

Funding for Multi-Tiered System of Supports Implementation

Summary of Interview Findings with Minnesota Schools

Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) collaborated with Wilder Research to conduct interviews with schools to understand how schools use their existing funding in order to sustain Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) implementation. Information on MDE's MTSS is included at the end of this summary.

MDE identified 21 schools to invite to participate in the voluntary interviews. These schools have been implementing MTSS for at least six years, participating in the annual Minnesota MTSS implementation surveys, and have made gains in one or more target academic areas of improvement (e.g., student reading proficiency, math proficiency, and graduation rate). They included small and large schools in the Twin Cities' metro area and greater Minnesota.

Wilder Research sent an email invitation to the school principals. They could choose to have their MTSS team members in the interview. In addition, they were told that an MDE MTSS specialist would join the interview to hear firsthand from the school teams about their successes and challenges with funding their MTSS implementation, and supports they might need from MDE. Wilder completed interviews with 12 school teams in mid-March through early May 2021. Additionally, one school sent their responses via email.

Findings from the interviews are presented by themes. Selected interviewees' comments are included to illustrate the themes; they are slightly modified for clarity. Due to the small number of schools in the interviews, findings are not disaggregated by school characteristics.

Findings

School teams reported that their primary motivation to meet all their students' academic and social and emotional needs influence the way they implement the MTSS framework and allocate school funds, staffing, and other resources to support it.

MTSS is my number one [priority] that has to be in place because every child deserves what they need. Figuring out where your students are, what they need, and giving them targeted instruction. That is the key. All the other stuff can fall away but this and core instruction need to be done. You do these two pieces and your students are going to achieve.

School teams were asked to describe how they implemented each of the key features of MTSS and how they funded them. These critical features of MTSS framework included:

- Dedicated team(s) that coordinate their MTSS implementation
- Content experts or access to experts who can translate research into practice in areas such as reading, math, social and emotional learning or behavior
- Access to assessments and data that include universal screening, progress monitoring, fidelity implementation, and other quantitative and qualitative data that can be disaggregated by student groups to produce meaningful and culturally relevant information
- Access to timely or usable data to inform instruction and interventions for students
- Resources and materials for curriculum and instruction of all tiers of MTSS that are aligned to state standards and supported by research evidence
- Time for staff (teachers, coaches, problem-solving teams, leadership teams) to attend MTSS framework training and to work collaboratively to implement MTSS (e.g., discussing student data and instruction, supporting teachers and monitoring classroom instruction, monitoring and adjusting instructional supports and school-wide supports for MTSS implementation)
- Time for engaging and collaborating with families, caregivers, and communities in order to improve student outcomes and education systems

Typically, schools reported using the general fund to implement their MTSS framework.

Primarily, it comes from the general fund.

Fund 01 is a source that can be used for everything and is a way to fund MTSS.

While all schools reported implementing the key MTSS features using the general fund, there are some variations in schools' structures and other factors that influence how the fund is used or augmented with other funds. These factors include the composition of the school leadership and implementation teams; roles of and supports from school districts; and availability of other funding sources, including from state and federal sources, community members, and partner organizations. The size of the school or district and composition of the student population were also mentioned by some interviewees as aspects that affect the allocation of their funding.

Schools described the different staff roles that made up their coordinating and implementation teams. The composition, number, and size of the team appeared to vary depending on the school needs. Some schools also mentioned having school district staff in their team. Along with other funding available to the individual schools, these resulted in a variety of ways schools funded their MTSS teams.

The school's Positive Intervention Team (PIT), which is a Tier 3 problem-solving team looks at the whole MTSS system in the school building: where best to allocate resources, time, and focus. Grade and team level representatives, advanced academics, assistant principal, MTSS consultant/school psychologist, counselors, and district special education assessment are part of PIT. The funding primarily comes from general fund, and some parts come from Title IV and Q Comp. The consultant/school psychologist and special education assessment coordinator are funded by the district.

That is my full-time role. I also have the role of test coordinator but primarily, my time is spent coordinating MTSS. [MTSS coordinator] also does intervention and supporting that role [in addition to Fund 01] can come from Title I and Compensatory Fund because it funds reading and math interventions.

Our MTSS team consists of a behavior team and an academic team. We have our school psychologist is on both and then we have a special education teacher, a classroom teacher, and our interventionist for our academic piece. So we have four to five people on our team for our academic and behavioral, and each team meets every other week. And of course, [the principal] is on both of those. We use general fund, and ADSIS for reading and Title I for math teachers who are part of the academic team.

Our teams come under the umbrella of Administrative Dean and myself [principal]. The Administrative Dean facilitates the weekly meetings with the school psychologist, the special education coordinator for the building, intercultural specialist, one primary teacher and one intermediate teacher. The speech and occupational therapist come as needed. The funding of it comes from ADSIS as well as literacy dollars [Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy].

Staff from small district schools may have multiple roles, serving both the district and school as one team.

There isn't a separate funding source for coordination. A theme you will hear a lot from a school district of just over 1000 students is that all of us wear multiple hats. Everybody on our team is part of the district. We are a district of a K-7 building and a high school building. That is the entire district. What we are doing here is the district plan. MTSS coordination is part of what all of us are doing, as part of our weekly routine. The funding would come out of general funding for most part.

Regardless the structures of the teams, all school teams described that coordination and implementation of the MTSS framework is embedded into their jobs, and thus, paid by staff contracts. Staff teams routinely meet to work on it and some specifically mentioned that MTSS is part of their school development plans.

In terms of monitoring the broader MTSS process, we do that through our Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) where we talk about our school improvement plans, what goals we have, and where we want to improve throughout the school year. It's part of the [staff] contracts. I actually think they get some Q Comp money too, as a matter of fact, to be on ILT. Not much but a little bit.

Administrative Dean facilitates the weekly meetings. And on that team, you would find our school psychologist, the special education coordinator for the building, intercultural specialist, one primary teacher and one intermediate teacher. The speech teacher, occupational therapists, school nurse, English Language teachers will come as needed. We run that by agenda; there is weekly agenda.

Most school teams described having positive working relationships with their district leaders. They also described receiving a variety of resources and support from the district, but the school teams were often unclear about the sources of district's funding.

All school teams mentioned that the district selected and purchased their assessment systems and tools (e.g., FastBridge, STAR, DIBELS, NWEA, aimswebPlus). A few schools also added that there was flexibility in that they could supplement or replace some of the district's assessments with other assessments that worked better for their school.

All assessments are determined by the district. It's important that we have consistency in assessments between schools within the district because we have students moving between buildings.

We use what the district has, but if it does not work for us, we figure something else and sometimes the district might start using the assessments [that we chose]. We used Compensatory and Integration Funds before receiving district's supports.

District has an assessment budget, but I am not sure which source of funding they utilize.

In addition to having their internal content experts, school teams most often mentioned receiving supports of math and reading coaches from their district. Some also mentioned receiving content-expert supports on social and emotional learning and behaviors topics.

[Our school MTSS coordinator's work] is about translating research into practice. We also have a literacy and math coach from the district who fills the roles of content experts who can translate research into practice for us. I am not sure what funds the district uses to that. My guess is that they use Title I and Compensatory Funds.

We have a district elementary reading coach and we have a coach for social and emotional, because there's a team [in the district] that works in that area. The district's teaching and learning department funding [that funded the coaches] comes out of general fund and probably a combination with targeted services dollars.

Our district's and school's MTSS coaches are paid through Q Comp.

I am a school psychologist and special education coordinator, hired by the district through a special education cooperative. One-third of my time is to support MTSS, mostly at a consultative level at each school building. I am not sure where the funding comes from.

School teams also reported that their district provided support in getting them curriculum and instruction materials and helped fund all or part of the materials.

We have plenty of resources for teaching our curriculum. Also, our school uses the ARC Bookshelf which is a great reading supplement to what we use as a district; we also use Benchmark Reading. They are paid mostly by the district expenditure. Some of the software components [that come with the materials] are paid through our building's Compensatory Fund.

They're a combination of school funds and district funds. Some of it come from the literacy dollars that we get, others come out of [district's] teaching and learning department.

Mostly from Title I and Compensatory Funds. We can use a very little amount of Fund 01 as well.

There is the district's general fund dollars that pay for the curriculum. We also have sort of a separate pot of general fund money that we call MTSS funding. We use that to pay for the intervention tools. We just recently started using that to pay for some trainings.

During their working time and as part of their responsibilities, teachers, interventionists, and other specialists routinely meet to collaborate, be part of Professional Learning Communities (PLC), and receive training. Q Comp and school's professional development funds were often mentioned by school teams as additional source of funding.

Whenever we have professional development days, for example before the school year starts or throughout the school year, MTSS is always a part of those professional development days. During a regular contracted day is when we would have those MTSS meetings. General fund or Fund I is how teachers are funded, or we can buy teachers' time out of referendum funds.

The teachers are doing progress monitoring and the intervention teachers are doing the skills check. We also have built in, dedicated time every week to review that data as a collaborative team. We have a student support team where students go to if they are not showing growth or inadequate growth. This is part of teachers' contracts.

Q Comp would pay our PLCs.

If there's an intervention that we would like to use, I [the principal] can use PD funds to train my staff to use those interventions. Like right now, we're doing a building-wide restorative practices training. So I'm paying for that out of PD funds; the district equity department is helping us out by providing the presenter.

In years past, we attended Response to Intervention training to learn how to be responsive and learned the system or framework in order to do that. We've come a long way since we did that. We also have plenty of professional developmental dollars to fill the needs of teachers and teams that make decisions and continue to build our knowledge base. Teachers receive training in implementing interventions, monitoring data, doing skills check, and how all of those are working together.

To engage parents and communities, school teams worked with their Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and site council. They use Title I funding to involve parents in school activities for their children. Some schools mentioned that their community partners and parents also volunteered and contributed funding for their school's parent and community activities.

We have a site council, including families in the council that are really supporting us. They worked on the budget committee and really supported us in that way. Our PTA is also very involved. Those are the two big pieces in terms of community and family involvement. We also have a parent liaison through Title I.

Significant arm of Title dollars are parent involvement funds. We do all of our core engagement efforts from parent-teacher conferences to parent phone calls and meetings [using the funds]. And as part of our parent involvement plan, we would meet with kids who are receiving additional services and instructions and would host parent meetings. [The goal is] for parents to have the skills so that they can extend learning for their kids, which is the point of the parent involvement funds.

I have not used any of our building funds for this. The district paid for this stuff this year. When I organize this, I get people who will do it for free – like community professionals (doctor, the county). They talk about health trends with kids, for example. They are a service that we tap into to educate our community.

When asked how schools navigate funding options, the school teams described their district provided necessary guidance. Related to it, when schools faced budget cuts or needed funding for additional interventions, they relied on the school district's support as well as their own experience in adjusting staffing and resources and getting additional funding.

The executive director of our business services is a huge part of it – knows our funding and sources that are available to us. We try to be creative and efficient with how we use funds for the best outcomes for kids.

We are hustling to find any money to help kids. Some is very predictable. [District assessment coordinator who was in the school team] worked hard on renewing our ADSIS application this year. That has its timeline and due dates that we plan for and have become accustomed to being part of our school at this time. Other times we hear about an opportunity like Math Corps, a low cost way to deliver a very effective and important service to a number of our kids. We have to always try to be open to opportunities that come up. We have to discern between possible strings attached to our building by taking on money that competes with our own agenda or aligns with our agenda. Math Corps is a perfect example – we have time built in our schedule and bring Corps members in to provide Tier 2 math interventions.

Sometimes you have a structure that you know you can do and it works nicely. I think of our general education paraprofessional who has provided us flexibility that if we have some restrictions based on funding, she is a nice go between to get the kids what they need.

The biggest thing we end up doing with that is prioritize. We [principal and district coordinator] have meetings and go through some of these things. We have to look at the Title I budget, and what it will look like for the next year. That is tricky on the Title I side because typically we are not seeing numbers until the summer. At that point, hopefully most of our staffing decisions are wrapped up. That timeline is a bit tricky sometimes. When we look at funding and the pieces that cost money outside of what we were already going to be spending for (i.e. aimswebPlus, NWEA assessments, materials, trainings we want to send people to or bring in). We look at all of those pieces, what they will cost and what we will get out of that, what is optional and what is necessary, to keep going forward. There is not a highly organized mechanism for it. We just sit and budget, and rank how much we value the tools we do have. We also look at our past numbers to guess what our future numbers are going to be.

I think that we get the financial support that the district can afford out of the teaching and learning department. So oftentimes we might say that we are really looking for X, Y, Z interventions. They will try to find the dollars that match to that, or they will try to find resources for us.

We have an ADSIS-funded position and an intervention-funded position in our building. The intervention-funded person could potentially be a little more flexible with the who, what, where, when and why of a child [is served] as opposed to the ADSIS-funded person. So, it's being sensitive about where the money is going or allocated for the right work or to do the right things and being very clear to the staff. I think that honors the work that those teachers and educators are trying to do, knowing that we're in a flexible system, but at the same time, when you also try to stay in your lanes, it allows you to be really good in the lane you're working in.

In terms of improvements, school teams wished for more, flexible, and consistent funding. Interviewees mentioned being able to anticipate when the funding will be available would help with budgeting.

Put some of the money in Fund 01 or open it up so that it's easier for schools to access, It lets you do what you need to do, and lets you try to do different things with it to see if we can make a difference for kids. People are so stuck on what they can spend money on; it takes the creativity out of it. Because we are so strict on how we can spend funds, people don't open their minds and think outside the box.

Some of the funding sources create silos or create things that make it tougher. An example: our ADSIS interventionist could not work with any students who were identified for special education because the ADSIS goal was to prevent students from being in special education. Some students were receiving speech only services in special education but then could not get reading or math interventions also [from the same interventionist]. So, we worked with a different interventionist like our paraprofessional funded by general funding, not ADSIS, who could work with those students. The state has worked on fixing that and I think the law has changed now. For several years that was always a hiccup in the funding sources that prevented some things from happening.

Compensatory Fund is not consistent [in our school building]. When you talk about MTSS and how we are supporting kids through those different tiers, it is really hard to get a consistent program for kids when your funding source is not consistent.

In my opinion, it will be the consistency of funding and knowing when those funds will be available.

With that implementation comes staffing. We need to have the appropriate staff, the people in the right seats on the bus. We might have the framework in place but the work isn't being done appropriately. We were lucky this year that we had some Compensatory money to have two teachers [to do] two hours of intervention. We have used them extensively this year to work with students. Next year we won't have that. Our ebb and flow of success goes up and down depending on staffing.

Schools were asked if they had more funding, what MTSS aspects they would like to enhance or add. Schools wanted to hire qualified teachers, interventionists, and specialists who can work effectively with students and to increase staff professional development. One school team mentioned wanting to be able to get the services earlier to students who needed them.

We actually had some extra funding this year and put it in toward an additional interventionist to support teachers next year. We wanted teachers to be interventionists for the Tier 3 in particular. To ensure that we don't put too many kids into special education, we want to make sure that Tier 2 students can get interventions mostly through associate educators – but, we really want to make sure that the Tier 3 students who are really struggling have a licensed teacher doing the interventions with them. That's what we put in place. We also bought a "what they need teacher," is what we're calling it. Whether it is for the high level, for the advanced learners or if we need more support for the intervention. Throughout the year this will change. If, in one year, we have 5th graders who are struggling in a subject, we have this teacher to support them for six weeks or more until needs change. These teachers are adjustable. We call them "what they need teachers."

Hire more interventionists and specialists and increase professional development for staff.

We have a reading intervention program to help students that have fallen behind. We had/have quite a few that need this assistance and know that a trained teacher is best able to give this intervention. We had to make a reduction in this spot due to lack of funds and replaced that position with a paraprofessional. That adjustment affects the amount of gain for our students. Just not the same as the trained teacher in reading.

To be able to serve all the students who we identify as needed services and to get them the services early.

Areas that schools mentioned could be strengthened included math intervention and assessment, remedial education materials, and a fidelity checklist. While not specifically mentioned as a need, a few schools described having a central data system that can merge and organize data across different tools and systems. This helped the school teams to readily access and use their data, instead of having a dedicated staff member to pull the data for them, as some other interviewees had mentioned.

The program we have used to help those kids in reading has been effective and we can pretty accurately predict which students will qualify for SPED in reading based on this program. We are still looking for a good math program for intervention.

The one we have the least of is implementation fidelity. We do screening, progress monitoring, use multiple sources in our student information system with grading, and in our data warehouse we can disaggregate any of our data by student groups – we don't typically have implementation fidelity data.

Solid material for remedial things - real research-based materials or strategies we could easily get from MDE or they could push out to all the principals or directors that kind of give us the right direction in supporting the kids.

Having eduCLIMBER has really sped things up. We used to have to pull all the data for our teachers. I put them into Excel spreadsheets, and then they would use it. Now with FastBridge and especially eduCLIMBER, teachers will be totally using it independently next year. Right now, our MTSS team uses it. But by next fall, everyone will have access. The system gives us longitudinal data about individual kids, along with the notes from the team meetings [that can be stored in the system], to really give us an idea of the history of what interventions we've done and where we're sitting.

Finally, school teams mentioned continued staff buy-in and collaboration, support from leadership, and a shared understanding of what constitutes tier interventions as important factors to sustain MTSS. Schools need to anticipate adjusting their work from time to time, especially when some schools are facing declining enrollment, which probably affect their funding.

Staff buy-in is a factor. We use exiting staff so much in implementations so it requires a level of buy-in. Also staff optimism, and not having initiative fatigue. That is, it is not a new thing but this is a sustainable thing [that] we are making a priority.

We talked about the importance of administrators' support for MTSS. We have great administrators who really support MTSS, and are always working on the practices we have and make them better. That comes down to a willingness of allocating resources to MTSS. That comes from the top too. Our district superintendent is in favor of MTSS and is willing to spend money on this initiative. That is huge. If we lost a few key members of [lead] administrators, it would be devastating.

Common understanding of what an intervention is.

I think the goal should be to change people's mindset about MTSS towards focusing on Tier One first.

Our MTSS process has focused, the past few years, on making sure we have a systematic way of identifying student needs and that they are getting the help they need. Have we dedicated a separate budget line for MTSS things? No. Like a lot of things in small districts, we have had the people already in place, and a lot of this was happening. This is more about collaboration and coordination than it is about creating something brand new.

Where that gets challenging is now when we are entering a period of declining enrollment. There is some adjusting to size [of student in intervention groups] that has to happen occasionally.

Definition of funding sources mentioned in this study

- Fund 01 or general fund is used to account for all revenues and expenditures of the school district that are not accounted for elsewhere.
- Compensatory Fund is determined by the percentage of students with free and reduced-price lunch at the school site.
- Achievement and Integration Fund is used to create equitable educational opportunities and reduce academic disparities based on students' diverse racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds in Minnesota public schools.
- Quality Compensation (Q Comp) is typically used by schools to provide staff professional development and rewards teachers and other licensed staff for working toward raising student achievement. Q Comp Fund is also used by districts to implement an effective professional learning community (PLC) where teams focus on identifying and addressing student needs through improved instruction. Q Comp is also referred by schools in this study as Alternative Teacher Pay for Performance System (ATPS).
- Alternative Delivery of Specialized Instructional Services (ADSIS) Fund can be used to provide instruction to assist students who need additional academic or behavioral support to succeed in the general education environment. The goal is to reduce the number of referrals to special education by providing supports early to struggling students. ADSIS is available to schools that apply for it every two years.
- Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy is a state grant to provide coaching supports for teachers and education leaders, strengthen the use of evidence-based literacy practices in targeted schools and nonprofits, and engage families and communities, all with the aim of increasing the literacy skills of disadvantaged children in Minnesota.
- Title Funds are federal monies that are intended to support existing state funding for education. Title I funds programming for low-income students; Title II supports recruitment of qualified teachers, principals, and other staff and staff professional development; Title III is for supporting English Language (EL) learners and immigrant students; and Title IV is intended for academic enrichment, STEM curriculum and technology integration in classrooms, and other educational supports (e.g., health and physical education and counseling).

Minnesota MTSS

MTSS is an integrated system of high-quality, standards-based instruction and interventions that are matched to students' academic, social-emotional, and behavioral needs. The framework relies on multiple tiers of instruction that work together as a means of supporting student success.

The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) advocates for the use of MTSS in Minnesota's public schools to increase the number of students meeting grade-level standards and graduating with skills for further education and careers. MDE's work with MTSS is connected to implementing the Minnesota K-12 Academic Standards with fidelity and building supports to increase academic achievement for all students (<http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/dse/mtss/>).

MTSS implementation survey and the present study

Working with MDE, Wilder Research has been conducting annual voluntary surveys of Minnesota K-12 schools about their implementation of MTSS since the 2012-13 school year. Schools that participated in the surveys receive their results along with the aggregated results of the same type of schools (elementary, middle, high school, and K-12) in Minnesota.

In early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic drastically changed life across the globe, especially for educational systems. MDE decided to pause on the statewide survey. In its place, MDE decided to invite a few schools to participate in key informant interviews to ask specifically about their successes and challenges related to allocating their school's funds. Having enough funding was mentioned by schools in the surveys as one of the challenges in implementing and sustaining MTSS. MDE aims to use the findings to give insights to other schools and districts about how these schools are working and making adjustments to sustain and fund MTSS given their existing resources. Additionally, MDE aims to use the findings to inform policymakers about additional funding and supports schools might need to continue implementing the MTSS framework.

The summary of key findings and recommendations can be found at <https://www.wilder.org/wilder-research/research-library/minnesota-multi-tiered-system-supports>

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Information. Insight. Impact.

451 Lexington Parkway North
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55104
651-280-2700
www.wilderresearch.org

For more information about this report,
contact Edith Gozali-Lee at Wilder Research,
651-280-2676 or edith.gozali-lee@wilder.org.

Authors: Edith Gozali-Lee, Amanda Petersen
Daniel Lee, and Thalia Hall.

MAY 2021



For more information about MTSS, contact Vicki Weinberg at
651-582-8245 or vicki.weinberg@state.mn.us

John Gimpl: 651-582-8353 or john.gimpl@state.mn.us

We are grateful for the advice and guidance of Jean Duffy
from the Regional Center of Excellence.

We thank the school teams who participated in the interviews
and provided valuable information.