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CA MTSS Pilot Phase 2A Participation Year 2 Summary

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CA MTSS School-Site Implementation: Pilot Phase 2A

PARTICIPATION
YEAR 2 SUMMARY

2020-2021 School Year

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CALIFORNIA MTSS

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BACKGROUND

In this report, we share findings from the CA MTSS Phase 2A pilot project's Year 2 of participation qualitative data collection and analysis.

The purpose is to shed light on California Multi-tiered System of Support (CA MTSS) implementation processes, successes, and challenges from the 14 schools participating in the CA MTSS Phase 2A pilot. This report builds on the Baseline Data Summary (Farkas et al., 2021), in which we presented data from Year 1 of participation, the 2019-20 school year.[1]

The CA MTSS Phase 2A pilot project follows 14 schools[1] from 7 districts across California as they implement the CA MTSS framework at the school level with a focus on school climate, positive behavioral supports, and social-emotional learning. 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" (A.B. 1808, 2018). Specific goals of the pilot program include "fostering positive school climate, improving pupil-teacher relationships, increasing pupil engagement, and promoting alternative discipline practices." Within these goals, an important focus of the pilot program is school-based work to address stark racial/ethnic disparities through the implementation of restorative models and culturally responsive practices, among others. The project is co-led by Orange County Department of Education, Butte County Office of Education, and the University of California, Los Angeles Center for the Transformation of Schools (UCLA-CTS).

Schools participated in the pilot during the 2019-20 and 2020-21 academic years. During the fall of the first year, school leadership teams, along with district and county stakeholders, attended a two-day pilot "kick-off" centered on a school-level approach to implementing the CA MTSS framework; during summers, school staff and other stakeholders attended three-day Professional Learning Institutes (canceled in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic). Each school was also assigned a coach who met with the school site leader or leadership team weekly or biweekly to guide and support implementation during

the two years of participation. Finally, participating schools received sub-grants to support their efforts.

The purpose of this report is to understand, through principal and coach interviews conducted by the UCLA-CTS research team, the CA MTSS pilot program's Phase 2A school site implementation process during the two years of participation (2019-20 and 2020-21). In addition, we present findings from a retrospective analysis of Year 1 teacher focus group data to complement our main findings. Quantitative data are presented to describe participating schools (using last available valid data from the California Department of Education: 2020-21 for enrollment and 2018-19 for suspensions, chronic absenteeism, and achievement); but valid cross-participation year comparisons are not possible due to incomplete data during the COVID-19 pandemic. 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) how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced implementation.

The report is intended to inform both the executive team (Orange County Depart of Education, Butte County Office of Education and UCLA-CTS) and coaches in the ongoing development of support for the pilot program's successful implementation.

SCHOOL DISCIPLINE PRACTICES AND INEQUITIES

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

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1 In the present report, and all subsequent reports, participating school names will be anonymized.

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learn. 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. 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).

MULTI-TIERED SYSTEM OF SUPPORT IMPLEMENTATION

MTSS has 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, in fact, 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 in order to decrease racial/ethnic gaps in discipline, the approach schools take 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.

COVID-19 CONTEXT

Pilot schools began participating during the 2019-20 academic year. In-person instruction was interrupted in Spring 2020 as schools moved to distance and/or hybrid learning models. Distance and hybrid learning continued until Spring 2021, with schools just transitioning back to in-person learning when we conducted our interviews in May/June 2021. As a result, challenges brought about by the pandemic became a big part of our interview conversations with schools.

Figure 1. Cumulative Enrollment and Suspension Rate by Race/Ethnicity, California, 2018-19
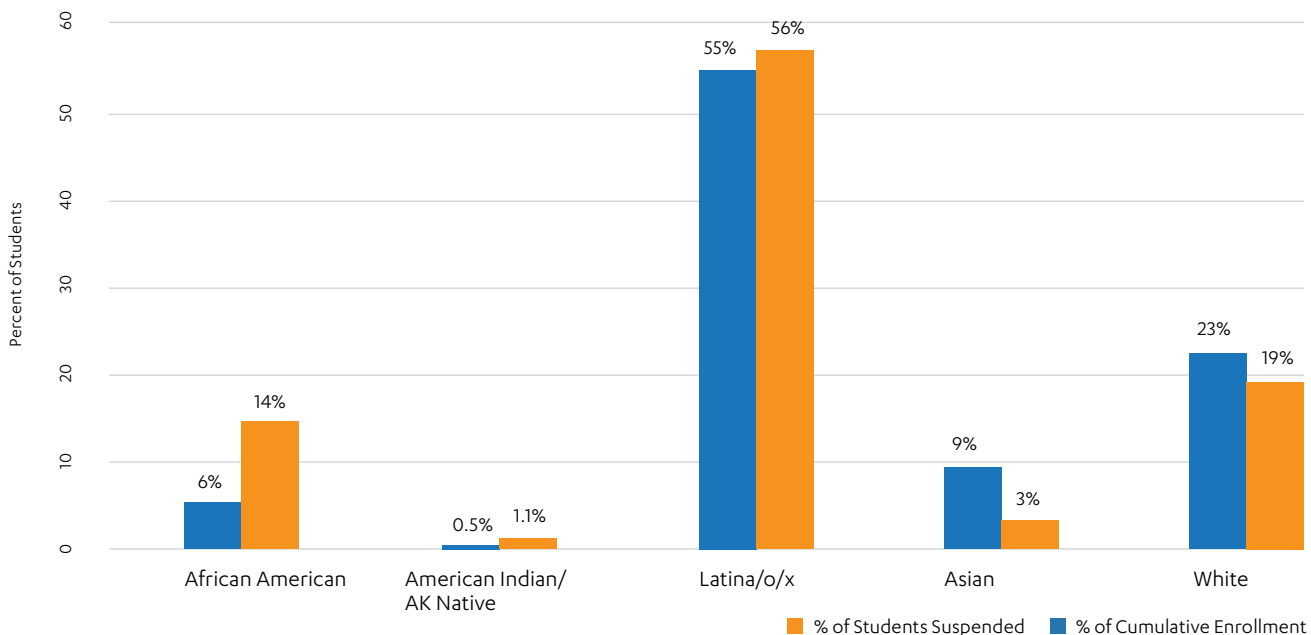
DESCRIPTION OF PARTICIPATING SCHOOLS

In this section, we present quantitative data publicly available from the California Department of Education[2] to describe participating schools.

To do this, 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.

PARTICIPATION YEAR 2 ENROLLMENT AND DEMOGRAPHICS

Participating schools included six elementary schools, seven middle or junior high schools, and one high school. This group of schools represented seven school districts, counties, and geographic lead areas. In Tables 1 and 2, we present total census enrollment (n) and demographics from the 2020-2021 participation year.

In 3 of the 6 elementary schools, most students identified as Latina/o/x; at the remaining three schools, white students comprised the largest group. Three of six elementary schools had lower proportions of Black students (0.3% - 3.2%) compared to the state (5.2%), and 3 of 6 had higher proportions (6.7% - 18.4%) compared to the state. All of the elementary schools identified a majority of their students as socioeconomically disadvantaged; all but one had a much higher proportion of such students (78.7% - 99.2%) compared to the proportion across the state (59%). Two of the six elementary schools had a much higher percentage of students labeled English Learner (34.1% and 53.9%) than that across the state (17.7%). Three of six schools had a somewhat lower proportion of students with disabilities (5.6% - 9.8%) compared to the

Table 1. Elementary School Census Enrollment Demographics, 2020-21

	ES 1 (n=461) %	ES 2 (n=381) %	ES 3 (n=659) %	ES 4 (n=694) %	ES 5 (n=342) %	ES 6 (n=316) %
By Race/Ethnicity						
American Indian	0.4	0.5	0.3	0.4	2.0	4.1
Asian	5.2	1.0	0.5	6.6	1.2	15.5
Black	6.7	0.3	0.5	12.8	18.4	3.2
Filipino	0.7	0.0	0.0	3.2	4.7	0.0
Latina/o/x	75.1	45.7	97.6	24.2	32.5	18.0
Pacific Islander	0.7	0.0	0.0	1.6	2.0	0.0
Two or More Races/Ethnicities	3.3	6.8	0.0	12.4	0.3	13.6
White	6.9	42.3	1.1	38.6	38.3	45.3
By Subgroup						
English Learner	9.3	34.1	53.9	16.7	6.4	10.1
Socioeconomically Disadvantaged	78.7	84.0	99.2	63.8	90.4	91.8
Students with Disabilities	17.1	9.4	5.6	9.8	15.2	19.0

Downloadable data files retrieved from https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/ad/downloadabledata.asp

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state (12.5%); and 3 of 6 had a somewhat higher proportion (15.2% - 19%), while the remaining 3 had a higher proportion of students with disabilities.

Enrollment in 5 of 8 secondary schools consisted mostly of students identifying as Latina/o/x (65.5% - 88.9%, compared to 55% in the state). At three schools, white students comprised the largest subgroup (36% - 58% compared to 22% across the state). Five of the eight schools had a similar or higher proportion Black student enrollment (5% - 17.4%) compared to the state (5%); the remaining three schools had no or very few Black students (0 - 2.7%). All secondary schools identified at least 2 out of 3 (67.7% - 86.7%) of their students as socioeconomically disadvantaged, above the figure for the state (59%). The proportion of students labeled English Learner was less than 10% at half of the schools (1.8% - 8.3%) and 18.1% - 28.3% at the remaining half of schools (compared to 17.7% across the state).

PRE-CA MTSS PILOT PARTICIPATION SUSPENSION RATES, CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM RATES, AND ACHIEVEMENT

We describe participating schools' suspension rates, absenteeism rates, and English language arts and math achievement using data from 2018-19. Data from 2019-20 and 2020-21 is either not available or not valid because of pandemic-related disruptions to instruction and assessment (California Department of Education, 2021). Therefore, we present the most recent available valid data, which are from 2018-19, the year immediately prior to CA MTSS pilot project participation. These data can be considered baseline data, describing schools during the year they applied and were selected to participate in the pilot.

Table 2. Secondary School Census Enrollment Demographics, 2020-21

	MS 1 (n=660) %	MS 2 (n=359) %	MS 3 (n=978) %	MS 4 (n=690) %	MS 5 (n=832) %	MS 6 (n=339) %	MS 7 (n=448) %	HS 1 (n=1327) %
By Race/Ethnicity								
American Indian	0.3	0.6	0.5	0.1	0.5	5.6	0.9	0.8
Asian	9.1	1.1	1.8	1.9	3.5	1.2	2.5	8.6
Black	5.0	0.6	1.0	17.5	8.9	2.7	15.4	12.1
Filipino	3.0	0.0	0.0	5.7	4.7	0.6	3.6	3.7
Latina/o/x	73.8	47.4	88.9	65.5	73.0	13.0	32.1	31.3
Pacific Islander	0.0	0.0	0.2	0.6	0.5	0.3	2.5	1.0
Two or More Races/Ethnicities	2.0	5.3	1.0	3.9	4.1	17.7	0.0	6.4
White	6.5	44.0	6.4	4.6	4.6	58.7	43.1	35.9
By Subgroup								
English Learner	8.3	18.1	21.5	28.3	27.0	1.8	3.1	6.9
Socioeconomically Disadvantaged	75.5	83.6	86.7	82.8	82.0	75.8	74.1	67.7
Students with Disabilities	15.6	9.5	9.1	11.7	11.7	13.9	13.2	15.6

Overall suspension rates **(Figure 2)** were relatively low at 3 of the 6 elementary schools, ranging from 0.2% to 2.3% (suspension rate across the state: Grades K-3 = 0.9%; Grades 4-6 = 2.9%). However, at the remaining three elementary schools, suspension rates were higher (5% - 11.9%) and varied by race/ethnicity. For example, in Elementary School 4, the overall suspension rate across all students was 5%; however, the rate was nearly three times that for Black students (14.3%) and was less than the overall rate for white students (3.2%). In Elementary School 5, the suspension rate for white students was somewhat higher than the overall rate (10% vs. 9.2%), but the rate for Black students was still the highest across groups (15.3%). At Elementary School 6, Latina/o/x students were more likely to be suspended (14.5%) compared to white students (12.6%) and to the school's overall suspension rate (11.9%).
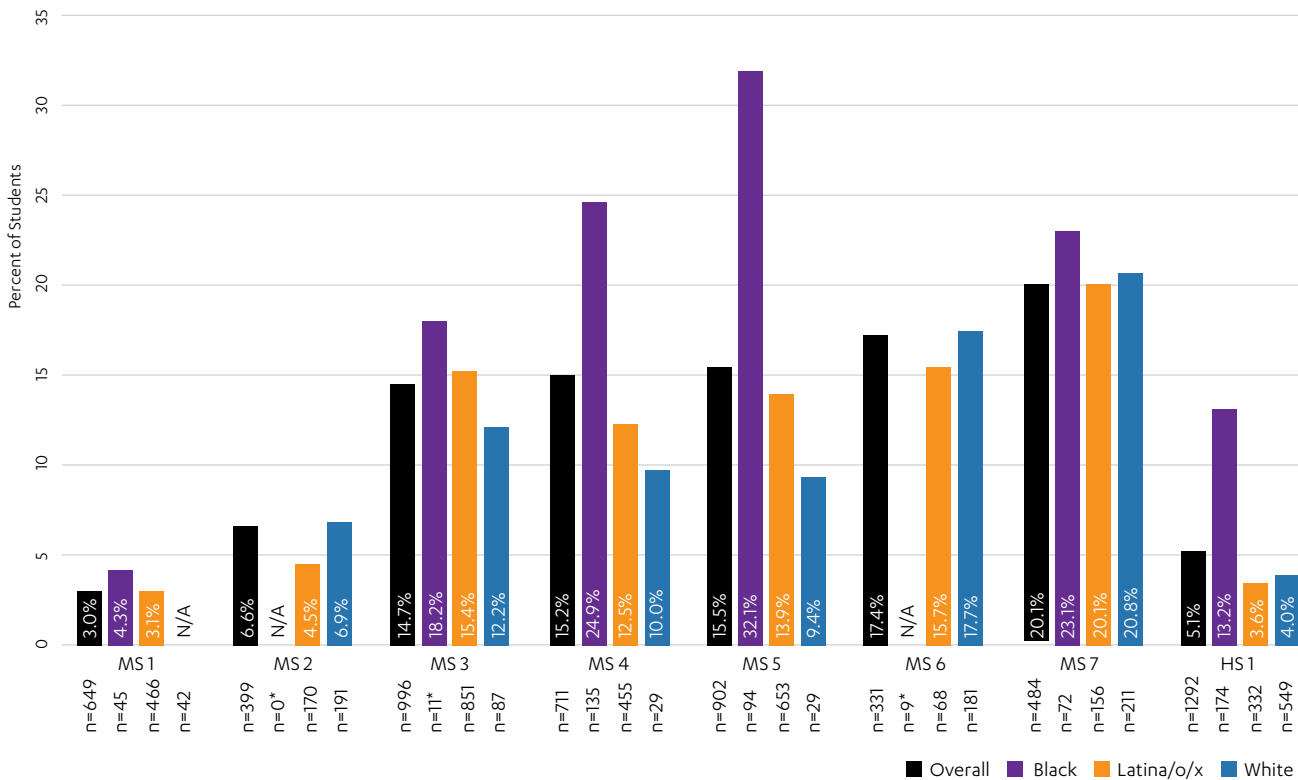
Figure 2. Elementary School Suspension Rates, 2018-2019
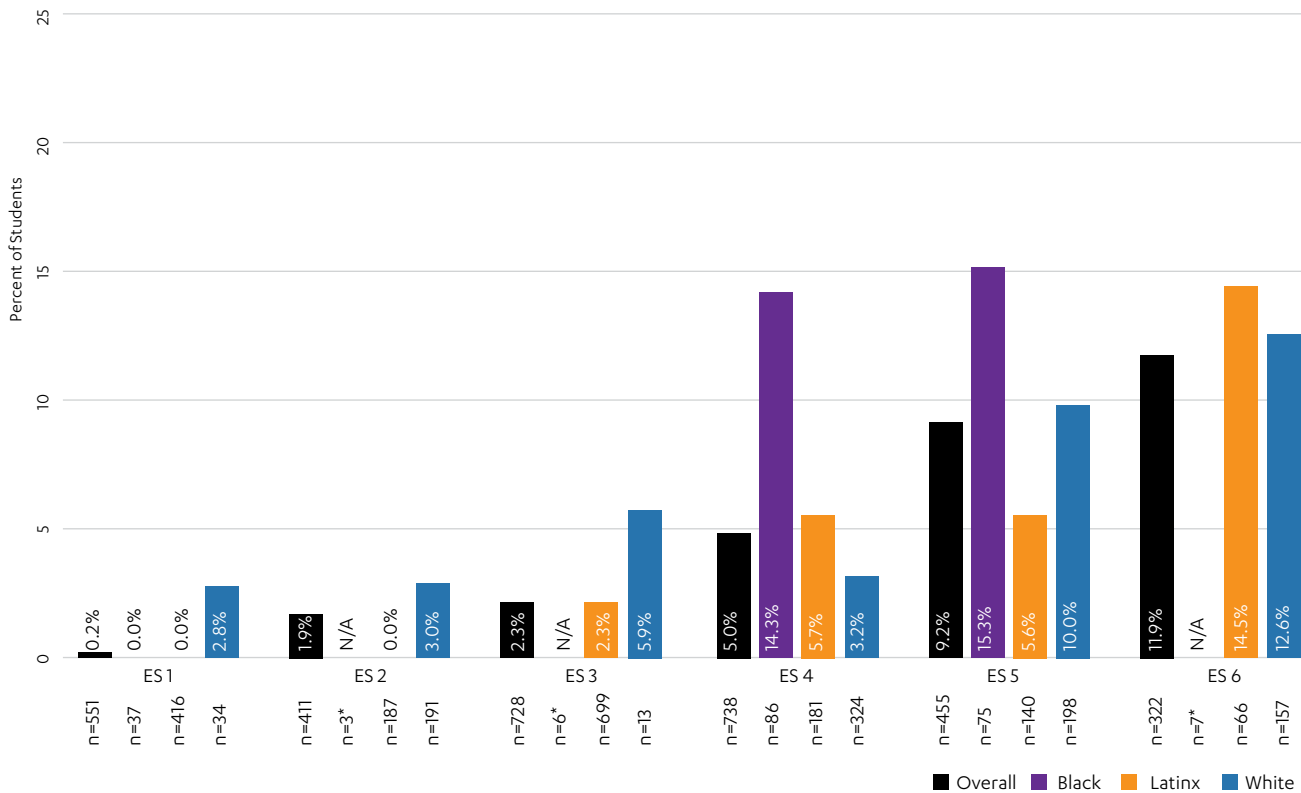
Note. Figure shows percent of unduplicated student suspensions among each group, which is calculated by the CDE using cumulative enrollment. Cumulative enrollment numbers are not available for small groups, so for reference, provided under each group name is the census day total enrollment for that group. *Data not available due to small group size.

Overall, suspension rates were higher for the secondary school sample **(Figure 3)** compared with the elementary school sample, ranging from 3% to 20.1%, a pattern consistent with suspension rate patterns across the state (Grades 7-8 = 6.7%; Grades 9-12 = 4.7%, compared to Grades K-3 = 0.9%; Grades 4-6 = 2.9%). With the exception of Middle School 2, which had no enrolled Black students, and Middle School 6, which did not have available data for Black students due to low sample size, at all secondary schools Black students were more likely to be suspended than the student body as a whole and than any other group of students by race/ethnicity. By contrast, at 5 of the 8 schools, white students were less likely to be suspended than their Latina/o/x and/or Black counterparts.

Figure 3. Secondary School Suspension Rates, 2018-2019

Note. Figure shows percent of unduplicated student suspensions among each group, which is calculated by the CDE using cumulative enrollment. Cumulative enrollment numbers are not available for small groups, so for reference, provided under each group name is the census day total enrollment for that group. *Data not available due to small group size.

Chronic absenteeism rates (percent of students missing 10% or more of instruction days in an academic year) ranged between 6.4% and 24.3% at the six participating elementary schools **(Figure 4)**; this rate was higher than that across the state (9.5% for Grades K-3; 8.4% for Grades 3-6) at all but one of the elementary schools. Chronic absenteeism rates varied by race/ethnicity.
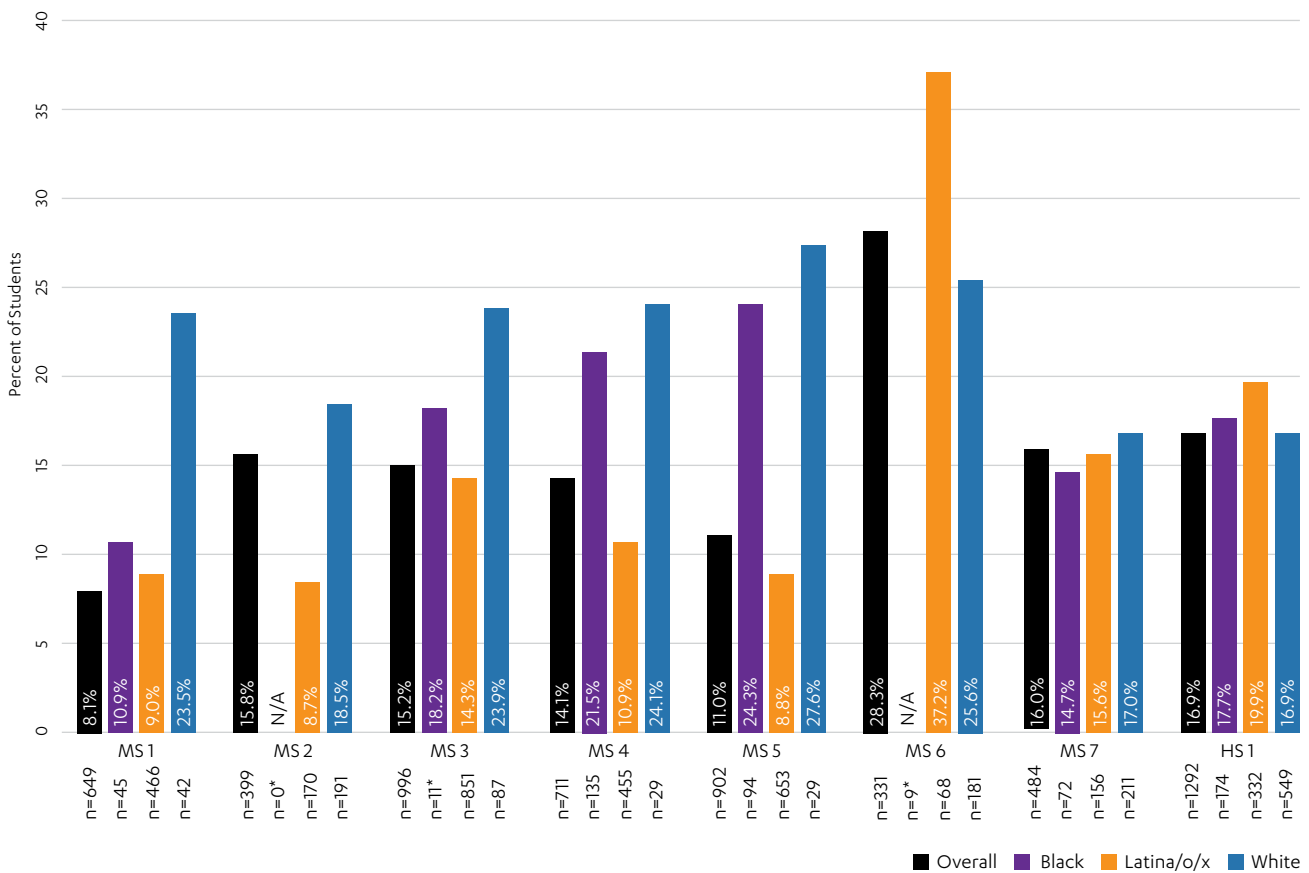
Figure 4. Elementary School Chronic Absenteeism, 2018-2019
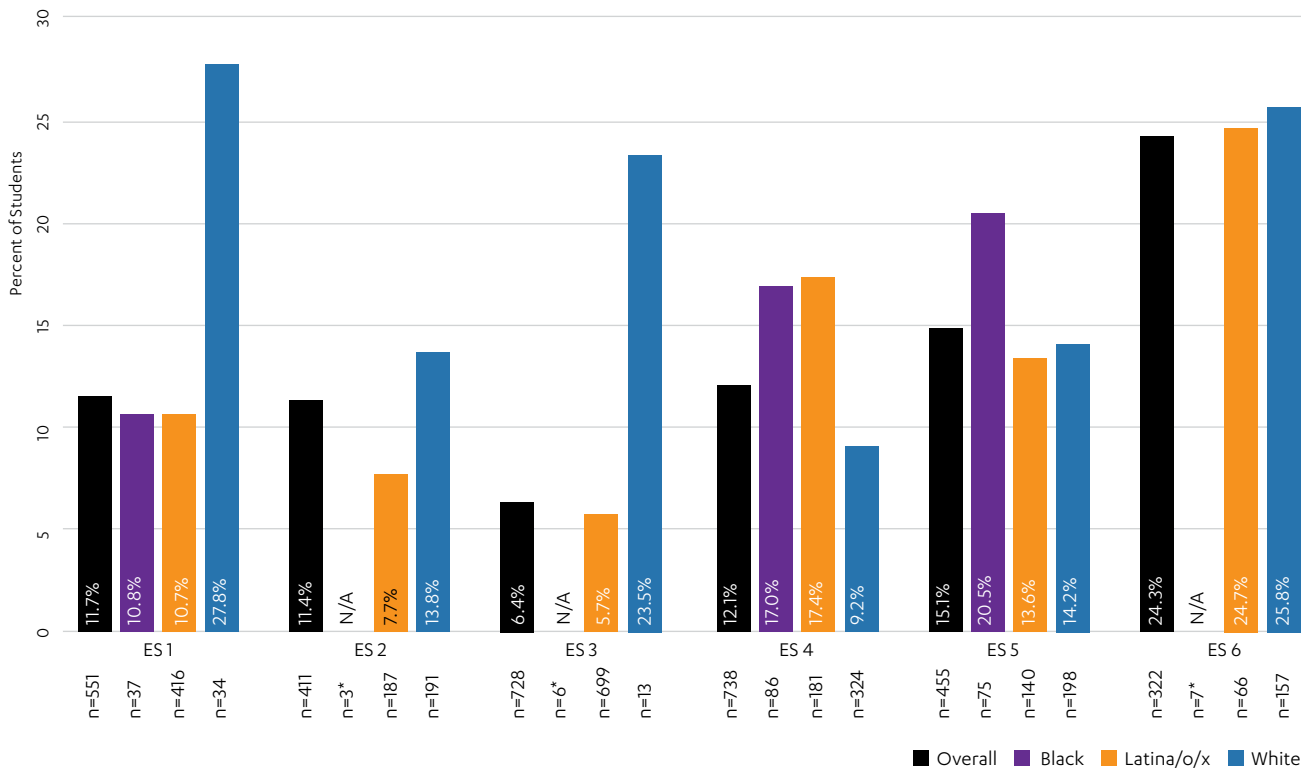
Note. Percentages are calculated by the CDE using cumulative enrollment. Cumulative enrollment numbers are not available for small groups, so for reference, provided under each school name is the census day total enrollment for that school. *Data not presented due to small group size.

At the participating secondary schools, chronic absenteeism rates ranged between 8.1% and 28.3% **(Figure 5)**. This rate was higher at all middle schools but one compared to that across the state (10.3% for Grades 7-8); and was similar to the state's (16.4%) at the participating high school. At 4 of 8 schools, Black and white students were more likely to be chronically absent than Latina/o/x students and than students overall. At two schools, Latina/o/x students were more likely to be chronically absent than other students.

Figure 5. Secondary School Chronic Absenteeism, 2018-2019

Note. Percentages are calculated by the CDE using cumulative enrollment. Cumulative enrollment numbers are not available for small groups, so for reference, provided under each school name is the census day total enrollment for that school. *Data not presented due to small group size.

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. At participating elementary schools, the percent of students meeting or exceeding ELA standards ranged between 19.6% and 47.8% (by comparison, the percent of students across the state was 49% - 52%, depending on grade level, for elementary school students) **(Figure 6)**.
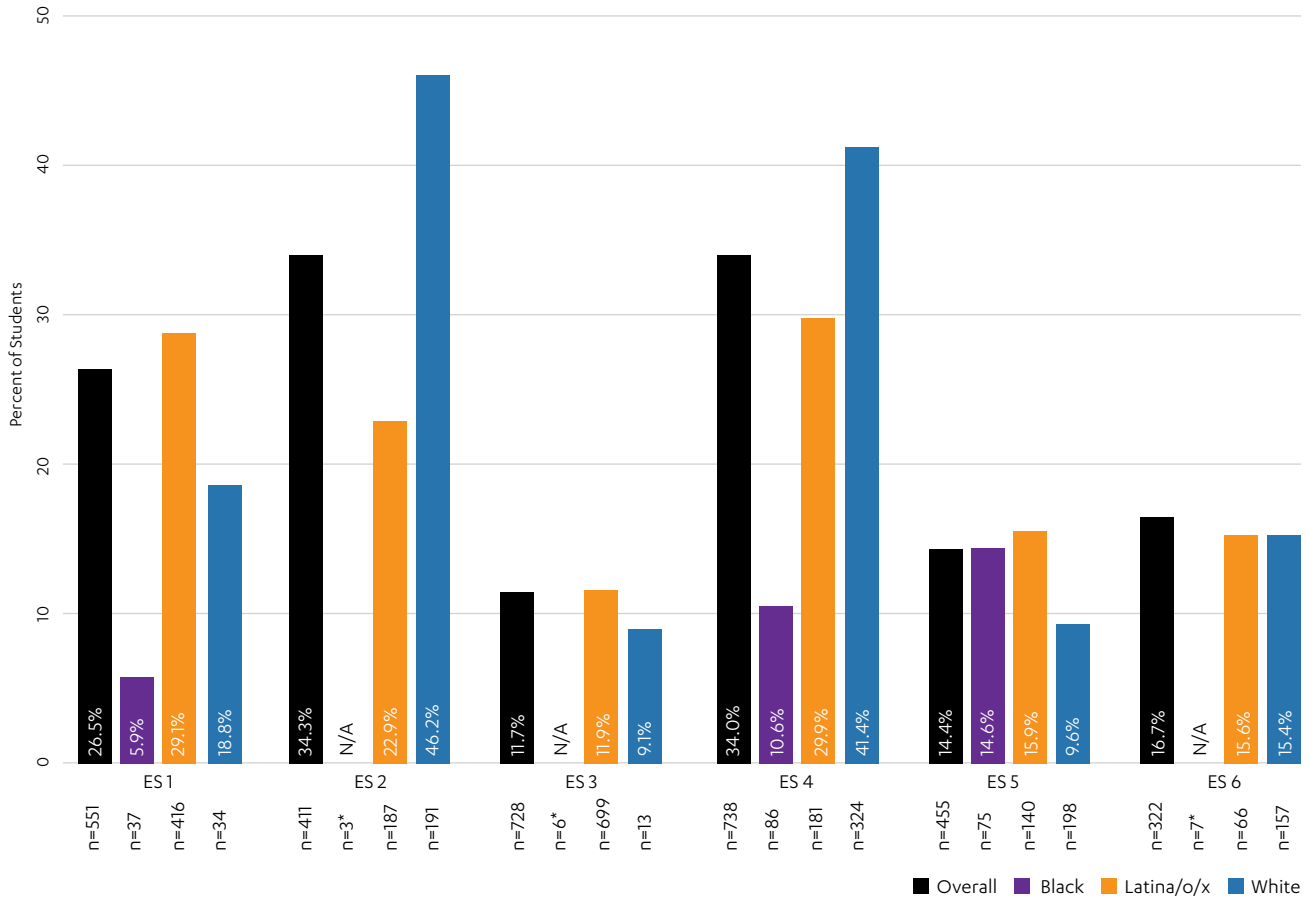
Figure 6. Elementary School Students Meeting or Exceeding Grade-Level SBAC English Language Arts Standards, 2018-2019
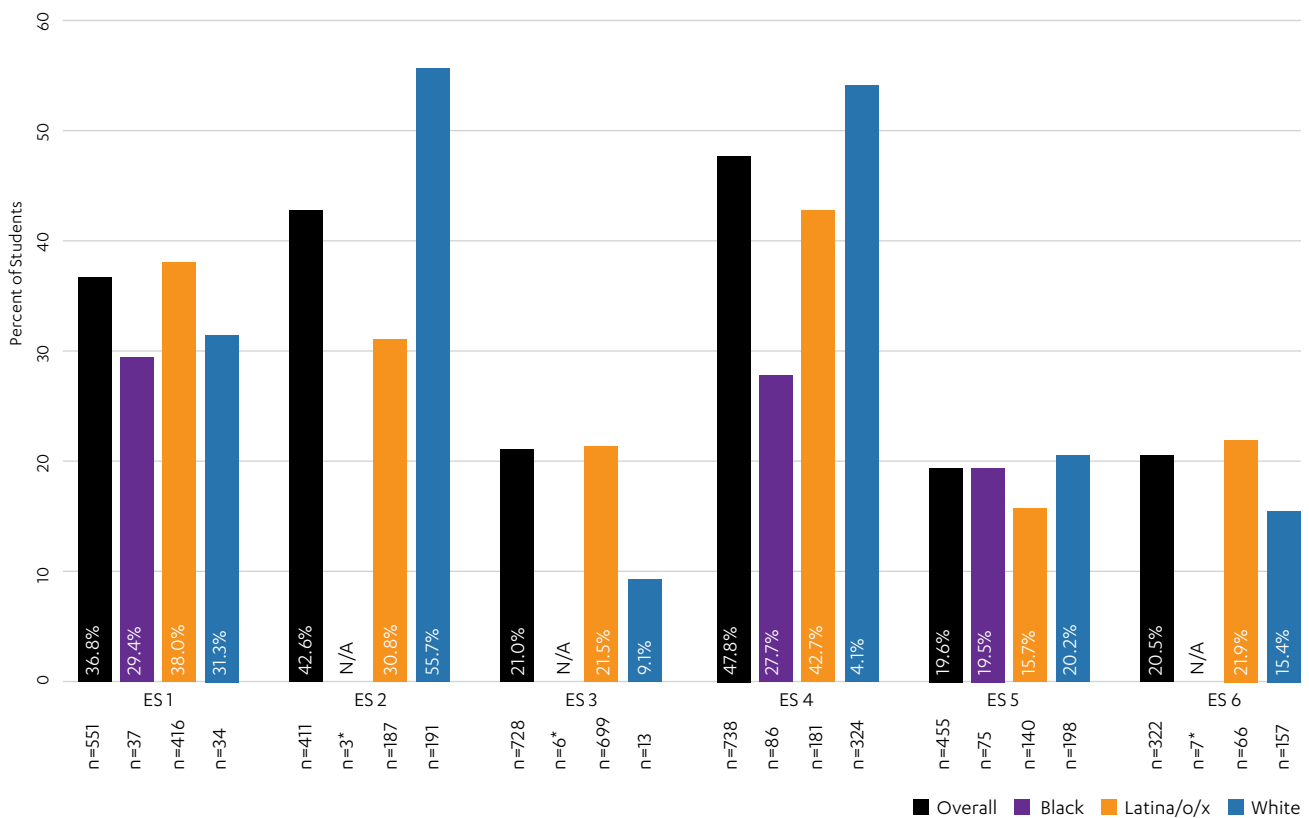
Note. Provided under each group name is the census day total enrollment for that group. SBAC = Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium. *Data not available due to small group size.

The percent of students meeting or exceeding math standards at the elementary schools ranged between 11.7% and 34.3% (by comparison, the percent of students across the state was 38% - 50%, depending on grade level, for elementary school students) **(Figure 7)**. Elementary Schools 2 and 4 showed the largest differences by race/ethnicity in both ELA and math performance, with white students much more likely to meet or exceed standards than Black and/or Latina/o/x students.

Figure 7. Elementary School Students Meeting or Exceeding Grade-Level SBAC Math Standards, 2018-2019

Note. Provided under each group name is the census day total enrollment for that group. SBAC = Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium. *Data not available due to small group size.

At participating middle schools, the percent of students meeting or exceeding state ELA standards ranged between 35.1% and 54% (by comparison, the percent of students across the state was 49% - 51%, depending on grade level, for Grade 7-8 students) **(Figure 8)**.

Figure 8. Secondary School Students Meeting or Exceeding Grade-Level SBAC English Language Arts Standards, 2018-2019
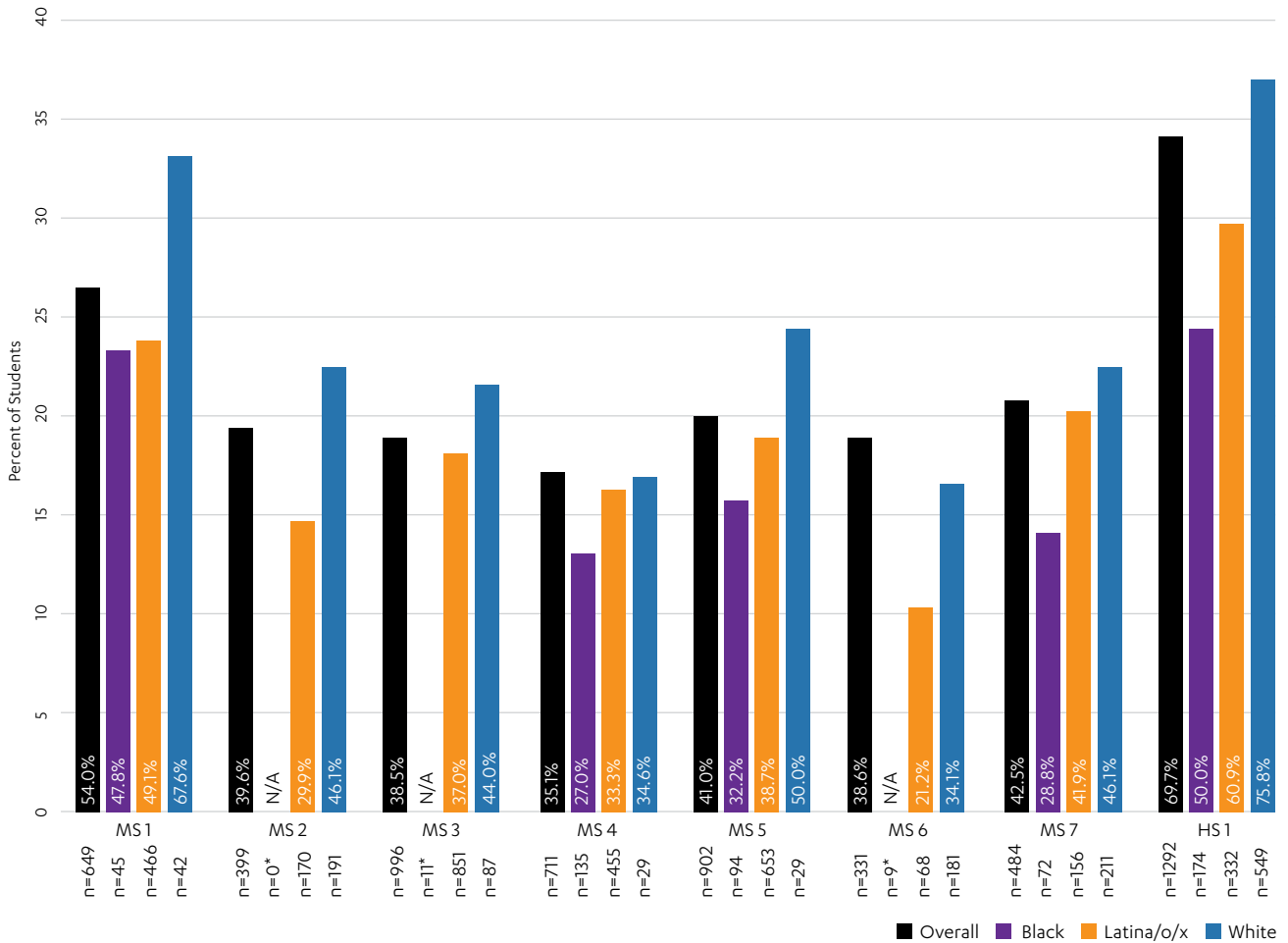
Note. Provided under each school name is the census day total enrollment for that school. SBAC = Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium. *Data not available due to small group size.

The percent of students meeting or exceeding state math standards at the middle schools ranged between 16.2% and 35.6% (by comparison, the percent of students across the state was 37% - 38%, depending on grade level, for Grade 7-8 students) **(Figure 9)**. At the participating high school, 69.7% (versus 57% across the state) of students met or exceeded ELA standards and 42.5% (versus 32% across the state) met or exceeded math standards.

Latina/o/x students were less likely to meet or exceed ELA and math standards than white students at 7 of the 8 secondary schools. Similarly, Black students were less likely to meet or exceed ELA and math standards than white students at all five secondary schools with available data (n > 10) for this group. The gap was larger for Black students than for Latina/o/x students at all five schools.

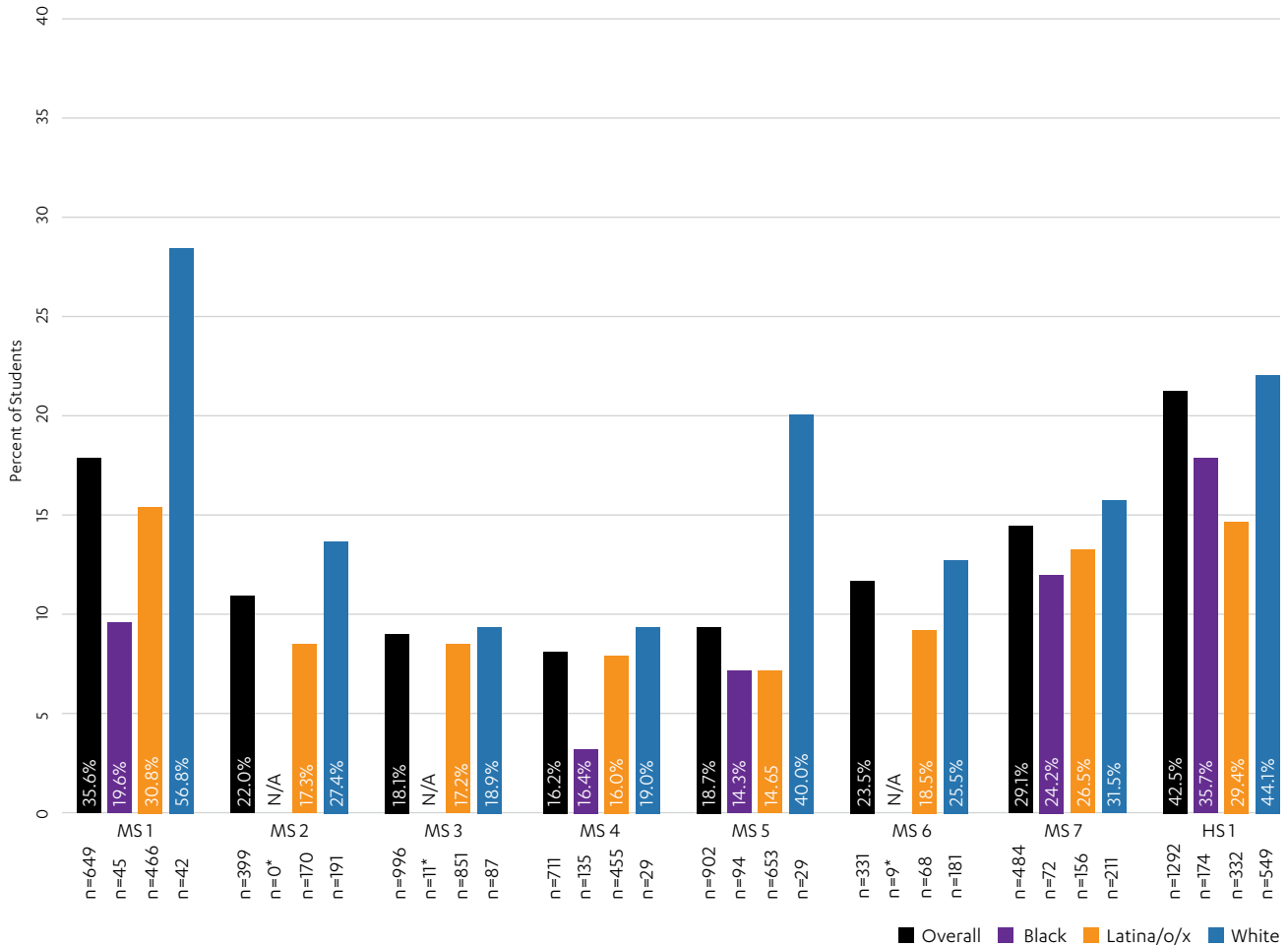**Figure 9.** Secondary School Students Meeting or Exceeding Grade-Level SBAC Math Standards, 2018-2019

Note. Provided under each school name is the census day total enrollment for that school. SBAC = Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium. *Data not available due to small group size.

SCHOOL PRINCIPAL AND COACH INTERVIEWS

METHOD

Researchers from the UCLA-CTS conducted interviews with participating Pilot Phase 2A school principals and coaches in May and June 2021 to understand CA MTSS implementation, schools' focus on race-based disparities, the coaching process, and the influence of the pandemic on implementation efforts. Specifically, the research questions guiding these interviews were the following:

1. **In what ways did school sites engage in CA MTSS implementation? (i.e., what processes, procedures, structures did they introduce or reinforce?)**
   a. **What benefits did school sites attribute to CA MTSS pilot participation?**
   b. **What challenges did school sites experience in implementing the CA MTSS framework?**
2. **How, if at all, did schools engage with the pilot project's focus of addressing ethnic/racial or cultural diversity and reducing discipline disparities?**
3. **In what ways did schools engage in the coaching process?**
4. **How did the COVID-19 pandemic influence the coach-school site collaboration specifically and the MTSS implementation more broadly?**

All 14 principals and 11 coaches were invited to participate. Of these, 9 principals and 8 coaches participated and were interviewed via Zoom video call (the COVID-19 pandemic likely impacted some prospective interviewees' ability to participate). The research team (four researchers) conducted 30-60 minute semi-structured interviews with each participant, using separate principal and coach interview protocols. Interviews were transcribed via Rev.com and analyzed using Dedoose software with an inductive analytic approach. The research team conducted

the analysis through a stepwise process: 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. The research team derived themes individually and collaboratively. Interview protocols and analyses were driven by the four main research questions.

FINDINGS

Results are presented below, organized by the first three research questions. Results of the fourth research question regarding the influence of the pandemic are embedded throughout the other results. The influence of the pandemic pervaded all aspects of project participation for school sites and coaches, and was, therefore, most coherently understood within the context of our other questions.

RESEARCH QUESTION 1

In what ways did school sites engage in MTSS implementation? (i.e., what processes, procedures, structures did they introduce or reinforce?)

Finding 1: Consistent coaching was an important resource for implementation efforts. The processes and procedures for coaching varied across school sites as a result of the pandemic, coach and staff turnovers, and, at times, unclear visions of CA MTSS implementation. In general, principals who reported consistent and positive collaboration with their coaches also reported more understanding and benefits of CA MTSS implementation. For instance, at school sites with more reported successful implementation, there was a clear schedule for meeting or communicating with coaches, a vision and process for CA MTSS, and a positive rapport between coaches and administrators. Principals shared positive statements such as,

"...our second coach has been more proactive in reaching out to us and helping lead us and guide us through different areas and keeping us on track a little bit more... My team has opted to work with [the coach] again next year." (Principal 30)

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In contrast, at school sites where the relationship between administrators and coaches was inconsistent, challenges in MTSS implementation were present. For instance, one principal reported that the lack of consistency was the biggest challenge for implementation. The principal stated that during the six months before being assigned a new coach, MTSS implementation was "very confusing" (Principal 33). Once they had a coach with whom to meet regularly, there was a noticeable improvement.

Many administrators also reported having questions and feeling overwhelmed with time constraints and CA MTSS content. In almost all cases, coaches were able to support administrators in these areas. Their consistent collaboration also helped to align ideas for the focus of the CA MTSS implementation. This remained true throughout the pandemic.

Finding 2: School site implementation teams played an important role in the CA MTSS pilot. However, the prioritization of implementation teams varied across school sites. A noticeable benefit of the implementation teams was that teams tended to have a clear understanding of the needs of the school community, and they were able to participate in the collaboration with the CA MTSS coach. For many schools, the vision, scope, and sequence for the CA MTSS Pilot were developed with the site implementation team. Coaches also supported the designing process and procedures for school site implementation teams. For example, at one school, a principal shared that the implementation team created on-campus "oversight" of MTSS and that the team was "making sure that all of the MTSS structures and all of this is fitting with that vision and is moving forward where we didn't have that before" (Principal 35).

Implementation teams played a significant part in the rollout of MTSS procedures and routines across school sites. Implementation barriers reported by principals included the amount of MTSS content, teacher buy-in, coaching, and time; as a response to some challenges, many schools had multiple implementation teams. For instance, schools reported teams for PBIS, MTSS, Intervention, SST, Guiding Coalitions, and more. One principal stated,

"I have an MTSS team and we meet on the overall MTSS process, and then we also have a PBIS team, which is separate. Some of the team members are the same. We have our SST team, which integrate[s] … some members

are on that, some aren't. So, we've got several different teams with different players involved." (Principal 30)

Perhaps due to the overwhelm created by some of the challenges mentioned above, it seems that understanding MTSS and then planning routines and procedures comprise the main role of implementation teams. While documentation and data use are essential components of MTSS, there was little reported evidence of teams reviewing data to inform and improve their practice. Instead, it seems that coaches or individual school site staff, such as behavior specialists, were responsible for data review. When data use was mentioned, it was often mentioned with no clear examples or details. However, COVID-19 did have an impact on data use at many schools due to the lack of office referrals and other measures while students were remote learning.

" …it looked different during the pandemic because we did not have students in front of us to do that regularly scheduled progress monitoring." (Coach 14)

Finding 3: PBIS supported the use of data and tiered student supports, but needed complementary programs. Many schools and implementation teams attempted to implement a data collection process to inform their practice, often through the use of PBIS teams and matrices, although widespread understanding of data collection and usage was inconsistent across school sites. Not only was PBIS used as a tool for data collection, but a few principals reported that their schools utilized PBIS matrices as the foundation for tier one and two interventions and supports for CA MTSS implementation. As one principal stated, "these matrices came up as far as 'before you send the kid out, do this, talk to them, ask them what's going on'" (Principal 16). Essentially, the matrices functioned as a flow chart — if a student shows X behavior, teachers, staff, and administration will respond by X intervention or support. Variations of this statement concerning the PBIS matrices were shared by many principals and coaches.

Principals and coaches recognized that PBIS alone is insufficient to support the diverse behavior needs of students, and more comprehensive support and interventions are needed. To address these needs, interviewees reported that school sites increased professional development to address staff mis/understandings of race, culture, and equity. Additionally, schools adopted social and emotional learning content and or the use of restorative practices. Details of these

increased practices were mentioned across interviews; however, coaches and principals limited explanation of these practices. Nevertheless, an awareness of the need for such practices was present.

What benefits did school sites attribute to CA MTSS pilot participation?

Finding 4: Principals reported gaining a sense of focus for their MTSS-related work. Many principals reported that the most important gain resulting from CA MTSS pilot program participation was a sense of focus and direction for their work related to student supports and school climate. In addition, participation lent various initiatives legitimacy as part of the larger CA MTSS framework (instead of, as one principal put it, "sneaking in" new initiatives), resulting in greater teacher buy-in. For example, one principal shared,

"I think we gained some direction. That was I think a big piece of it. The work that we have done has been really successful and really important, and we've got a trajectory, I think. Of course, it's not like we weren't doing stuff with PBIS and MTSS and all types of things, but I think having something that puts it all together into a package where you can see how it all flows together and that becomes something that's really guiding the school instead of little initiatives that we're doing, but an entire framework. And I think that the pilot process kind of brought that to the forefront and made it seem really clear to the staff and the community and even myself, so that we could really have that long-term sustainable plan and have it be uniform, which makes it more effective, right? Versus just little initiatives here and there that as soon as one person leaves the school they would probably just dissolve into nothing." (Principal 35)

Finding 5: Principals reported becoming aware of the need for a wider equity lens. Some principals reported that CA MTSS helped raise their awareness of the need to adopt a new, wider lens on equity, as well as the need to focus on culturally responsive instruction and addressing discipline disparities. For example, a principal shared,

"I think we've gained a lot. I think we've gained more of a wider perspective on culturally proficient instruction and relationships with students and staff, just on the activities that we started in [the 2019-20 academic year] that we're going to carry through for next school year. We've had a lot of learning in that respect." (Principal 31)

Finding 6: Principals reported valuing resources provided by coaches. Some principals reported that their implementation was greatly supported by the resources provided by their coaches. For example, some coaches supported principals with data monitoring, specific implementation strategies, and sometimes even with teacher professional development. For example, a principal shared,

"And now with the coach that we have now really focusing on our subgroups and the California dashboard and really setting some very specific and strategic, intentional, smart goals to move our school out of the orange or yellow in some of those areas for some of our subgroups." (Principal 31)

What challenges did school sites experience in implementing the CA MTSS framework?

Finding 7: Inconsistent coach-school relationships posed a challenge to implementation. For many principals, a challenge arose from not having a consistent relationship with a coach, especially during the first year. In many cases, principals conjectured that this inconsistency stemmed from the upheaval the pandemic caused in the education system, placing more demands on coaches in their other roles. Principals reported that having regular meetings with coaches during this time might have helped them prioritize MTSS implementation at a time when they were feeling overwhelmed by the switch to virtual instruction. In most of these cases, an eventual transition in coaches helped schools reengage in their MTSS work. Regarding pandemic-related disruptions to coaching, principals shared things like,

"So, we met probably monthly, it was hard to schedule and coordinate with our coach who then, … In the Fall of the pandemic, so September 2020 or August, I think the state pulled her in to do some COVID stuff. So then, really no coaching at all, until … we got assigned a new coach … I think it was March of 2021… So, we were really floating along, still trying to follow the tenants, still trying to do the work because it is so critical. I want our systems to be stronger and I want to be sure we're supporting all of our students…. So… Beginning in March, because we've had a weekly, a standing weekly meeting… It has been helpful to have the weekly check-in with the coach." (Principal 34)

Another principal shared the positive transition to a new coach,

"We have changed coaches during this time. Prior to the pandemic, we had met [with the first coach] in person once and then there was kind of sporadic communication, that would be I guess, in 2019, by phone. Then the pandemic started, really 2020, end of 2019, 2020, and I really didn't have any communication at all with them. It just stopped. We then had... There was a reforming of it. Our current coach is ... excellent. The last six months, we've met almost weekly. ... So now, we're pretty good as far as the number of times meeting. Really, to me, it feels like about six months of meeting prior to that, it was just very confusing." (Principal 33)

Finding 8: A lack of time to prioritize CA MTSS was an important challenge for principals. This included time to meet with coaches and with MTSS-related implementation teams (e.g., MTSS leadership team, PBIS team); and time to engage with and understand CA MTSS well enough to share with staff and to implement. Some principals reported that having a coach who consistently supported them to keep their focus on MTSS or who helped provide clear direction for engaging in implementation was (or would have been) helpful for overcoming this challenge. For example, a principal shared,

"We [principals] spend most of the day running around like chickens with our heads cut off, trying to figure out 10,000 different things. What would have been helpful previously, is for the coaches in the program to really understand that the persistence needed to catch up with us, and to force us to sit and think about MTSS. And if there were any massive barrier, right now, for me, in implementation of MTSS, there's lots of barriers, but a huge one's related to time, and related to just having, just the energy and the effort and place to make the time to do this is the hardest thing. So what would have been better? In the years previous--in 2020 and 2019--when the coaches kind of disappeared, they had to search us out. But I realized that the whole education industry was turned on its sphere." (Principal 33)

Some coaches also shared that finding time to work with principals was a challenge,

"I mean, of course, the demand that's on all of our plates over the last year and a half has been a challenge and it's time. And just the response of all the other things that we're tasked to do, and that I want to be able to make sure

that I am supportive and I'm that person that's helping to remove barriers." (Coach 14)

Finding 9: School staff burnout from the pandemic posed an important challenge for implementation. Principals and coaches reported that school staff were incredibly overwhelmed and burned out during the academic year because of the pandemic. Principals and coaches described teachers, specifically, as "drowning," "traumatized," and "running on adrenaline" the entire year. Some schools struggled with teacher shortages, at times because teachers were so exhausted that they could not make it to the virtual classroom. Principals scrambled in these cases to find substitutes or to even step into the teacher role themselves. Within this context, principals reported a lack of time for prioritizing MTSS, including not being able to ask teachers to engage in activities additional to their focus on curriculum and instruction. For example, principals and coaches shared things like,

"But just since I've come on, it's just, it sounds like it's even gotten worse to the stories of teachers being so burned out that they're not coming in. So, the principal is in classrooms, the superintendent is in classrooms because there just aren't enough teachers." (Coach 16)

"Teachers have been doing [their jobs] with all of this trauma going on in their lives, and in the communities all of this time during COVID. What's happened now is we're about to hit the end of this horrific COVID year, and teachers are done." (Principal 33)

"I think that the pandemic was a challenge. I mean, I just... It flat out was a challenge. I think, uh, and I don't think there's anything any of us could have done with that. I mean, the reality is school principals, specifically in leadership teams, were doing things and having to figure things out that they'd never had to do before." (Coach 12)

Finding 10: Gaining teacher buy-in for CA MTSS posed a challenge at some schools. At some schools, principals and coaches reported that they were mindful of gaining teacher buy-in for CA MTSS-related work. According to interviewees, strong leadership from principals was an important factor for increasing teacher buy-in for MTSS during this difficult school year, when the pandemic was exacerbating an already existing dearth of school resources. In addition, a few principals and coaches reported directly involving teachers in implementation efforts (e.g., including teachers in MTSS meetings to discuss culturally responsive pedagogy; teachers meeting

one-on-one with a coach through video calls). Finally, principals' and coaches' highlighting the big-picture nature of MTSS as a framework for organizing various initiatives helped with staff buy-in; staff could feel that there was a sense of consistency over time and across initiatives under the MTSS umbrella. Coaches and principals shared things like,

"[I tried to be] mindful of not this being another thing added to everyone's plates, that they're already drowning, and now here's one more thing for you to do kind of think--that being very intentional calling out, 'Here's the big picture. Here's where we're going to weave this in as part of what you're currently doing. This is a whole framework that we're implementing. … And so I've kinda taken that approach where I kinda do the 30,000 feet altitude zoom out to then zoom in to show them where each of these pieces are falling so that as they meet with the team, the teachers that are already drowning, saying, "Why do I have to carve out an hour to sit on this monthly team with…" that they know that they're part of the big picture work." (Coach 18)

"[With CA MTSS] it was easier for me to say, 'Hey, look, we're doing this and that's why we need to do it.' As opposed to, 'I want,' when I want to do it, I get the pushback but it's like, 'Look, all of these things align in the same direction, here's the reason we need it.' It was easier to get buy-in." (Principal 23)

RESEARCH QUESTION 2

How, if at all, did schools engage with the pilot project's focus of addressing ethnic/racial or cultural diversity and reducing discipline disparities?

Finding 11: The use of data was a step towards addressing discipline disparities, according to principals and coaches. Specifically, respondents discussed "looking deeply at data," and asking the question, "what is the data telling us?" Additionally, respondents discussed the use of discipline referrals, attendance, and suspension as sources of data that were used to engage conversation amongst staff about disparities. However, principals and coaches provided limited information regarding what these conversations looked like. There was limited information regarding how data were disaggregated to gain an understanding of disparities or what themes arose from "looking deeply" at data.

"I personally have spent lots of time looking at data related

to ethnic diversity, related to issues of discipline and ethnic diversity. So at the administrative level, we do a lot of that work. Do teachers have an awareness of that? No, they don't. They don't really spend a ton of time talking about it." (Principal 33)

Finding 12: Some schools focused on ethnic/racial or cultural diversity and reducing discipline disparities through professional development. Respondents discussed engaging in school-wide and district-wide professional development training centered around cultural responsiveness, restorative practices, and additional alternative discipline frameworks. For example, a principal reported,

"[Topics of ethnic racial or cultural diversity or disparities in student discipline] was a huge focus last school year. Yeah, we were looking deeply at that data from the previous school year. And we were progress monitoring that data and going to a series of workshops with teachers on culturally proficient instruction and then improving classroom management." (Principal 31)

However, at certain sites administrators reported a delicate balance between staff buy-in and discussing racial or ethnic disparities. For example, one coach reported,

"The principal kind of wants [a more cultural lens] to be the focus next year. But, she wants it to come from the team. We're hoping that, as we begin to start having conversations next year, that the team begins to focus in that direction. Her worry, if you will, is that, when you just come out and say, 'Oh, this year we're focusing on cultural relevance,' if the teachers don't have buy-in or even an understanding that that's needed, then a lot of times there's pushback and it goes nowhere. We're trying to figure out a way to navigate it in that direction…" (Coach 13)

Finding 13: Covid posed a barrier to discussions around ethnic/racial or cultural diversity and reducing discipline disparities. When asked about conversations regarding ethnic/racial or cultural diversity and reducing discipline disparities, many principals and coaches cited the Covid-19 pandemic as a barrier to these conversations. Principals reported placing their discussions around discipline disparities "on hold" during the past year due to the pandemic and discussed a lack of discipline data due to distance learning. They also shared that they refocused their attention on issues related to rurality or poverty during the past year due to the increased need for

access to technology resources at home. By shifting their attention to addressing equity issues related to access, sites were limited in their capacity to have meaningful conversations around ethnic/racial or cultural diversity and did not seem to discuss the intersections between poverty/access and race. Principals shared things like,

"Unfortunately, most of those topics [ethnic/racial/cultural diversity] come from looking at discipline data and looking at racially disproportionate data and things like that... So realistically recently in the pandemic not as much because we've had very little discipline data, I think a lot of schools have had that very beautiful luxury this last year, but we did have some of those discussions, but I feel they were centered a little bit more about issues of poverty or maybe geographic location because they came up more with our attendance re-engagement this year which would have been discussed with our MTSS team... Because those are the kids that we really felt like were underserved this year, you know, our kids that were not able to get internet access or didn't get great internet access." (Principal 35)

"We're in a community where the demographics have changed, but the dominant culture, majority culture, by a little bit, hasn't realized that it's changed. We're beginning those conversations. Conversations about equity, about inclusion. From an administrative point of view, they need to be at the center of what we're doing. This last year, we've just been in survival mode, but they need to be at the center of what we're doing, and it's a very harsh reality that we have to face as the demographics continue to change." (Principal 33)

RESEARCH QUESTION 3

In what ways did schools engage in the coaching process?

Finding 14: Coaches and principals had to adapt their communication as a result of the pandemic.
COVID-19 impacted how coaches and principals communicated during the academic year. Virtual methods of communication were essential during this time. Many coaches and principals managed to create a working schedule that held them accountable for maintaining a consistent, communicative relationship. Consistent communication allowed for a sustained system of accountability between the coach and principal, leading to implementation progress. For example, one coach shared,

"At first, it was hard to get them to engage with me

because I think they didn't understand why I was there or what I was doing, or what exactly we were supposed to be doing together. But then, once we were able to identify the area of confusion and separate out the different grant programs that they were participating in and how my role fit into that, then we hit the ground running. There were weekly email communications going back and forth. Then, we were able to meet via Google Meets every other week. Really put together a plan that we're going to be able to move forward with." (Coach 13)

In some cases, coaches and principals mentioned benefits of virtual compared to in-person communication. For example, video calls made it possible for one coach to conduct one-on-one meetings with teachers to support the school's MTSS-related work at the classroom level.

Finding 15: Expressions of care from coaches were central for trust and collaboration. Many coaches and principals highlighted the importance of coaches expressing care, listening, and understanding before more practical support such as providing resources or skills. Additionally, an essential component of coach-school site collaboration was a non-hierarchical relationship in which coaches met school sites' needs rather than imposing their approaches. This often involved coaches recognizing schools' challenges in implementation and their needs for time and support amidst competing demands and priorities. All of this bred trust and provided much-needed emotional support during an especially stressful year.

"For me it's, they don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. I needed to come in as somebody new with that lens of, I hear you, I want to know where you're at. I want to know what your priority is and I'm not here to tell you how to change things. That was an important relationship piece. So that coaching piece as I came in I'm like, I get it. You're burning the candle at both ends of the wick." (Coach 17)

"And [our coach is] so patient. I would say then other relationships, coaching relationships, that rigidity wouldn't be good, or has been a problem for me, so I think what has been beneficial is the flexibility and being able to pivot and understand that there's so much going on here." (Principal 22)

In turn, the rapport and trust developed between coaches and principals was important for sustaining the collaborative relationship. For example, principals and coaches shared things like,

"I think that it's been a really unique experience. Like I said earlier, I think that getting paired with [our coach] for our school was really positive. I think that having the right coaches with the right school is a big success piece for us. And I think that that's always a really important thing to consider when you're doing any kind of coaching model." (Principal 35)

"I was going to say credibility too, that they know the work that we're doing is going to turn around their data points and ultimately help their entire system. I think that's helpful for our relationship. … I think a coach needs to be approachable and be willing to meet the schools and admin where they're at, but also have the ability to push them to the next level." (Coach 18)

Finding 16: Coach familiarity with geographic area was important for the coaching relationship. Coaches brought a variety of experiences and expertise to their work with school sites. An important aspect of this background was familiarity with a geographic area/ community. Both coaches and principals reported on the value of coaches being able to provide personalized support to their designated school sites when they held prior experience working with schools situated in similar geographical regions and communities. Principals and coaches shared things like,

"So the coach we have now is from [the area where the school is located]… they've worked with … schools nearby. So they know the area and they know the school systems here. … I think that's more effective than someone that's in an entirely different county, city, who of course have their own experiences and knowledge and wisdom. But it's a little different when the person you're talking to can say, 'I worked at a school 20 miles from here, with the same demographics and we did this there.'" (Principal 31)

"And the pandemic, to tell you the truth, I've never met [the school staff] in person. There's a lot to be said about building relationship live, in person, and seeing the way a school functions and being able to see how kids interact and hear what learning sounds like and looks like in a classroom. The pandemic has been a barrier in that way as well. Plus, they're [in a distant county]." (Coach 13)

TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES: SUPPLEMENTAL RETROSPECTIVE FOCUS GROUP ANALYSES

Given the strong theme we observed around teacher buy-in, we wanted to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges teachers faced from the perspective of teachers themselves, not just those of administrators and coaches.

Because of the challenges of the 2020-21 school year due to the pandemic, we were not able to interview teachers. Thus, we decided to re-analyze in depth some of our data from the first year of the pilot program, which included school staff (including teachers) focus groups, attending to challenges reported by teachers.

During Winter 2020, UCLA CTS researchers conducted site visits to each of the 14 participating school sites. Each visit included an interview with administrators and a focus group of school staff (i.e., teachers, MTSS coordinators, other support staff, at times administrators). Questions focused on processes, successes, and challenges related to CA MTSS implementation (general findings are reported in a Baseline Data Summary shared on UCLA-CTS's website).

For the present research, two researchers re-analyzed focus group transcripts from three elementary schools and three middle schools. These data represented the focus groups with the largest numbers of teacher participants. Across the six schools, 27 teachers and support staff participated. Analyses were conducted using Dedoose software and an inductive analytic approach.

RETROSPECTIVE FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

Finding 1: According to teachers, collaborative support staff were essential for MTSS implementation. Many teachers reported that school support personnel, such as student aides, mentors, teachers on special assignment (TOSAs), or school counselors, are an essential part of successful MTSS implementation. This was often mentioned in conjunction with statements about positive staff collaboration along with clear guidance of staff roles in MTSS implementation. One counselor stated,

"I think it's just the collaboration between all of us and how we're all on the same page and just trying to get us to this place where we all have this buy-in now. And it's not just 'well, you do it.' Now it's, they collaborate with me, or she'll tell me, 'oh, if you can work on this with my students at Tier 1 level, and then can you take a group of students like I did this morning, and do it and then I have her [student] individually.' Now we're all... they're giving me things so that we can all work together to now not have you guys feel so, 'oh my God, I have 36 students and how am I going to do it?' We're now, we're just kind of like a whole team."

This statement was supported by teachers in the focus group, and it was consistent across school sites where successful collaboration occurred. Support staff at a different school shared that they regularly discuss how to support students and collaborate with teachers individually and as teaching teams. Speaking highly about the school's process for collaboration, one school counselor stated,

"[Another staff member] and I meet regularly for attendance. To start looking at those reports and saying, 'Who do we need to start looking at for upcoming?' Just so that we're prepared for that. And then get all that legwork and back work done. Talking to the teachers."

Schools without consistent support staff frequently shared challenges of MTSS implementation for teachers, stating that the program is overwhelming for teachers to carry out on their own. In a focus group, two teachers shared,

Teacher 1: *"Right now, they keep saying, 'Oh, well we gave you a PBIS-IA.' One, for three hours. Do you understand that is [only] one person? We have 30 problem behaviors. How many ways can you divide one person? You can't. It's not physically possible."*

Teacher 2: *"We have a psychologist who's here for half his*

time, but...

Teacher 1: *"He's always working on... the evaluations."*

A special education teacher made similar comments with regard to meeting students' needs,

"It's just a variety that they have. And I have tremendous empathy for that. But, I feel like the students who get referred a lot more are because there's either avoidance, or they've learned this behavior for so long in elementary school there's no one here to stop it. And even like... our students who are in the resource setting, they're in general ed all the time. And some of them hardly ever see... I think there are a few of them that never see their case manager. Their case manager never has an opportunity to work with them. And that's a challenge."

Often, it seemed as though teacher buy-in to MTSS implementation was not related to teachers' personal perceptions of the program, but rather due to burnout from consistent lack of staffing, time constraints, and overwhelming content. Teachers shared that MTSS protocols are time-consuming, and often all for naught, when they refer students for additional supports, yet no supports or support staff are available.

"Now we can't even agree with the forms that we're pulling out because it's too much work. So there is each fault... Some teachers decide to do their own thing, so we don't really feel that connected even though we meet almost every day."

Furthermore, even schools with support staff frequently reported overwhelming caseloads. Another teacher stated,

"I think we need more people. I think when it comes down to it, really, is just people because we have so many kids who need attention and want attention and deserve attention and clearly they're getting it nowhere but here. But we only have a finite amount of people and at any given time, we could have anywhere from three to seventeen kids blowing up... That was it and sometimes she has a three hour IA and usually when they blow up, that IA is not here."

A counselor at a different school shared something similar,

"I'm supposed to be doing academic support for kindergarten through second grade and English for all of those and math only in second grade but there's just no way I could do that and do everything else I'm

also tasked with doing, which is supporting attendance throughout the school, behavior of kindergarten through second grade. That's not even getting to social emotional learning."

In contrast, a focus group that explicitly stated improved buy-in reported having more staff and consistent collaboration as one of the reasons. One counselor stated,

"So I'm very much involved in PBIS, so I know what's kind of in place. So for me, I think what we do really well is kind of, the little things that everybody else has said, is that I think that the collaboration we have, how there's been a lot of buy-in that there hadn't necessarily been before, a lot of the support, having more staff..."

Overall, focus groups revealed that teachers and staff across all school sites are aware of MTSS and the protocols for implementation. Teachers and staff also have a keen understanding that students, staff, and the broader school community are in need of support at individual and district levels. There is some disparity among focus groups in regards to why students and the broader community may need support, or as to why MTSS is not operating as smoothly as desired; however, a consistent theme of positive school site collaboration, clarified roles and responsibilities, and additional support staff and resources were consistently highlighted throughout focus groups as a key to the program's success.

Finding 2: Teachers reported being overwhelmed with out-of-school factors affecting student behavior.
Many teachers across elementary and middle schools expressed beliefs that external factors such as family, social inequity, and social media created challenging student behaviors. Often, teachers felt that these factors were culturally and historically new, creating student behavior that was more challenging than ever before.

Several teachers reported believing that their students did not receive adequate support in the home, either because parents were not attentive because of their own struggles or because parenting had become too permissive. For example,

"Because homes have changed so much, kids don't get the love and the acceptance and help with homework and all that stuff at home anymore. They just, they come in, and they just need everything. They need the social emotional, they need the food." (Teacher)

"And then the other one is just a lack of... It's not... Well,

it is respect, but it's more than just respect. I feel like we have a lot of students who have never been taught themselves. It's hard to criticize a student who nobody's ever taken the time to teach them, 'you don't speak to adults like that.' They see the adults in their lives speak to each other like that, so they think it's okay to come to a classroom and speak to us like that. … When I first started teaching, we were teachers. But now I feel like there's this… I would break it down… maybe I'm 50% teacher, 35% social worker, and like 15% of it feels like parenting, like I'm parenting these kids. Because nobody else is parenting them." (Teacher, Middle School)

Some teachers saw challenging student behaviors as exacerbated by students' exposure to social media. For example, teachers expressed beliefs that social media modeled behaviors the teachers found to be disrespectful, made it difficult for students to be patient, and contributed to students' seeking attention in the classroom.

"Another thing that I think is different today is, I see students with less… They have fewer coping strategies. Many students lack the ability, if they do get upset, or they get triggered by something, they lack the ability to calm themselves. So it's zero to 90 in a split second, just the fuses. And I don't know where that comes from. We live in a culture where there's a lot of instant gratification, social media, and technology I think has sort of begun to breed that in people." (Teacher, Middle School)

"I think definitely social media. I think students, children today are being able to guide themselves on social media. They are not necessarily having the restrictions around them. … but I feel like TikTok is socially changing them to think some things are okay and some things are not okay. …And some of [the TikTok videos] will show disrespect, and they're kind of funny in a way, so the kids get used to laughing at those things that maybe are disrespectful. But what I see in my classroom, I have a lot of great students that come to school to learn, and they're doing great. … I have some students that come to school, and they see an audience. And so, they're needing attention for whatever reason, they're needing some kind of support or approval. And so, the classroom becomes their audience." (Teacher, Middle School)

A few teachers spoke to the work educators could engage in to better understand their students' lives outside of school and to better support their students.

"No, that was a conversation that we've had, that most of us don't even know where our kids are, where they're living. We don't know, really, what they're facing. We just see the impact of it. And I think that's one of the things that … we're ignorant to it. So we don't fully know. We're not equipped enough to really support them in that. And that's something we've talked about as a step that we need to work on." (Teacher)

"Gosh, if we could give them something to be successful at. … But these kids that can't read are being put, and they just, internally, they probably feel so stupid. And it's such a disservice to not build them up where they can feel what they deserve to feel. They can't feel it at home, because the parents don't know how. We should be educators, we should be educated on how to do that." (Teacher)

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CALIFORNIA MTSS

CONCLUSIONS

Analysis of Year 2 interview data with school site administrators and CA MTSS pilot project coaches shows that schools were successful in some of their implementation efforts, even as they faced challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our re-analysis of Year 1 school staff focus group data gave us insight into teachers' challenges with implementation and their possible solutions. Based on our findings, we offer six suggestions for schools to consider as they work to implement an MTSS framework.

Working consistently with an outside coach, while establishing school site teams, can aid implementation efforts. Coaches helped schools stay engaged in the implementation process, even when that process was slowed by pandemic-related challenges. Coaches provided a sense of focus and direction, resources, and often a caring and collaborative relationship. Coaches familiar with the geographic and cultural context of the school were especially helpful to school administrators. In addition, establishing school site teams composed of staff members who were intimately familiar with the school was an important complement to administrators' work with outside coaches.

Having support staff and team collaboration across the school site can support successful MTSS implementation. Schools with ample support staff — counselors, behavior specialists, instructional aides, TOSAs, and more — consistently reported feeling more successful with MTSS implementation. In addition, schools with implementation teams that were inclusive of support staff, and with delegated time for implementation teams to meet, reported higher levels of understanding of MTSS and implementation. A key factor to this success is the delegation of roles and responsibilities, consistent meeting times, and assigning a staff member(s) to disseminate summaries of team findings and discussions to other non-attending staff members in the school community.

Attending to school staff's social-emotional and practical needs may help lessen staff burnout and support schoolwide adoption of components of the CA MTSS framework. Administrators and coaches reported that teachers experienced high burnout and that

teacher buy-in was a barrier for CA MTSS implementation. Our re-analysis of Participation Year 1 teacher focus group data suggested that teachers struggled with MTSS implementation when their schools lacked the support staff necessary to provide students with necessary supports. Teachers also expressed that they appreciated opportunities to collaborate with colleagues, including support staff, to find solutions to challenges with students. Creating opportunities for collaboration, mutual support, and explicit social-emotional support could help teachers as their schools work to implement the CA MTSS framework. Social-emotional support may be especially important as schools transition back to in-person instruction and continue to experience pandemic-related challenges and burnout.

Bringing an explicit focus to ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity at the school could help schools address race-based inequities. School administrators credited participating in the CA MTSS pilot project with helping them gain an awareness of a need to bring a racial/ethnic and cultural lens to their work. Yet, most sites did not seem to engage consistently in work to address inequities that were present in their pre-CA MTSS pilot participation (2018-19) suspension and achievement data (see Figures 2, 3, 6, and 7). Coaching and professional development aimed at inspecting data to understand disparities and adopting approaches that explicitly address such disparities (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) are essential components of culturally conscious implementation of MTSS (Gregory et al, 2017; Welsh & Little, 2018).

Supporting teachers' approach to student behavior through professional development may help teacher engagement with alternative discipline approaches, and with MTSS more broadly. In our re-analysis of Participation Year 1 teacher focus group data, many

teachers expressed beliefs that external factors such as family, social inequity, and social media created challenging student behaviors. Such beliefs may pose a barrier to adopting alternative approaches to discipline. Professional development opportunities to support teachers in building positive relationships with students and families and an asset-based mindset may aid in school-wide MTSS adoption.

Attending to the continuing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on students and teachers will be imperative as schools continue to pursue CA MTSS implementation. The pandemic posed a number of barriers to school staff as they worked to implement CA MTSS, including a lack of time and teacher burnout. Awareness of these barriers should help contextualize the pace of implementing a school-level multi-tiered system of support, which even during more typical times is a years-long process (Fixsen et al., 2005). In addition, implementing an MTSS inclusive of tiered social-emotional, behavioral, and academic supports may be vital as schools navigate a return to in-person instruction after a long hiatus and a time of stress and trauma for many students.

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