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CA Multi-Tiered System of Support Implementation Pilot Program

Title

MTSS School-Site Implementation: Pilot Phase 2A Participation Year 3 & Phase 2B Participation Year 1 Summary

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Authors

Huff, Brian

Blanchard, Sam

Berdan, Jennifer

et al.

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CA MTSS School-Site Implementation:

PILOT PHASE 2A

PARTICIPATION YEAR 3

& PILOT PHASE 2B

PARTICIPATION YEAR 1

SUMMARY

Brian Huff

Sam Blanchard, MAT

Jennifer Berdan Lozano, MA

Tatev Sarkissyan, MA

Lauren Fischbacher

Mayra Cazares Minero, Ph.D., MSW

2021-2022 School Year

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SUMMARY

In this report, we share findings from the qualitative data collection and analysis of the California Multi-Tiered System of Support (CA MTSS) pilot projects Phase 2A and Phase 2B. The purpose of this report is to describe, through administrator interviews conducted by the UCLA Center for the Transformation of Schools (CTS) research team, factors that influenced the implementation of the CA MTSS pilot program during Phase 2A's third year of participation and Phase 2B's first year of participation.

The CA MTSS Phase 2A and 2B pilots follow 35 schools from 26 districts across California as they implement the MTSS framework at the school level with a focus on school climate, positive behavioral supports, and social-emotional learning. The Phase 2A cohort comprises 14 schools from seven districts and the 2B cohort follows 21 schools from 19 districts. The Orange County Department of Education, Butte County Office of Education, and UCLA CTS co-led the project.

Researchers scheduled interviews in February and March 2022 with 13 2B schools and 11 2A schools. Researchers conducted 30-to-60-minute semi-structured interviews with each participant. Interviews were transcribed via Rev. com and analyzed in Dedoose, using an inductive analytic approach. The research team conducted the analysis stepwise: First, collaborative coding was conducted to capture the major topics related to the research questions (e.g., MTSS implementation procedures, challenges, gains), followed by individual coding; then, the research team derived themes individually and collaboratively.

This pilot project is part of an effort to expand “the state’s Multi-Tiered System of Support framework to foster a positive school climate in both academic and behavioral areas” (AB 1808, 2018). Specific goals of the pilot program include

1. “Fostering a positive school climate,
2. Improving pupil-teacher relationships,
3. Increasing pupil engagement, and
4. Promoting alternative discipline practices” (AB 1808, 2018).

Within these goals, an important focus of the program is school-based work to address stark racial/ethnic disparities through the implementation of restorative models and culturally responsive practices, among others. Qualitative interview data are used to answer research questions about

1. How schools engaged in CA MTSS implementation and what implementation-related benefits and challenges they experienced;
2. How schools engaged with ethnic/racial or cultural diversity and discipline disparities;
3. How schools engaged in the coaching process; and
4. What factors contributed to successfully implementing CA MTSS.

This report intends to inform the CA MTSS executive team and coaches in the ongoing development of support for the pilot program’s successful implementation.

BACKGROUND

SCHOOL DISCIPLINE PRACTICES

Extensive evidence shows that exclusionary discipline practices (e.g., suspension, expulsion) can lead to negative student outcomes in both academic and behavioral domains (Noltemeyer et al., 2015; Skiba et al., 2014). Such disciplinary responses remove students from the classroom, excluding young people from opportunities to learn and perpetuating a cycle of underachievement (Skiba and Noguera, 2006). Yet, suspensions specifically, and punitive responses broadly, are still a common school response to student behavior (California Department of Education [CDE], 2019).

Exclusionary discipline responses are also used disproportionately with Black and American Indian students compared to their white and Asian counterparts. Nationally, Black students are three times more likely to be suspended than their white peers (Office for Civil Rights, 2016). In California, in 2018–19, Black students made up 5% of the state’s enrolled K–12 population, but 14% of all suspended students. American Indian students made up 0.5% of the state’s enrollment, but 1.1% of its suspended students. By contrast, white students made up 23% of enrollment, but only 19% of suspended students (see Figure 1; CDE, 2019). Research has shown that racial stereotypes play a role in teachers’ perceptions of students’ behavior. Researchers have found that these negative stereotypes can influence teachers’ responses to student behaviors across race and cause them to respond to Black students more punitively (Okonofua and Eberhardt, 2015). Additionally, teachers are more likely to detect negative behavioral patterns in Black students compared with their white counterparts (Okonofua and Eberhardt, 2015). There can even be a negative impact on Black students who are not suspended or expelled. Research has shown that stereotype threat or the stress that arises when acting in a situation for which one’s group has been negatively stereotyped can negatively impact the achievement of Black students (Steele and Aronson, 1995).

MULTI-TIERED SYSTEM OF SUPPORT IMPLEMENTATION

MTSS have been suggested as one component of a framework for increasing equity in schools, including in school discipline (Gregory et al., 2017). By combining Tier 1 supports – universal supports intended for all students – with more focused and intense Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports, an MTSS approach to student behavior utilizes both prevention and intervention methods. And research has shown that tiered systems of support (such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports [PBIS]) tend to be successful in addressing school discipline issues overall (see Welsh & Little, 2018 for a review).

Research has also shown that to decrease racial/ethnic gaps in discipline, schools must explicitly address issues of culture and race. Scholars suggest that a culturally conscious implementation of MTSS, coupled with approaches that explicitly target racial inequities (e.g., bias-aware classrooms; data-based inquiry for equity; culturally relevant and responsive teaching; inclusion of student and family voice on behavior causes and solutions) is necessary to decrease race-based inequities (Gregory et al, 2017; Welsh & Little, 2018).

In our research, we were interested in the processes, successes, and challenges schools experienced in implementing the CA MTSS framework and a pilot model that was developed for a school-based approach to improve school climate. We were also interested in determining whether and how school staff explicitly addressed issues of race and culture in their implementation.

DESCRIPTION OF PARTICIPATING SCHOOLS

In this section, we present quantitative data publicly available from the California Department of Education to describe participating schools. We use the last available valid data: 2020–21 for enrollment and 2018–19 for

suspensions, chronic absenteeism and achievement. We do not present cross-year comparisons, as these are not possible due to incomplete data during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participating schools included 10 elementary schools and 11 secondary schools. In Tables 1 and 2, we present total census enrollment (n) and demographics for participating Phase 2B schools.

Phase 2B Enrollment and Demographics

Latinx students made up the majority of the student population in both elementary and secondary schools across phases. The only exception was elementary school 9 (ES 9), where Black students made up the majority of the student body. According to the socioeconomic index used by the California Department of Education, all elementary schools in Phase 2A had a student body that was composed of more than 50% socioeconomically disadvantaged

students. For 2A schools, ES 1 had the fewest economically disadvantaged students (76%) compared with ES 3 (99%), which was composed of the highest percent of disadvantaged students across phases. The same was true for 2B schools, with the exception of three schools. For the 2B elementary schools, ES 16 had the lowest number of socioeconomically disadvantaged students (21%) compared with ES 9, which had the highest percentage (92%).

For 2A Pilot schools, Latinx students made up the majority of the student population in ES 1 and ES 3. Over half of students in ES 3 were English language learners, and the majority of students in ES 2, ES 3 and ES 6 were socioeconomically disadvantaged. Almost 20% of students in ES 6 had a disability. For 2B schools, Latinx students made up three quarters of the student population in ES 10, ES 11 and ES 15.

Table 1. Elementary School Census Enrollment Demographics, 2021-22

2A Pilot Schools	ES 1 (n=424) %	ES 2 (n=349) %	ES 3 (n=639) %	ES 4 (n=692) %	ES 5 (n=364) %	ES 6 (n=312) %
By Race/Ethnicity						
American Indian	0.5	0.3	0.5	0.3	2.5	3.2
Asian	4.0	0.6	0.3	9.1	1.6	15.4
Black	6.1	0.6	0.5	11.3	15.1	4.5
Filipino	1.4	0.0	0.0	4.2	2.7	0.3
Latinx	76.2	46.7	98.0	24.4	34.3	20.5
Pacific Islander	0.7	0.3	0.0	1.7	1.1	0.0
Two or More Races/Ethnicities	2.4	6.6	0.2	12.0	2.5	13.1
White	5.9	41.5	0.3	36.8	38.7	42.9
By Subgroup						
English Learner	10.1	31.5	68.2	14.9	4.7	9.9
Socioeconomically Disadvantaged	75.7	81.4	99.5	61.0	77.7	91.0
Students with Disabilities	16.5	11.7	5.5	9.5	13.5	19.6

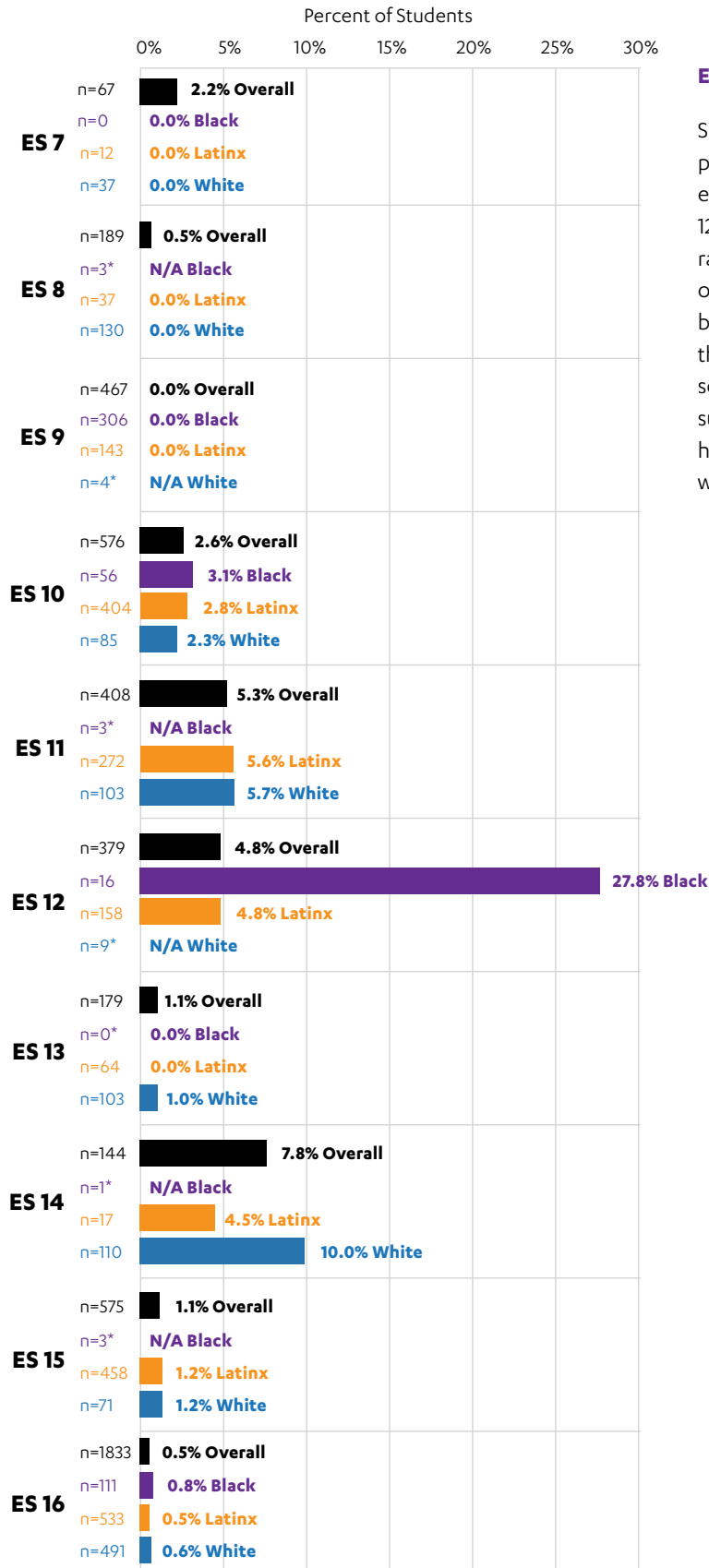
2B Pilot Schools	ES 7 (n=120) %	ES 8 (n=205) %	ES 9 (n=377) %	ES 10 (n=566) %	ES 11 (n=405) %	ES 12 (n=312) %	ES 13 (n=191) %	ES 14 (n=88) %	ES 15 (n=497) %	ES 16 (n=1896) %
By Race/Ethnicity										
American Indian	3.3	0.5	0.0	0.2	0.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.8	0.2
Asian	0.8	1.0	0.8	1.1	3.0	18.6	0.0	0.0	1.0	16.1
Black	0.0	0.5	53.8	7.6	0.5	2.0	0.0	0.0	0.8	7.6
Filipino	0.8	0.5	0.8	3.2	0.2	19.4	0.0	0.0	1.2	5.8
Latinx	28.3	15.1	36.3	73.7	75.3	45.4	36.6	9.1	79.9	31.0
Pacific Islander	0.0	0.0	0.3	0.5	0.7	4.9	0.0	1.1	0.0	0.4
Two or More Races/Ethnicities	9.2	3.4	3.2	3.0	2.7	7.1	3.1	6.8	1.2	16.1
White	55.0	79.0	0.3	10.8	17.0	2.6	60.2	65.9	11.1	21.7
By Subgroup										
English Learner	9.2	2.4	16.2	11.3	32.8	35.1	21.5	0.0	18.5	7.4
Socioeconomically Disadvantaged	63.3	51.7	92.3	64.0	66.7	59.1	41.4	29.5	78.9	20.9
Students with Disabilities	14.2	5.9	14.3	17.5	11.1	10.6	15.7	14.8	7.6	10.2

Table 2. Secondary School Census Enrollment Demographics, 2021-22

2A Pilot Schools	SS 1 (n=607) %	SS 2 (n=396) %	SS 3 (n=639) %	SS 4 (n=700) %	SS 5 (n=799) %	SS 6 (n=324) %	SS 7 (n=449) %	SS 8 (n=1346) %
By Race/Ethnicity								
American Indian	0.2	0.8	0.3	0.1	0.5	4.9	0.9	1.0
Asian	6.9	1.8	2.0	2.9	3.0	3.1	1.1	7.8
Black	3.3	0.0	1.1	18.4	7.4	3.7	15.8	12.1
Filipino	3.0	0.0	0.0	6.0	3.6	0.6	2.7	3.9
Latinx	76.6	49.2	89.4	62.3	77.6	15.4	35.9	32.1
Pacific Islander	0.3	0.0	0.2	1.1	0.1	0.0	2.2	1.3
Two or More Races/Ethnicities	3.3	4.5	0.4	4.6	3.0	13.9	0.7	7.4
White	5.3	40.2	6.6	4.6	4.5	57.7	39.6	34.1
By Subgroup								
English Learner	8.7	21.2	20.8	24.0	23.5	2.8	3.3	7.4
Socioeconomically Disadvantaged	75.5	79.8	87.0	78.0	74.8	74.7	59.0	65.2
Students with Disabilities	14.0	10.4	6.9	12.4	11.1	11.4	18.9	16.0

2B Pilot Schools	SS 9 (n=2539) %	SS 10 (n=1263) %	SS 11 (n=578) %	SS 12 (n=1255) %	SS 13 (n=734) %	SS 14 (n=606) %	SS 15 (n=2276) %	SS 16 (n=759) %	SS 17 (n=110) %	SS 18 (n=736) %	SS 19 (n=1225) %
By Race/Ethnicity											
American Indian	0.4	0.6	0.2	0.3	0.0	0.2	0.2	0.1	1.8	0.7	0.9
Asian	3.6	1.0	2.9	0.6	6.4	0.7	0.5	5.0	1.8	2.4	14.9
Black	9.9	1.1	6.4	0.2	1.4	0.2	8.8	4.6	0.0	0.5	2.6
Filipino	5.8	0.4	1.2	0.6	3.4	0.3	0.2	3.2	0.0	0.3	0.9
Latinx	46.8	33.0	65.9	88.8	28.1	79.9	87.0	71.1	15.5	49.7	56.6
Pacific Islander	0.4	0.1	0.2	0.3	0.3	0.0	0.5	0.0	0.0	0.3	0.2
Two or More Races/Ethnicities	4.9	1.4	2.8	0.2	8.0	0.5	1.1	4.6	5.5	5.4	3.1
White	27.3	62.2	18.5	8.5	51.0	5.1	1.6	10.0	75.5	40.6	20.5
By Subgroup											
English Learner	8.5	5.8	15.9	19.0	12.5	24.9	25.8	34.9	1.8	17.9	22.9
Socioeconomically Disadvantaged	32.9	43.5	82.2	83.6	27.5	60.9	90.6	62.8	67.3	53.9	78.4
Students with Disabilities	14.5	15.1	16.6	16.5	13.4	18.5	15.0	13.8	4.5	20.2	14.4

Figure 1. 2B Pilot Elementary School Suspension Rates, 2018-19

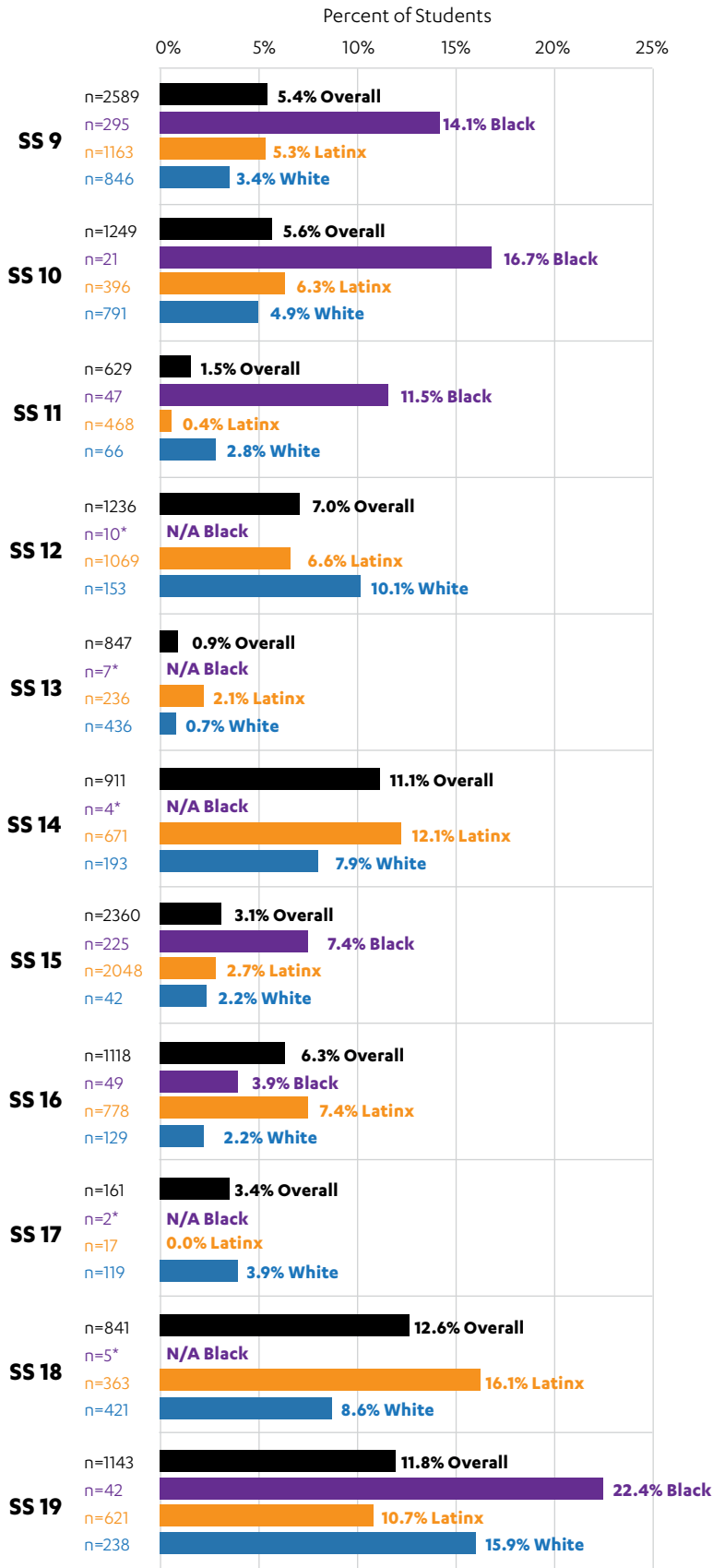


Elementary School Suspension Rates

Suspension rates were relatively low across participating Phase 2B elementary schools, except for three (**Figure 1**). Elementary school 12 had the most disproportionate suspension rates for Black students in the Phase 2B sample of elementary schools, with Black students being expelled at a rate of 28% compared with the overall suspension rate of 5%. Elementary school 14 had the second-highest rate of suspensions in the sample; the subgroup rates, however, were not disproportionate compared with the school’s overall suspension rate.

*Data not available due to small group size. ■ Overall ■ Black ■ Latinx ■ White

Figure 2. 2B Pilot Secondary School Suspension Rates, 2018-19

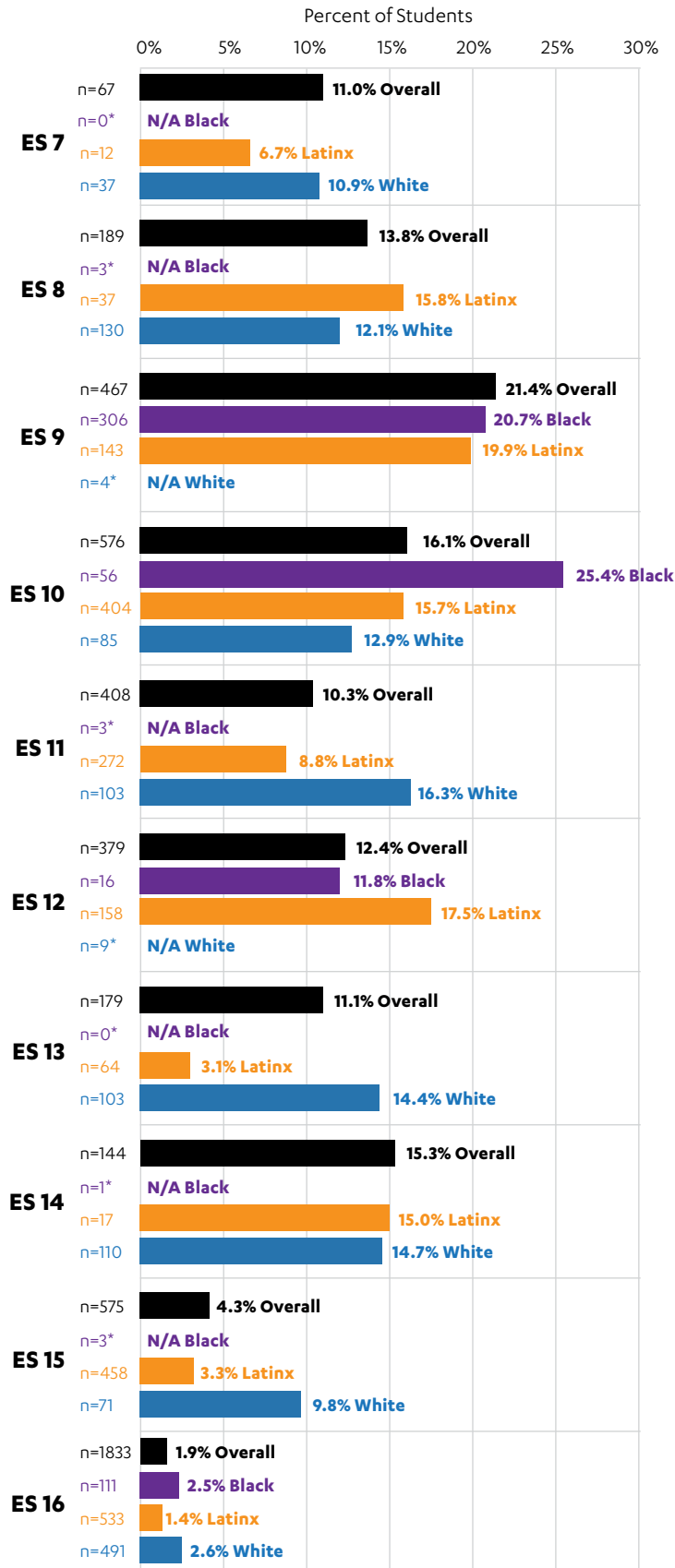


Secondary School Suspension Rates

Suspension rates were overall higher across the secondary school sample, with overall rates ranging from 1% to 13% (Figure 2). Of the 11 secondary schools, five suspended Black students at a highly disproportionate rate: double or more of the overall suspension rate. Secondary school 11 had the most disproportionate suspensions for Black students at a rate of 11.5% compared with the school’s overall rate of 1.5%. Latinx students were suspended at a higher rate than the overall suspension rate at five of the 11 schools. The overall suspension rates for Latinx students in these schools ranged from 2.1% to 16.1%.

*Data not available due to small group size. ■ Overall ■ Black ■ Latinx ■ White

Figure 3. 2B Pilot Elementary School Chronic Absenteeism Rates, 2018-19

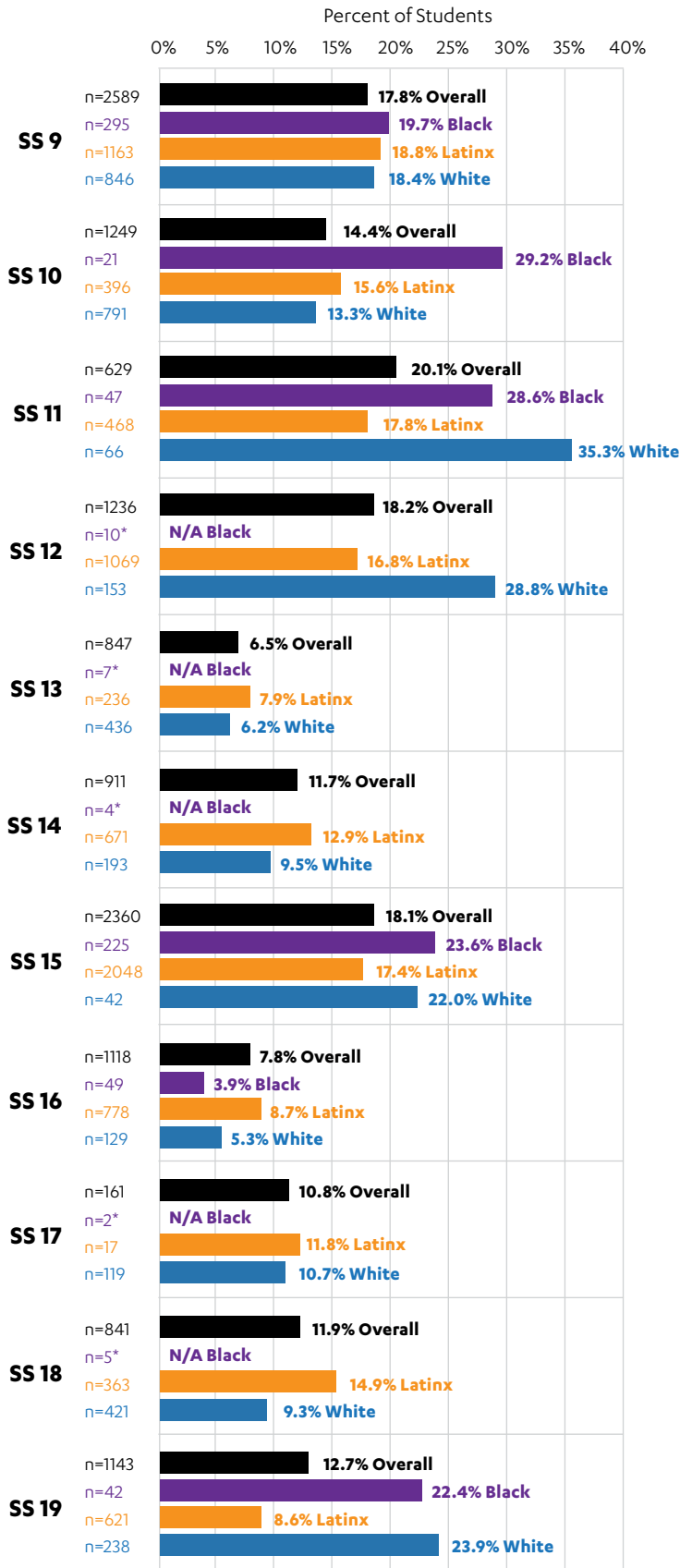


Elementary School Chronic Absenteeism

Chronic absenteeism rates (percent of students missing 10% or more of instruction days in an academic year) ranged from 2% to 21% at the 10 participating Phase 2B elementary schools (Figure 3). The absenteeism rate was higher for all but two elementary schools compared with the state rate (9.5% for grades K-3; 8.4% for grades 3-6). Chronic absenteeism rates varied by race/ethnicity. However, elementary schools 10, 12 and 15 had disproportionate rates for at least one subgroup of students. The chronic absenteeism rate for Black students at elementary school 10 was 25% compared with 16% overall. At elementary school 12, Latinx students’ absenteeism rate was 17.5% compared with an overall rate of 12%. At elementary school 15, white students were absent at a rate of 10% compared with an overall rate of 4%.

*Data not available due to small group size. ■ Overall ■ Black ■ Latinx ■ White

Figure 4. 2B Pilot Secondary School Chronic Absenteeism Rates, 2018-19

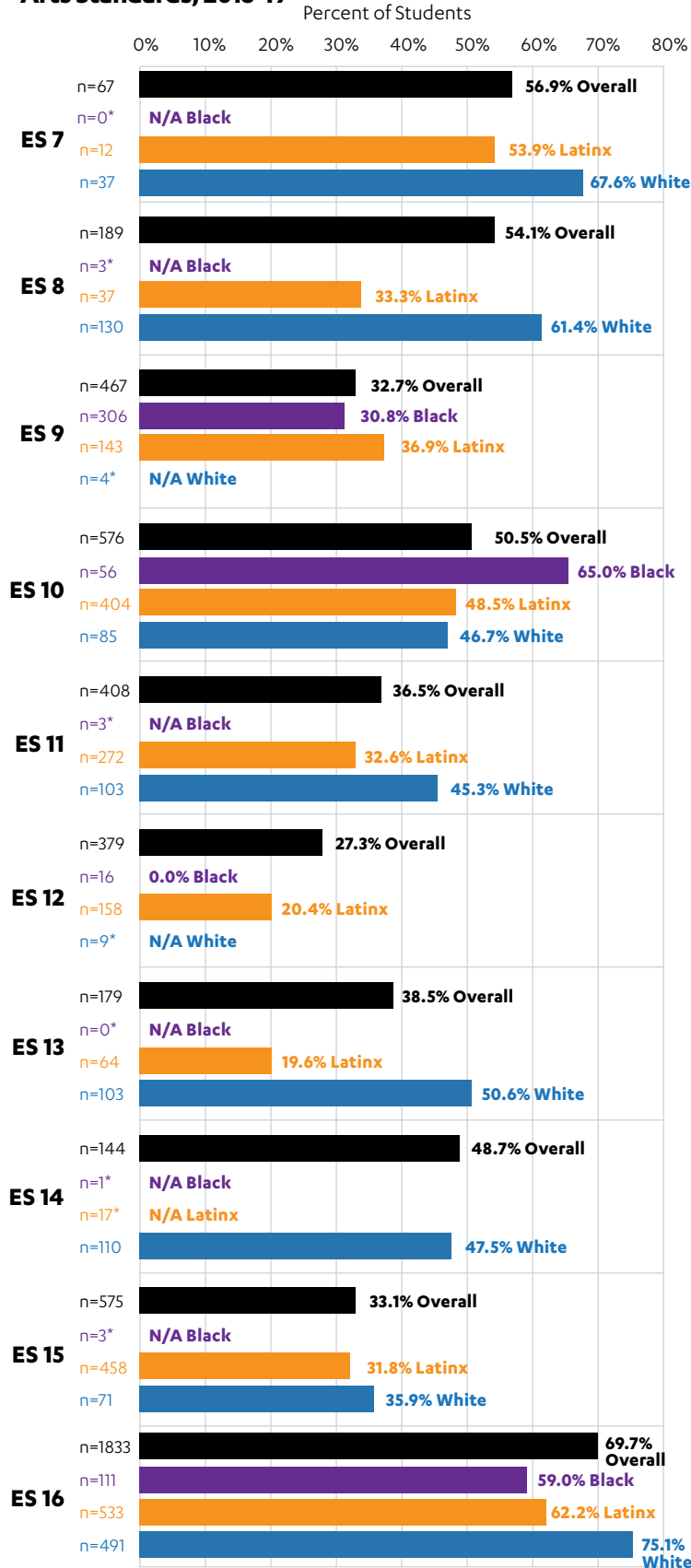


Secondary School Chronic Absenteeism

The chronic absenteeism rates for the 11 secondary schools in the Phase 2B sample held to a narrower range (6.5% to 20%) (Figure 4). However, rates were more disproportionate for the secondary school sample compared with the elementary school sample. Rates for Black students ranged from 3.9% to 29%. Black students were most disproportionately suspended at secondary school 10 (29% compared with 14%) and secondary school 19 (22% compared with 13%). The secondary school absenteeism rates for Latinx students ranged from 8% to 19% and most disproportionately absent at secondary school 18 (15% compared with 12%).

*Data not available due to small group size. ■ Overall ■ Black ■ Latinx ■ White

Figure 5. 2B Pilot Elementary School Students Meeting or Exceeding Grade-Level English Language Arts Standards, 2018-19



*Data not available due to small group size. ■ Overall ■ Black ■ Latinx ■ White

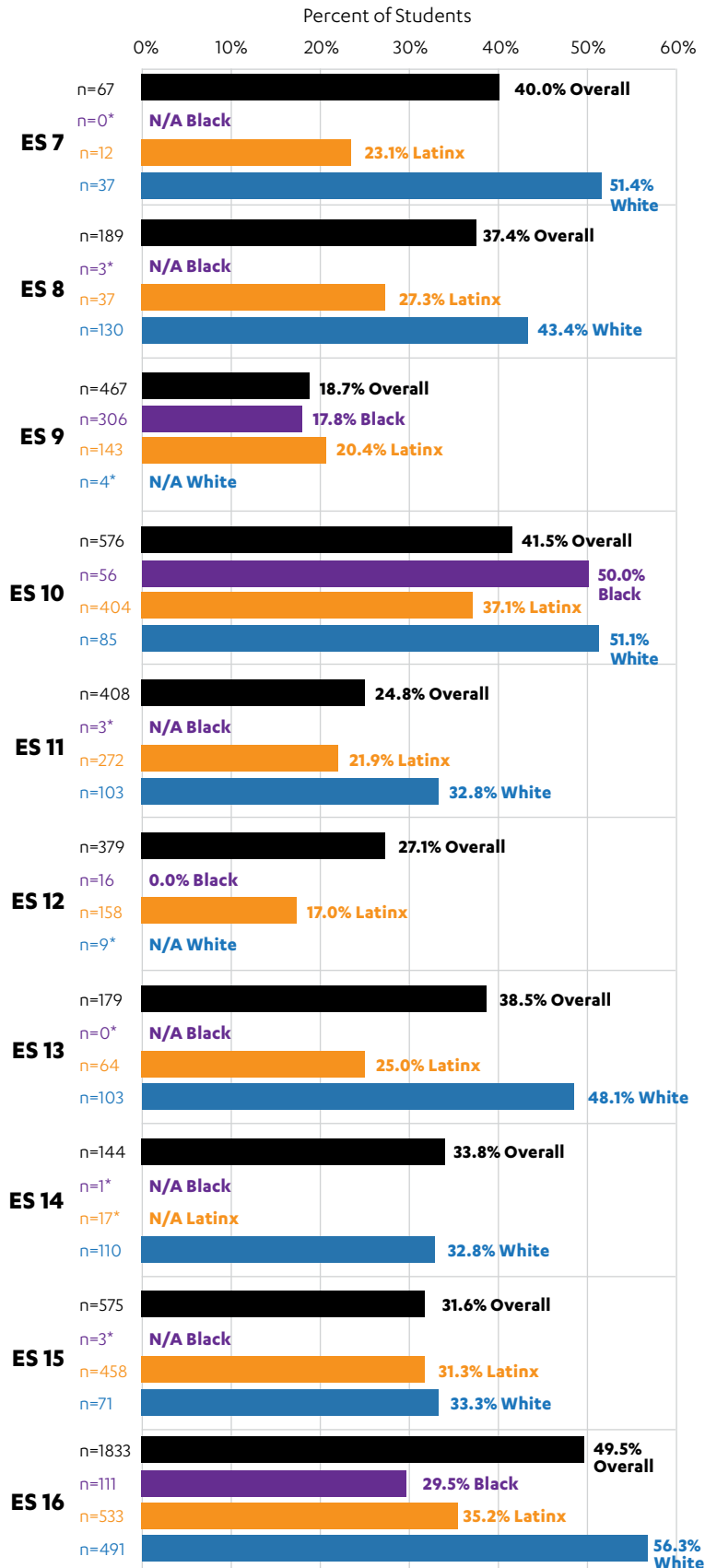
Achievement

To describe student achievement at participating schools, we present the percent of students meeting or exceeding standards on the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) English Language Arts (ELA) and Math state standards assessments. We present these results for the elementary school sample in **Figures 5 and 6** and the secondary school sample in **Figures 7 and 8**.

Elementary School ELA Standards

At participating elementary schools, the percent of students meeting or exceeding ELA standards ranged from 27% to 70% (by comparison, the percent of students across the state was 49% to 52%, depending on grade level, for elementary school students) (**Figure 5**). Latinx students were below the average achievement rate for ELA at most schools; however, the rate was most disproportionate in elementary school 13, where 20% of Latinx students met or exceeded standards compared with 38.5% for the school overall. However, Latinx students were close to meeting the school’s overall percentage of students meeting or exceeding standards at most schools and overperformed at one school. At elementary school 9, 37% of Latinx students met or exceeded standards compared with 33% for the school overall. Similarly, Black students outperformed the school average at elementary school 10, with 65% meeting or exceeding standards compared with 50.5% for the school overall.

Figure 6. 2B Pilot Elementary School Students Meeting or Exceeding Grade-Level Math Standards, 2018-19

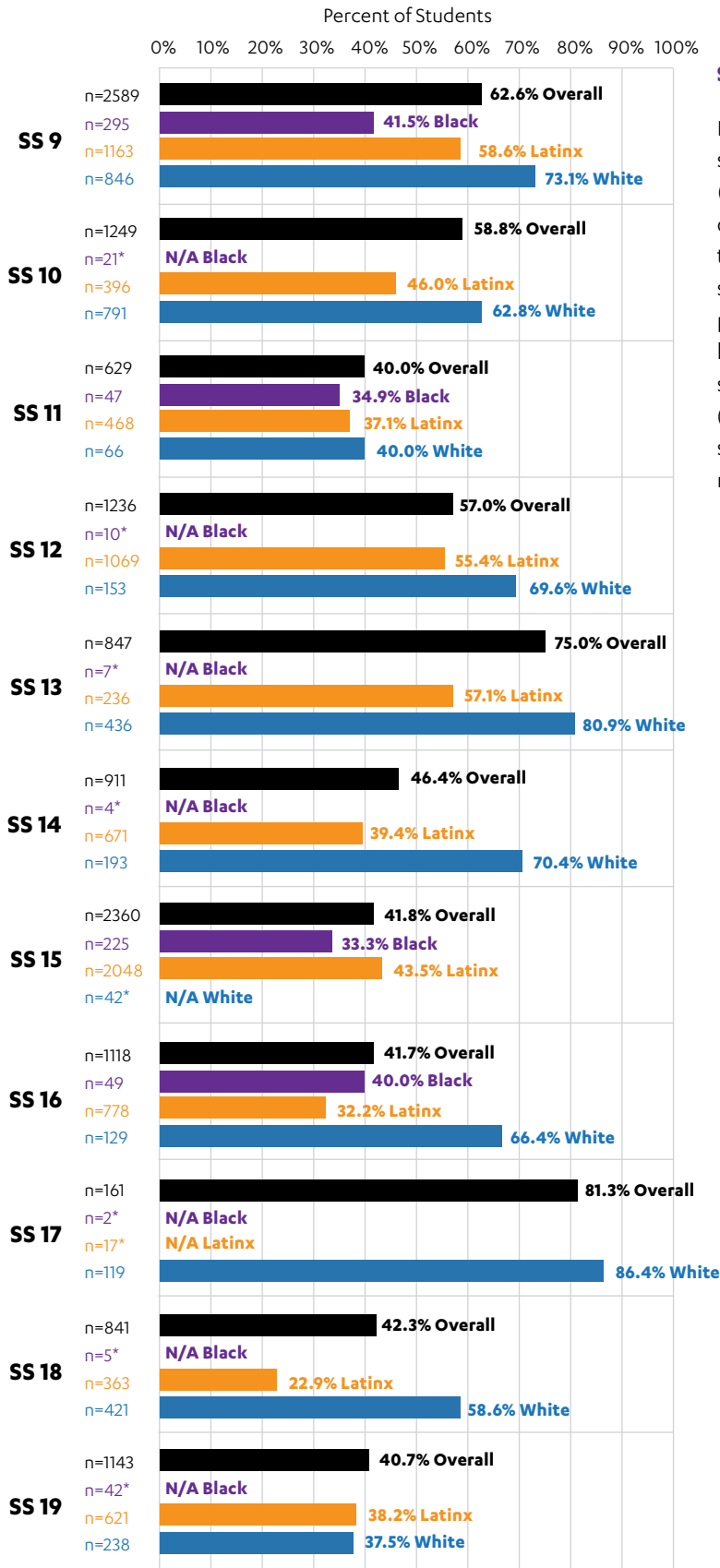


Elementary School Math Standards

The percent of students meeting or exceeding math standards at the elementary schools ranged from 19% to 49.5% (by comparison, the percent of students across the state was 38% to 50%, depending on grade level, for elementary school students) (Figure 6). Latinx students underperformed compared with the overall school average across most elementary schools in the Phase 2B sample. However, similar to ELA achievement, Latinx students in elementary school 9 outperformed the overall school average (20% compared with 19%). While there were few schools that reported achievement rates for Black students, Black students in elementary school 10 outperformed the overall school average (50% compared with 41.5%).

*Data not available due to small group size. ■ Overall ■ Black ■ Latinx ■ White

Figure 7. 2B Pilot Secondary School Students Meeting or Exceeding Grade-Level English Language Arts Standards, 2018-19

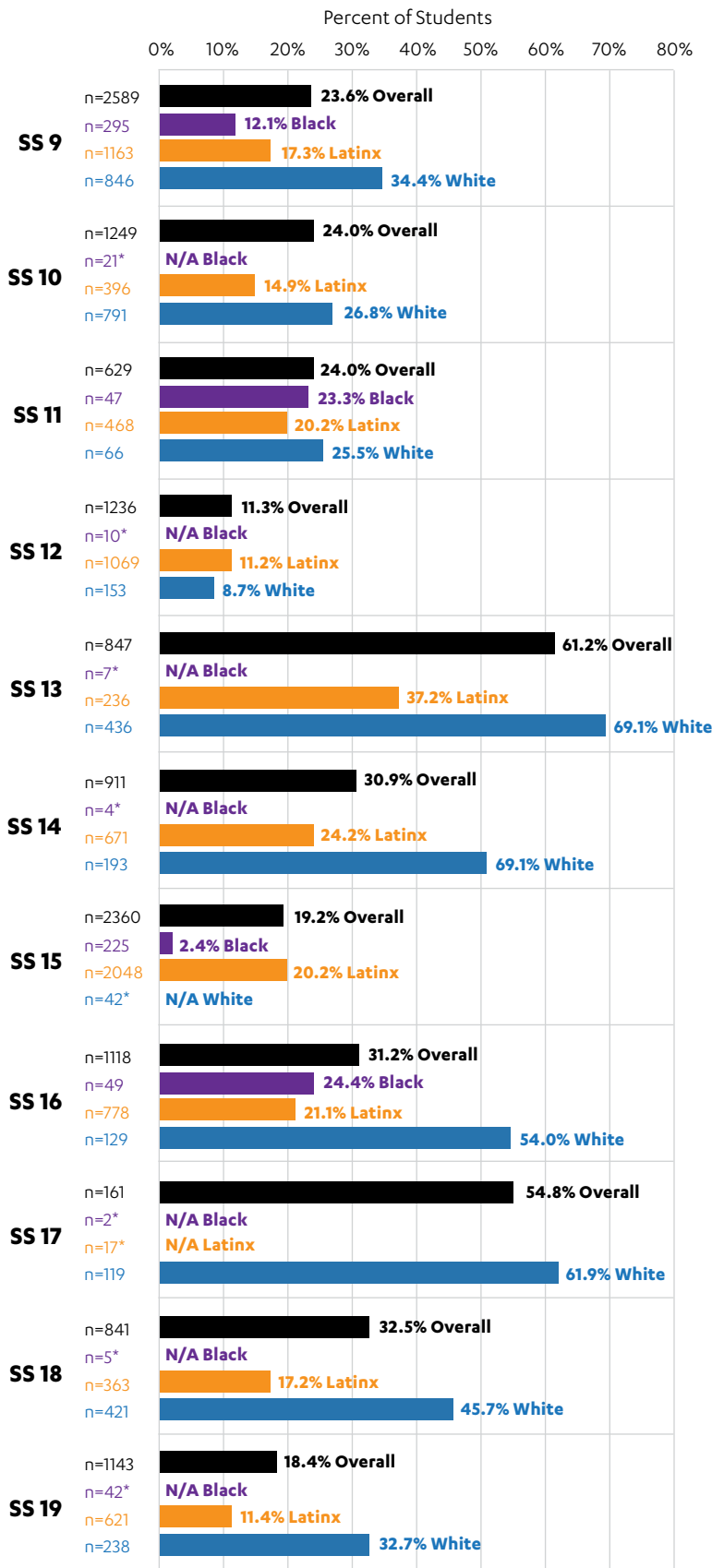


Secondary School ELA Standards

ELA achievement rates for participating secondary schools ranged from 40% to 81% (Figure 7). The school with the lowest percent of students meeting standards (SS 11) also had the lowest cases of disproportionality across subgroups. Black students were the lowest-performing subgroup in secondary school 9; however, this is also the school where Black students performed the best across the sample (41.5%). Latinx students also performed best in secondary school 9, with 59% of the subgroup meeting or exceeding standards.

*Data not available due to small group size. ■ Overall ■ Black ■ Latinx ■ White

Figure 8. 2B Pilot Secondary School Students Meeting or Exceeding Grade-Level Math Standards, 2018-19



Secondary School Math Standards

The percent of students meeting or exceeding math standards in the secondary school sample ranged from 11.3% to 61% (Figure 8). Secondary school 13 had the highest percent of students meeting standards (61%); however, it also had the highest level of disproportionality for Latinx students. At secondary school 13, 37.2% of Latinx students met or exceeded math standards compared with 69% of white students. At the lowest performing secondary school (SS 12), Latinx students outperformed their white peers (11% compared with 9%). Of the schools that reported achievement rates for Black students, secondary school 16 had the highest percent of Black students that met or exceeded standards (24%); however, their white peers outperformed them by 30 percentage points (54%). Secondary school 15 had the fewest Black students who met or exceeded standards (2.4%). Similar to ELA achievement, secondary school 11 had the lowest cases of disproportionality across the Phase 2B secondary school sample.

*Data not available due to small group size. ■ Overall ■ Black ■ Latinx ■ White

METHODS

Researchers for the UCLA CTS conducted interviews with participating Phase 2A and 2B school administrators in February and March 2022. Interviews focused on experiences with CA MTSS implementation, race-based discipline disparities, and the coaching process.

Current and past research questions were driven by this guiding statement from the California Department of Education: “Using Implementation Science, Universal Design for Learning, and the Whole Child approach, among other evidence-based interventions, MTSS affords a full range of academic, behavioral, and social support for all students to achieve.”

Based on this statement, our team developed four guiding research questions. These questions address the diversity of issues facing schools today. Through these research questions, the team developed a protocol that attempted to focus on how CA MTSS might be utilized to address pressing issues facing educators in California and America more largely.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Interview protocols and analyses were driven by four main research questions:

- 1. Do pilot schools have tiered supports in place to support student behavior, social-emotional well-being, and learning?**
 - a. What factors facilitate MTSS implementation in creating a successful tiered support system?
- 2. How do pilot schools respond to student behavior? Are schools moving away from traditional practices to alternative approaches?**
 - a. What factors facilitate MTSS implementation in moving away from traditional discipline practices to alternative approaches?
- 3. Do pilot schools implement changes to address race-based inequities?**
 - a. What factors facilitate MTSS implementation in addressing race-based inequities in student outcomes?
- 4. What factors pose challenges to MTSS implementation?**

From our analysis, these three factors mattered the most for CA MTSS implementation:

- 1. Support through strong leadership and school site teams**
- 2. School and community context**
- 3. Relationships (of all kinds)**

FINDINGS

1. Support through strong leadership and school site teams matters for CA MTSS implementation.

Schools that reported having strong Tier 1 resources often cited strong and engaged site leadership and strong educator support systems as necessary for establishing a robust continuum of support. Many administrators took on the responsibility of seeking out professional development themselves to establish a stronger understanding of how to leverage the CA MTSS framework to meet their schools' needs. District support for organizing professional development (PD) opportunities for administrators was seen as essential for this element of the work. By engaging with other administrators' conceptions of CA MTSS, some principals were able to gain more clarity in their understanding of the framework. Administrators viewed their understanding of MTSS as crucial for the implementation of the framework in their school communities. However, by engaging with administrators whose understandings of MTSS ran counter to their own, they were able to understand the potential negative consequences of implementing CA MTSS with a limited understanding of theoretical underpinnings. When referring to a district professional development opportunity, one administrator stated:

They used to think of [the student reward system] as being an MTSS model. And you know, I have to be honest, over the summer we did some MTSS work with our district principal's academy. I'm going to say this because I know I'm just principal 22 and it's not saying the district missed the boat completely. They were talking about your MTSS kids being 5%, "your 5% kids," and I'm like, "Whoa, we're doing damage here, right?" I think that a lot of people get that a little and not because they're trying to do damage, I just think that is their understanding. That it's the intervention. (Principal 22)

ACADEMIC DOMAIN

Collaboration between teachers across subjects is important for developing and sustaining a strong continuum of support in the academic domain. Many administrators reported the use of teams to facilitate their CA MTSS goals in the academic domain. School leaders

viewed implementing the CA MTSS framework as a way to facilitate collaboration between teachers in service of academic growth. Additionally, administrators discussed how fostering collaboration between teachers across subjects was a useful strategy in supporting whole child development in the academic domain. One administrator said:

We now have like a universal screener for math and language arts, which I know sounds hilarious that we didn't have one, but we didn't. And the teachers, you know, using their collaboration time to look at those and kind of address some of the bigger issues working together to plan lessons. So that's been helpful. (Principal 51)

Furthermore, administrators saw the construction of teams as a necessary and efficient resource for supporting teachers. School site teams were used to bolster their continuum of support and also help teachers engage with data to evaluate the effectiveness of their academic supports as well. **Administrators found that supporting their teachers in collecting and analyzing student data was an effective strategy for shifting their school culture and "way of doing business."** Administrators also saw it as their role to ensure that their whole staff understood the CA MTSS framework and how their existing academic supports fit into the framework. When asked about the work their school was doing around CA MTSS one administrator responded:

We've continued to discuss, learn, and investigate MTSS as a staff. And I try to, you know, point out or even just bring MTSS up in my conversation, right? Even just the acronym. I think also I'm very afraid, so we have [a reading program], a reading intervention time that we do, I hate the word intervention, instruction time, that we do during the day. We rotate grade levels; you know that kind of program. But, you know, people say that's MTSS and that's not MTSS <laugh> we are all MTSS all day. So, I've been using the MTSS framework with staff a lot more and showing them the difference. (Principal 22)

Additionally, administrators have leveraged CA MTSS implementation to help teachers expand their approaches to identifying students for academic supports. Administrators expressed that **ensuring uniform**

standards for assessing proficiency levels across subjects was a necessary part of the implementation process. Administrators demonstrated strong leadership in this pursuit by encouraging and supporting the use of data in their schools. Administrators saw a need to help teachers expand their toolkits for facilitating differentiated learning in the classroom. **Having teachers consistently use data across the school community was commonly cited as an antecedent to implementing new supports in the academic domain.** By facilitating professional learning communities (PLCs) and teacher collaboration, administrators were able to bolster their Tier 2 supports in the academic domain. One administrator explained:

[I started by] giving them a tool to be able to collect some data on their students. When I was trying to work with them to set up groups for classrooms next year, the word was, "Oh, they're high, they're low." What do you mean by low? Are they on grade level? So, to have tools in place now that they could assess students and be able to say, "Well, no, he's one year below level, or, you know, he's just six months behind, and based on this assessment [we should use these strategies]." So that was good this year.... I had about eight new staff, but some of them also came in with the understanding of how to do small groups and things like that. So, it was just basically, again, giving them that opportunity to gel; you know, teachers they've gotta work together to see each other's teaching styles and to share those ideas. And so, PLCs helped with that. (Principal 27)

However, administrators were also aware that **PLCs need guidance and structure to be their most effective.** Many administrators sought to use these groups to center the use of data in the practices of their teachers. **Creating a culture around the use of data was a necessary antecedent to bolstering Tier 1 instruction and supports.**

And then our solutions team is the academic side of that.... We're looking at academic growth. We're looking at the fidelity of our academic interventions. We're looking at Tier 1 instruction and seeing how, you know, what are we doing within the grade levels to try and improve. How can we help PLC groups, you know, really become effective groups? One of the problems with PLC groups is they love to talk about field trips, and they don't necessarily love to talk about data. I'd rather they talk about creating systematic patterns for looking at data within their grade-level groups and then improving the Tier 1 instruction. So, we've been working on that and helping those groups out too. (Principal 33)

BEHAVIOR DOMAIN

Strong leadership and school site teams played an integral role in addressing student behaviors that adults found challenging. Across all schools, PBIS was the most used Tier 1 support to address student behavior. **Administrators who spoke highly of their Tier 1 supports often shared about schoolwide use of PBIS expectations,** which are taught explicitly with assemblies, classroom direct instruction, and station rotations. One administrator explained further:

Well, we do have something called the first 20 days, where we are able to train our students in all classrooms simultaneously in academic conversations, noise meters, conversation stems, and PBIS behaviors so that they all know what those expectations are from the beginning. And we practice those in non-threatening ways. And so, all students have the opportunity to learn the routines of school together. That provides that foundation. (Principal 53)

While PBIS has been an important implementation tool for addressing student behaviors, staff collaboration was cited as essential to establishing schoolwide use of PBIS standards. PBIS teams were often cited as one of the most important school site teams. **Like the academic domain, collaboration across departments was often discussed as an important factor in establishing effective PBIS teams.** Having representation from all departments was a way that school leaders ensured the effectiveness of these teams. When discussing examples of ways teachers were supported during the implementation process, one administrator stated:

When we looked at the members of the [PBIS] team, we tried to make sure we had each department represented. So anybody who's directly at the meetings and doing the work is somebody in the department who is then also giving that feedback. I try to have an open door as much as possible; somebody can come in and ask for any help. But what we've really tried to do is to have our committee representative. (Principal 23)

Participants across the pilot schools spoke of efforts to reduce office referrals and off-campus suspensions. Most said they had a PBIS matrix or flow chart system for teachers to follow when responding to minor and major behaviors. Administrators often leveraged features of the family and community engagement domain in these efforts. Teachers often use classroom interventions,

relationship-building techniques, or conversations with students and parents before issuing office referrals or administrators suspending students.

We have an articulated majors and minors chart as you do with PBIS... And then we also have kind of a, we call it the [mood] break. And it's primarily for students who do actually need to access the wellness room.... But what we've found out in practice is, teachers are also using it and we're kind of examining this, but they have a behavior that's kind of in between a minor and a major, and they're not sure what to do. And so instead of continuing a power struggle, they'll give them a [mood] break, as a way to stop it from going to a major. [From there] our PBIS and support person steps in. They're really critical in those moments because they can then ask some questions, do some problem solving and then reintegrate the student back into class before it turns into a referral. (Principal 46)

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING DOMAIN

Across all schools, leaders expressed an increased focus on helping students feel safe at school. However, issues identified in the social-emotional learning (SEL) domain varied greatly across schools. **In many cases, social-emotional supports were tightly coupled with behavior supports and mental health resources.** In these cases, PBIS teams held ownership and responsibility for assessing and developing social-emotional supports. In these cases, administrators saw social-emotional learning skills as tools to help with depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues affecting youth across the United States. Mindfulness strategies were the most commonly cited SEL support across schools. **Administrators saw it as their job to ensure that mindfulness strategies were implemented with fidelity and viewed the integration of these strategies into existing Tier 1 supports as important for implementation.** However, there were fewer examples of how administrators used leadership or teams to develop or implement social-emotional learning supports in Tiers 2 and 3.

At the end of that year, [we] spent time putting together a schoolwide plan that included things like a mindfulness minute over the PA that our student body would practice. We had already implemented our success strand of courses, which is intervention and acceleration, and organizational and SEL all combined into one, as a class period that all our students would get in some fashion. So we had some lessons, some common lesson planning that had everything from SEL lessons, avid strategies, and note-

taking strategies. It ran the gamut of PBIS behavior skills. And so, we added a series of mindfulness lessons to that. So, it would be part of a regular class for the kids. (Principal 35)

2. School and community context matters for implementation.

School and community context was cited as a factor that influenced CA MTSS implementation in several ways.

Issues related to staff turnover, rurality, political climate, social justice, and poverty were all cited as influencing implementation in direct and indirect ways. Furthermore, these issues were reported as influencing implementation across all domains.

ACADEMIC DOMAIN

School and community context influenced the implementation of CA MTSS in the academic domain for many schools, specifically rural schools. For example, many administrators identified a mismatch between their process for identifying students for special education compared with expectations from the state. **Administrators feared that not taking into account issues that are unique to rural communities might lead to an overidentification of students for Individualized Education Programs.**

Overall, we over-identify, which is curious. I think most schools probably do. Often, it's a funny combination. There are issues within the community that — I mean — so the state says we're supposed to identify a certain percentage. You know, like their number is the number you should have for this type of rural school — that is the number of special ed students. I think the community really drives that. The families drive access to health care, the access to prenatal care, the access to early reading programs, and Head Start programs. (Principal 33)

Furthermore, administrators believed that ensuring that supports were in place to address the specific needs of their communities and implemented with fidelity was an important part of the CA MTSS implementation process. However, **rural administrators also saw their location as a barrier to accessing resources to develop and grow their tiered supports.**

We had kids that were reading two grade levels below. Entered the [Leveled Literacy Intervention] program and were reading on grade level in six months. What's that mean? That means that the Tier 1 instruction at different

grade levels is maybe not effective or maybe, you know, maybe the application of intervention programs should be strong across the board. Do you know what I mean? Like there's, in small schools, there's a skill and/or capacity level that is difficult to maintain, whereas maybe larger urban schools have — I'm just guessing — more professional development support for all teachers. (Principal 33)

BEHAVIOR DOMAIN

Context of all kinds was an important factor when implementing CA MTSS to bolster supports in the behavior domain. However, the historical context of the school itself and the legacies of past administrators were especially important when implementing CA MTSS in smaller communities. **In smaller communities, administrators believed that implementing MTSS to address issues in the behavior domain required cooperation across all school levels as well as transparency with the community at large.** In smaller communities, with less out-migration, administrators felt that the school was central to the community and therefore changes were more subject to scrutiny from the community at large. As one administrator commented, *"It was hard, but we're there now. And you know, now we're — with MTSS — we're working with folks as a resource to bring in even more information about what the best system is and most effective for kids this age."* (Admin 33)

Additionally, **administrators felt that a mismatch between the socioeconomic status of teachers and students was an important contextual factor that influenced the implementation of CA MTSS in the behavioral domain.** Attention and understanding of differences in the cultural background of students was an important factor for understanding which supports were right for which students. Administrators felt that teachers having a strong knowledge of these differences was an antecedent for implementing CA MTSS. For instance, schools with higher concentrations of students experiencing poverty must ensure that their faculty and staff understand the unique issues facing this population, especially if they themselves come from higher socioeconomic status. As one administrator explained:

You know, I attributed it to a lack of cultural understanding. I attributed it to a lack of connectedness. I have teachers who are fine human beings, but they apply a method of understanding adolescent behavior that I think works for middle-class students. But I have other students who are not of the same cultural background, who come from

single-parent homes, poverty, and just the social issues that are out there. They are held to the same kind of narrow parameters as everybody else. So, they invariably get caught up in the discipline system. (Principal 48)

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING DOMAIN

Across schools, **the return to in-person learning is still an important context to consider when implementing CA MTSS in the behavioral and social-emotional learning domains.** Administrators felt that student behavior was often a result of complex emotions stemming from the interruption of in-person learning caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. **Administrators were aware of the ways the pandemic exacerbated social issues that were already impacting their communities and disproportionately impacted certain populations.** Students expressing anger due to these issues might be disproportionately referred to disciplinary action instead of receiving the social-emotional supports that would help them to effectively process their emotions and improve their learning. Administrators often identified this as an implementation barrier; however, few felt that they had plausible solutions.

I will also add the other challenge that I believe that we have is that our community is 83% poverty. During the pandemic ... their parents lost their income, and they had no supervision. Housing was not secure for some of our kids. Food was not secure for some of our kids. And yet our teachers continued to get full paychecks, and there's a disconnect there. I think in their minds they believe they understand what our kids went through, but I really don't think that they — they did not see suffering(?) in the way that our students and our families did. And I believe part of the behavior when we came back was because our kids were angry at the adults and rightfully so. It doesn't mean that we didn't expect, you know, appropriate behavior at school, but I've been thinking about it and trying to figure out how to work with them, and I think our kids were angry at the grownups. (Principal 34)

Schools with the most robust social-emotional learning supports tailor those efforts to the specific needs of their student body. In these cases, schools did not view social-emotional resources as an extension of mental health resources or as additional behavioral supports. They were more likely to have Tier 3 social-emotional supports that were tailored to individual students provided by specialists. They were able to ensure that social-emotional learning supports were delivered

to all students in Tier 1 through assemblies and activities that centered on social-emotional learning as a part of the school culture. However, they were more likely to have the most robust SEL supports in Tier 2. By having a deep understanding of the groups that make up their school community, and the potential supports they might need, they were able to ensure that students were learning the most pertinent skills for their social-emotional needs.

We have what's called a therapeutic behavior strategist. That's something that's district-wide. We have one that helps us with those students that need it. [Our strategist] has a curriculum that talks about anger and grief, decision-making, and character-building. And we have groups for that at all grade levels. We have a group called Curls, Coils, and Crowns for African American female students to help with self-esteem. We are about to begin our boys' council for our boys that just need a little bit more guidance. So, we'll have some excellent behaviors in there, but we have some of those students as well that need that extra, additional help. We've done a lot of anti-bullying interventions [through] assemblies. In many class workshops, we've done anxiety workshops for some of our students that suffer from anxiety. (Principal 52)

3. Relationships (of all kinds) matter for implementation.

Relationships were important for all aspects of CA MTSS implementation in schools. Relationships were a common theme across interviews in reference to various domains and school roles. Relationships were important internally, as well as externally, and seen as important for supporting students and for implementing CA MTSS across all domains.

ACADEMIC DOMAIN

Relationships between faculty and support staff were a factor that supported CA MTSS implementation in the academic domain. Having open communication between academic support staff and faculty was an important part of improving the process of identifying students for supports. Administrators believed that stronger relationships between faculty and support staff would speed up getting students the support they need to succeed in the academic domain. In many school districts, support staff such as counselors and literacy coaches were shared across schools. The limited availability of support staff created a culture where teachers were less likely to closely involve these staff in their planning. Many

administrators viewed strengthening the relationship between teachers and support staff as important for the implementation process.

The counselor and the literacy coach are very good friends here on campus.... They've done a lot of work asking the staff how they best communicate. Would you like a text? Would you like an email? Because they were sending out emails, you know, like "Here, I'm here, you know, I can help" and not getting any responses. So, they've done a lot of work and relationship-building. The literacy coach has struggled with the more veteran teachers not really seeing her as, you know, being an expert. We've never had a full-time counselor at elementary schools in our district up until ... I think this is her second full year of being full time. I think we were part-way through the year before she became full time, but she was split between two schools. And the year before that we had a counselor that was here one day a week. So, you know, I think there's just a little bit of like, trust and anxiety for adults that like, "I'm not going to make [this person] part of my plan until [I know they're here full time] and then the same thing for literacy coach — we haven't had literacy coaches. (Principal 22)

BEHAVIOR DOMAIN

Pilot schools discussed their attempts to move away from responding to student behaviors with traditional practices (e.g., suspension, removal from the classroom, detention) to alternative practices (e.g., calm room, meditation, repair harm circles, wellness room, think sheets). One of the major themes that arose among the pilot schools was building relationships. **Principals and administrators from various schools echoed the need to address issues with a person-centered lens, treat students like humans and adolescents, teach instead of suspending, talk to students instead of just disciplining them, and build a connection with students, staff, and parents.** Echoed by one of the principals, the goal of restorative practices is to keep students accountable for their actions in different ways, rather than punishing them (2B 49). Restorative practice in schools seems to help students connect with their environment – the school, their classmates, and their administrators – and examine how their behaviors affect the environment. A majority of schools stated that they were using the PBIS framework and cited the need to be proactive instead of reactive about student behaviors. Schools attempted to track where the disruptive behaviors took place more often (classrooms or playgrounds) and implement activities in these areas to prevent the behaviors from

occurring instead of reacting to them afterward. One school discussed implementing a technique called active education on the playground – teachers/staff would facilitate structured games during recess to keep kids engaged (2B 52).

Overall, there was an explicit focus on keeping students in the classroom and not excluding them from opportunities to learn. Administrators reported the belief that strengthening the relationships that students have with their school would help ameliorate some of the behaviors that have intensified since the return to in-person learning. As one administrator explained:

The kids are not connected to schools. They're not connected to the site. They're not connected to care — to an adult that they feel cares about them. So, they're engaging in more risky behaviors or behaviors that they think that they can get away with because it only affects them, and they could care less about anybody else.”
(Principal 47)

Additionally, many administrators **felt that strong relationships between teachers and students were necessary to establish effective Tier 2 supports in the behavior domain.** One administrator said, “If you don’t have a relationship with your kid, a restorative circle’s not gonna work. I can’t repair the harm to a relationship that never existed.” (Principal 34)

However, much like the academic domain, a relationship between teachers and support staff was seen as crucial for having strong supports in the behavior domain. In many instances, teachers have become aware of the nuances in students’ behaviors after returning to in-person learning. By becoming more aware of these nuances, teachers are able to find alternative means to address student behaviors that don’t involve excluding them from the larger school community. **However, cultivating these alternative practices requires strong collaboration between teachers and support staff in addition to well-established practices for identifying behaviors.**

So, we have an articulated majors, minors chart as you do with PBIS... And then we also have kind of a, we call it the [student] break. And it’s primarily for students who do actually need to access the wellness room.... They might be a little bit escalated, but what we’ve found out in practice is teachers are also using it and we’re kind of examining this, but they have a behavior that’s kind of in between a minor and a major, and they’re not sure what to

do. And so instead of continuing a power struggle, they’ll give them a [student] break, as a way to stop it from going to a major. [From there] our PBIS and support person, he’s really critical in those moments because he can then ask some questions, do some problem solving and then reintegrate the student back into class before it turns into a referral. (Principal 46)

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING DOMAIN

Relationships were important for implementing CA MTSS to meet the social-emotional learning needs of school communities. Relationships in the form of teacher-teacher, teacher-student, student-student, and school-community were most frequently mentioned as being integral to the implementation process.

Administrators saw it as their role to help teachers build relationships with students as a part of building up their social-emotional learning supports. **Relationship building between teachers and students was most often centered as a Tier 1 support strategy.** One strategy used by a majority of schools was having teachers greet students at the door in the morning. However, the schools that were most successful with this strategy were those that intentionally implemented it with a plan for measurement as well. As one administrator stated:

We put together a starter kit for building relationships, and so we modeled it. We had teachers engage with it together before school even started. We came to a consensus that we were gonna really focus on very intentional strategies so that students came to school and felt welcome and had that positive connection with an adult. Every student has to have a positive connection every single morning, and greeting the students at the door each day with a very specific strategy is done schoolwide. We monitor it, we praise it and it happens.
(Principal 31)

Helping teachers manage stress and burnout was an important aspect of social-emotional learning work at schools. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, communication between teachers and families has taken on more casual forms across most schools. However, administrators also reported that this more open communication can create a burden for teachers, especially in smaller communities. **In smaller communities, schools seemed to operate as hubs for the community, creating more permeable boundaries between parents and teachers outside school hours.**

Administrators cited a need to help teachers establish those boundaries as a preemptive measure against teacher burnout.

Now I get teachers that get texts, you know 7-8 o'clock at night, wanting to know about homework on the weekends, things like that. And so that has/is? just an added layer of things. We understand that parents are coming home late, and they've got a student that's maybe in quarantine or isolation or independent study for whatever reason ... and so some of us are concerned that would be something going forward. So, we're trying to figure a way to help say, "Hey, the staff needs some off time too." We'll try to figure out how to do that for mental wellness. (Principal 38)

Across interviews, a need to build relationships with families as well as the local community at large was seen as an important aspect of implementing CA MTSS in the social-emotional learning domain. **Administrators in areas with higher poverty levels were able to make the connections between the social-emotional needs of students and the conditions they may face at home.** Being able to support students in this way was seen as an important antecedent to implementing CA MTSS. Understanding how factors related to poverty influence social-emotional health was a theme that arose across many interviews.

The needs of the students are definitely increasing, especially the social-emotional ones, and it's gonna be super important to be really tightly partnered with families. The partnership is not also just about, or not only about the student, but it's also about the well-being of the family because we do have high poverty. So, we have the high-class end and then we also have students living in trailers next to the river. I mean, so we do have extremes. So, the staff really realizes that we can't do it by ourselves anymore, so to speak. Reaching out to community leaders, business leaders, organizations, the churches, is gonna be very important. (Principal 41)

CONCLUSION

Analysis of Year 4 data shows that schools were successful with some of their implementation efforts. However, between-school differences were a major factor to consider when examining implementation efforts. Administrators sought to implement CA MTSS in a number of ways to intentionally address issues in their unique school communities. Based on these findings, we provide the following suggestions for schools seeking to implement the CA MTSS framework.

Establishing strong support networks for teachers and administrators can enhance successful CA MTSS implementation.

Strong support networks can provide a number of benefits for schools seeking to implement the CA MTSS framework. The creation of school site teams and PLCs was important in schools for establishing schoolwide standards and ensuring fidelity. Additionally, these networks bolstered the skills and resources of teachers and staff. Schools with established teams saw them as space for teachers to unpack and process the data from their own classrooms and compare it with other teachers. This was seen as important for establishing standards in the school. Additionally, administrators who received the opportunity to participate in networks with other administrators in their district viewed this as an invaluable resource to support their implementation efforts.

Ensuring uniform and consistent use of data across the school can support CA MTSS implementation.

Uniform standards for collecting and analyzing data are essential for implementing a continuum of support that will meet the needs of students. Administrators reported that having rich data was essential for identifying areas for growth. Ensuring that uniform standards were in place for assessing and reporting proficiency levels across the school was a necessary antecedent to implementing CA MTSS. Administrators saw that supporting their teachers in collecting and analyzing classroom data was an effective way to shift their school culture around academics, behavior, and social-emotional learning.

Cultivating healthy relationships within the school and with the community can support CA MTSS implementation.

Healthy relationships are essential for supporting CA MTSS implementation. Strong relationships in school are essential for bolstering supports across domains. Cultivating healthy relationships between teachers and support staff was often viewed as strengthening the supports across the academic domain. Healthy relationships between teachers and students can strengthen the resources for addressing student behaviors. Additionally, having strong relationships with families and the community largely supported the development and implementation of social-emotional learning supports.

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