



A Whole-Student Approach:

Laconia School District's Multi-Tiered System of Supports for Behavioral Health and Wellness

Behavioral Health Improvement Institute
Keene State College

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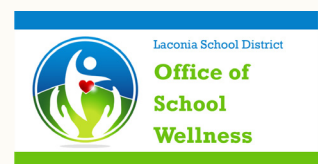


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Nestled at the entry to New Hampshire's Lakes Region, with a population of just over 16,500, the city of Laconia in Belknap County, NH has a bustling and sleepy hometown vibe all at once.¹ A former mill town just a stone's throw from the tourist-rich shores of Lake Winnepesaukee, Laconia has its own up-and-coming downtown peppered with coffee shops, grills, and retail shops. The home of an annual motorcycle "Bike Week" and now a fall Pumpkin Festival, with summers on the lake that almost double its population, Laconia feels welcoming while remaining both genuine and community-oriented. At the same time, Laconia is working hard to respond to community risk factors and support its most vulnerable residents, with youth well-being as a recent priority.

Laconia's community challenges: poverty, substances, trauma, and other ACEs

Laconia youth face a host of community and home risk factors. Laconia's poverty rate hovers at 12.1%, notably higher than that of NH and the nation. Across Belknap County (County), 9.4% of households experience food insecurity and 16% of families face severe housing problems such as overcrowding, high costs, or a lack of plumbing or kitchen facilities.^{2,3} These types of environmental stressors contribute to higher rates of substance misuse and violence in Laconia. In 2019, Laconia was among the 10 NH towns with the highest number of fatal drug overdoses.⁴ According to the 2019 regional Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), 46.7% of youth have lived with someone with drug or alcohol problem, and 26.2% have been exposed to domestic violence at home.⁵ Violent crime has historically been high in the County, typically beyond both national and NH rates.³

Laconia School District (District) is home to five main schools, all of which qualify as high-poverty. In 2019, almost 60% of the District's nearly 2,000 students were eligible for free and reduced lunch. District-wide, more than 6% of students experienced homelessness and over 7% were court-involved.⁶ Student-reported rates of fighting and bullying, substance misuse, and dating and sexual violence have also exceeded the state and national rates in recent years. A concerning 23.2% of students reported seriously considering suicide and 10.6% reported suicide attempts in the previous year.⁵



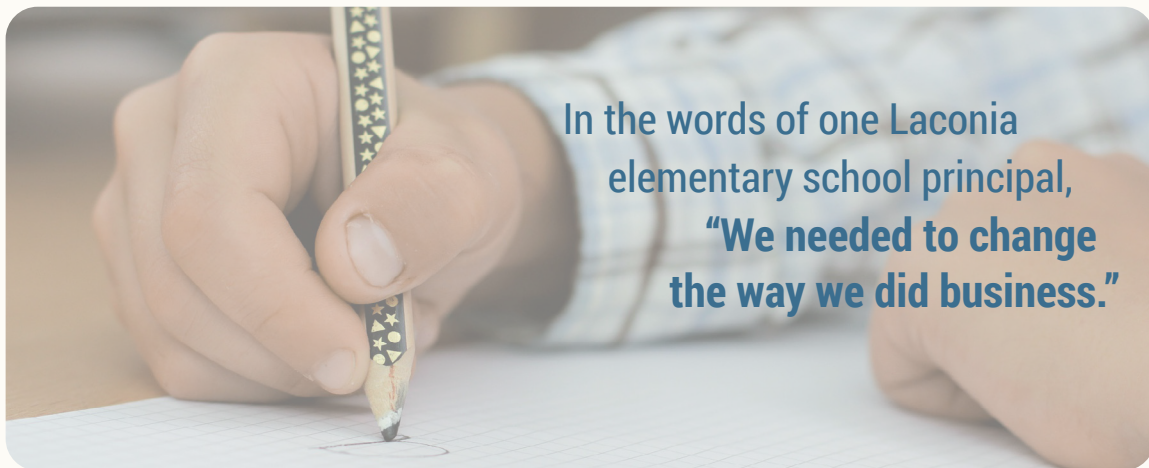
Community challenges potentiate problem behaviors in schools

These community risk factors and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) trickle down into the school setting. As ACEs increase, so do negative outcomes – including academic underachievement, depression, substance misuse, disability, unemployment, and physical maladies.⁷ Children who have experienced toxic stress show up at school hypervigilant to perceived threats and disproportionately respond with aggression, disengagement, dissociation, and other disruptive behavior as a means of self-protection. Chronic, frequent, and/or strong adversity evokes prolonged hyperactivation of the stress response system, triggering a developmental cascade that increases the risk of serious health and mental health problems, suppressing the academic and social development of children.⁸ Without the appropriate supports – typically lacking in school settings – children with mental health disorders are at greater risk of negative outcomes such as dropping out of school, substance use, risky sexual behavior, violence, and more severe mental health difficulties.^{9,10}

Laconia students have historically received office discipline referrals (ODRs) at rates much higher than the national mean, with accompanying high rates of suspension.¹¹ Schools often use ODR rates as a leading indicator of school climate, and problem behaviors are suggestive of student distress. ODRs are linked with student aggression, drug use, defiance, behavior disorders, and delinquency,¹² and out-of-school suspensions resulting from ODRs have been associated with higher risk for high school dropout.¹³

District on the edge shifts to a “whole student” mindset

In 2013, Laconia community and school leaders collaboratively acknowledged the challenges their students were facing and how they were impacting student readiness to learn. The collective feeling was that something needed to be done – something that transcended traditional academic approaches to improving student engagement in learning – to a broader focus on student wellness, mental health, and how educators interacted with students in need.



Laconia leaders, intuitively, knew that addressing students’ social, emotional, and mental health needs would lead to improved student outcomes – which the research supports.¹⁴ As a result, in recent years Laconia schools have adopted a laser focus on student wellness in order to better support the mental health needs of their students and ultimately promote academic achievement. Laconia stakeholders recognized that schools are a prime setting in which to support children’s self-regulatory capacity, and by using a trauma-responsive lens, educators and school communities could foster attuned, caring, and supportive relationships that offered students and staff paths to resilience and increased availability for learning.

These realizations were newly vocalized amongst a powerful group of community and school leaders and focused on the adoption of a social-emotional learning (SEL) lens as a priority for Laconia youth. SEL focuses on the skills that lead to development of a healthy identity, supportive relationships, and the achievement of personal and collective goals: self-awareness and self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness.¹⁵ According to stakeholders, this SEL paradigm shift – underway prior to the receipt of any grant funding– has been the bedrock of Laconia’s success.

Benefits of social-emotional learning:

- Increased academic achievement
- Decreased problem behaviors
- Reduced emotional distress
- Decreased substance use
- Impacts are long-term



SEL promotes healthy development and subsequently, the academic achievement of students.¹⁶ When teachers integrate SEL with academic information, student problem behaviors decrease and understanding of the subject matter improves. SEL programming decreases emotional distress, disruptive behavior, and substance use while improving test scores.¹⁷ Students who participate in SEL programs fare better than their peers – up to 18 years later – in terms of social, emotional, and mental health.¹⁸

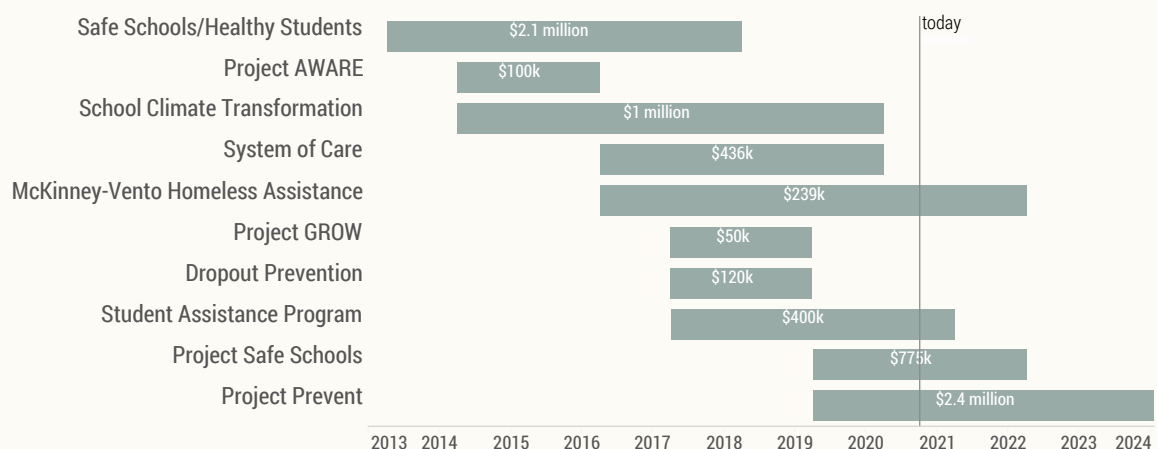
Laconia School District
leverages over
\$7.6 MILLION
in funding since 2013
to support student SEL
and mental health and
improve school climate

Funding provides venture capital for district to translate vision into reality

To make the move to a more holistic educational model infused with SEL, the District successfully sought and leveraged several funding streams. In doing so, the District sought to implement large scale changes to improve school climate, implement an evidence-based continuum of SEL and mental health supports, and integrate trauma-responsive strategies across all schools.

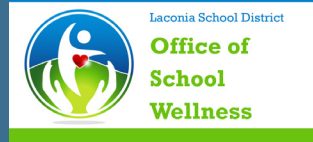
Since 2013, the District has leveraged both federal and state funding sources. These include Safe Schools/Healthy Students and System of Care grant subawards from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) via the NH Department of Education (NH DOE), a School Climate Transformation Grant from the US Department of Education (US DOE), a Project AWARE grant from SAMHSA, a Student Assistance Program grant from the NH Bureau of Drug and Alcohol Services, a Project GROW grant from NH DOE, a Dropout Prevention grant from NH DOE, a McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance sub-grant from NH DOE, a Project Safe Schools grant from the US Department of Justice, and a Project Prevent grant from US DOE – all of which support school climate transformation, MTSS-B implementation, and student SEL and mental health. Taken together, the District has leveraged over \$7.6 million to turn their vision of student wellness into reality.

Laconia School District funding streams to support student wellness



Most tangibly, grant funding resulted in the creation and staffing of the District's Office of School Wellness (OSW) to promote optimal social, emotional, and educational outcomes for children through a focus on student, staff, and overall school wellness. McKenzie Harrington-Bacote has served as the OSW's Grants Administrator since 2014, where she works as a high-level administrator with considerable decision-making latitude through shared collaboration and leadership with fellow administrators, and a seemingly inexhaustible attitude toward finding ways to sustainably support the work.

The importance of this new OSW student and school wellness structure cannot be overstated. Evaluation data across grant-funded school SEL and mental health enhancement initiatives show that the most dramatic improvements in student mental health access and outcomes occur when district administrative teams make student SEL and mental health a top priority, and when school-based teams take a systematic approach to use data to strategize, monitor results, and adjust accordingly. Within that structure, creative problem-solving aimed at the highest leverage targets can flourish, to remarkable effect.



Laconia brings strategic SEL vision together with grant funding to create the District's Office of School Wellness, which blends and braids funding to transform school practice, climate, and outcomes.

This new focus on student well-being triggered the convening of a district-level Community Management Team (CMT), which brought together District leaders and staff with community organizations and individuals with a stake in student SEL and mental health. The local community mental health center, the police department, family resource center, and other child-serving agencies are represented on this important team. It is through the CMT that the community is made aware of SEL-related efforts, new alliances are formed, and better integration and utilization of community and school resources materialize. Offshoots of the CMT work have included new and better SEL programming, interagency agreements, enhanced community and family engagement, and better school-community mental health integration.



MTSS-B: Just enough framing and structure for Laconia to do its thing



Laconia's CMT was aware that enhancing school-level systems and overall school climate would be an essential part of their work. The District selected the Multi-Tiered System of Supports for Behavioral Health and Wellness (MTSS-B) as its evidence-based framework for building tiered prevention systems to support a continuum of SEL and mental health supports for students. MTSS-B promotes the behavioral health of students by blending research-based school mental health practices and social-emotional learning with Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). PBIS teaches schoolwide behavior expectations at the universal level (Tier 1), offers targeted supports for at-risk students (Tier 2), and provides intensive, individual services for the highest-need students (Tier 3). High fidelity implementation of MTSS-B is associated

with reduced student problem behavior and discipline events;¹⁹ enhanced social-emotional functioning,²⁰ attendance,²¹ and academic achievement;²² and enhanced school climate.¹⁹

MTSS-B is predicated on a trauma-responsive approach to education, which prioritizes relationships between staff and students that seek to understand the underlying meaning of student problem behavior. Laconia has been implementing trauma-responsive practices to promote social and emotional safety for students, including helping school staff to understand the brain-based impacts of trauma, address the needs that underlie distressed behaviors, learn how to respond to student needs in the moment in de-escalating ways, and react to problem behaviors with positive, restorative approaches.

NH MTSS-B: Essential Components



Tier 1 (universal), Tier 2 (targeted),
Tier 3 (individualized) supports



Evidence-based behavioral health
assessment and intervention



Data-based problem solving and
decision making



Universal screening and progress
monitoring



Shared leadership



Social-emotional learning



Layered continuum of supports for
all students

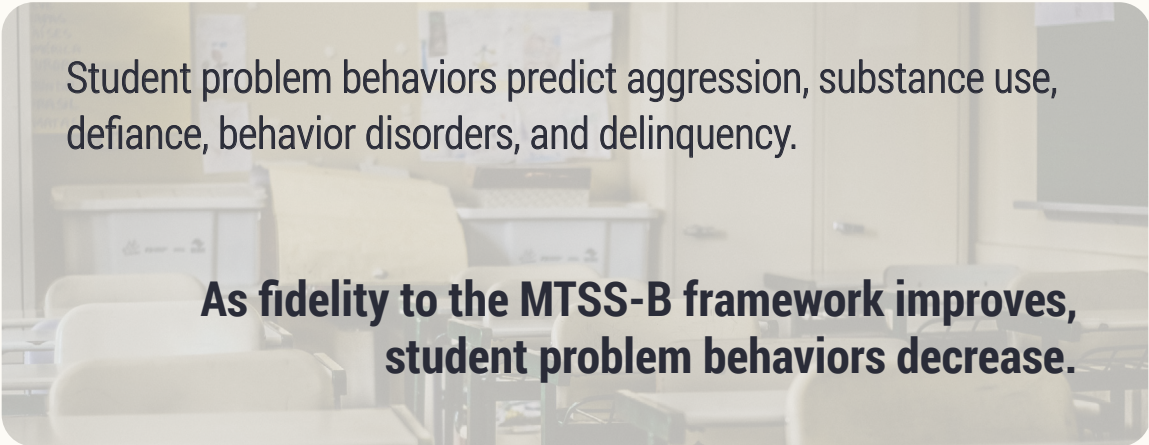


Family, school, and community
partnerships

District encourages and supports, but does not dictate, school-level approaches

A hallmark of Laconia's approach to MTSS-B has been the provision of district-wide resources and systems to support the work, while simultaneously cultivating an understanding that each school, with its specific local context and culture, would need to approach MTSS-B mechanics in its own way. The District used the onset of funding in 2013 to boost the awareness, knowledge, and commitment to MTSS-B of all major players, including CMT members and building-level administrators. As administrator of the OSW, Harrington-Bacote established a certificate program with a local university to offer incentives to staff to become educated and skilled in MTSS-B and hired an internal, district-wide MTSS-B coach, Maureen Tracey, to support local school implementation. Additionally, she hired a Training and Marketing Coordinator, Janet Brough, to support the coordination of all professional development and information dissemination across the District.

The internal district-level coach role was essential in providing consistency and structure to systems change efforts across all schools. Additional external MTSS-B coaches from the University of New Hampshire's Institute on Disability and the Southeastern Regional Education Service Center, also funded through OSW, provided expertise to schools in the implementation of specific interventions and supports. The district-wide and external coaches helped schools adapt the MTSS-B framework to meet their unique local needs. For example, Laconia High School initially struggled to see how traditional reward systems for positive behavior – a hallmark of Tier 1 schoolwide practice – could appeal to their students. Ultimately, the high school administrators were successful in creating a “reward” system that fit for this population. They and their colleagues frequently wandered the corridors of the school providing verbal praise and recognition to students, including the occasional high-five for students seen reaching out in prosocial ways to their peers. Schools installed the essential ingredients of MTSS-B, maintaining fidelity to the model, in ways that worked in their context. For more examples of building-level adaptation, see the school-level profiles at the end of this report.



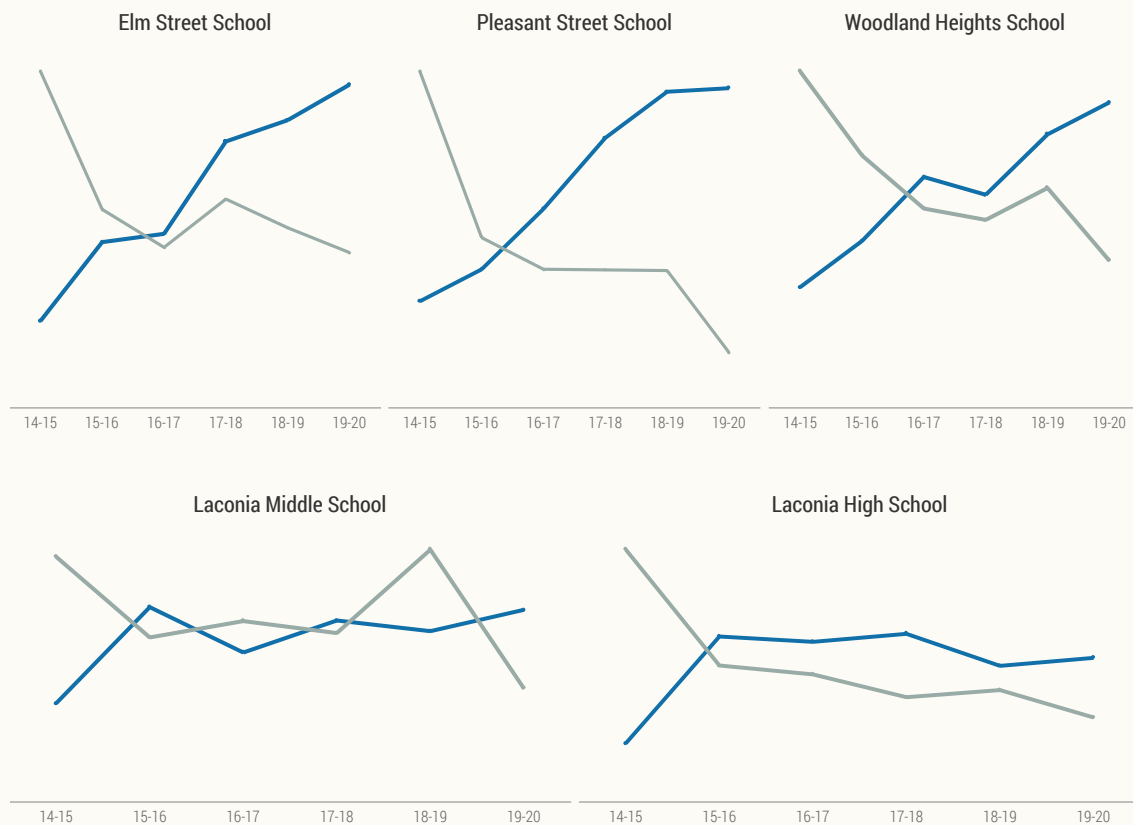
Student problem behaviors predict aggression, substance use, defiance, behavior disorders, and delinquency.

As fidelity to the MTSS-B framework improves, student problem behaviors decrease.

Prioritizing MTSS-B systems and practices pays off in spades

The graphic below provides a striking illustration of the power of the high-fidelity implementation of MTSS-B achieved in Laconia schools. In the graphic, the light gray lines reflect overall MTSS-B fidelity over time. The dark blue lines represent the incidence of ODRs over the same time period. In each school, the lines are almost mirror images; as MTSS-B fidelity increases, ODRs decrease, and vice versa. High-fidelity MTSS-B clearly leverages ODRs and other school outcomes.

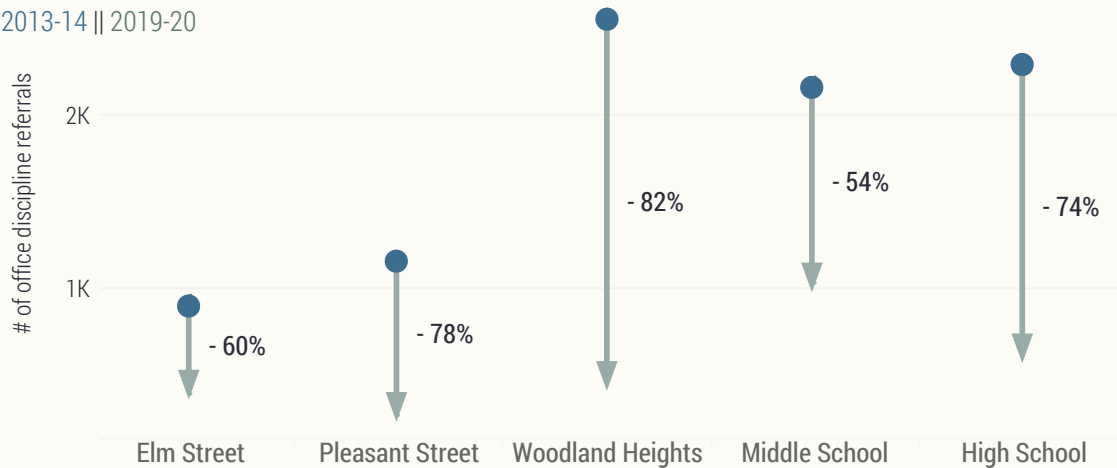
Office discipline referrals per 100 students || Overall MTSS-B fidelity



The reductions in student problem behaviors seen as the District has prioritized a strong MTSS-B program are stunning. Laconia’s ODR rates across schools were skyrocketing at the time they began this work in 2013. After six years, ODR rates have dropped remarkably across schools. Qualitative reports from building-level administrators capture the ways in which schools feel safer and calmer as a result, setting the stage for a more conducive learning environment. One elementary school administrator captured it succinctly: “Before, people did not want to come to our school. Now, we have people who actually want to come here.”

Student problem behaviors plummet over time

2013-14 || 2019-20



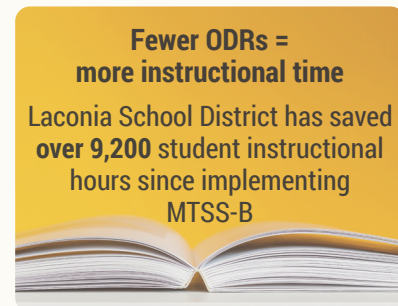
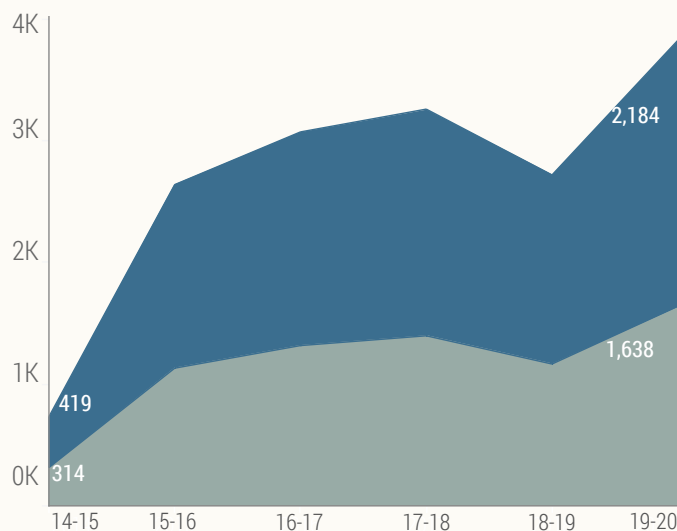
Increased learning time in the classroom

Reducing ODRs through high-fidelity MTSS-B recaptures educational and administrative time that would otherwise be lost to preventable student problem behaviors. All students, including the disruptive student, lose instructional time when problem behaviors interfere in the classroom. Using established estimates,²³ the chart below shows the total amount of administrator and student instructional time gained per student per year through reductions in ODRs, relative to the 2013–2014 baseline year.

Hours gained due to ODR decreases, each year

Student || Administrator

Each year is compared to baseline (2013-14); ODRs and time estimates statistically adjusted with enrollment trends to remain comparable from year to year



Total hours gained since 2013-14

9,279

6,960

More time to learn may be paying off

Variations in how academic achievement is measured at the school level present a challenge for assessing the impact of these instructional time gains on student achievement. The best consistent measure we currently have for student achievement, while not perfect, is the NH state assessment program. Data from the last three years shows that all Laconia elementary schools have seen upticks in student proficiency in English Language Arts (ELA) and Math



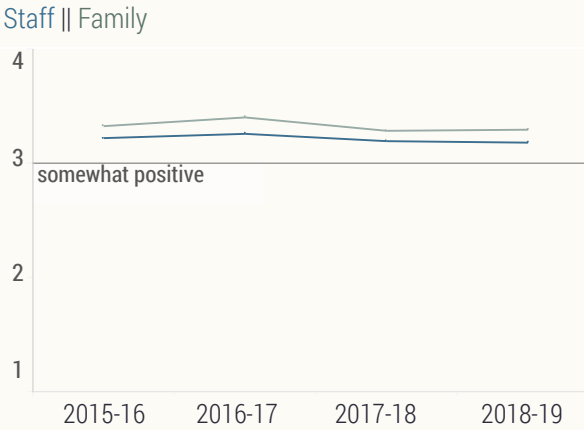
since 2017. While these upward trends have not yet been mirrored at the middle and high school levels, these are encouraging recent data, suggesting that increased time in the classroom, due to reduced disruptive behaviors, may be manifesting as improved academic achievement. Time will tell how these gains might continue with continued high-fidelity implementation of MTSS-B.

Perceptions of school climate

In theory, as MTSS-B implementation contributes to reduced student problem behaviors, improved relationships between students and staff, and a host of other positive school- and student-level outcomes, school climate should benefit. The District began measuring staff and family perspectives of school climate in the 2015-16 school year (administration of student surveys was made impractical by legislation requiring active parent consent for all non-academic surveys) using the School Climate Survey Suite.²⁴ School climate ratings started out positive across schools, and have shown little variability over time (see chart below).

While staff typically rate school climate slightly lower than families, both consistently rate aspects of school climate – including the physical school environment, school safety, teaching and learning structures, staff and student relationships, and family engagement – in the somewhat favorable range; these ratings have held remarkably steady since the first school climate survey was administered in Spring 2016. School climate surveys are somewhat crude measures. Focus groups and more detailed surveys of specific areas of interest related to school climate may be more effective in capturing nuances of the story; the school-level profiles included at the end of this report share a more qualitative read on the felt sense of school climate as MTSS-B implementation has progressed over time.

Perceptions of school climate



Increased access to mental health supports

Far too few children with behavioral health conditions get the help they need. Unmet social-emotional needs place children at risk for a host of negative outcomes (e.g., poor attendance and performance in school, severe mental illness). The school dropout rate for students with severe emotional and behavioral needs is approximately twice that of other students.²⁵ School mental health programs overcome logistical barriers to care and decrease help-seeking stigma, which results in dramatic improvements in access to care.²⁶ In fact, 70 to 80% of children and adolescents who receive mental health services do so in schools.²⁷

The District used “internal” and “external” strategies to increase student access to mental health services. Internally, the District hired social workers and a Licensed Alcohol and Drug Counselor as a Student Assistance Program (SAP) Coordinator, and developed Tier 2 (targeted intervention) groups in schools, a strategy most appropriate for students with relatively mild to moderate behavioral health conditions. Additionally, the District contracted

School-based mental health services increase 12% in the first year

Laconia meets target by serving almost **20%** of students in need of mental health supports



with the local community-mental health center for the provision of school-based mental health counseling at the middle and high schools. This strategy dramatically improved school-based mental health access rates. In the first year of implementation, the number of students receiving school-based mental health services increased by 12% to a total of 19% of students to match the need (about 17% of youth nationwide experience a mental health disorder²⁸) – and those gains have held steady over time.

Laconia’s “external” strategy was to increase mental health access through facilitated referrals to community-based mental health providers. Community-based mental health services are

most appropriate for students requiring longer-term and/or more intensive forms of treatment than can be provided in the school setting. Unfortunately, passive referrals (distributing brochures, lists/phone numbers of providers) from schools to community-based mental health often fail. Active, facilitated referrals (e.g., staff completing forms with families, making calls or appointments, assisting with transportation, helping families understand and communicate the reason for referral) are much more successful.^{29, 30, 31}



Through the Community Management Team, the District has strengthened its working relationships with community mental health providers. In 2019–20, the District reported that 42% of its referrals to community mental health were successful – an impressive statistic, given that estimates have placed the typical success rate as low as 30%.³²



Efforts to engage families

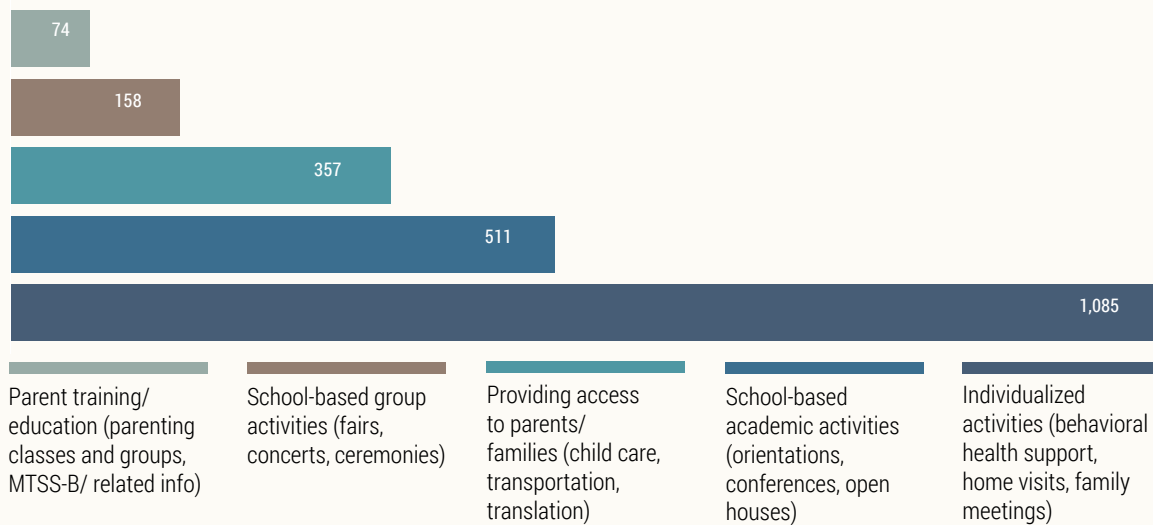


The District has also heavily emphasized family engagement in its MTSS-B implementation. Family involvement in their children’s education results in better academic achievement, improved behavior and social skills, and increased graduation rates. Community members also serve as role models and supports for students.³³ The District has made a massive 460% increase in its outreach to families since 2014–15.

The District’s family engagement efforts have covered a wide range of services and supports, with individualized activities such as home visits, individualized behavioral health support, and family meetings representing the majority of their family engagement work. The addition of social workers in each school likely contributes greatly to Laconia’s ability to outreach frequently to families to provide such supports.

While families’ perceptions of their involvement at school – defined, on the school climate survey, simply as volunteering, attending conferences, and participating in groups a such a parent-teacher organization – is lower, they rate the quality of school-home partnerships more positively on school climate surveys, by about 16%. The District’s family engagement outreach efforts, and most likely their heavy emphasis on individualized supports to families – seem to be paying off.

Family outreach activities since 2016-17



The essential ingredients of Laconia's MTSS-B work

Laconia's approach to transforming their "whole student" mindset into a reality across district schools showcases a number of important lessons for supporting student wellness through systems change.



District- and community-wide vision, knowledge, and commitment

Laconia began their efforts in just the right place – by convening a group of school and community leaders with the right mix of passion, knowledge, and decision-making power to effect change. MTSS-B comes to life when district-community leadership teams composed of personnel with purse-string, strategic planning, and decision-making authority drive the work. From the start, Laconia invested in the development of shared vision and goals across schools and important agencies, where each CMT member had a stake in helping youth succeed. Laconia poured considerable resources into ongoing coaching to leverage up-front MTSS-B training and professional development.

Marshalling/braiding resources

Laconia's investment in the development of a dedicated Office of School Wellness has been crucial to their success in securing and braiding multiple funding streams to support MTSS-B implementation. While NH public school districts do have access to potential funding streams (Title I & IV-A, IDEA, etc.) to support MTSS-B, competing priorities and insufficient allocations often lead to MTSS-B needs going unmet, even when identified as a priority. Districts generally require additional funding as venture capital to start this work. Additionally, Laconia School District operates under a tax cap, limiting any increases in local funds earmarked for schools. Many municipalities also operate with a city tax cap, further limiting additional funding that could support implementation of frameworks such as MTSS-B. The important decision to create a dedicated Grants Administrator position in Laconia for student and school wellness efforts – with, importantly, administrative decision-making power in the District – has been a hallmark of the District's success. Without this driving force and the ability to leverage several funding streams at once, directing resources where they are needed at any one point in time, MTSS-B can often slow and recede into the day-to-day hustle of school life.

Creative implementation within a rigorous but flexible framework

Laconia's selection of MTSS-B as its evidence-based framework for building tiered prevention systems has been key to their success in supporting student mental health. MTSS-B requires several essential ingredients – a guiding district-level team (the CMT), school-based teams that design and deliver a continuum of supports across tiers, data-based decision-making, and ongoing monitoring and quality improvement. At the same time, it can be flexibly adapted to



school contexts to best meet local needs. The District supported high-fidelity, rigorous implementation of MTSS-B through considerable investment in training and internal and external coaching resources across all schools. The District's fidelity scores reflect this rigor. At the same time, creativity in application of supports and interventions was encouraged at the school level, resulting in high-leverage results that worked for specific settings.

Getting Tier 1 right

A cornerstone of the District's MTSS-B implementation across schools has been an early and comprehensive focus on installing Tier 1 systems in a thoughtful way. Too often, the reflexive temptation to use MTSS-B energy and funds to first increase capacity to deliver Tier 3 individualized interventions takes precedence, as schools grapple with alarming student behaviors and needs. However, the strategy of "going slow to go fast" is crucial when it comes to implementation of a framework that is inherently designed to manage student behaviors in a more prevention-minded way. High-fidelity Tier 1 supports such as schoolwide positive behavior expectations, proactive and restorative discipline practices, and schoolwide training and coaching in trauma-responsive strategies can address many of the disruptive student behaviors – and under-lying social-emotional needs – that stress school settings. The school-level profiles included at the end of this report detail these preventative and early intervention successes across Laconia schools.

Schools meet the challenges and transform, in their own time and ways



The remainder of this report shares how each of the five District schools approached MTSS-B implementation. Every school presents a unique snapshot of local context, with important lessons learned about patience, adaptability, persistence, and faith in systems change.

Elm Street School



Pre K-5



315 Enrolled



Free & Reduced Lunch 56%

About MTSS-B: NH's Multi-Tiered System of Supports for Behavioral Health and Wellness (MTSS-B) is an evidence-based framework for building tiered prevention systems to support a continuum of social-emotional learning and mental health supports for students. MTSS-B promotes the behavioral health of NH public school students by blending research-based school mental health practices and social-emotional learning with Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), teaching schoolwide behavior expectations at the universal level (Tier 1), offering targeted supports for at-risk students (Tier 2), and providing intensive, individual services for the highest-need students (Tier 3). High fidelity implementation of MTSS-B is associated with reduced student problem behavior and discipline events; enhanced social-emotional functioning, attendance, and academic achievement; and enhanced school climate.

Safety, trust, and reliability rebuilds vitality and resilience

At Elm Street School, relationship-building has been at the heart of the successful roll-out and ongoing sustainability of their MTSS-B efforts, and their work showcases how successful MTSS-B implementation is heavily reliant on hard-won connections and trust. Strong relationships between students, staff and administrators have been crucial to the school's gradual expansion of MTSS-B programming.

Building foundational trust

Tara Beauchemin assumed her role as Principal of Elm Street School in 2014 after a series of administrative changes that seemed to leave staff exhausted and tentative. She quickly understood that motivating staff to focus on improving supports for students – and ultimately improving school climate – first meant connecting with, listening to, and empowering staff. Beauchemin researched and organized team-building activities that intentionally created opportunities for her full staff to collaborate, share ideas, and build unity.

“You have to have a great relationship with your staff and have a common goal: to support every student in the building.”



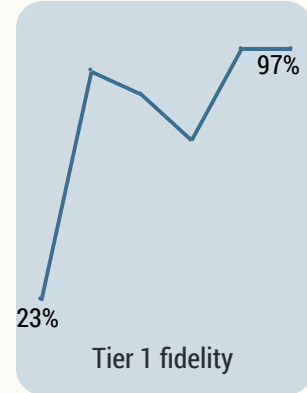
Though it took time to build relationships with her team, the rapport they established was well-timed. Laconia's School Climate Transformation Grant was awarded shortly after Beauchemin's arrival, and her newly united staff were poised to embrace the work.

Aligning frameworks

Elm Street School's external MTSS-B coach, Eric Mann, was a frequent visitor as the staff began to roll out the framework. Like Beauchemin, Mann recognized the importance of strong team relationships as a foundation for improving systems and climate within a school. He took time to understand the barriers that challenged MTSS-B implementation and guided the staff in exploring opportunities for change. Mann met staff where they were and gave them a voice early in the process.

They started with a year-long deep dive into universal Tier 1 interventions, which included development of a schoolwide behavior matrix, teaching expectations, and acknowledgment systems. Staff received dedicated professional development on Tier 1 approaches and met regularly with Mann. "He was our teacher," Beauchemin says. "We wanted to make sure we did it right." Part of doing it "right" meant understanding the behavioral support systems already in place.

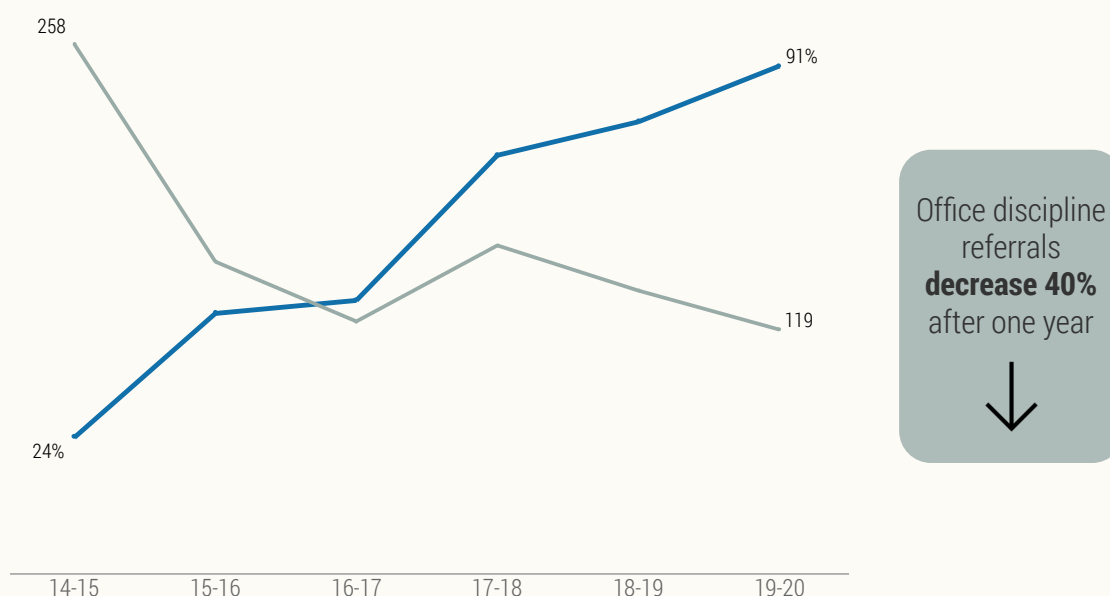
Teachers were already implementing the Responsive Classroom framework, which consisted of practices and strategies to build academic and social-emotional competencies. By folding the Responsive Classroom work within MTSS-B, the Elm Street School team effectively reinforced the hard work and expertise of teachers, aligned frameworks, and avoided "initiative overload."



Developing internal leadership

Early success – a nearly 40 percent drop in office discipline referrals in 2015-16, for instance – spurred staff to think creatively about refining Tier 1 while expanding Tier 2 interventions. They reviewed school data to identify specific areas of student need and explored how more staff could be engaged in universal and specialized group supports. As a team, they mapped out ways to leverage each staff member’s strengths and relationships with students to increase supports through an MTSS-B lens.

Office discipline referrals per 100 students || Overall MTSS-B fidelity

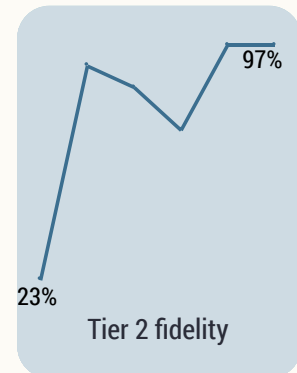


Soon, nearly every person on staff was involved in some form of intervention, from a school-wide competition where classrooms compete to earn the coveted “Championship Belt of Behavior” by earning points for showing good character to a support group for students experiencing grief or loss. The addition of a full-time social worker within the school brought even more structure and synergy to their system of referrals and supports.

Internal leadership grew as Mann nurtured MTSS-B expertise, confidence, and structures within the school. Ambitious staff involved in early MTSS-B efforts felt moved to dig more deeply into the model and take ownership of the work. Regular team meetings dedicated time for teachers to share what they were practicing in their classrooms and learn and problem-solve together. Mann worked alongside them to create tools and manuals that would encourage high-fidelity implementation, further institutionalizing the MTSS-B culture that had emerged in the school. Tailoring the MTSS-B model to local need, Mann supported the development of a combined Tier 2/3 Team, better leveraging existing resources at the smaller elementary level. By the fourth year of the grant, the school was confident enough in their MTSS-B practices to release Mann as their coach and continue implementation on their own.

Using momentum to overcome disruptions

New staff have been the biggest variable in implementation over the last six years, according to Beauchemin. Those who are unfamiliar with MTSS-B may not understand or adhere to the model at first. “Fidelity is very hard, and it’s not something that comes easily,” she says. However, consistency in MTSS-B language, expectations and protocols – particularly when faced with internal changes – has been vital to continued success. While Beauchemin would like to see ODR rates drop further, the Elm Street School team continues to implement MTSS-B with high fidelity. Beauchemin is proud of her staff for embracing MTSS-B and persevering in the face of disruptions, whether it’s a change in staff or a transition to remote learning due to a global pandemic. “We have a close-knit, family feel here,” she says.



“Everyone is always willing to do what’s best for the kids.”



Pleasant Street School



Pre K-5



295 Enrolled



Free & Reduced Lunch 53%

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Creativity within constraints transforms Pleasant Street School

When embarking on a new grant-funded initiative, schools can feel tempted by the new financial windfall to rush into the work, immediately hiring more staff or launching new programming in a knee-jerk response to the most pressing needs of the day. But for Dave Levesque, Principal at Pleasant Street School, that temptation was curbed by his ambition to set up an enduring MTSS-B system rooted in school culture. Philosophically, Levesque recognized the importance of framing MTSS-B as a “belief system” instead of a “time-bound program.” “People think of it as a solution to behaviors, but it’s much more than that,” Levesque observes. It’s an embedded approach that requires rethinking relationships between students and adults and getting creative to meet the needs of each individual student.

Seeing MTSS-B as more than a “time-bound program”



Pleasant Street School experienced significant behavioral challenges prior to 2014. Office discipline referrals and suspensions were peaking and staff lacked the tools and systems to adequately meet students’ social-emotional needs. Levesque, who began as Principal in 2013, was quick to grasp the potential when funding to support MTSS-B began to funnel into the District. He was equally aware that his staff were already experiencing “initiative burnout” and that adding on a new model for supporting student behavior needs without generating buy-in would likely fall flat. He strove to balance acclimating school stakeholders to MTSS-B and adapting the framework to work within the existing school culture.

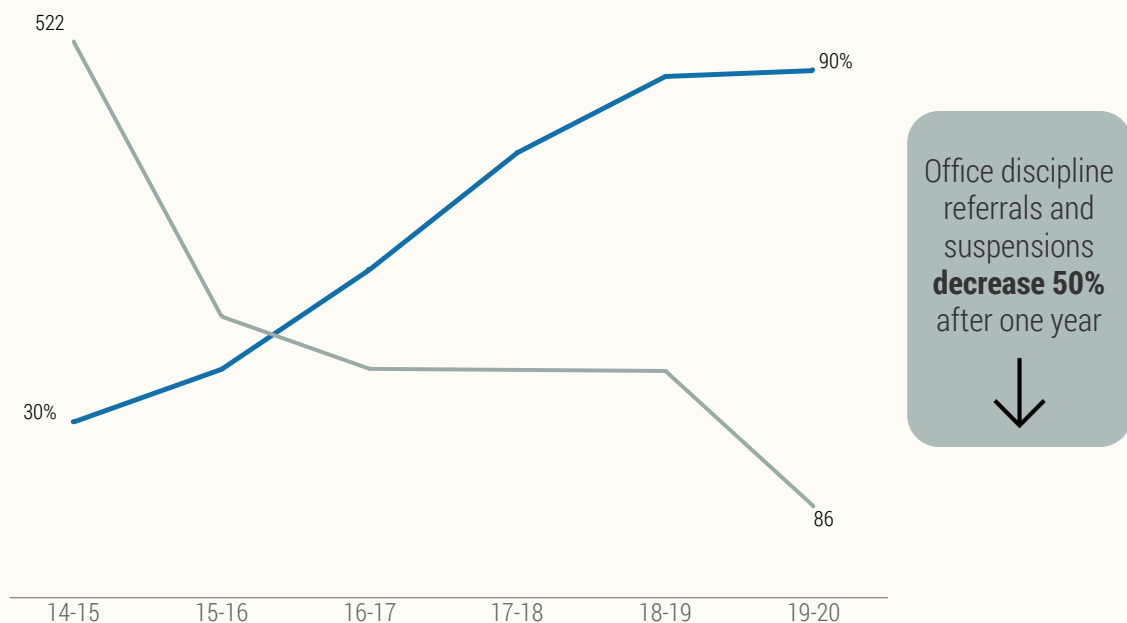
Logistically, Levesque and his team had to inventory, streamline, and integrate the school's existing efforts around social-emotional well-being within the MTSS-B framework. In doing so, they established a consistent, common language and set of behavior expectations across the school.



The existing Responsive Classroom framework and its associated social-emotional competencies was seamlessly integrated into MTSS-B. Faculty meetings were transformed to regularly include time for the review and discussion of student behavior data; these discussions provided a platform for deeper exploration of student needs, staff protocols, and administrative systems. PSS also took advantage of combining Tier 2 and Tier 3 topics into one advanced tier team meeting. Data-driven changes like these, among many others, developed a shared understanding and collaborative approach around MTSS-B implementation.

After dedicating their first award year to the difficult work of setting up MTSS-B infrastructure, the staff saw remarkable results: between the 2014-15 and 2015-16 school years, the rate of both office discipline referrals and out-of-school suspensions dropped by nearly 50 percent; in-school suspensions dropped by more than 60 percent. More importantly, Levesque could tell that school climate was improving. With this momentum at their backs, Pleasant Street School staff got creative.

Office discipline referrals per 100 students || Overall MTSS-B fidelity

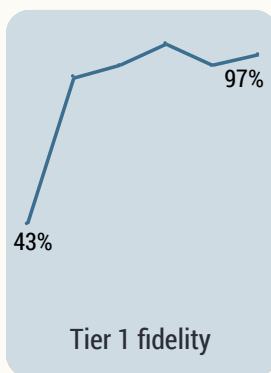


We CONNECT: An innovative, inclusive student support system

Driven by a vision of an inclusive, schoolwide culture of social-emotional wellness, in 2017 Levesque and his team initiated We CONNECT. Originally conceived as a Tier 2 intervention for students with elevated needs, We CONNECT was soon added as a Tier 1 support for all students as staff recognized its schoolwide potential. We CONNECT uses trauma-responsive practices to create safe spaces where students are encouraged to share their thoughts and feelings with a trusted adult. All school staff participate as We CONNECT mentors, and each staff person is matched with a group of 8 to 12 students. The groups discuss selected topics at each session; the program curriculum is derived from student screening data and targets social-emotional learning competencies such as self-regulation, peer relationships and respect, responsible decision-making, and others.

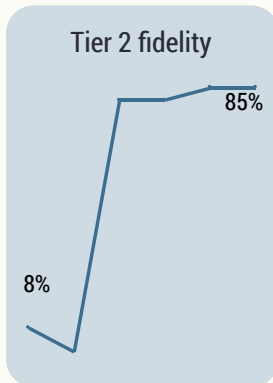


“Belief in MTSS-B must be from the top. When teachers see the administrators’ support for the program, they buy in. Then the students buy in. It’s layered and each layer is critical to supporting the implementation.”



We CONNECT uses the vehicle of positive and safe relationships to increase student social supports, improve identification of students in need, put trauma-responsive practices into use, increase students’ felt sense of physical and emotional safety, decrease problem behaviors, and ultimately, improve school climate. Levesque shares that We CONNECT sessions are the only times in which the school’s motion-sensing hallway lights go dark, as everyone is fully engaged in their group conversations. Given the school’s past challenges with behavior incidents, a quiet hallway is a remarkable accomplishment in this dynamic elementary school.

Building on school culture



Intent on making the school a place that students and staff alike want to come to every day, Levesque and his team have prioritized Tier 1 schoolwide practices to maintain and enhance feelings of positivity and pride in the school's culture. They set the school-wide behavioral expectations of "Pride, Safety, Self" so that the acronym "PSS" matches that of Pleasant Street School. With the help of district funding, they branded the effort by purchasing "PSS: Pride, Safety, Self" t-shirts and water bottles for the school community.

Levesque has recently taken MTSS-B to the next level by adopting a new universal support at this school: a therapy dog. Levesque worked with administrators, staff and relevant boards to develop the necessary school policies while he worked to certify his boxer, Remi, as a therapy dog. Levesque speaks to the importance of an inclusive, "bought-in" school culture in developing this new policy: "It was not top-down, but rather a collaborative decision."



Woodland Heights School



Pre K-5



358 Enrolled



Free & Reduced Lunch 73%

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Open-concept building no match for MTSS-B at Woodland Heights

At Woodland Heights, the usual high energy of elementary school students and staff is amplified by the school's unique design: there are no walls between classrooms. Their open-concept model has encouraged innovative approaches to teaching and learning, but at times has also been a challenge – particularly when student behaviors turn the typical din of an elementary school into a chaotic setting that limits students' ability to learn. Since 2014, the implementation of MTSS-B at Woodland Heights has provided a framework to guide staff and administrators in restoring a more peaceful and positive learning environment – no walls required.

Opportunity for improvement

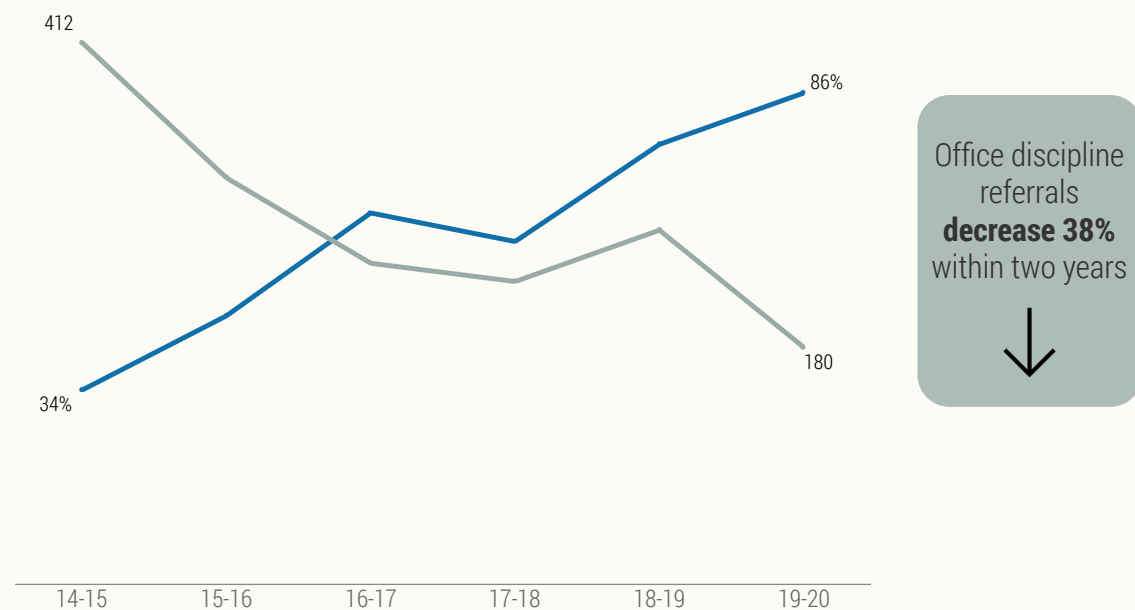
When Eric Johnson became Principal of Woodland Heights in 2014, he was aware of its reputation as “the school on the other side of the tracks.” That year, over 70 percent of students at Woodland Heights qualified for free and reduced lunch – the highest rate in District, and more than double



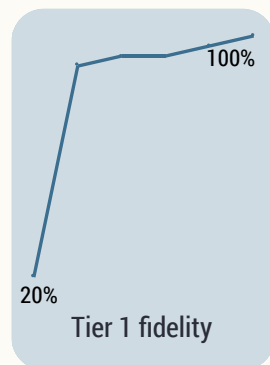
the NH average. Students were exhibiting challenging behaviors and staff struggled to teach amidst all the disciplinary disruptions. The rate of office discipline referrals (ODRs) at Woodland Heights was the highest in the district that year. “The school was in tough shape all around,” says Johnson. “I knew we had some work to do.”

MTSS-B presented Johnson with the opportunity to better address students' social-emotional needs at Woodland Heights. Although staff are sometimes resistant to new frameworks, this was not Johnson's experience. Instead, he found them eager for strategies to address student behaviors. "They were ready to try anything to fix it," Johnson says.

Office discipline referrals per 100 students || Overall MTSS-B fidelity

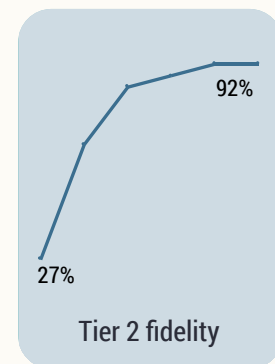


Data-driven developments



With the assistance of Howard Muscott, Woodland Heights' external MTSS-B coach, Johnson and his staff used data to decide where to begin. One of the most common types of student problem behaviors was physical aggression. "We sat down as a team to ask, 'Why is this?' and saw emotional dysregulation," says Johnson. Driven by data, the team adopted the Zones of Regulation curriculum at each grade level. The curriculum – a Tier 1 social-emotional support – uses a four-color system to help students learn to identify and self-regulate emotions and impulses, manage their sensory needs, and improve problem-solving and conflict resolution.³⁴

According to Johnson, this universal social-emotional support "brought consistency and common knowledge to everyone in the school." They integrated their Responsive Classroom efforts to create a seamless approach to social-emotional learning.

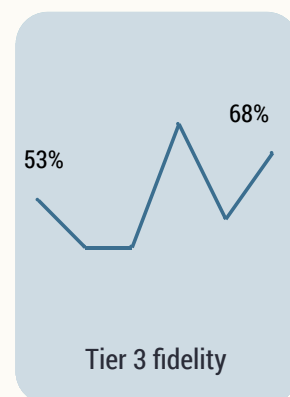


Consistency was also facilitated by Muscott and his practical approach to MTSS-B implementation. As a former school principal himself, Muscott understood the inner workings of school buildings. He carefully rolled out coaching and MTSS-B in manageable “chunks.” Muscott created an MTSS-B implementation manual that codified the process in a way that empowered the staff to build shared MTSS-B fluency. “I can’t say enough good things about Howard,” shares Johnson. “This has been a partnership, and he has made this a joy.”



The early efforts of the Woodland Heights team quickly paid off: rates of ODRs, in-school and out-of-school suspensions all dropped significantly after two years. The Woodland Heights team built on their success by taking a data-driven dive into Tier 2. They created small groups that focused on identified topics – such as anxiety, grief and loss, or divorce – and made it a priority for students to attend the groups, even if it meant missing out on instructional time. Teachers were engaged in the effort, too. “They would get a pre-screening on the student’s behaviors, and after the intervention they’d get another one to see if there was any improvement,” Johnson says.

Tier 3 has been more challenging for Woodland Heights, with Johnson acknowledging limited capacity to provide individualized services at school: “Maybe we didn’t bring enough of the outside people in,” he speculates, referring to the potential for increasing school mental health capacity with contracted clinicians from community partner organizations. Nevertheless, the facilitated referral process to Tier 3 community mental health supports was strengthened through the MTSS-B framework, as a school social worker now collaborates closely with community mental health centers to ensure that students receive the services they need.



“It’s been a turnaround”

By the 2017-18 school year, Woodland Heights had hit its stride: MTSS-B practices at all tiers were being implemented at record-high fidelity levels, and rates of ODRs and in- and out-of-school suspensions reached new lows. “It’s been a turnaround,” says Johnson, reflecting on the how far the school has come since 2014, when it was regularly disrupted by student behavior.



“We’re at the point where we can focus on academics.”

At Woodland Heights, implementing MTSS-B was an opportunity to reclaim a safe and supportive learning environment. “Before, people did not want to come to our school,” Johnson admits. “Now, we have people who actually want to come here.” Their story highlights how frameworks like MTSS-B can offer structures and supports that meet both the social-emotional needs of students and the environmental needs of a dynamic elementary school.

Laconia Middle School



6-8



481 Enrolled



Free & Reduced Lunch 59%

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Doubling down on MTSS-B pays off at Laconia Middle School

Like most new school administrators, Alison Bryant anticipated a learning curve when she became Laconia Middle School (LMS) principal in 2016 – and with the onset of her new position, there was no way for Bryant to estimate how the responsibility for overseeing the implementation of MTSS-B would steepen that curve.

Troubling trends

While it quickly became apparent to Bryant that “we have some pretty challenging behaviors in Laconia,” the MTSS-B implementation begun by her predecessor in 2014 was already paying dividends in decreased office discipline referrals (ODRs) and suspensions – giving the impression that these improvements could be maintained while she focused on other priorities. By the end of the 2016-17 school year, however, MTSS-B implementation was backsliding. As Bryant admitted, taking LMS’s collective eyes off the MTSS-B ball resulted in decreased fidelity and a resurgence in disciplinary events. Everyone had fallen back into familiar habits that did not necessarily align with MTSS-B. “I had an overwhelming sense that things weren’t working,” Bryant says.

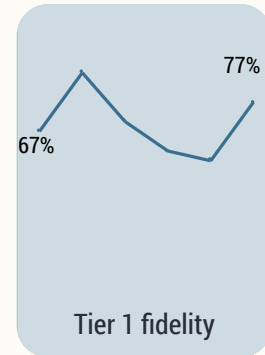


Calling in the coach

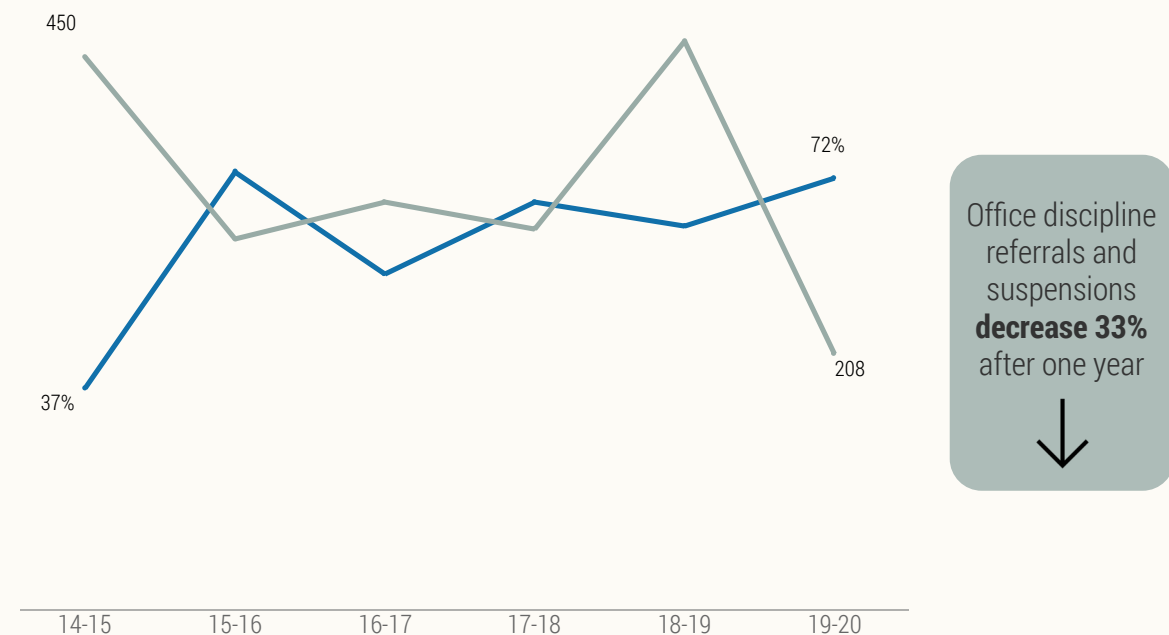
Fortunately, staff were open to doubling down on MTSS-B. With the encouragement of district leadership and the help of their external MTSS-B coach, Kathy Francoeur of UNH's Institute on Disability, LMS redoubled their MTSS-B efforts. Francoeur's guidance was invaluable to Bryant and her team: "Sometimes you hear things from an external person that you wouldn't hear from the inside," Bryant says.

Staff meetings were restructured to make space for MTSS-B discussions and planning, additional professional development opportunities were coordinated, and social-emotional well-being was woven into conversations throughout the school. "Kathy has been a phenomenal external coach," Bryant explains. "She's very connected with our staff, the work we're doing here, and our kids."

Several LMS staff – including a behavior specialist, librarian, and science teacher – had taken graduate-level courses on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) prior to Francoeur's arrival. Francoeur spent considerable time providing additional coaching and mentorship to these self-identified staff leaders in MTSS-B. By 2018, the combination of Bryant's vision, Francoeur's coaching, and these new internal MTSS-B champions stabilized LMS's MTSS-B fidelity and discipline rates.



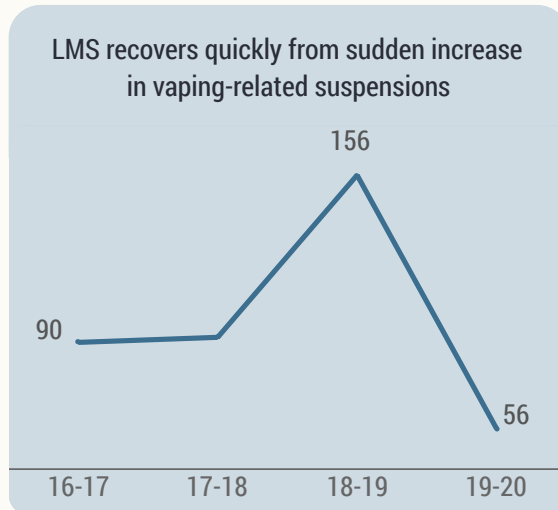
Office discipline referrals per 100 students || Overall MTSS-B fidelity



Engaging families in the vaping struggle

The 2018–19 school year, however, was fraught not only with ongoing administrative changes, but also with the rising popularity of vaping and electronic cigarettes among students at LMS. ODR and suspension rates increased as staff and administrators responded to concerns about substance use, but they stood united behind a response that was grounded in meeting the social-emotional needs of their students.

Family engagement was a significant component of the school’s systemic response to student substance use. Recognizing that vaping is a practice that the school alone cannot contain, parents and guardians were invited to discussions on the topic of vaping to facilitate ongoing conversations with their students about making healthy choices. By connecting school staff with families, adults could discuss resources available to students struggling with substance use, and students were receiving consistent messaging in the classroom and at home.



An unanticipated result of vaping-focused family engagement efforts was an increase in parent- and guardian-led efforts to build a positive environment in the school. Families were invited to brainstorming sessions on how to improve school climate and subsequently led efforts to bring some of those ideas to reality. One such idea was the “Coffee Cart,” a parent-led effort where school staff were brought coffee, tea, and sweets on a cart that circulated throughout the building once a week. Through these small actions, Bryant says, families contributed to a positive school climate and “carrying out the dreams we have in our building.”

Trusting the system

There will always be disruptive events that cause school systems and practices to waver, and administrative turnover at LMS is a classic example. Ongoing commitment to MTSS-B can provide school communities with a consistent and coherent problem-solving framework when



they encounter disruptions and challenges. Reflecting on her first year as principal, Bryant recognizes how important it was for her to understand, believe in, and advocate for MTSS-B as a system in her school. “I didn’t know what I didn’t know at that point,” Bryant says, “but if I could do it all over again, I’d make sure I was on top of it from the very beginning.”

Laconia High School



9-12



533 Enrolled



Free & Reduced Lunch 50%

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Low and slow: Embedding social-emotional learning into the fabric of LHS

High schools face an uphill battle when it comes to implementing MTSS-B. Stickers, field trips, and other incentives that work well for elementary and middle school students can fall flat with high schoolers, and high school staff hired for their content expertise are often skeptical about new schoolwide initiatives. For these and related reasons, reaching fidelity for a framework such as MTSS-B often takes much longer in high schools.³⁵ Against these long odds, Laconia High School (LHS) has experienced great success with MTSS-B. Assistant Principal Dave Bartlett attributes LHS's success to strong district leadership and support, commitment to staff understanding and buy-in, freedom for creative adaptation, a slow timeline, and opportunities to see and build on successes.

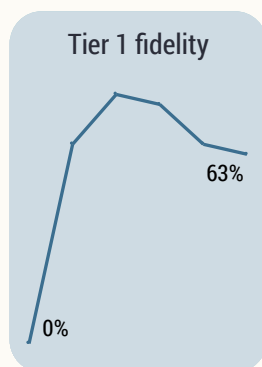
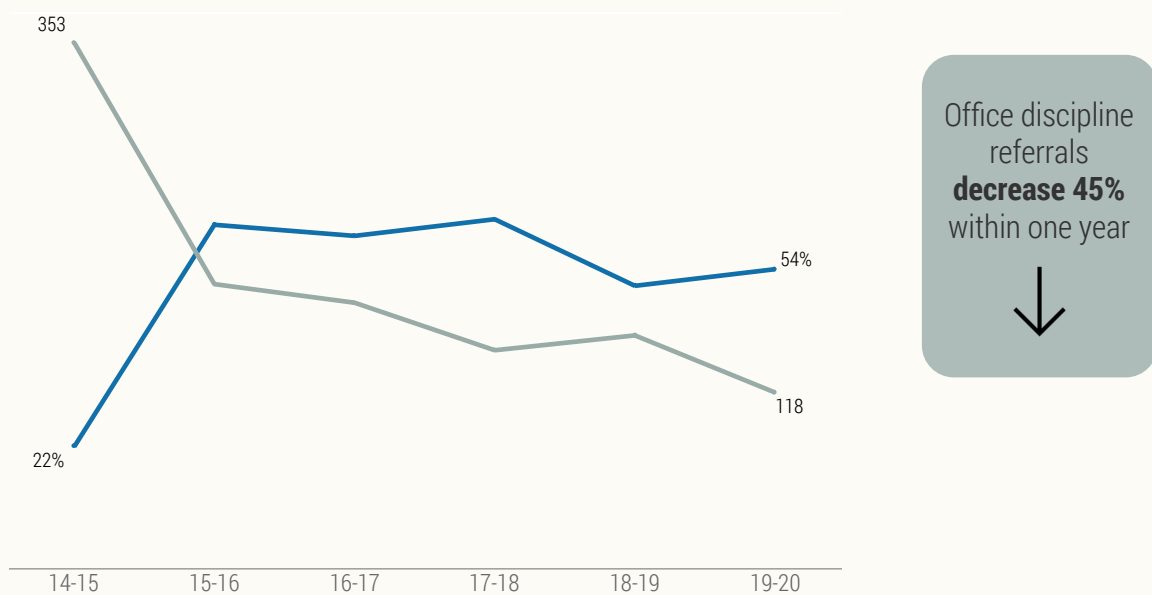
Going slow, together

LHS has seen a variety of student social-emotional wellness initiatives rise and fall over the years. Staff and administrators had become all too familiar with the transience of these “flavor of the week” programs, none of which produced visible and lasting outcomes. When funding to support MTSS-B began to materialize, Bartlett knew that the biggest challenge implementing in his school would be earning staff buy-in. Staff would need to be shown that MTSS-B could create positive, lasting results.



Bartlett's strategy started with developing a strong relationship with the district's Office of School Wellness (OSW). Bartlett and his team met with the OSW Program Administrator, McKenzie Harrington-Bacote, early and often to develop a shared understanding of OSW's expectations and LHS's capacity for MTSS-B implementation. "McKenzie was very open to letting us do it our way with our staff," Bartlett says. "She didn't jam this stuff down our throats." Though they stayed true to the core features of MTSS-B, Bartlett and his team were given the freedom to adapt the standard implementation "playbook" in a way that respected the school's culture and made staff more receptive to the gradual roll-out of the MTSS-B framework.

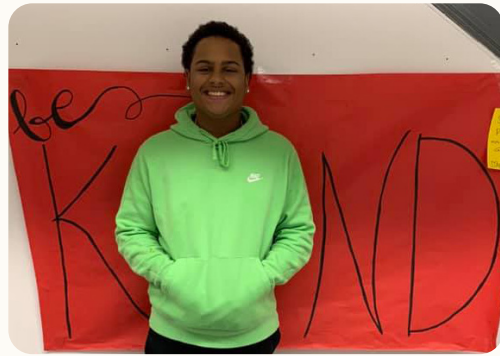
Office discipline referrals per 100 students || Overall MTSS-B fidelity



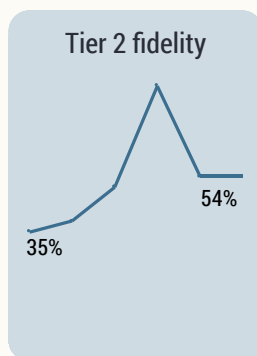
Their first steps were small. Staff were involved from the very beginning, as Bartlett and Harrington-Bacote introduced the MTSS-B framework and integrated discussions about student behavior into regular staff meetings. Professional development opportunities were infused with MTSS-B. Time and patience were at the heart of this approach, making sure not to move too fast.

"Do it in small chunks. Don't think you're going to change everything overnight."

This gradual approach to implementing universal Tier 1 social-emotional supports was a beneficial one. Students responded to newly established behavior expectations by demonstrating fewer problem behaviors in classrooms and in the cafeteria, engaging more attentively in academics, and leaving the hallways cleaner, according to Bartlett. The changes in student behavior data were remarkable: within a year, ODRs were cut nearly in half, and by 2016-17, in-school suspensions were reduced to zero. With these concrete results, support for MTSS-B amongst staff – including those who were previously skeptical about the new initiative – increased. Consequently, so did MTSS-B fidelity – a self-reinforcing cycle.



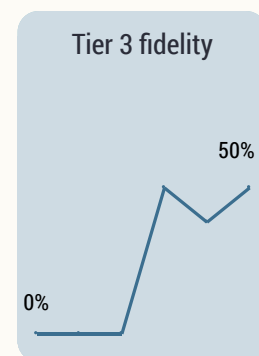
Beyond Tier 1



Next, Bartlett and his team focused on developing targeted Tier 2 interventions and Tier 3 individual interventions for students needing additional supports. Tier 2, according to Bartlett, has been the most difficult to implement in the high school setting. Tier 2 practices typically take the form of targeted small group or one-on-one social-emotional supports. Due to the academic rigor and requirements at the high school level, it can be difficult for students and staff alike to find time to participate in Tier 2 groups during the school day. Maintaining consistent staff leadership within their Tier 2 implementation team has also been challenging. Nonetheless, LHS runs several Tier 2 groups that

provide valuable supports for students. “Not everything is data-driven,” Bartlett says. “It’s got to be an organic thing for Tier 2 groups to come together and share.”

Unlike Tier 2, Bartlett described setting up Tier 3 supports as “pretty simple,” since the school already had established systems for supporting students who need individualized social-emotional supports. Their systems were further strengthened with the help of the OSW’s Harrington-Bacote, who assisted Bartlett in establishing relationships with a Mental Health Counselor from the local community mental health center and a Licensed Drug and Alcohol Counselor (LDAC) from Child and Family Services. Mental health providers continue to offer counseling on-site at LHS several days a week, while the LDAC has since been hired as a full-time district employee who splits her time seeing students at both the middle and high schools – greatly increasing access to these vital Tier 3 services. Fidelity to Tier 3 has increased by 50% since the onset of MTSS-B – though remains an area for growth for LHS.



An institutional shift toward justice

With the exception of a brief spike in ODRs and OSS during the 2017-18 school year, the improvements in student behavior seen during the early years of MTSS-B implementation at LHS have been maintained. Bartlett is confident that the positive trends in student behavior, and more importantly the integrity of the MTSS-B framework, will be sustained beyond any particular grant funding stream. The school has overcome the typical MTSS-B implementation barriers at the high school level and is committed to using the framework to meet student needs.

Each year, LHS staff receive professional development on MTSS-B to fuel and grow their ongoing practices across all tiers. In 2020, LHS added a Restorative Justice Coach to its roster of employees, who will empower students to practice healthy conflict resolution in school and in their lives. This new hire demonstrates an institutional shift away from punitive discipline and toward a commitment to meeting the social-emotional needs of students. “It’s part of our culture now,” Bartlett says. “It’s about the system that’s in place and the way people see it all working.”



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