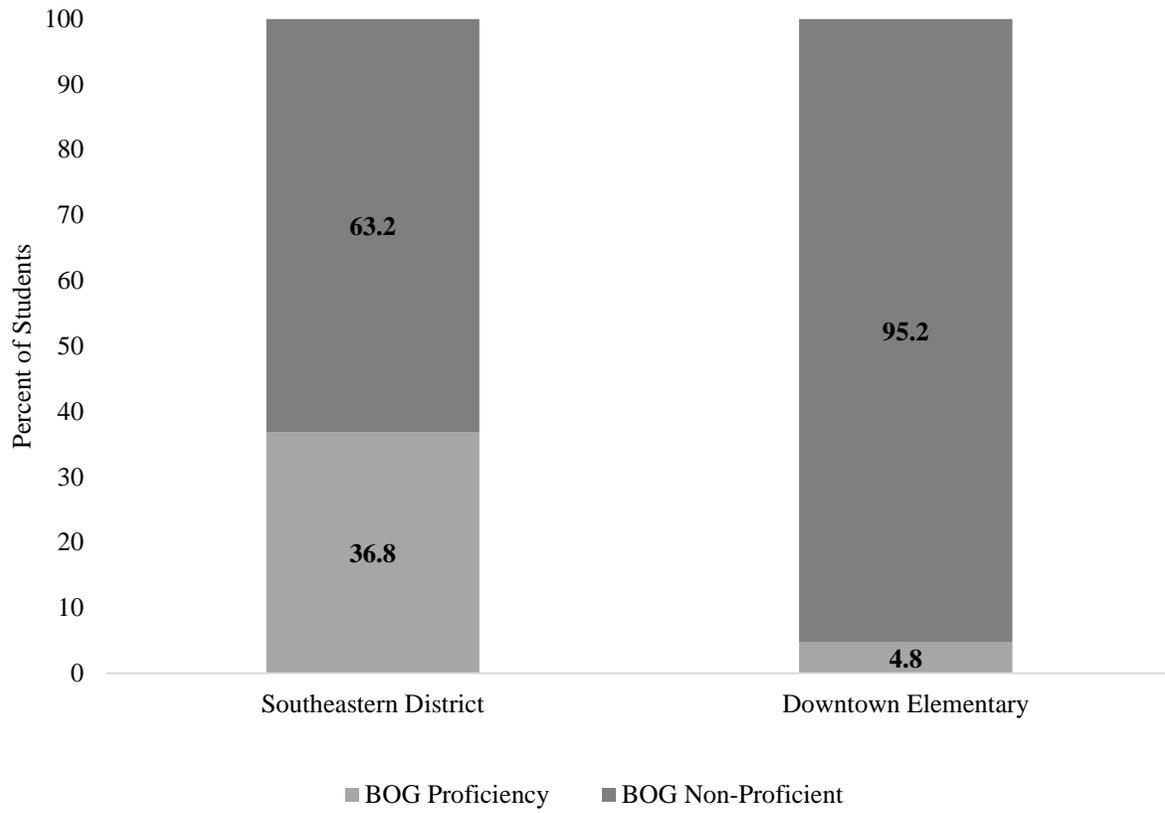
While monitoring of student progress occurs between the BOY and MOY benchmark administrations, analysis of data from the benchmarks is used at DES to examine the impact of and make adjustments to core instruction. A surface look at MOY benchmark data indicates that

Table 5

*Beginning of Grade 3 Assessment Data*

	I	II	III	IV	V
Southeastern District (N=2085)	858	460	228	463	76
DES (N = 41)	32	7	1	1	0

### Comparison of Achievement on BOG 3



*Figure 8.* BOG 3 proficiency percentages: District vs DES students.

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Table 6

*BOY Benchmark TRC Data for Grade 3 Students at DES*

	Far below Proficient (Book Levels J or less challenging)	Below Proficient (Book Level K)	Proficient (Book Levels L to M)	Above Proficient (Book Levels N or more challenging)
Number of students at each level	30	5	2	1

very little has changed in terms of the number of students in each level. Table 7 shows the number of students in each achievement level and the book levels included at each level for the MOY TRC administration. To be considered proficient at the MOY benchmark administration students should be reading at book level O (Amplify Education, 2014).

For the sake of comparison, in Figure 9, the percentage of students in each level between the two benchmark administrations shows an increase in the students assessed at “Far Below Proficient” as well as an increase in students assessed at “Proficient.” These raw data show that two students regressed going from “Below Proficient” to “Far Below Proficient,” two students moved forward from “Below Proficient” to “Proficient,” and both students who were “Proficient” at BOY moved to “Above Proficient.” When combining the “Proficient” and “Above Proficient” levels, there was an increase in the number of student on track to be proficient readers as measured by the TRC at the end of the school year from 8% to 13%.

Because not all progress can be measured in terms of proficiency, an examination of the number of book levels by which each student increased or decreased between the BOY and MOY, or his or her growth in reading, provides a secondary measure needed to determine students’ success with core instruction. While I can find no research to support the exact determination of growth expectancy between the BOY and MOY benchmark administrations for TRC, Southeastern District uses the number of book levels needed to sustain “Proficiency” at the BOY benchmark into “Proficiency” at the MOY benchmark as the marker for expected growth. Anything above that number is considered to be ambitious growth. On this basis, for Grade 3 the number of book levels between “Proficiency” at the BOY and MOY benchmarks is two, or, in other words, students who are proficient at the BOY administration and reading at a book level

Table 7

*MOY Benchmark TRC Data for Grade 3 Students at DES*

	Far below Proficient (Book Levels K or less challenging)	Below Proficient (Book Levels M to N)	Proficient (Book Level O)	Above Proficient (Book Levels P or more challenging)
Number of students at each level	32	1	2	3

Comparison of BOY to MOY Benchmark Data

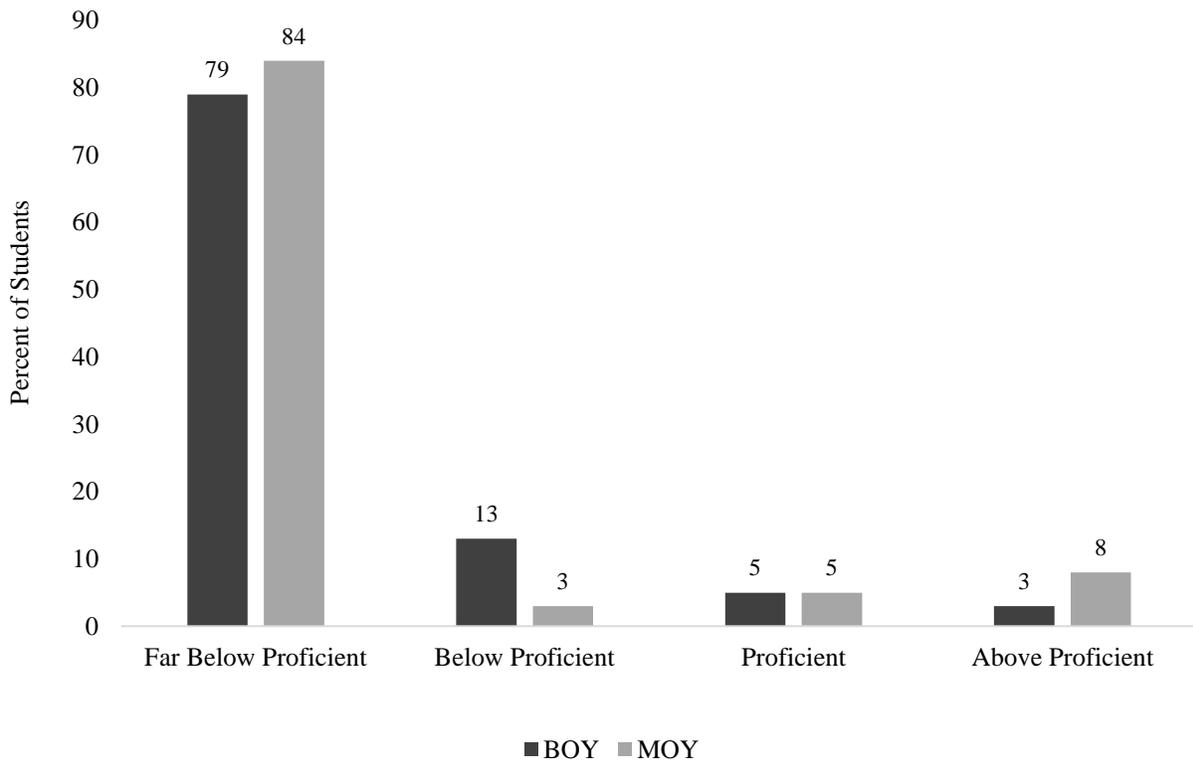


Figure 9. Comparison of assesses reading levels at DES across this study.

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of M are expected to read at a book level of O at the MOY benchmark administration to maintain proficiency.

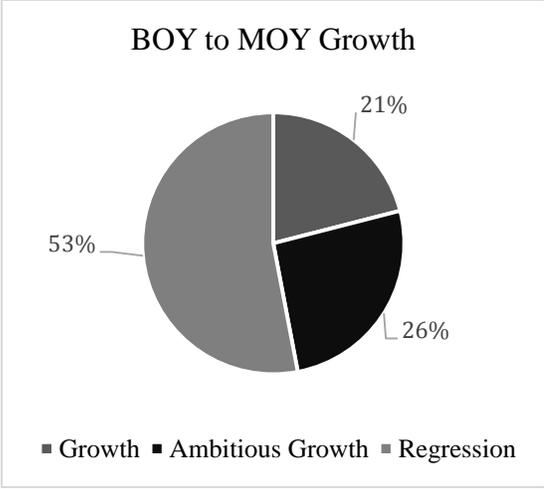
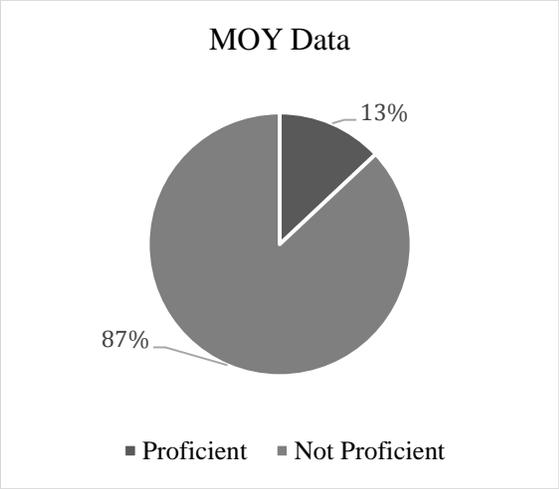
Using Southeastern District's method for determining growth paints a very different picture of students' success with core instruction and academic interventions at DES indicating that about 47% of students showed growth or ambitious growth between the BOY and the MOY benchmark periods. Of the thirty-eight students assessed at BOY and MOY at DES, eight students increased two book levels and ten students increased three or more book levels. The contrast between proficiency data at MOY and growth data between BOY and MOY is displayed in Figure 10.

Considering only proficiency data does not accurately reflect the ability of the MTSS process to positively impact student achievement outcomes at DES. Looking again at Figure 10, at the middle of the year, only 13% of the Grade 3 students are reading on grade level. However, when the growth results are considered, over half of the students in Grade 3 at DES are showing expected growth in their reading skills. The caveat to these promising data is that the majority of these students are reading two or more grade levels below expectations.

While students at DES need a high rate of growth in order to approach proficient reading skills, unfortunately teachers and administration may not deem this growth as a success because the state and district focus primarily on proficiency data. I will explore this notion, and additional thoughts and perceptions about the MTSS process, through analysis and discussion of interview responses and meeting observations.

### **Summary of Interviews**

Interviews and observations from meetings provide additional information about the MTSS process that numbers cannot capture. Throughout the course of my study, I interviewed



*Figure 10. Comparison of MOY proficiency to BOY to MOY growth.*

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six staff members at DES including teachers, instructional coaches, and administrators. The interviews took place during teachers' planning time, after school, or at another convenient time designated by the interviewee.

Fourteen semi-structured questions served as the basis for the interviews, with follow-up questions used when needed to gain additional information based on interviewees' responses. The semi-structured questions and transcripts of all interviews are available in Appendix C. Transcripts for the teachers and instructional coaches use the designation of "T" to indicate interviewee responses and "I" to indicate the interviewer's questions and responses. For the interview with the administrators, where two administrators participated in one interview session, A1 and A2 are the designations used to represent responses from each administrator. Where necessary, when the specific name of a teacher, staff member, or student was mentioned, the first letter of the named person is used to protect the identity of the individual.

The next 5 sections provide a summary of responses to the semi-structured questions that were used as the basis for all interviews. The questions were divided into the categories of demographics (2 questions), training and professional development (3 questions), meeting protocols (3 questions), core instruction (3 questions), and general thoughts and opinions (3 questions). Following the response summaries are an examination of the six critical components of the MTSS process (NCDPI, 2014), and the level of implementation supported by interview statements and meeting observations.

## **Demographics**

The first two questions for all interviews pertained to the number of years each respondent has been in public education and the number of years each has worked at DES. While the number of years of service in public education varied from four to over forty, the average, as

well, as the median and modal number of years at DES was two. Both teachers interviewed, one instructional coach, and one administrator (A1) all began at DES at the beginning of the 2015-2016 school year, meaning that at the end of the current school year they will all have worked at the school the same length of time. The other instructional coach had worked in Southeastern District prior to moving overseas, and, after returning, began working at DES in March of the 2015-2016 school year. The second administrator (A2) interviewed has been at the school for 3.5 years, working for the first 1.5 years with a different school administrator who retired at the end of the 2014-2015 school year. It would appear that there is little continuity at the instructional/instructional leadership fields at DES.

### **Professional Development**

The next three questions focused on the training or professional development provided or still needed regarding the MTSS process. In response to the training on the MTSS process that has been provided at the school, answers were varied and reflected the positions of the interviewees. Both teachers included in their replies that the MTSS process was the focus of many faculty meetings, and that the MTSS coordinator provided much of the training. When asked to describe the training, Teacher 2 responded that paperwork and collecting data were components of the trainings. Interestingly, when asked if additional training was needed on any MTSS processes or for further understanding of the process, the two teachers' replies were very different even though they have been at DES for the same length of time and have both taught the same grade level two consecutive years. Included in Teacher 2's response was that she didn't feel additional training was needed, and that, in comparison to a school in a different district where she previously worked, working at DES "has really broadened my knowledge a lot with MTSS" (Teacher 2 Interview). Teacher 1 explained that she thought the MTSS process needed to

be more simplified, and that new hires to the county, including herself, needed “a really in depth explanation of what MTSS was” (Teacher 1 Interview).

In comparison to the teachers’ responses to questions about professional development, the instructional coaches’ answers dwelt more on the training they received as a result of having a leadership role at DES. Instructional Coach 1 discussed the training she received as more of a mentoring relationship, meeting weekly and sometimes twice a week with the school psychologist who worked closely with the school to implement the MTSS process. Instructional Coach 1 also commented that the district MTSS coordinator came to the school when she was new to go over MTSS processes, and that she has since continued to attend monthly MTSS coordinator meetings.

Instructional Coach 2 began describing her training as an instructional coach, but, upon redirection, focused her response on the MTSS process more in regards to the universal screening assessments used to collect much of the data used when discussing students and making decisions about instructional interventions. Instructional Coach 2 also mentioned trainings she has attended with the district MTSS coordinator.

The two administrators provided insight into training on the MTSS process they have received as administrators, and training that is provided at the school level. Administrator 2 briefly commented that she had received some training as a teacher shortly before becoming an administrator and some district level training as an administrator. Administrator 1 described the training at the district level as snippets during monthly administrator meetings. I chose not to ask her to describe these snippets as I attend the monthly meetings and am familiar with the training that is provided each month by the district MTSS coordinator. I will share a description of these brief trainings in my analysis of the six critical components of MTSS.

Administrator 1 then turned the reply to training done at the school level, and included a mention of the school psychologist that Instructional Coach 1 mentioned. Administrator 1 said that the school psychologist provided an overview for the staff at the beginning of the 2015-2016 school year, and that then the administrators and instructional coaches took on the responsibility of talking about the MTSS process, individual students, and tiers of instruction with teachers at monthly grade level meetings.

In response to the question asking if teachers needed additional training to better understand or implement the MTSS process, the instructional coaches and administrators' answers were more consistent than were the teachers' replies. Instructional Coach 2 discussed the need for more modeling of Tier 1 instructional strategies. Instructional Coach 1 and Administrator 2 both responded that teachers need to understand that classroom interventions can and should take place in Tier 1 or core instruction. Administrator 2 referred to this as a misconception and a teaching problem stating that teachers did not know they were supposed to do intervention strategies in their core instruction instead waiting until a student was in a higher tier to begin interventions. Administrator 1 echoed this when reflecting on a teacher who said that she did not have MTSS students, commenting, "In this building they said that?" and added, "because they're not all Tier 2 and Tier 3" (Administrators Interview).

### **Meeting Protocols and Goals**

The next series of questions dealt with MTSS meeting protocols and goals. Because the interview with the administrators was focused more on core instruction, the protocol and goals questions were asked directly to the teachers and instructional coaches. With regards to describing a typical MTSS meeting, given that at DES there are different types of MTSS

meetings, I had to adjust the question during the first interview to include the context of a MTSS meeting when discussing core instruction.

In response to questions about a typical MTSS meeting and protocols or structures used in meetings two answers were given by all participants; paperwork and data. Teacher 1 and 2 both referenced the paperwork that must be completed. Teacher 1 mentioned all the charts that were used to look at students' strengths and weaknesses, while Teacher 2 discussed the number of charts she had to complete on a daily basis for students in the MTSS process for behavior. Teacher 2 also reported that completing the paperwork was a bit easier this year due to the fact that the forms were online. Both teachers considered completing paperwork and looking at data to be the only protocols or standard processes that were a part of the MTSS meetings at DES. Instructional Coach 2 was the only respondent to discuss a specific meeting structure. She reported that the meetings followed the four-question format of the DuFour Professional Learning Community (PLC) model stating the four questions she uses as "What do you want kids to know and be able to do, how do we know they know it, what do we do if they do, and what do we do if they don't?" (Instructional Coach 2 Interview).

Each of the teachers was asked to say what she thought the goals of the MTSS meetings were. Teacher 2 replied "I feel like everything we do is for data purposes. I know that's kind of lame, but I feel like ultimately that is what the goal is" (Teacher 2 Interview). Teacher 1's response was "I guess it's to help support the teacher and what they're doing in the classroom" (Teacher 1 Interview). The implications of both of these comments will be further examined in the analysis of the six critical components of MTSS.

## **Core Instruction**

The three questions focused on core instruction were varied slightly to accommodate for the role of each participant. When talking with the instructional coaches and administrators, the questions were adjusted to elicit their thoughts on teachers' understandings about core instruction.

Grade level standards, whole group instruction, small group instruction, and differentiation were common to the responses from both teachers when asked to define core instruction and describe what it looks like in their classrooms. While Teacher 1 stated that core instruction was what the standards "tells us to do and teach," she also included that she would differentiate within her small groups saying "I may have to teach it different ways to different kids" (Teacher 1 Interview). Teacher 2 responded that core instruction included a mini-lesson using Grade Three standards, but upon assessing where students' needs are, she differentiates by using lessons designed for a lower grade level. In her own words, "I think core is teaching the kids what they need at their grade level, but yet still meeting their needs at different times in small group settings" (Teacher 2 Interview). When asked how they knew whether or not students were successful with core instruction both teachers indicated they used assessments, however, the types of assessments differed between the two teachers. Teacher 1 stated that she used quizzes, tests, and conversations, and that if she felt the students were struggling she would spend more time on something. Teacher 2 discussed students' attitudes towards tests, sharing that if students do not care about a test she was not able to determine what the students really knew and understood. She preferred to use smaller, more informal assessments such as exit tickets, which, in her opinion, were less strenuous for the students and provided her with more information than a big assessment.

Interestingly, Instructional Coach 1 and Teacher 2 had similar responses to their definition of core instruction. Instructional Coach 1 said she thought of core instruction as “what’s happening in your classroom and meeting your students’ needs through differentiation, using different manipulatives, and different strategies” (Instructional Coach 1 Interview), which agrees with Teacher 2’s reply about meeting students’ needs in small groups. Instructional Coach 1 added that she thought teachers at DES would respond similarly if asked to define core instruction. Instructional Coach 2, when asked if teachers at DES could define core instruction, stated that she thought some could and some could not. She went on further to say that some teachers may be able to better define core instruction for math because DES has a math curriculum that all teachers utilize. In her opinion, core instruction for reading was harder to define because “it is a little more loosey goosey” (Instructional Coach 2 Interview). She explained that by this she meant that multiple resources were used as pieces of core instruction.

Both instructional coaches expressed concern for teachers’ abilities to know if students were successful with core instruction. Instructional Coach 1 described how looking at the data should reflect looking at the whole child and not just TRC or Dibels scores. She went on to discuss how she might use data and questions when making decisions about tier placement for individual students. After asking for the question to be repeated, Instructional Coach 1 offered that she thought gathering and looking at different kinds of data was challenging for teachers and something that is currently a work in progress. She included that she thought teachers are more likely to look at and use data from more formal assessments than they would be to use data from informal assessments. Instructional Coach 2’s response echoed that concern by saying that many teachers look at the data on a surface level and either do not know how to or will not take the

time to “go deep in the data to see what’s wrong” (Instructional Coach 2 Interview), instead just taking the data for face value.

Much of the administrators’ responses to questions and discussion about core instruction indicated a high level of frustration very reflective of issues associated with lower performing schools with high concentrations of poverty. These responses will be further explored in the analysis of the six critical components of MTSS. Phrases such as “broken core” and “Tier 1 here might look like Tier 3 somewhere else” are just a sampling of responses that signal a problem with core instruction.

### **General Thoughts and Opinions**

The final portion of each interview invited participants to offer their thoughts on MTSS process having the potential to positively impact student learning and achievement and general recommendations or suggestions for strengthening the process at DES. The responses provided in this concluding portion of the interviews will be integrated into the analysis of the six critical components of MTSS and their presence at DES and will be used to formulate recommendations regarding the MTSS process at the school and district levels. In brief summary, the teachers and instructional coaches that participated in the interviews all believed that the MTSS process had the potential to positively impact student achievement with some suggestions for change. The administrators’ responses indicated that they were cautiously optimistic about some aspects of MTSS, however they had serious reservations as to whether the process directly impacted student achievement.

### **Analysis of the MTSS Critical Components**

The State Department of Public Instruction (SDPI) has identified six critical components necessary to the successful implementation and sustainability of the MTSS process. The six

components are leadership, building the capacity/infrastructure for implementation, communication and collaboration, data-based problem solving, three-tiered instructional/intervention model, and data evaluation. To help schools assess and prioritize their readiness to implement or current status in regards to the identified components, the SDPI developed the Self-Assessment of MTSS Implementation (SAM). The complete SAM instrument can be found in Appendix D. SDPI recommends that schools complete the SAM at least once per year, but schools may use it multiple times during the school year.

The SAM is subdivided into the six “Critical Components,” with a number of elements listed under each Critical Component that collectively delineate specific tasks associated with each component. Elements 1-5 describe leadership followed by elements 6-16 under building capacity/infrastructure for implementation. The third Critical Component, communication and collaboration, has the fewest elements which are numbered 17-20. Elements 21-27 are listed under data-based problem solving, elements 28-33 further define the component of three-tiered instruction, and the final elements, 34-39 are used to describe tasks associated with data-evaluation. The SDPI developed a 0-4 rating scale with descriptors of Not Implementing (0), Emerging/Developing (1), Operationalizing (2), and Optimizing (3) for schools to use as indicators of the level of implementation for each element of each component. The scores for each element are summed to provide an overall rating for each critical component corresponding to one of three implementation ratings for the component: Not Implementing, Initially Implementing, or Fully Implementing.

Unfortunately, DES did not complete the SAM instrument before beginning the implementation of the MTSS process, nor has the school completed the instrument in the two years since implementation began. Thus, there are no baseline data regarding the situation at the

outset of the MTSS implementation—given that all Critical Component ratings presumably would have all been “Not Implementing.” Due to DES’s designation by the SDPI as a priority school (based on persistent low student achievement and the requirement to utilize a specific school improvement rubric and tool), it was decided between district and school leadership that the SAM would not be completed. In the time since DES began the SDPI required school improvement process, a document aligning the elements of the required school improvement rubric and the SAM has been completed. To date, the completion of the SAM at DES has not been mandated nor is it a priority.

On the basis of the context as already described, I opted to use the six critical components and most elements of the SAM to (a) focus my observations and interviews on specific characteristics necessary for the successful implementation of MTSS, (b) organize my findings and align them to specific areas of critical need, and (c) provide feedback to the staff at DES in a user-friendly format that offers ratings with easy to understand elements and components in the hope that the school will then utilize the tool and the results to refine plans for MTSS implementation.

In the following six sections, using selected elements from the SAM, direct interview quotes and MTSS meeting observations will be provided to support the analysis of and determination as to whether each critical component has been successfully implemented, or if there are components or specific elements of components that are barriers to implementation. The SAM instrument includes specific elements that address student behavioral needs and processes specific to those needs. As the focus of this study is academic achievement, those elements will not be addressed in the analysis. Each of my discussions of the six SAM Critical Components opens with a table showing which of the 39 elements associated with that Critical

Component were factored into my analysis. The numbering of the elements is consistent with the full SAM which can be found in Appendix D.

## **Leadership**

According to the NC MTSS Critical Component Document (n.d.), school leaders support the implementation of MTSS by communicating a mission and vision, providing necessary resources for things such as evidence-based instruction and interventions and time for planning, and ensuring that staff have the data needed to make decisions about individual students.

Included on the SAM, among the elements used to assess the critical component of leadership are the establishment of a MTSS leadership team, strategic plans for implementation and professional development, and active facilitation of meetings by the principal and members of the leadership team. Table 8 outlines the elements used in the determination of the level of implementation for leadership.

The MTSS leadership team at DES has been securely established and facilitates all non-instructional and many instructional duties associated with the MTSS process. The leadership team consists of the principal, one assistant principal, the school MTSS coordinator, the school MTSS counselor, the school psychologist, the instructional coach, and two teacher leaders. During my observations, I had the opportunity to witness the many tasks the members of the MTSS leadership team carry out including preparing for and facilitating MTSS meetings, assessing and providing academic interventions to students, and completing necessary paperwork.

In regards to implementation leadership elements 4 and 5, because DES is required by the SDPI to utilize a specific school improvement tool and rubric, a strategic plan for MTSS implementation apart from the school improvement plan does not exist. However, the MTSS

Table 8

*Elements of Leadership*

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Element	Description
1.	The principal is actively involved in and facilitates MTSS implementation
2.	A leadership team is established that includes 5-7 members cross-disciplinary representation (e.g., principal, general and special education teachers, content area experts, student support personnel) and is responsible for facilitating MTSS implementation
3.	The leadership team actively engages staff in ongoing professional development and coaching necessary to support MTSS implementation
4.	A strategic plan for MTSS implementation is developed and aligned with the school improvement plan
5.	The leadership team is actively facilitating implementation of MTSS as part of their school improvement planning process

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process is a part of the school improvement plan, and is listed among strategies to be used to address instructional excellence and alignment as well as behavioral and social and emotional issues of students.

Over the course of the MTSS meetings I attended, specific scenarios from two meetings stood out as exemplars of the work of the leadership team. Examples from these same two meetings will be used again, although in a different aspect, as supporting evidence in the analysis of the building capacity and infrastructure component.

The first meeting I attended, a weekly grade level PLC where the topic of discussion was core instructional strategies used during the reading block, was facilitated by the principal. This type of meeting would normally have been facilitated by the instructional coach, but the instructional coach was assessing students to obtain MOY data. The principal opened the meeting by asking what core instruction looked like in each teacher's classroom. As teachers described the reading block, the principal passed out results from a recent benchmark assessment. The principal would periodically stop each teacher and ask if the data from the benchmark assessment supported the planning for core instruction. She directed the teachers' attention to a specific item analysis report that showed the percent of students that had answered each question correctly as well as the most commonly chosen incorrect answer. She also pointed out that the report showed an alignment of each question to a grade level standard. This was followed up with a discussion of using the results of the assessment to plan for whole group and small group instruction. The principal's ability to not only facilitate the meeting in the absence of the instructional coach, but to lead the discussion using data to direct the conversation and to offer insight and suggestions for instructional strategies is indicative of her understanding of the MTSS process as it relates to core instruction and the instructional leadership she provides.

The second meeting which highlighted the work of the leadership team was a monthly MTSS meeting to discuss results from the TRC MOY data. MOY assessments for all students were completed by members of the leadership team. This meeting was led by the school MTSS coordinator and the instructional coach. Evidence of careful planning included printed teacher reports, a data presentation, prepared questions to guide the discussion and draw attention to specific data or students, recommendations for areas of academic focus with instructional strategies to be used, and a plan defining what data should be collected and presented at the next monthly meeting. The MTSS coordinator facilitated most of the data discussion followed by the instructional coach, who explained the instructional areas of focus and the strategies to be used. It was evident from the meeting that the leadership team was focused on using teacher's limited planning time effectively and efficiently and stayed on schedule, ending the meeting in time for teachers to return to class to meet students returning from "specials" (non-core instruction classes which, in elementary schools, enable core instruction teachers a semblance of preparation/correction time).

Comments during interviews also attest to the functionality of the MTSS leadership team. Both teachers spoke in their interviews about the support and training they receive from the MTSS coordinator, the instructional coaches, and the MTSS counselor. When asked about training on the MTSS process at DES, Teacher 2 replied "We've had a lot of PLC's, a lot of faculty meetings, pretty much all inclusive with [the MTSS counselor] and our head MTSS people" (Teacher 2 Interview). Teacher 1 commented, in regards to paperwork, that she was not comfortable with that, "[the MTSS counselor] helps, they do help" (Teacher 1 Interview).

Even though both instructional coaches are a part of the MTSS leadership team and were not asked directly to describe their role as a member of the team, both of them contributed

statements that indicate they understand and carry out their roles as leaders. Instructional Coach 1 talked about her role in data discussions saying “We’re always looking to try and triangulate the data, looking at the whole child” (Instructional Coach 1 Interview), going on to give examples of her thought process when thinking about data, and how she models that thought process when meeting with teachers. Instructional Coach 2 described how she supports teachers instructionally by modeling strategies. An example she gave was a strategy called hot/cold reads, she explained, “We want them to use hot/cold reads for fluency and I’m not sure if they know how to do that. So that might be where I’ll go over it step by step, how to do it, how to embed it in your literacy block, and what to do with the results and so forth” (Instructional Coach 2 Interview).

Examples from observations and interviews serve to affirm that there is an MTSS leadership team in place at DES, and that the leadership team carries out its responsibilities in the MTSS implementation process. The team provides ongoing support through coaching and professional development, and facilitates many aspects of the MTSS process. Using the ratings of the SAM, analysis of the elements under the leadership component support a rating of initially implementing. It is evident that members of the leadership team have the best interest of teachers and students in mind when carrying out their leadership duties. However, some of the same leadership qualities that may be perceived as helpful to and by the teachers at DES may also present barriers to implementation. This is best explained through the analysis of the next critical component of building the capacity/infrastructure for implementation.

### **Building the Capacity/Infrastructure for Implementation**

Many of the elements associated with the critical component of building the capacity/infrastructure for implementation are closely linked to those of leadership. While

leaders often do things with the intentions of being helpful (e.g., compiling instructional resources for teachers in the interest of saving time), the outcomes can have an adverse effect such as diminishing teachers' creativity or independence. It is these unintentional outcomes that sometimes slow the process of building capacity to implement and sustain new initiatives.

I have aggregated the eleven elements of the building capacity/infrastructure for implementation, as seen in Table 9, into categories of professional development, coaching, scheduling, processes and procedures, and resources to allow for a finer grained analysis.

**Professional development.** Several examples were used in the previous section to assert that DES has a MTSS leadership team in place, and that the team members carry out roles and responsibilities in an effort to positively support the implementation of the MTSS process. Within the context of building capacity for the implementation and sustainability of MTSS at DES, professional development and coaching are areas in need of further development.

I received only vague responses to my interview questions asking what training had been provided and inviting descriptions of the training for MTSS implementation at DES. Both teachers I interviewed responded that much of the training for MTSS took place at faculty meetings or at after school professional development sessions. Interestingly, both teachers began teaching at DES at the same time, but had differing opinions about the trainings. Teacher 1 explained that MTSS was new to her and that she had attended "several staff meetings that we go over MTSS and they try to explain, but it's really confusing to me" (Teacher 1 Interview). When questioned about additional training that might be helpful, she replied

I think it needs to be more simplified. Because when you start just jumping in and talking about the different tiers, and you're coming to a new county, maybe new hires need that. But to try to explain what that is because each county does something different and you come in and you're lost cause you're not sure what all that means. So it would have been nice to have a really in depth explanation of what MTSS was. (Teacher 1 Interview)

Table 9

*Elements of Building Capacity/Infrastructure for Implementation*

Element	Description
6.	The critical elements of MTSS are defined and understood by school staff
7.	The leadership team facilitates professional development and coaching for all staff members on assessments and data sources used to inform decisions
8.	The leadership team facilitates professional development and coaching for staff members on data-based problem-solving relative to their job roles/responsibilities
9.	The leadership team facilitates professional development and coaching for all staff on multi-tiered instruction and intervention relative to their job roles/responsibilities
10.	Coaching is used to support MTSS implementation
11.	Schedules provide adequate time for trainings and coaching support
12.	Schedules provide adequate time to administer academic, behavior and social-emotional assessments needed to make data-based decisions
13.	Schedules provide adequate time for multiple tiers of evidence-based instruction and intervention to occur
14.	Schedules provide adequate time for staff to engage in collaborative, data-based problem-solving and decision-making
15.	Processes, procedures, and decision-rules are established for data-based problem-solving
16.	Resources available to support MTSS implementation are identified and allocated

In contrast, Teacher 2, who also came to DES from another county, agreeing that MTSS was the topic of many faculty meetings, said that in her opinion no additional training on the MTSS was necessary. Teacher 2's reply was

I feel like our school is pretty good what the whole MTSS. I know at my last school it was not so much. I was in another county and I didn't really do much with MTSS so this school has really broadened my knowledge with MTSS. (Teacher 2 Interview)

I also asked the instructional coaches about the professional development they had received regarding the implementation of the MTSS process. Instructional Coach 1 discussed a more mentor-like relationship with the district MTSS coordinator and the school psychologist where they met on a weekly basis, sometimes twice per week, that she felt was beneficial when she first began in her role. Instructional Coach 2, instead of sharing training she had received on the MTSS process, focused on training for specific assessments administered as part of the MTSS process. After discussing her role in the assessment process, she did include that she attended district level meetings with the district MTSS coordinator just as Instructional Coach 1 did.

Each instructional coach had suggestions for additional training that she thought would better help the teachers at DES to implement the MTSS process. Instructional Coach 2 zeroed-in on the use of instructional strategies at various grade levels. Her descriptions suggested that professional development around instructional strategies was focused on the areas of academic need as determined by assessments and occurred during grade level PLC meetings. She described one training provided by the district elementary literacy lead teacher on the program Writing Fundamentals, and how that led to teachers using the resource. Her summary statement, "whatever needs to be worked on, whatever strategies they need, whatever help they need"

(Instructional Coach 2 Interview) supports her opinion that additional professional development is needed in the area of instructional strategies.

Instructional Coach 1 shared a more reflective and global response to the question of additional training and professional development. Her analysis, as a leader, led her to verbalize a misunderstanding about the MTSS process held by some of the teachers at DES. She stated that teachers lack the “understanding that interventions occur at core, not when they are at a Tier 2 or Tier 3. Those interventions can start in your classroom” (Instructional Coach 1 Interview). She went on to explain that this may be a result of lack of time to gather resources or lack of training to implement interventions as a part of core instruction. Ironically, both administrators also identified this same misconception in responses to other questions. This is evidence of a barrier to effectively implement core instruction related to a need for continual professional development. This issue will be more fully discussed in the section on three-tiered instruction.

When asking the administrators questions about professional development on the MTSS process, my questions were directed to the training they had received as administrators, and then the training provided at the school level. Both administrators admitted to having had little training on the MTSS process. Administrator 2 reported that she had some training as a teacher before becoming an administrator, but very little since then. Administrator 1 said she had “snippets” of training provided at monthly administrator meetings. I did not ask her to elaborate on the “snippets” as I also attend the monthly meetings and have first-hand knowledge of the trainings.

From my first-hand experience, each month the district MTSS coordinator presents a ten- to fifteen-minute session on implementing MTSS. The topics vary from month to month focusing on a wide range of information from MTSS paperwork, to school level teams, to

instructional strategies. The informational sessions also oscillate between an instructional focus and a behavioral focus. The sessions are not intended to provide full training on the foundational components of the MTSS process, but to motivate administrators' discussions of how the process is handled in individual schools. This can be problematic because, as Administrator 1 said with frustration in her voice, "Tier 1 here might look like Tier 3--I'm sure looks like Tier 3-- somewhere else" (Administrators Interview). A full-day training was provided to school level leadership teams when Southeastern district began initial implementation of the MTSS process. Since that time, no in depth district level trainings have been provided for administrators new to the district or transitioning from a classroom to a building level administrator. The district MTSS coordinator does provide assistance with implementation when invited by the principal. The lack of a consistent plan to orient and initiate new administrators regarding the MTSS process is another barrier to successful implementation of the MTSS associated with professional development.

Although clearly a systemic problem, the lack of a consistent introductory professional development plan is evident at the school level as well. Administrator 1 reported that the school psychologist delivered an overview of the MTSS process for the entire staff at the beginning of the school year and the MTSS leadership team provided monthly discussions at grade level PLCs about tiered instruction and paperwork. Again, with frustration in her voice, Administrator 1 said,

And we've trained again on the process and what you do and it's just so convoluted. No matter how black and white you try to make it, when you're dealing with children and individual issues, it's just not always black and white. (Administrators Interview).

As evidenced by comments from teachers new to the process, there are a number of areas in need of improvement. Among them are instructional coaches who recognize misconceptions

in foundational understanding, administrators who have had a formal district training on the MTSS process, and professional development for all. Although professional development is just one element of the critical component of building capacity/infrastructure for implementation, shortcoming is this element is a barrier that must be addressed if the MTSS process at DES is to be fully implemented and sustained.

**Coaching.** DES has four instructional coaches. One is the MTSS coordinator, one is the Title I instructional coach, and the remaining two coaches are teacher leaders who do not have classroom teaching assignments. Evidence to support the analysis of coaching as an element of the MTSS process are based on my observations of the MTSS coordinator and the Title I instructional coach (referred to as the instructional coaches) as neither of the other two teacher leader coaches was a participant in the meetings.

The instructional coaches are well suited to their positions as members of the MTSS leadership team—they seek to fulfill their duties to the best of their capabilities to meet the needs of the teachers and students at DES. Both coaches are well trained in the administration of the universal screening assessments, and in the analysis of the data used in the MTSS process. However, as referenced in the section on leadership, sometimes well-intentioned initiatives can have unintended consequences.

For example, the coaches collaboratively led a meeting to discuss results of the TRC MOY benchmark and instructional implications based on the data. As leaders, they were well prepared for the meeting with handouts and data presentations. During the meeting, my attention was drawn to the teachers. They sat and listened patiently as the data were explained to them. Because all assessments were completed by the instructional coaches, the teachers had no first-hand knowledge of specific errors students had made in reading or incorrect responses made to

questions. Again, they were simply shown data as the coaches told them about their students' performance. When asked to provide their own interpretation or explanation of the data, the teachers had little to offer, instead relying on experiences from interactions with the students in the classroom.

After the teachers were told how their students performed and shown data indicating areas of weakness for the majority of the students, they were asked what could change in core instruction to help students move from needing intense interventions to just strategic supports. The disengaged teachers offered little input, and were then directed to use three specific strategies during core instruction to address the identified issues. One of the required strategies was to increase teacher read aloud using story structures, inference questions, and having the students complete two Writing Fundamental lessons. Teacher 1 expressed concern about moving the teacher read alouds to the core instructional block, and was told that the data indicated the students were not grasping questioning skills and inference skills because it was not being modeled for them during core instruction. Several resources were shared, teachers were told what data to bring to the next meeting as evidence that they had implemented the required strategies, and the meeting was dismissed at the end of the designated 35 minute time period.

My analysis of interactions and body language during this specific meeting is that the instructional coaches perceive their organization, telling of the data and the strategies which must be implemented, and providing a list of resources as being helpful to the teachers who are constrained by limited time to complete these tasks on their own. The atmosphere of the meeting was professional and positive, however, the teachers, while accepting what was provided, were not engaged as active participants in the planning of instruction for their students.

Further evidence of the lack of teacher input into data analysis and planning can be found in the interview with Instructional Coach 2. When asked about additional training teachers might need to better implement core instructional strategies, her response was

We're going to be meeting with 3<sup>rd</sup> grade and we're going to be telling them these are the things we want you to focus on. These are the things we want you to use. And then we'll be doing follow up. (Instructional Coach 2 Interview).

Because my interview with the administrators occurred after my observation of the above described meeting, I shared some of what I saw, and asked Administrator 1 about telling the teachers what would be monitored versus having them discuss the data and having the time to do that reflection and planning. She explained that, in the upcoming weeks, the teachers would be given an extended block of time to “restructure their literacy block and make the changes we are talking about” (Administrators Interview). Administrator 1’s response reaffirms my perception that the unspoken and counterproductive rationale is that “we are helping the teachers who do not have the time they need by telling them what to do.”

As with professional development, problematic coaching is a second element in the critical component of building capacity/infrastructure for implementation that is a barrier to successful implementation. Administrator 1, unprompted, made a statement about building capacity saying, “And as principals that’s our job, to build capacity and ensure this and ensure that. It’s a lot easier said than done” (Administrators Interview). Instead of building capacity, the level of coaching that is provided at DES may serve to diminish teacher autonomy and create further reliance on assistance--inviting yet another unintended consequence: blaming the leaders/coaches when what they told you to do did not result in the outcomes anticipated. In short, it can be described as the difference in empowering teachers and enabling teachers.

**Scheduling.** Among the many necessary factors for the successful implementation and sustainability of MTSS is the adequate time to complete essential components. This is an issue that has induced acute frustration for both teachers and administrators. Responses from all interview participants included at least one comment on the lack of time to carry out essential components of the MTSS process.

Teacher 1's and 2's frustration with time and scheduling was the completion of the time-consuming required paperwork. Teacher 1 lamented, "Especially if you're just a classroom teacher, and you're supposed to be teaching and you've got to fill out all these forms. When do you have time for all that" (Teacher 1 Interview). Instructional Coach 1, as discussed previously, shared her thoughts on teachers not implementing interventions during core instruction as a result of not having time to gather the data and resources needed to implement interventions.

It was the administrators who provided the most input on the issues of scheduling and time as it relates to implementation of MTSS--specifically in the areas of planning and professional development. In discussing the lack of planning time, especially in elementary schools, Administrator 1 reflected on the fact that teacher assistants are not as plentiful as they used to be, and when teachers are not in the room instruction suffers saying, "maybe if they had that time to plan, then the time they were instructing it would be better" (Administrators Interview). She told Administrator 2 about a practice she was aware of in another district where there was a scheduled early release day once per week for the purposes of teacher professional development. As Administrator 1 was explaining this I shared that the early colleges in our very own district have early release days every Friday for the purpose of professional development and she exclaimed, "So why wouldn't you do that for a low performing school?" (Administrators

Interview). She continued sharing her frustration and disappointment that when out-of-the-norm things are suggested as ways to bring about change, she is not taken seriously.

Also along the lines of scheduling, I asked the administrators their thoughts on the DES being shifted to a year-round calendar at the beginning of the current school year. Administrator 1 shared her experiences in another school district working in a low performing school that was moved to a year-round calendar. Her comment was, “I don’t think it makes a difference how you slice the 185 days. Either you have good instruction or not” (Administrators Interview). The results--in her previous experience--showed no improvement in student achievement, and the school was eventually switched back to a traditional calendar.

**Processes and procedures.** There is evidence to support that some processes and procedures for data-based problem solving exist at DES, but not all are established enough to be routinely used. The most common process that is fully implemented is that of MTSS paperwork. Examples include teachers completing behavior charts and turning them in to the MTSS counselor on a weekly basis, the instructional coaches completing tiered instructional plans as scheduled, and assessment reports being completed by the school psychologist in time for MTSS meetings.

A procedure that has the potential to be more fully implemented is a meeting procedure to guide PLC meetings. Evidence to support this finding comes from several observations and interviews. Most specifically, Instructional Coach 2 mentioned in her interview the use of the DuFour PLC structure and that she had extensive training on the procedure. She stating that she used the following four questions when she led PLC meetings: “What do you want children to know and be able to do? How do we know if they know it? What do we do if they do? What do we do if they don’t” (Instructional Coach 2 Interview)?

In a meeting I observed that was led by Administrator 1, there were glimpses of evidence of the same four questions referenced by Instructional Coach 2. At the beginning of the meeting she stated the purpose as “to review data to see if the students are responding to core instruction, and, if not, what do we need to change.” Later in the meeting she asked the teachers about data that supported their analysis of their instruction, and discussed changes that needed to be made.

The DuFour PLC model is not currently a formalized process, but with evidence of members of the leadership team utilizing similar questioning structures in PLC meetings, this is a potential area to build capacity and infrastructure to implementing the MTSS framework. At this time, it is not viewed as a barrier, but rather as an emerging strategy.

**Resources.** The allocation of human and instructional resources is a bright spot in the MTSS implementation process at DES. Along with the negative consequences of being designated as a persistently low performing school comes additional funding. The funding is often allocated to specific areas such as personnel and instructional resources. As mentioned throughout this study, DES has many additional instructional support staff. Along with a designated instructional coach and MTSS coordinator, there are two additional teacher leaders who serve as instructional coaches as well. As a result of extra teacher positions, class size is most grade levels is small with an average of 15 students per class. DES also has eleven teacher assistants as well as certified academic tutors who provide interventions to students. There are also additional non-instructional support people including a full-time nurse, counselor, social worker, and mental health specialist. DES also has two assistant principals.

Evidence-based instructional resources are readily available at DES. The drawback to having multiple resources is that the right resources are not always utilized to address the specific needs of students, or, alternatively, that so many resources are used that time and

training are not devoted to using the resources with fidelity. I noted an example of the latter during two consecutive PLC meeting led by the administrators.

During the first meeting, Administrator 1 mentioned I-Ready as a resource she was willing to purchase to be used as part of core instruction in reading if the teachers wanted it. She brought one student book and one teacher guide for the teachers to peruse. The teachers showed interest in the material, but were not made fully aware of the accompanying resources. At the PLC meeting the following week, both administrators took time to log onto the website and demonstrate some of the resources explaining how they could be incorporated into core instruction. The teachers all agreed they would like to have the resource and it was purchased. During interviews with the teachers which occurred after these series of meetings, both teachers reported using the newly purchased resource and recounted the changes they had made to core instruction as a result of having the resource. Teacher 1 used the example of resources available to support her instruction on plays and dramas saying, “There’s plays in there that might be a page line that a lower group may use and then there’s some that are four or five pages that my groups could use. So it’s differentiated. It’s great!” (Teacher 1 Interview). In her explanation of core instruction in her classroom, Teacher 2 referenced the ability to use off-grade-level lessons from the I-Ready resource as pre-requisite lessons for her small groups. During the interview with Instructional Coach 2, many references were made to various resources available to teachers.

My analysis of resource allocation shows that the administration ensures that teachers have the resources they need and want in the form of additional support staff and instructional materials. My reservations relate to the potential use of materials without fidelity, or abandoning one resource and moving on to a different resource without collecting data to support the change.

## **Communication and Collaboration**

The MTSS Critical Components Document (NCDPI, n.d.) states that “many initiatives fail due to a lack of consensus, lack of feedback to implementers to support continuous improvement, and not involving stakeholders in planning” (p. 2). Of the six Critical Components identified by NCDPI, the evidence surrounding Communication and Collaboration, using the two elements displayed in Table 10, causes me the most concern. It is not that DES does not have a process in place to collect or provide feedback on MTSS implementation fidelity, but that issues arise in terms of consensus and engagement in the implementation. Most specifically, my concern relates to the administrators’ beliefs about the MTSS process.

As described in the earlier analysis of the components of leadership and building the capacity/infrastructure for implementation, the administrators at DES are actively engaged in the facilitation of the MTSS process. One, and many times both, administrators attended the MTSS meetings I observed, several of which they facilitated. They are both adept at asking probing questions about classroom instruction and data, offering suggestions about instructional strategies, and ensuring that teachers have the resources they need. There is no question of their sincere devotion to the students and staff at DES.

Being most appreciative of their complete honesty in our interview, and even identifying with many of their statements based on my own experiences in a similar school, I am disheartened at the lack of consensus between the participating teachers and staff and the administrators in their perceptions of the potential of the MTSS process to have positive impacts on the academic outcomes for students at DES.

Table 10

*Elements of Communication and Collaboration*

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Element	Description
17.	Staff have consensus and engage in MTSS implementation
18.	Staff are provided data on MTSS implementation fidelity and student outcomes

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All participants acknowledged the at-risk factors that students at DES exhibit and are very much aware of the extreme academic deficits the students struggle to overcome. Administrator 1 reported that over 70% of the students are considered to be students in need of intensive academic support (IAS), meaning they are two or more grade levels behind. When I entered the administrators' office area before our interview, Administrator 1 was talking with a student who had left his classroom because of his frustration over not being able to complete his work. After talking with the student and pairing him with an instructional support person to assist him, she explained her inability to have full faith in the MTSS process when the majority of her students were already so far behind. I invited her to elaborate on this theme during our interview. Much of the substance of my interview with her also serves as evidence for my analysis of core instruction in the three-tiered instructional model section.

Just before the interview began, Administrator 1 admitted that the MTSS process was more beneficial and that she was seeing greater results, in her opinion, with students receiving Tier 2 and 3 interventions. During the interview, she referred to the difficulties of trying to build instructional expertise among her teachers, and stated that

Kids who are getting Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions are getting it from great people outside the classroom. But when your core is broken and they are getting pulled out 30, 40 minutes a day, but the rest of the time you're sticking them back into a broken core, it's just a vicious cycle. (Administrators Interview)

I invited her to delve further into the issues associated with a broken core. As she discussed the very real deficits and issues that the students at DES come to school with, she pointed out that she was not placing blame on the students because as she put it, "it isn't their fault or anything they would choose" (Administrators Interview). She went on to discuss how students and teachers in the past would hide behind behavior issues and the improvements the school had made in that area. Using her fingers to insert air quotes to indicate that those things

are “not measurable,” she stated her frustration outright saying “We’ve made some strides in those areas, but until it reflects academically nobody cares” (Administrators Interview).

In later questions, Administrator 1 described the teachers as being “glazed-over” and “full” of the difficulties of their daily jobs compounded by their own personal lives outside of school. She stated that “we [the administrators] were nurturing the grown-ups in the building just as much as they were nurturing the students” (Administrators Interview). She turned to Administrator 2 and wryly asked, “Who nurtures us”? Administrator 2 replied, “each other, each other” (Administrators Interview).

Administrator 1 talked about the difference in climate and culture at DES. She described climate as more surface level things in which you see can see a quicker change, and expressed optimism about positive changes in the school climate. However, she stated, “We still have a culture of low achievement and belief systems are hard to change” (Administrators Interview). It was at this point, in response to Administrator 2’s comment, that Administrator 1 recounted how, at a recent conference, she heard a talk on schools such as DES being “gifted by sweet and low” (Administrators Interview). She reflected that “We talk about our babies are sweet, sweet, sweet, and they’re low, low, low instead of just thinking that they CAN achieve” (Administrators Interview). With that, Administrator 1 shared the dissonance between her philosophical beliefs and the reality of what she witnesses daily. She said she believed philosophically what Administrator 2 said about their students being able to achieve, but that she could not just pretend that the students were not so far behind academically. Her argument was that students that are two or more years behind are not going to catch up in a year--which creates “a sense of urgency because if that was my kid sitting there I wouldn’t want to say, ‘oh, change takes five to seven years,’ and there’s a kid sitting there that doesn’t have five to seven years” (Administrators

Interview). Administrator 1 went on to explain that she does want to have high expectations for students, but that teaching them on grade level, in her opinion, is not the answer.

Near the end of the interview, just as I asked all the other participants, I asked the administrators to share their thoughts on the MTSS process having the potential to positively impact student achievement. Before I share her response, I will recap the replies of the other participants.

Teacher 1, who claimed to have no MTSS students in her class, and was concerned that she did not receive an in-depth introduction to the MTSS process, said, “Yes, I do because the ones that are like Tier 2 that get the extra help, they’re being pulled out to work in smaller groups and they work on something other than what we’ve been working on in class” (Teacher 1 Interview). Her response concurs with what Administrator 1 shared regarding students working off grade level, however, Teacher 1 views this as providing help to students--help which will positively impact student achievement.

Teacher 2, who correctly stated that MTSS includes a lot of paperwork and assessments, and was concerned that she was not able to gauge what her students understood if they didn’t care about certain types of assessments, stated that she, too, believed the MTSS process had the potential to positively impact student achievement outcomes saying,

I do because we are making it a big deal to go out of our way to meet those needs of the kids weekly whether its three times a week every week so I do think so. Because we make it a habit to do those things and to really make sure we log it. And I’m like, if we’re doing it with fidelity then it should be making a difference” (Teacher 2 Interview).

Thus, Teacher 2 believes that what she is doing is making a difference for her students.

Instructional Coach 1, who came to realize that teachers did not understand that providing interventions in the classroom was a part of core instruction, and that possibly providing additional time and training might help to remedy this issue, affirmed her belief about the

potential of the MTSS process to positively impact student achievement. In doing so, she inserted a qualifier relating to the need for more focus on core instruction, saying,

I do. I think the new framework and the new philosophy, we're still trying to get down to that core part of really understanding the impact of core because if core isn't effective it effects the Tier 2 and Tier 3, so really trying, I think we are still in the process of really having people understand the importance of core and how we know it's effective. (Instructional Coach 2 Interview)

Instructional Coach 2, who has had extensive assessment and PLC training, and is concerned that the teachers need more training on instructional strategies, had the most enthusiastic response to whether or not she thought the MTSS process had the potential to positively impact student achievement, asserting that it definitely has potential. When I asked her what was needed to make it a reality at DES, she focused her response on being very intentional about everything that is done in the classroom, because, as she said, "every second counts" (Instructional Coach 2 Interview). She added, "You know, I think we've got a great team here with it and I think we're moving along and I like the structure. I think we have a lot of good structures in place, for behavior and academic."

Finally, when I asked Administrator 1 to share her thoughts about the MTSS process and its potential to positively impact student achievement, she paused for some time, forcibly placed her pen on the desk, and said,

I'm uncertain as to whether the minimal benefits outweigh the time it takes for teachers, and the paperwork and the meetings and all that. And the fact that the skills they are working on are so foundational that it doesn't. And yes, they need to catch up on those. I'm not saying that it's a terrible thing or terrible process, but I am really uncertain if that outweighs the other stuff that is a part of MTSS, which is paperwork and time, and it not being something that necessarily helps them on their grade level work. (Administrators Interview)

I chose to share each individual response as a part of my analysis to show the stark differences in consensus regarding the MTSS process among those I interviewed at DES. With

so much distance between the beliefs of the administrators and those of the instructional staff, I am initially tempted to say that there is little evidence to support the successful cultivation of the critical component of Communication and Collaboration. My hesitancy is born of my observations of the ease with which Administrator 1 facilitated the PLC meetings, her ability to ask probing questions about core instruction and to discuss instructional strategies, and my knowledge of the resources she has committed to the MTSS process. The outward confidence with which Administrator 1 approaches tasks associated with the six critical components of the MTSS process masks her true inner feelings.

### **Data-Based Problem Solving**

The MTSS Critical Component Document recommends the four-step problem solving approach to data-based problem solving. The four steps are 1) defining the goals and objectives to be attained, 2) identifying possible reasons why the desired goals are not being attained, 3) developing a plan for implementing evidence-based strategies to attain goals, and 4) evaluating the effectiveness of the plan (NCDPI, n.d.). Among the elements outlined in Table 11, there is evidence to support the use of data to identify the “gap” between expected and current student outcomes, areas of weakness and reasons for those weaknesses, the development and implementation of specific intervention plans and the monitoring of student progress. The MTSS leadership team at DES ensures that all required data is collected and reported in a timely manner. This was noted multiple times in meeting observations. Careful plans are written and interventions are monitored on a regular basis as a result of the data collected.

The central issue in the critical component of data-based problem solving, as discussed in the section on coaching, is the absence of teacher engagement in the process. Based on meeting observations, much of the data analysis and planning for interventions at all three tiers is

Table 11

*Elements of Data-Based Problem Solving*

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Element	Description
21.	Integrated data-based problem solving for student academic, behavior and social-emotional outcomes occurs across content areas, grade levels and tiers
22.	Across all tiers, data are used to identify the difference or "gap" between expected and current student outcomes relative to academic, behavior and social-emotional goals
23.	Academic, behavior and social-emotional data are used to identify and verify reasons why students are not meeting expectations
24.	Specific instructional/ intervention plans are developed and implemented based on verified reasons why students are not meeting academic, behavior and social-emotional expectations
25.	Student progress specific to academic, behavior and social-emotional goals specified in intervention plans are monitored
26.	Data-based problem-solving informs how patterns of student performance across diverse groups (e.g., racial/ethnic, cultural, social-economic, language proficiency, disability status) are addressed
27.	Resources for and barriers to the implementation of MTSS are addressed through a data-based problem solving process

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completed by members of the MTSS leadership team. While they do have time dedicated to carry out these duties, they may be missing critical pieces of information that an assessment of skills cannot provide. Although addressed in the next section on the three-tiered instructional model, often it is not the classroom teachers who provide Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions. Interventions and monitoring are often delivered by an instructional support person in a pull-out setting meaning the interventions are delivered outside of the classroom. While classroom teachers are aware of the skills students are working on and the possibly the intervention being used, they may not see the progress being made as a direct result of the intervention. Ironically, Administrator 1 made a statement about the use of supplemental funding to get positions that could be used to deliver interventions “so teachers then could just work on Tier 1 which is still a part of the MTSS process. It’s not like we’re leaving teachers out of the MTSS process” (Administrators Interview). The evidence supports just the contrary, that classroom teachers are not directly engaged in the problem-solving process.

### **Three-Tiered Instruction**

While Tier 1 or core instruction is the focus of this study, evidence does support the use of a three-tiered instructional system at DES. Directly related to resource allocation and the functionality of the leadership team, it is not surprising to find evidence that supports a more fully developed and implemented Tier 2 and Tier 3 support system. However, it is cause for concern. Elements of a three-tiered instructional model are listed in Table 12.

When asked to define and describe core instruction in their classrooms, each teacher found it easier to provide examples of how Tiers 2 and 3 work than to describe their instructional core strategies. Teacher 1 specified Reading Mastery, as an example of an instructional strategy she did have to use in her classroom. Even though she does not provide Tier 2 and Tier 3

Table 12

*Elements of Three-Tiered Instruction*

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Element	Description
28.	Tier 1 (Core) academic practices exist that clearly identify learning standards, school-wide expectations for instruction that engages students, and school-wide assessments
30.	Tier 2 (Supplemental) academic practices exist that include strategies addressing integrated common student needs, are linked to Tier 1 instruction, and are monitored using assessments/data sources tied directly to the academic, behavior and social-emotional skills taught
32.	Tier 3 (Intensive) academic practices exist that include strategies that are developed based on students' needs, are aligned with Tier 1 and Tier 2 instructional goals and strategies, and are monitored using assessments/data sources that link directly to skills taught

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interventions, Teacher 1 was able to very easily describe the process by which students are pulled to receive academic interventions and the length of time and numbers of days per week. Similarly, when asked to describe a typical MTSS meeting where the focus was on core instruction, Teacher 2 jumped straight to describing processes for Tiers 2 and 3.

Instructional Coach 1's comment on her beliefs about the potentiality of the MTSS process to positively impact student achievement best exemplifies the concern regarding core instruction. She stated, "we're still trying to get down to that core part of really understanding the impact of core because if core isn't effective it affects the tier two and tier three, so really trying, I think we are still in the process of really having people understand the importance of core and how we know it's effective" (Instructional Coach 1 Interview).

Evidences to support her statement are numerous. One of the first quotes that I identified as evidence of a potential misconception about core instruction was when Teacher 1 stated, "well luckily this year I don't really have a lot of the MTSS kids" (Teacher 1 Interview) in her interview. In the interview with the administrators, I used this statement as an example to question whether or not the teachers at DES really understood core instruction. Without hesitation Administrator 1 summed up the teacher's thinking saying, "Because they're not all Tier 2 or Tier 3" (Administrators Interview)

Both administrators at separate times during the interview identified the same misconception about core instruction and the use of interventions. Early on in the interview, Administrator 1 said, "You know, we're trying to make sure teachers understand that Tier 1 is still a part of MTSS. See, you don't have to wait until somebody is in Tier 2 or 3 to do an intervention" (Administrators Interview). Then towards the end of the interview in reference to Administrator 1's ascertain that she thought more progress was made with students receiving

Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions, Administrator 2 added “and clearing up those misconceptions of not doing strategies until—well now they need to be Tier 2 or Tier 3, what do I need to do? Do those strategies on core!” (Administrators Interview). Administrator 1 concluded the comments on this misconception saying, “I taught it, they didn’t get it. They must be Tier 2” (Administrators Interview).

A final piece of evidence that supports the need to strengthen the implementation of core instruction is Administrator 1’s reference to the broken core. Twice during her interview she referred to students getting the interventions they needed at Tiers 2 and 3, but was concerned about the students as they were placed back into a broken core. The second reference she made was to the retention of students and not placing the blame on the students for a “core that is broken” (Administrators Interview)

In summary, there is evidence to support the implementation of a three-tiered instructional model at DES. Disconcerting is the fact that much of the evidence suggests that the implementation of Tiers 2 and 3 are stronger than the implementation of core instruction.

### **Data Evaluation**

Of the six critical components, data evaluation appears to be the component that is most fully implemented. As with the three-tiered instructional model, the existence of a strong support staff and leadership team allows for the dedicated time, space, and personnel necessary to carry out and monitor the elements listed in Table 13. Administration of assessments, data collection and entry and data analysis are all completed by members of the leadership team. While this practice does allow for a high degree of fidelity, as noted in other components, it has the potential to lead to unintended disengagement in the MTSS process by teachers.

Table 13

*Elements of Data Evaluation*

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Element	Description
35.	Policies and procedures for decision-making are established for the administration of assessments, access to existing data sources, and use of data
36.	Effective data tools are used appropriately and independently by staff
37.	Data sources are used to evaluate the implementation and impact of MTSS implementation
38.	Available resources are allocated effectively

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## **CHAPTER 5: SIGNIFICANCE AND REFLECTION**

As a final component of my program evaluation of the implementation of the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) structure at Downtown Elementary School (DES), in this concluding section I provide recommendations based on my analysis of the data I collected through my observation of MTSS meetings and interviews with staff members at DES.

Following my recommendations, I share my reflections on my experiences from completing this program evaluation.

### **Recommendations**

My recommendations are based on findings from the evaluation of the implementation of the MTSS structure at DES in Southeastern District. I have a total of five recommendations to offer--two at the systems level, followed by three at the school level.

#### **System Recommendation 1**

I recommend that Southeastern District Board of Education design a school assignment plan using race and socioeconomic status as considerations in the determination of attendance boundaries. Elementary schools in Southeastern District are largely segregated by race due to current school attendance zones that support neighborhood schools. Outside of the known academic implications, segregation impedes children's abilities to prepare for an increasingly diverse workforce, to function tolerantly in a globalizing society, and to interact with a wide variety of consumers, colleagues, and friends (Potter & Quick, 2016). In their study of 91 schools and school districts working to promote socioeconomic and racial integration, Potter and Quick (2016) found the most common strategy for promoting such integration is redrawing school attendance boundaries citing the reason for its prominence as that it most easily fits with existing enrollment protocols.

Support for my recommendation already exists in Southeastern District at the top levels of leadership. In July 2016, the superintendent sent a memo to the school board in which he outlined a pattern of low academic achievement at high poverty, high minority schools in the district. The local newspaper shared portions of the superintendent's memo in which he wrote,

I do think our current assignment plan places a huge burden on certain select schools. The barriers of poverty are hard to overcome and require enormous resources. While we do give some additional resources to these schools, I am concerned that this is only a partial solution. The long-term solution is to redraw the lines to help balance the schools based on socio-economic levels. (Bellamy, 2016)

The local newspaper article went on to explain the history of neighborhood schools in Southeastern District, and citing opinions of members of the school board that support the current school assignment plan who, presumably, were not supportive of the superintendent's proposal to redraw the attendance zones.

While the likelihood of redrawing attendance zones along more socioeconomically equitable lines may, under usual circumstances, be problematic, there is a window of opportunity in the near future. Before discussing this opportunity, I would like to highlight one of the benefits of considering race and socioeconomic status to promote school integration that is advocated by Potter and Quick (2016): It has the potential to affect all schools in the district simultaneously. Southeastern district will have such a window of opportunity to take this forward-thinking step when school attendance zones are slated for adjustment to take into account the anticipated opening of a new elementary school at the beginning of the 2017-2018 school year. It is my recommendation and hope that the Southeastern Board of Education will use race and socioeconomic status as factors to recreate schools that provide all students with equitable opportunities to achieve their fullest potential as citizens of a global society.

## **System Recommendation 2**

I recommended that Southeastern District create a two-fold plan to orient new staff members to the MTSS process. Part I of the plan should focus on apprising administrators new to the district and/or new to an administrative position in Southeastern of the MTSS process and Southeastern's expectations regarding their facilitation of the process as school leaders. The orientation plan should include a comprehensive grounding in the rationale underlying the use of the Self-Assessment of MTSS Implementation (SAM) and how it stipulates the Critical Components and elements necessary for successful implementation and sustainability of the MTSS process. As a part of the MTSS orientation training for administrators, I suggest that the new administrators be provided with a current status report of the state of MTSS implementation for the school they will serve.

Part II of my recommended orientation plan should focus on teachers new to Southeastern District. Similar to the plan for administrators, the teacher plan should include an introduction (less intensive than the administrators' comprehensive grounding) to the use of the Self-Assessment of MTSS Implementation (SAM) in order to their build awareness of the necessary components of the MTSS process. The primary focus of the teacher orientation plan should be the paramount importance of core instruction and its role in the MTSS process.

In addition to the preceding recommendations at the Southeastern District level, I have three recommendations to offer to be implemented at the Downtown Elementary School level.

## **School Recommendation 1**

My first recommendation for Downtown Elementary School (DES) is for them to complete the Self-Assessment of MTSS Implementation (SAM). My research revealed that the SAM has not been completed at DES. Although DES will be provided with the results of this

evaluation, including my analysis of the level of implementation of the six Critical Components of MTSS implementation, completion of the instrument by members of the staff is a necessary step (a) to establish a baseline against which to gauge progress, and (b) to create awareness of the elements that are critical to successful implementation of the process. After completing the SAM, results should be used to prioritize areas of most critical need and used to engage the teachers in a collaborative project to develop an improvement plan.

### **School Recommendation 2**

My second recommendation is that DES implement a specific PLC meeting structure that actively engages classroom teachers as the primary leaders of the PLC meetings. While there are several noteworthy PLC structures, my recommendation is to use the DuFour PLC structure. This recommendation for the adoption of a specific PLC meeting structure is based on my interviews and observations that showed that key members of the MTSS leadership team have had training on the DuFour meeting structure, one member has had extensive training, and all are currently using pieces of the structure. Further, my recommendation of this specific PLC structure is that, while not consistently implemented at each school, it is the PLC structure that Southeastern District has selected. There are members of the district level instructional support staff that have had extensive training on the DuFour PLC structure and are able to lead the training and implementation of this structure at DES.

The DuFour structure entails teachers as the primary leaders of the PLC meetings, which will directly address my findings that show that classroom teachers currently exhibit low to no engagement in the PLC and MTSS meetings.

### **School Recommendation 3**

My third and final recommendation is that DES seek support from the district MTSS coordinator specifically to focus on increasing understanding and implementation of core instruction by classroom teachers. Numerous examples from observations and interviews indicate that a strong instructional core is problematic at DES. From Administrator 1 referring to the core as broken, to Teacher 1's assumption that she had no MTSS students because none of her students were receiving Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions, to Instructional Coach 1's epiphany that a misconception exists among teachers that they should not include interventions during core instruction, understanding and implementation of core instruction is a clear area of concern.

Consequently, my recommendation is that the school and district MTSS coordinators work together to develop and deliver a series of concise professional development sessions on core instruction. Session topics should include, but not be limited to, the importance of core instruction, critical components of core instruction, appropriate interventions for students in core instruction, and formative assessments that can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of core instruction.

### **Reflections and Significance**

My reflections are based largely on my experiences at DES and are prompted by phrases that linger in my mind from interviews with staff members. The overarching theme of my reflections has emerged as lack of voice. There are potential significant implications for the continued implementation of the MTSS at DES if these voices are not heard.

Classroom teachers at DES lack voice in the creation and delivery of core instruction. Possibly even unnoticed by the MTSS leadership team—and certainly unintended—teachers have essentially been removed from one of the most crucial elements of MTSS: core instruction.

In meetings I watched as teachers sat and listened as their students' data were presented to them and then they were told what to do about it. Occasionally they would be asked to reflect on the data, but the teachers were not the ones who collected the data, and they lacked any ownership of the data. Consequently, they were unable to offer any real insight as to what the data might show, and unperturbed by their inability to do so. For their part, those presenting the data were just as unperturbed, and proceeded to say what they had planned to say beforehand. Throughout the series of meetings I attended, I watched as teachers became increasingly less actively engaged just accepted what they were told to do. I pondered what the impact of such passive acceptance must be on the teachers' sense of self-efficacy? Do they come to believe their administrators do not have faith in their professional expertise? Do the teachers think the MTSS leadership team must not have confidence in their abilities to administer assessments and interpret data?

My own answer to these questions is that the administrators at DES and members of the MTSS leadership team truly value the limited amount of time teachers have to do things such as instructional planning and analyzing assessment data, and have put processes and resources in place as a well-intentioned effort to minimize teachers' perceptions about the large amount of time required to effectively implement MTSS processes. However, these are the exact processes that teachers should be involved in because it is the teachers—not the members of the MTSS leadership team—that work with the students on a daily basis. Removing teachers from the MTSS process is like removing a link from a chain, it harbors dependence and powerlessness. Yes, the chain of core instruction is broken at DES, but maybe not for the reasons that the administration thinks. It is broken because a vital link has been removed.

It is not only the teachers at DES that lack voice. Administrator 1 insinuated several times in her interview that she experiences a lack of voice when trying to share innovative ideas with district level leadership. A specific statement she made clearly exemplifies her thoughts:

You see though, when you suggest crazy things like mandatory two-year kindergarten, I would love to have mandatory two-year kindergarten. You suggest things like that and it's so outside the box that people just look at you like you're crazy and oh that would rock too many feathers and how could we ever pull that off? Or having a non-graded system where you just put the kids where they need to be where they are performing, not to keep them there, but to keep them moving forward. Let them feel successful instead of how D feels right now. Or something like getting out early one day a week, and that's somebody bigger than me. (Administrator Interview)

Administrator 1 feels as though her voice is not heard, which has led her to listen to a different voice. She is listening to the voice of negativity and allowing it to inform her thoughts on the potential effectiveness of the MTSS process. When I asked Administrator 1 her thoughts on the MTSS process having the potential to positively impact student achievement, I could see that she was carefully choosing her words when she said

I'm uncertain as to whether the minimal benefits outweigh the time it takes for teachers, and the paperwork and the meetings and all that. And the fact that the skills they are working on are so foundational that it doesn't. And yes, they need to catch up on those. I'm not saying that it's a terrible thing or terrible process, but I am really uncertain if that outweighs the other stuff that is a part of MTSS, which is paperwork and time, and it not being something that necessarily helps them on their grade level work (Administrators Interview).

Based on my observations of her ability to facilitate meetings, model the steps of data-based problem solving, the ease with which she is able to offer instructional suggestions, and witnessing the amount of human and instructional resources she has provided the school, I am not convinced she truly believes that the benefits of the MTSS are minimal. I believe she is suffering from cognitive dissonance. Although I know it is possible to lead initiatives without complete belief in the potential for positive outcomes, my observations and experiences with Administrator 1 incline me to believe that this is not the case. She understands that DES is a

school with a negative label, and she knows that in the eyes of district level leadership and the public, DES will retain that negative label until its students achieve success. The success of the school is judged by proficiency on a state test given at the end of the school year. Administrator 1 understands that students at DES have a lot of ground to make up to become proficient readers, and that growth in reading skills is necessary for this to happen. She acknowledges that students at DES have made strides in areas such as increasing literacy skills and decreasing behavior problems, but listens to the voice that tells her that “but until it reflects academically nobody cares” (Administrators Interview). She has no way to give voice to the accomplishments of her students and staff, leading, in my opinion, to a negative perception of the potentiality of the MTSS process.

My concern is that until her voice is heard, instead of leading the MTSS initiative with the confidence that she outwardly exudes, she will channel the voice of negativity telling her that because her students are not proficient, and that MTSS—the process itself, as opposed to its implementation—must not be working.

### **Conclusion**

I began this program evaluation pondering whether or not the MTSS process had the potential to impact positively the academic achievement outcomes for students at high poverty, high minority schools, and to investigate the implementation level of components that are critical for successfully implementing and sustaining the MTSS process. The outcomes of this evaluation are varied and have implications at both the school and district levels.

In regards to the MTSS process having the potential to positively impact student academic outcomes, my conclusion is that indeed it does have this potential. However, the definition of academic outcomes is dependent upon the stakeholders’ views. At DES, it is

evident that students are showing growth in academic areas of deficit as measured by the TRC benchmarks, but the administration feels that this is not the type of positive outcome that district leadership views as increasing student achievement. The administration at DES is, therefore, inclined to believe that the MTSS process does not have the potential to positively impact student achievement outcomes. I contend that for the students at DES, a large majority of whom are working at least two grade levels behind their actual grade level, it is exactly this academic growth in deficient areas that they must demonstrate as they progress towards becoming proficient readers.

There were six Critical Components for successful implementation that I evaluated during this study including (a) leadership, (b) building capacity/infrastructure for implementation, (c) communication and collaboration, (d) data-based problem solving, (e) three-tiered instruction, and (f) data evaluation (NCDPI, n.d.). Among the areas of strength that I noted are leadership and data evaluation, however, with a caveat. Although DES has a strong MTSS leadership team, the team assumes many of the MTSS responsibilities in an effort to reduce teachers' stress and ameliorate the negative opinions about the time needed to assess students and complete paperwork. The good intentions, perhaps paternalism, of the leadership has fueled the unintentional consequence that teachers are becoming disengaged from the process and displaying a lack of ownership. It is essentially these good intentions that have given rise to lack of agency on the part of the teachers and paved the path to ineffective implementation in the remaining four Critical Components—thereby erecting barriers to successful implementation to the MTSS process at DES.

The three-tiered instructional model component is the area that I perceive as being the most critical area and I recommended that it be addressed first. It is clear from interviews and

observations that teachers have a lack of understanding of core instruction. Teachers are largely disconnected from the assessment and data analysis process leaving them without a clear picture of how to adjust their classroom instruction. Without this knowledge and understanding, answers to questions such as why core instruction is not more effective and why students are not more successful will remain elusive.

The outcomes of this program evaluation have implications at the district level and for schools similar to DES. At the district level, the results indicate a need for a consistent MTSS orientation process for all new administrators and teachers, as well as a definitive support plan from the district MTSS coordinator for schools that, like DES, have a large population of students not demonstrating academic success. Implications for schools similar to DES include using caution when allocating additional funds to provide more instructional support personnel so as not to create a situation in which classroom teachers become disconnected from the MTSS process.

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## APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL



**EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY**  
**University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board Office**  
4N-70 Brody Medical Sciences Building · Mail Stop 682  
600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834  
Office 252-744-2914  · Fax 252-744-2284  · [www.ecu.edu/irb](http://www.ecu.edu/irb)

### Notification of Initial Approval: Expedited

From: Social/Behavioral IRB  
To: [Elizabeth Murray](#)  
CC: [Robert Reardon](#)  
Date: 12/20/2016  
Re: [UMCIRB 16-001997](#)  
\_Protocol - Wed Oct 19 11:04:38 EDT 2016

I am pleased to inform you that your Expedited Application was approved. Approval of the study and any consent form(s) is for the period of 12/20/2016 to 12/19/2017. The research study is eligible for review under expedited category #6, 7. The Chairperson (or designee) deemed this study no more than minimal risk.

Changes to this approved research may not be initiated without UMCIRB review except when necessary to eliminate an apparent immediate hazard to the participant. All unanticipated problems involving risks to participants and others must be promptly reported to the UMCIRB. The investigator must submit a continuing review/closure application to the UMCIRB prior to the date of study expiration. The Investigator must adhere to all reporting requirements for this study.

Approved consent documents with the IRB approval date stamped on the document should be used to consent participants (consent documents with the IRB approval date stamp are found under the Documents tab in the study workspace).

The approval includes the following items:

Name	Description
Evaluating MTSS Proposal EFM	Study Protocol or Grant Application
Informed Consent No More than Minimal Risk	Consent Forms
Semi-structured Interview Questions	Surveys and Questionnaires
Semi-structured Interview Questions	Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

**APPENDIX B: PERMISSION LETTER**



*Reach, Equip, Achieve*

[Redacted]  
*Superintendent*

[Redacted]  
*NHCS Research Review Board Chair*

November 7, 2016

Dear Elizabeth Murray:

Thank you for your request to conduct research in [Redacted]. We are sure your research project will be beneficial to education. Your request for the study on **Evaluating the Implementation of** MTSS at [Redacted] has been reviewed and approved by the Research Review Board of [Redacted]. Permission has been granted to work with [Redacted] School to proceed with your data collection. In alignment with School Board Policy 8305, it is required that researchers must have parental consent from all participants in any research study.

We value research and the benefits your study may have on education. However, maintaining an optimal learning environment for all students remains our top priority. School administration reserves the right to withdraw the school from participation in your project at any time.

Please respect and follow established timelines and finalize research as specified in your request.

A copy of your research findings should be submitted to the Research Review Board of [Redacted] at [Redacted] by June 30, 2017.

Thank you for choosing to complete your research in [Redacted]. We look forward to collaborating with you.

Sincerely,

[Redacted]  
[Redacted] Research Review Board Chair

CC: [Redacted] Superintendent, [Redacted]  
[Redacted]

## **APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

### Semi-structured Interview Questions for MTSS

#### Demographic Questions

- How long have you worked in public education?
- How long have you worked in this school?

#### Training Questions

- What training on the MTSS process have you had since working at this school?
- How would you describe the training?
- In your opinion, what, if any, additional training is needed?

#### Meeting Protocol Questions

- Describe a typical MTSS meeting.
- What is your understanding of the goal of MTSS meetings?
- What structures or protocols are used during the meetings?

#### Core Instruction Questions

- How do you define core instruction?
- What does core instruction look like in your classroom?
- How do you know if students are successful with core instruction?

#### General Thoughts Questions

- Do you think the MTSS process has the potential to positively impact student learning and achievement at this school? Why do you think that?
- What general recommendations do you have that you believe would further strengthen the MTSS process at this school?
- Is there anything else related to MTSS that you would like to share

## APPENDIX D: SELF-ASSESSMENT OF MTSS IMPLEMENTATION

SAM Summary by Item	DES
<b>LEADERSHIP</b>	
1. The principal is actively involved in and facilitates MTSS implementation	
2. A leadership team is established that includes 5-7 members cross-disciplinary representation (e.g., principal, general and special education teachers, content area experts, student support personnel) and is responsible for facilitating MTSS implementation	
3. The leadership team actively engages staff in ongoing professional development and coaching necessary to support MTSS implementation	
4. A strategic plan for MTSS implementation is developed and aligned with the school improvement plan	
5. The leadership team is actively facilitating implementation of MTSS as part of their school improvement planning process	
LEADERSHIP Percent Implemented	<b>Implementation Level</b>
<b>BUILDING THE CAPACITY/INFRASTRUCTURE FOR IMPLEMENTATION</b>	
6. The critical elements of MTSS are defined and understood by school staff	
7. The leadership team facilitates professional development and coaching for all staff members on assessments and data sources used to inform decisions	
8. The leadership team facilitates professional development and coaching for staff members on data-based problem-solving relative to their job roles/responsibilities	
9. The leadership team facilitates professional development and coaching for all staff on multi-tiered instruction and intervention relative to their job roles/responsibilities	
10. Coaching is used to support MTSS implementation	
11. Schedules provide adequate time for trainings and coaching support	
12. Schedules provide adequate time to administer academic, behavior and social-emotional assessments needed to make data-based decisions	
13. Schedules provide adequate time for multiple tiers of evidence-based instruction and intervention to occur	
14. Schedules provide adequate time for staff to engage in collaborative, data-based problem-solving and decision-making	
15. Processes, procedures, and decision-rules are established for data-based problem-solving	
16. Resources available to support MTSS implementation are identified and allocated	
BUILDING THE CAPACITY/INFRASTRUCTURE FOR IMPLEMENTATION Percent Implemented	<b>Implementation Level</b>
<b>COMMUNICATION AND COLLABORATION</b>	
17. Staff have consensus and engage in MTSS implementation	
18. Staff are provided data on MTSS implementation fidelity and student outcomes	
19. The infrastructure exists to support the school's goals for family and community engagement in MTSS	
20. Educators actively engage families in MTSS	
COMMUNICATION AND COLLABORATION Percent Implemented	<b>Implementation Level</b>
<b>DATA-BASED PROBLEM SOLVING</b>	
21. Integrated data-based problem solving for student academic, behavior and social-emotional outcomes occurs across content areas, grade levels and tiers	

22. ACROSS ALL TIERS, data are used to identify the difference or "gap" between expected and current student outcomes relative to academic, behavior and social-emotional goals	
23. Academic, behavior and social-emotional data are used to identify and verify reasons why students are not meeting expectations	
24. Specific instructional/ intervention plans are developed and implemented based on verified reasons why students are not meeting academic, behavior and social-emotional expectations	
25. Student progress specific to academic, behavior and social-emotional goals specified in intervention plans are monitored	
26. Data-based problem-solving informs how patterns of student performance across diverse groups (e.g., racial/ethnic, cultural, social-economic, language proficiency, disability status) are addressed	
27. Resources for and barriers to the implementation of MTSS are addressed through a data based problem solving process	
<b>DATA-BASED PROBLEM SOLVING Percent Implemented</b>	<b>Implementation Level</b>
<b>THREE-TIERED INSTRUCTION</b>	
28. Tier 1 (Core) academic practices exist that clearly identify learning standards, school-wide expectations for instruction that engages students, and school-wide assessments	
29. Tier 1 (Core) behavior practices exists that clearly identify school-wide expectations, social-emotional skills instruction, classroom management practices, and school-wide behavior data and social-emotional data	
30. Tier 2 (Supplemental) academic practices exist that include strategies addressing integrated common student needs, are linked to Tier 1 instruction, and are monitored using assessments/data sources tied directly to the academic, behavior and social-emotional skills taught	
31. Tier 2 (supplemental) behavior and social-emotional practices exist that address common student needs, are linked to Tier 1 instruction, and are monitored using assessments/data sources tied directly to the skills taught	
32. Tier 3 (Intensive) academic practices exist that include strategies that are developed based on students' needs, are aligned with Tier 1 and Tier 2 instructional goals and strategies, and are monitored using assessments/data sources that link directly to skills taught	
33. Tier 3 (Intensive) behavior/social-emotional practices exist that include strategies developed based on students' needs, are aligned with Tier 1 and Tier 2 instructional goals and strategies, and are monitored using assessments/data sources that link directly to skills taught	
<b>THREE-TIERED INSTRUCTION Percent Implemented</b>	<b>Implementation Level</b>
<b>DATA-EVALUATION</b>	
34. Staff understand and have access to academic, behavior and social-emotional data sources that address the five purposes of assessment	
35. Policies and procedures for decision-making are established for the administration of assessments, access to existing data sources, and use of data	
36. Effective data tools are used appropriately and independently by staff	
37. Data sources are used to evaluate the implementation and impact of MTSS implementation	
38. Available resources are allocated effectively	
39. Data sources are monitored for consistency and accuracy in collection and entry procedures	
<b>DATA-EVALUATION Percent Implemented</b>	<b>Implementation Level</b>

