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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, Colorado

The Graduate School

UNIVERSAL SCREENING AND PROGRESS MONITORING WITHIN A MULTI-TIERED SYSTEM OF SUPPORTS

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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College of Education and Behavioral Sciences
School of Special Education

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This Dissertation by: Mary Anne Fleury

Entitled: *Universal Screening and Progress Monitoring within a Multi-Tiered System of Supports*

has been approved as meeting the requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the College of Education and Behavioral Sciences in School of Special Education

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ABSTRACT


Multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) is a systemic framework that includes response to intervention (RTI) and positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) practices, yet the combination of academic and behavioral supports is still foreign to many districts. Universal screening and progress monitoring is one component of many MTSS frameworks across the country; however, some states have chosen to incorporate it within other components, leaving it off the statewide visual model. This study, *Universal Screening and Progress Monitoring within a Multi-Tiered System of Supports*, is a qualitative study that focused on teacher perceptions of their school’s universal screening and progress monitoring practices. The perceptions of educators are what drive implementation with fidelity; therefore, the study included gaining insights from five focus groups within two different school districts. The major categories what were identified include (a) systems, (b) leadership, (c) intervention, (d) data, and (e) collaboration, with teachers expressing all of the categories as necessary in creating appropriate universal screening and progress monitoring practices that meet the needs of all students, regardless of their label. Systems that support appropriate practices include what district-level direction is provided as well as the MTSS system itself. Effective leadership was identified as a shared leadership model with a representative team, rather
than one leader, consistently ensuring best practices through joint decision-making. A focus on appropriate intervention for students with behavioral needs was evident in this study as well as making certain that plans of adequate intensity are provided to meet the needs of students. Consistent progress monitoring practices ensure that educators are taking data and using data to drive decisions to write appropriate plans for students. Collaboration is what supports the entire process, with teaming being identified as the most important for all focus groups. These five categories reinforce the thinking that universal screening and progress monitoring practices are essential and need to be in the forefront of state models in order for the MTSS framework to seamlessly work for all students.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I asked my son what phrase I say the most, and his immediate response was, “It is what it is,” and I realized that not only do I say that often, but I have a sign with the phrase on it hanging up at work, I have jewelry that a colleague gave me with the saying on it, and often before I say it, people say it, as they know that’s what I will say. Reflecting on this phrase, or the more sophisticated phrases that couch the same meaning within them such as “Que sera, sera,” or “C’est la vie,” it dawned on me that this phase often supports us in our time of frustration regarding things that we can’t change in life or issues that are out of our control. While it may make me feel “okay” in the moment, deep down, I know that “it” is not always what “it” appears to be, whatever situation the “it” may be, and that it is up to me to change “it,” or work to make things better. This is exactly how I feel about education and what has driven my passion in life, whether it be working as a special education teacher, an advocate, an administrator, or as a mom working to better the education of my own children. I have never slowed down, and I attribute this to growing up with parents who led the way by example, always working for others who could not change situations in their own lives, always trying to better our society. My mom once asked me where in the world did I get my drive, and I looked right back at her and said, “I’m looking at her.” My parents worked from within their soul, and they never recognized their own strength or how much they impacted the world
around them. I can only hope that I emulate a smidgen of their work and strength, and so, “it is what it is” is exactly what I will make “it” to be.

In this doctoral journey, of course, I could not make “it” happen by myself, and without the support, love, and encouragement from all in my life over the last five years, I would not be actually writing this acknowledgement. I cannot begin to express the belief in me that Michael, my husband of 33 years, has shown, not always in words, but by his actions, always making sure the family’s needs were met as I studied, wrote, slept, and worked. I love you, Michael, for you have stood by my side to make “it” happen.

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A huge thank you to my fellow doctoral learners, especially to Valerie Sherman, who also joined the MTSS bandwagon when most out there didn’t know what it was and who spent thankless nights with me as we shared our papers with each other, making sure our “its,” or “hot messes,” didn’t seem that way when we turned them in. When I doubted my wisdom and knowledge, you refuted my thoughts, kept me going, and reminded me that I do, indeed, have a lot to contribute. You, my friend, have already made a huge difference in “it,” or education, and I am proud to call you Dr. Sherman.

Last, but not least, to my friends and colleagues over the years who supported my district work in MTSS and supported my passion and vision for one system that addresses the needs of all students, helping me to break down the silos. This thank you goes out to
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Systemic change is not new to the educational process as school districts throughout the nation struggle to meet the ever-changing needs of their student populations. Since the enactment of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEIA or IDEA), the term response-to-intervention (RTI) has become part of common terminology in every state, district and school in the nation for general and special educators. The purpose of RTI, as defined in IDEA, is to provide research-based, tiered interventions for students prior to the identification of a specific learning disability (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

While the law granted permission for states to determine how to comply with the RTI requirements, states also gave school districts the right to determine the definition and process for their specific RTI models. This led to the creation of multiple RTI models throughout the states and across the nation (Leaver, 2012; Zirkel, 2012). In Colorado, most school districts function within a locally controlled model, allowing individual schools to create their own RTI models (CDE, 2008; Keller-Margulis, 2012; Martin, 2015). In essence, there are as many RTI models as there are districts due to the flexibility schools have had in the creation of their particular RTI models (Zirkel, 2012).

Positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) also provides a tiered model of interventions, identifying components that are necessary for behavioral success
for all students (Lane, Kalberg, & Menzies, 2009). The structure of PBIS utilizes a proactive approach, using data to identify students who need preventative interventions (Kalberg, Lane, & Menzies, 2010).

While the systemic practices of RTI and PBIS have increased both the academic and behavioral success for students, the models have done so in isolation, identifying issues relating to educational silos. The silo mentality in education is defined within the RTI and PBIS practices as teams that address academics and the teams that address behavior not sharing information or knowledge with each other, independently strategizing, creating a breakdown of communication amongst teams. This mentality reduces efficiency and can contribute to a lack of appropriate services (Fenwick, Seville, & Brunsdon, 2009). This has often produced a duplication of services and a lack of knowledge of the impact that academics and behavior have on each other.

Multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) is the combination of RTI and PBIS into a single model that addresses both academics and behavior. Being familiar to educators, the terms RTI and PBIS alleviate some of the concerns regarding another new initiative, as they have been actively used in education since IDEA 2004. However, many school districts throughout the nation still struggle with the definition of RTI, and consistent implementation is sporadic (Sanetti & Collier-Meek, 2015). There is a loyal following of PBIS practices for those districts that utilize it, but it is often not viewed in combination with academic supports.

The components of MTSS that have been in focus in Colorado since 2012 are (a) shared leadership; (b) data-based problem solving and decision making; (c) layered continuum of supports; (d) evidence-based instruction, intervention, and assessment
practices; (e) universal screening and progress monitoring; and (f) family, school, and community partnering (FSCP). This study specifically focused on the universal screening and progress monitoring component, identifying the perceptions of teachers and their experiences relating to this component within the MTSS model. To enhance the readers’ understanding of this component of MTSS, universal screening is defined as an assessment of all children in a grade, school, or district to identify the performance levels of students on indicators related to academics or social-emotional needs (Ikeda, Neessen, & Witt, 2007). Early identification of issues related to academic struggles and social-emotional issues is addressed through universal screening measures. The early detection of issues is important in developing appropriate interventions that are effective for students (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2008; Shinn, 2008).

Progress monitoring involves frequent checks of understanding of academic or social, emotional, and behavioral expectations through informal assessments. It is a research-based practice that is used to evaluate students’ achievement and the appropriateness of instruction (American Institutes for Research, 2016). Interventions are then provided to students who need additional academic or social-emotional support. The levels of response are tracked through progress monitoring techniques to determine if the interventions are effective (Shinn, 2008). Progress monitoring includes the tracking of responses and performance of the academic or social-emotional skill after an intervention is implemented (Shinn, 2008).

The Colorado Department of Education (CDE) utilizes practice profiles for each component of MTSS to support school districts in the self-evaluation of the levels of implementation within their schools (CDE, 2015). The Colorado Department of
Education characterizes universal screening as periodic assessments that collect academic and behavioral data for all students (CDE, 2015). These assessments identify how students are progressing in the curriculum. The Colorado Department of Education describes progress monitoring as an approach to gathering academic and behavioral data through multiple methods. The performance of students is regularly reviewed during the school year to determine whether interventions and instruction are successful (CDE, 2015).

**Statement of the Problem**

Previously, I conducted a quantitative study to determine whether the levels of implementation of universal screening and progress monitoring for academics and behavior impacted reading and math scores of third graders. While the results were not conclusive, a survey the principals completed did show that the levels of implementation for universal screening and progress monitoring in the area of behavior were low, meaning either not in use or in use with inconsistent expectations. The problem lies herein, as a true MTSS model includes academic and behavioral components, placing an equal emphasis on both. Without appropriate screening and data collection for both academics and behavior, teachers struggle with identifying strategies and interventions for students. The information from the previous study indicated that more training and attention is typically given towards the academic focus rather than the behavioral focus (Bohanon, Goodman, & McIntosh, 2009).

The importance of continuing research on the MTSS process is critical for the future success of students in schools today. The prevention of academic and behavioral challenges within a multi-tiered system can be accomplished through the collaboration of
professionals. Waiting until behavior improves or waiting to address behavior until the content is learned will drive the process in reverse, making it too late for success (Kalberg et al., 2010).

Research focusing on the individual components of MTSS is critical in determining the areas of strength and weakness in schools and for increasing awareness of necessary changes to curriculum and instruction that will meet the needs of all students. This research study will contribute to the field by focusing on the MTSS component of universal screening and progress monitoring, allowing schools to develop appropriate preventive measures for academics and behavior.

**Purpose of the Study**

Kalberg et al. emphasized the need for appropriate interventions surrounding academics and behaviors within our schools (2010). In order to identify effective interventions, universal screening and progress monitoring are necessary to provide the data educators need in order to implement interventions that align with student needs. This research relating to this necessary component of MTSS focused on teacher perceptions and the impact they may have on student achievement and behavioral success. The main purpose of this study was to identify, examine, and understand teacher perceptions relating to the MTSS component, universal screening and progress monitoring. An additional purpose was to reveal the importance of consistent screening and progress monitoring to encourage the use of the implementation with fidelity of this vital component. The long-term outcome of this study was to create an awareness of the importance of focusing on the component in order to improve practices and plan appropriate professional development.
Research Questions

The research questions that were addressed in this study are:

Q1 What are the perceptions teachers have relating to the specific universal screening and progress monitoring practices in each elementary school?

Q2 What are the perceptions teachers have about the impact universal screening and progress monitoring has on student achievement in both academics and behavior?

Q3 Do the teachers perceive that they have adequate training and knowledge of universal screening and progress monitoring practices for both academics and behavior?

Q4 How do teachers define their work in relation to universal screening and progress monitoring for both academics and behavior?

Significance of the Study

Universal screening and progress monitoring aids educators in knowing how to best respond to the needs of students (Brown & Sanford, 2011). This critical component of the MTSS process includes screening and monitoring of both academics and behavior. School success is determined by the acquisition of academic and behavioral skills, and within an MTSS model, these skills are interwoven within practices and data are reviewed and aligned to determine the need for further interventions. Instructional models that integrate academics and behavior have been shown to increase academic skills at a higher rate than academic-only models (Stewart, Benner, Martella, & Marchand-Martella, 2007). It is, therefore, important to ensure a universal screening and progress monitoring process is in place for both academics and behavior. “By not considering academic and behavioral needs together, critical information that can more fully inform intervention efforts and patterns of responsiveness may be overlooked” (Lane, Menzies, Oakes, & Kalberg, 2012, p. 4).
Recently the MTSS component, universal screening and progress monitoring, has been removed from the Colorado Department of Education’s MTSS visual model, embedding it into the other components. Therefore, the significance of this study was to emphasize the importance of keeping it at the forefront in order for educators to consistently focus on the impact this component has on student success. The timeliness of this study will support educational direction in maintaining effective screening and monitoring practices.

This qualitative research refers to a previous study that identified the levels of implementation of the MTSS component, universal screening and progress monitoring, in both academics and behavior. To further understand perceptions that alter teacher practices, five focus groups were conducted with teachers from each elementary school. The interviews provided information regarding the understanding, implementation, practices, and perceptions of the MTSS component. The significance of this study is in providing the districts with information that will emphasize a heavier focus on the importance of this component as well as a direction for future research.

**Implementation Science**

It was necessary to take into account the importance of implementation science within this work, as this study reviewed practices and perspectives and aimed to correlate student success with these practices. The National Implementation Research Network (NIRN) defined implementation science as “the study of factors that influence the full and effective use of innovations in practice,” (NIRN, 2015, p. 1). Implementation science has provided the field of education the opportunity to study the practices we use in our classrooms and to identify whether they are appropriate in educating our students,
rather than implementing practices without thought or connection to accurate student data.

The term “research-based” has been in popular use since IDEA 2004, and this coined term has driven schools throughout the nation to ensure that all practices, interventions, and curriculum are rooted in research prior to adoption. However, while schools are using curriculum and interventions that are technically research-based, many teachers do not follow through to ensure the instruction, curriculum, or interventions are evidence-based, meaning the data are not collected on student progress to determine whether the interventions are appropriate for each student. The evidence is not present to continue or change. This later term of “evidence-based” arose from the need to use data to inform decisions and improve instruction. A double meaning includes the use of evidence to determine effectiveness of interventions and curriculum prior to use in schools.

During the years of focusing on using research-based and evidence-based interventions, curriculum, and practices, it became evident that success was determined by the methods teachers used. Enter implementation science, the practice of studying the barriers and facilitators of interventions, curriculum, and practices that are research-based or evidence-based. By studying delivery methods, one can determine whether interventions are implemented with fidelity, meaning whether they are used as the developer and researcher intended (CRISP, 2016).

Implementation science addresses potential gaps in practices. Issues that commonly arise include the adoption of interventions and practices that are not used with
fidelity and practices not sustained long enough to determine success (Fixsen, Blasè, Horner, & Sugai, 2009). Often, educators struggle with the acceptability of practices.

“Acceptability is the perception among implementation stakeholders that a given treatment, service, practice, or innovation is agreeable, palatable, or satisfactory. Lack of acceptability has long been noted as a challenge in implementation” (Proctor et al., 2011, p. 67). The identification of teacher perceptions can determine the acceptability of practices by those who are required to follow them and determine causes for the lack of use of these practices.

Currently, there have been no studies conducted related to multi-year timeframes to reach full implementation of MTSS; however, districts have created timelines for implementation. One such timeline, created by a school district in Colorado, suggested a three- to five-year implementation plan (St. Vrain Valley Schools, 2013). Within this plan, it was recommended as follows:

- Year 1. Develop common language and common understanding, create professional learning communities (PLCs) to review current data and make decisions, hold data dialogues, and teach behavioral expectations to students.
- Year 2. Maintain practices from year one, refine teaming structures, review current interventions, and determine additional interventions based on academic and behavioral progress monitoring.
- Year 3. At all tiers, effective teaming and problem-solving practices should be in place, and 80% of the student population is responding to tier one instruction. Interventions at the tier two and tier three levels are refined using existing progress monitoring data.
• Year 4 and Beyond. Continue refinement of teaming structures, interventions and the monitoring of progress, identifying existing obstacles. Consistency across all schools is evident and decisions regarding the MTSS process are made quickly.

Every school district sets its own precedence for how MTSS is implemented, and while districts vary greatly, it is common for full implementation to take years to achieve.

**Theoretical Perspective**

Multi-tiered system of supports discusses the use of one system with many supports that serve academics and behavior. It intentionally does not address multiple systems to prevent the further creation of educational silos. This is an example of the structural-functional theory, which considers a system as interconnected, with each part working together for the betterment of the whole (Merton, 1996). To be a fully functioning MTSS model, all components need to be consistently implemented, and all schools desiring to delve into the world of MTSS need full implementation to improve the success of the whole, or the district.

The theoretical framework for this study also falls under the constructionism concept. Crotty (1998) stated that meaning is constructed through human interaction. Using perceptions of participants helps in determining the direct meaning of success of a model. As the meaning is created by human participants, a constructivist view using a grounded theory approach will provide the necessary framework for collecting data. Grounded theory was developed from collecting and analyzing data in a systematic way through stages. This involved constructing a theory through orderly analysis of data.
Terms Defined

**Benchmarking.** Identifying where students fall within the educational standards. Assessments are used to benchmark students throughout the school year. Benchmarking also provides data for educators to determine appropriate interventions as needed.

**Data-based problem solving.** The process that includes defining and analyzing problems, developing a plan, and evaluating the response to interventions that are related to the needs of students. A body of evidence includes the review of academic and behavioral data, including assessments. A review of information from families is also critical in the problem-solving process (CDE, 2014).

**Evidence-based.** The use of instruction, interventions, or assessments that have been proven to be effective through scientifically-based research studies. The results of the research guide the educational decisions made in schools. Used interchangeably with “research-based.”

**Implementation with fidelity.** Following a curriculum, intervention, or supplemental instructional materials as they were intended or designed to be used. It is important to follow the intended method in the use of teaching research-based curriculums or processes to ensure similar results to those that the research has proven (American Institutes for Research, 2015).

**Implementation science.** The study of specific practices to determine effectiveness and a direction for improvement.

**Layered continuum of supports.** Academic and behavioral supports that are provided at the universal level (for all), the targeted level (for some), and the intensive level (for few) within the MTSS process (CDE, 2014).
Multi-Tiered system of supports (MTSS). Educational components that provide a prevention-based framework to improve academic and behavioral outcomes for every student through a layered continuum of services within the classroom and school. Multi-tiered system of supports include a strong component of family, school, and community partnering that emphasizes common language and practices throughout the school, reinforced at home, and used within the community (CDE, 2014).

Positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS). A tiered model that emphasizes a positive, proactive approach to addressing behavioral education, focusing on the social and emotional needs of students. It is an approach, not a curriculum, that aids in the provision of social and emotional practices and improves the implementation of the practices through a review of data. This model is designed to maximize successful outcomes for all students through the teaching of behavioral expectations (Sugai & Simonsen, 2012).

Progress monitoring. An approach that uses multiple data collection methods on a regular basis to identify the growth of students. The performance of students is reviewed frequently during the academic year to evaluate students’ responses to instruction and interventions that were provided.

Research-based interventions. An intervention that is determined effective based on research conducted on that particular intervention and that indicated student success from its use. Used interchangeably with “evidence-based.”

Response-to-intervention (RTI). A systematic process that provides interventions ranging from general to targeted and intensive for students needing additional support after changes are made in classroom instruction. The needs of students drive the
interventions, and the data from these interventions can be used to determine the need for special education services. Progress is monitored frequently to make appropriate decisions regarding changes in instruction (Batsche et al., 2005).

*Shared leadership.* Decision-making shared by a group of individuals within the school community. This group within a school can include the principal, general and special education teachers, specialists, parents, and students. Shared leadership in a school is evident by different members coordinating the training of all staff as well as coaching, ensuring resources are provided, and evaluating the MTSS process (CDE, 2014).

*Universal screening.* Universal screening is a quick assessment administered to all students at least once during the year. A screening provides information as to the academic and behavioral levels of students. It can guide educators towards appropriate prevention techniques or early interventions that address identified issues. Universal screening is meant to be a fast and low-cost assessment that can be used repeatedly to determine the academic or behavioral growth of all students (CDE, 2014).

**Chapter I Summary**

The timing of this study was of the essence, as the CDE has removed universal screening and progress monitoring from the MTSS components. As a witness to the processes and practices in schools, I am concerned that the removal of this essential component from the visual model will set the schools further back in identifying appropriate levels of students and determining next steps in meeting the needs of students. Educators currently struggle with understanding how to monitor the progress of their students, and without a focus on this component, the collection of data will no
longer be a priority in the eyes of the teacher. The purpose of monitoring progress is to
know where students are in the learning process at all times and whether they are
demonstrating the necessary skills to advance (Miller, 2014).

This MTSS is one that addresses behavioral and academic supports for all
students, with an emphasis on the word all. It allows all educators to collaborate and
strategize as to how to best meet the needs of students. It also puts the responsibility for
educating all students on every educator, breaking down the silos between the different
departments in education, reinforcing the importance of focusing on student needs rather
than a job description.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

History and Development of Multi-Tiered System of Supports

The driving forces behind MTSS are IDEA 2004 and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). IDEA is the federal law that ensures special education services are provided within public schools. NCLB, also known as the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), requires all students to be proficient in reading and math, and that schools show a high graduation rate, as well as a low dropout rate (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). In 2015, the reauthorization of the ESEA was passed, and Every Child Left Behind was renamed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The goal of ESSA continues the purpose of NCLB to improve outcomes for all students. IDEA influenced the concept of RTI with the direction that schools provide research-based interventions for students who do not respond to generalized instruction (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Together, these two federal laws support the practices behind MTSS. Addressing both academics and behavior within one systemic model characterizes MTSS.

Response to Intervention

In 1975, President Gerald Ford signed Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children’s Act (EHA), ensuring equal access to education for all students
with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 1975). This law provided free and appropriate public education (FAPE) for students with disabilities and started what is now known as a child-find process in which school districts are required to find and identify students who qualify for special education services. Procedural safeguards accompanied this process, requiring parents to sign consent for assessments and placement in special education. The education of students with disabilities was the sole burden of special education teachers, creating educational silos and separation of students from general education instruction (Prasse, 2015). Discussion regarding student outcomes was limited at best, and the push to qualify students for special education was great when a student did not meet academic criteria in the general education classroom (Prasse, 2015).

Reform that included general and special education began around the time the IDEA was reauthorized in 2004, and the wording that supported a response-to-intervention model was included in the law. This provided an avenue to serve the needs of all students (CDE, 2015). Research supported the development of RTI models and included common features such as multiple tiers of interventions, a problem-solving process, and the expectation that educators collect data to inform educational decisions (CDE, 2015).

States throughout the nation are implementing RTI through the use of a three-tiered model, where each tier represents a level of intensity that increases with the need for more support. Standard practice throughout the country places emphasis on universal instruction in the first tier. Universal instruction includes the curriculum provided in the general education setting to all students. The second tier provides individualized
interventions within the general education curriculum accompanied by supplemental curriculum. The third tier increases the intensity, duration, and frequency of the interventions (Fuchs, Compton, Fuchs, Bryant, & Davis, 2008). Progress monitoring is frequent in both the second and third tiers, and a problem-solving method that analyzes assessment and classroom data informs decisions at each tier. It may be determined that a student should be assessed for qualification for a specific learning disability to receive special education services based on the analyzed data that identifies a student’s progress or lack of progress in response to applied interventions.

The National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) details the core components of RTI as (a) a multi-tiered model of service; (b) a problem-solving process determining interventions; (c) the use of research-based interventions; (d) progress-monitoring tools that drive instruction; (e) analysis of data to determine effectiveness of interventions; and (f) the use of screening, diagnostic, and progress monitoring assessments (Batsche et al., 2005). Although the term RTI is still being used, the MTSS frameworks also embrace these components, focusing on a school-wide prevention-based model.

Colorado has been considered a leader in using the RTI process for identification of specific learning disabilities and for global use, defining the process through six components: leadership; problem solving; curriculum and instruction; assessments and progress monitoring; positive school climate and culture; and family, school, and community partnerships (Zirkel, 2012). Emphasis in each of these areas is placed on the collaboration between school personnel and families. The Colorado Department of
Education stated that a true process must contain all six components and that an RTI process cannot function well without focusing on each area (CDE, 2010).

One recent “aha” moment noted in a school district in Colorado was that the focus for years has been on identifying what is wrong with the student and what interventions the student needs to succeed when not responding to universal instruction rather than on identifying what the educators can do differently to meet the needs of all students (J. Day, personal communication, January 28, 2013). The lesson here is to change instruction at the universal, or tier one level, and differentiate for all students prior to identifying the need for individual interventions (McIntosh, Sadler, & Brown, 2012). The other moment of revelation for this same school district was that changing instruction also includes changing behavioral expectations.

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports

Positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) was introduced into law under the Individuals with Disabilities Act of 1997 for the purpose of addressing effective behavioral interventions for students. A grant was created at the time to support the efforts of schools in providing evidence-based practices for students with behavioral issues. The University of Oregon was awarded the grant, and it initiated technical assistance to schools through the establishment of the National Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (Sugai & Simonsen, 2012).

The model of PBIS provides a tiered implementation framework, identifying four components that are necessary for behavioral success for all students (Lane et al., 2009). These components include systems, data, practices, and outcomes. Similar to RTI, PBIS uses a data-driven, multi-tiered approach for delivering services. The systems component
emphasizes the use of three to five school-wide behavioral expectations in the first tier. These expectations are formed into a school motto and are taught to students at the beginning of the school year and retaught as necessary throughout the year. The same expectations are present in every class and every area of the building, alleviating the confusion some students have in switching gears to meet different expectations for different teachers. Students are then rewarded for following the school-wide behavioral expectations and this, in turn, fosters a positive school climate (Sugai & Horner, 1999). The second tier initiates behavioral interventions for students who do not respond to the school-wide expectations. The third tier provides behavioral support plans for students who are not responsive to the support in tiers one and two. Rewards are often negatively viewed by educators, but research data demonstrate that students respond to positive rewards, whether intrinsic or extrinsic (Sugai, Sprague, Horner, & Walker, 2000).

The systems component of a PBIS model emphasizes the use of three to five school-wide behavioral expectations within a school motto that are taught in depth to all students. The same expectations are present in every classroom and every area of the building, alleviating the confusion some students have in switching gears to meet different expectations for different teachers. Rewards are given for following the school-wide behavioral expectations and this, in turn, fosters a positive school climate (Sugai & Horner, 1999). Data are collected and monitored to measure the success of behavioral interventions and appropriate practices. Practices that have been deemed successful for students through the monitoring of objectives, or outcomes, are continued, and the individuals that have appropriate skills to implement the system with fidelity carry on as leaders within the model (Sugai & Horner, 2009). Students who do not respond to the
positive behavior model are provided interventions that increase with intensity, duration, and frequency, depending on need.

**Multi-Tiered System of Supports**

Typically, educators have viewed academic information and behavioral information separately (Hawken, Vincent, & Schumann, 2008). Since the passing of IDEA 2004, data collection has become more prevalent, and schools have identified that students who struggle academically are more inclined to struggle behaviorally and vice versa (Bohanon et al., 2009). The current need is for one school-wide team to analyze academic and behavioral data to make decisions to meet the needs of the whole child. Addressing both academics and behavior in one systemic model defines MTSS. Colorado defines MTSS as a “whole-school, data-driven, prevention-based framework for improving learning outcomes for every student through a layered continuum of evidence-based practices and systems” (CDE, 2013, p. 1). The importance of implementing MTSS in our schools is driven by the need for clarity of purpose and the lack of implementation of fidelity within the RTI process. As districts struggle with definition, appropriate interventions and consistency in the membership of their teams is crucial (Johnson, Mellard, Fuchs, & McKnight, 2006).

The structure of PBIS includes rigorous practices with a solid data system which systematically tracks behaviors. Positive behavioral interventions and supports data across the nation have indicated whether or not schools are on track and using practices appropriately. States are realizing the importance of tracking academic progress in a similar manner as behavioral progress and are concluding that one system that can address both academics and behavior is working smarter, not harder (Sugai, 2006). With
evidence showing academic failure can be due to behavioral issues, MTSS has been
determined as the new systemic approach to meeting the needs of all students (Lassen,
Steele, & Sailor, 2006; Tobin & Sugai, 1999).

As districts across the nation move forward in the implementation of MTSS,
confusion still exists regarding the difference between RTI and MTSS models, and
educators are using the terms interchangeably (Hurst, 2014). Although RTI models
effective interventions and instruction across tiers, it focuses on the response of students
to particular interventions. A multi-tiered system of supports is a comprehensive
framework that is the umbrella for the system that houses RTI. It includes instruction and
interventions that address social, emotional, behavioral, and academic supports for all
learners, whether they are struggling or advanced. The multi-tiered system of supports
includes a greater emphasis on the collaboration between special and general educators
and provides alignment for policies and programs, which support district-wide
professional development (Hurst, 2014).

Throughout the nation, states have identified the need to revamp the RTI and
PBIS processes and combine them into the systemic tiered system of MTSS (Averill &
Rinaldi, 2011; CDE, 2013; Kansas Department of Education, 2010; University of South
Florida, 2011; UPDC, 2012). The combination, not elimination, of systems is being
driven by the need to improve success for students academically, socially, emotionally,
and behaviorally and is supported by research data that indicate a positive relationship
exists between systemic behavior support and increased academic performance (Horner,
Sugai, Todd, & Lewis-Palmer, 2005; Nelson, Benner, Lane, & Smith, 2004). Informal
identification of success in states has promoted the MTSS process nationwide through
consistent review of data; however, little research has been conducted by state
departments, and the need for longitudinal studies is necessary.

The California Department of Education has defined MTSS as a framework that
integrates standards with instruction and differentiation, aligning all systems to meet
individual academic, behavioral, and social needs of the learner. The state emphasizes
the need for flexibility, allowing for the redesign of supports and services that can adapt
to the changing needs of students. While California’s overarching MTSS process
addresses the needs of all students, RtI² is a component of California’s MTSS framework,
emphasizing teamwork that uses data-based decisions to address the academic and
behavioral needs of students who are struggling. The RtI² component specifically
includes support for students in special education, title programs, English learners, and
American-Indian students (California Department of Education, 2015).

Colorado defines MTSS as a “whole-school, data-driven, prevention-based
framework for improving learning outcomes for every student through a layered
continuum of evidence-based practices and systems” (CDE, 2014, p. 7). Colorado has
redefined RTI and PBIS as components under the umbrella of MTSS. The MTSS
process is comprised of six components: (a) shared leadership; (b) data-based problem
solving; (c) layered continuum of supports; (d) evidence-based instruction, intervention,
and assessment practices; (e) universal screening and progress monitoring; and (f) family,
school, and community partnerships. Emphasis in each of these areas is placed on the
collaboration between school personnel and families. The Colorado Department of
Education previously stated that a true MTSS process must contain all six components
and that this process cannot function well without focusing on each area (Figure 1, CDE,
However, in 2015, the CDE determined that educators might respond better to fewer components. The department decided to eliminate the component, universal screening and progress monitoring, and keep the remaining five (Figure 2). Per a conversation with the CDE’s Office of Learning Supports, the belief is that universal screening and progress monitoring should be embedded within the other components. This researcher’s belief is that the need for this component is more prevalent in the schools today with the need for data to determine next steps for students. Screening and the monitoring of progress provides data to make these determinations. Educators tend to not focus on practices if they are not emphasized, and the fear is that this component will become lost in the process. Thus, the reason for this study. The visuals below show the difference between the 2013 model and the 2015 model.

![Colorado MTSS Essential Components](image)

*Figure 1. Previous CDE MTSS model.*
Figure 2. Current CDE MTSS model.

A visual depicting the necessity for all students to be taught through the general education curriculum is emphasized through the layered continuum of supports (Figure 3). In 2015, Colorado stressed the importance of using a problem-solving process to aid in defining and analyzing issues, implementing strategies or interventions, and evaluating data to determine success (Figure 4). CDE recommended that this process be used with all teams in all schools (CDE 2015).
Figure 3. CDE’s layered continuum of supports.
Florida has renamed their RTI process as MTSS and directs that schools are to provide instruction and interventions that align to student needs. Identifying the current level of performance and how the student learns throughout time is to guide and inform instructional decisions. Florida closed the first phase of RTI in 2011, and its MTSS phase, or Phase II, is now in place. Florida also uses a four-step process, which is similar to Colorado’s model, focusing on defining student needs or problems, analyzing the issue determining why it is occurring, implementing a strategy or intervention, and evaluating data to determine success (Florida Department of Education, 2015). The state uses a common tiered model that details supports for the majority of the student population through core universal instruction, targeted instruction for academics and behavior for some students who need additional supports, and intensive individualized interventions for the few students who have not responded to the other tiered levels of support.
The state of Iowa scaled up its efforts in supporting students through an MTSS framework that focuses on five components: (a) evidence-based curriculum and instruction, provided at the universal level; (b) universal screening conducted three times a year; (c) evidence-based instructional interventions provided to meet the needs of students within the targeted and intensive levels; (d) the collection of progress monitoring data reviewed to direct instruction; and (e) the use of a data-based decision-making model.

The continuous improvement process Iowa uses is similar to the problem-solving process used in other states. It provides direction relating to defining and diagnosing problems, developing and implementing a plan, and evaluating the implementation of the plan. As Iowa moves toward statewide implementation with fidelity in every district, their focus remains constant on the Iowa core standards which aims towards exiting students “ready for life” (Iowa Department of Education, 2015).

The Kansas Department of Education centers its MTSS process on system-level change across the state. It defines MTSS as “a coherent continuum of evidence-based, system-wide practices to support a rapid response to academic and behavioral needs, with frequent data-based monitoring for instructional decision-making to empower each Kansas student to achieve high standards” (2015, p. 1). The goal of MTSS in Kansas is prevention based, identifying students who struggle early in the year and implementing supports and tailored interventions to avoid the widening of knowledge gaps. Flexibility is also key, using progress-monitoring data to determine when instruction needs to be altered. To demonstrate the state’s MTSS philosophy, Kansas has created a visual that depicts support for all students, emphasizing the inclusion of students who need targeted
and intensive interventions. The key components of leadership, professional development, and empowering culture are what supports effective instruction, curriculum, and assessment, ultimately making a positive difference for students (Kansas Department of Education, 2015).

Essential components of Michigan’s MTSS framework center around instruction and appropriate interventions, use of data and assessments, implementation of evidence-based practices, a problem-solving process, and engagement of stakeholders (Michigan Department of Education, 2015). Michigan states that early intervention is key in the prevention of long-term academic and behavioral issues. The state’s visual model intentionally displays tier one, or the universal level for all students as much larger than the other tiers, indicating the importance of general education instruction. While other states also emphasize the need for collaboration, Michigan directs the use of a collaborative problem-solving model as well as collaboration with parents and the community.

Pennsylvania has joined the ranks of states moving to full use of an MTSS framework. It also utilizes a problem-solving process that stresses the need to define and analyze issues, implement a specific plan to close gaps, and review information through an evaluation process. Pennsylvania defines their MTSS model as

A comprehensive system of supports that in the commonwealth includes standards-aligned, culturally responsive and high quality core instruction, universal screening, data-based decision-making, tiered services and supports, family engagement, central/building level leadership, RTI/SLD (specific learning disability) determination, and professional learning. (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2013, p. 1).

The state accentuates the need to include academic and behavior discussion in the process, identifying the need for all students to experience success in school.
The last state reviewed for comparison purposes relating to the MTSS process is Utah, which integrates interventions and assessments to increase student achievement, decrease behavioral issues, and increase readiness for life. Utah lists seven critical components necessary for student success. These include combining academic and behavioral supports, a collaborative problem-solving process, appropriate assessments, use of data to make decisions, pertinent professional development, guided leadership, and the engagement of families. Utah further defines the universal, targeted, and intensive tiers aligning them with state-identified critical components for success. A key component is equitable education for all, emphasizing, once again, the need to educate all students first through a universal setting, providing exposure to general education curriculum (Utah Personnel Development Center, 2012).

The commonalities between the MTSS frameworks in the different states indicate that data-driven instruction, interventions, and assessments are critical and necessary for closing educational gaps, and that a problem-solving process will aid in the determination of next steps in meeting the needs of students. They identify the need for tiered levels with interventions that increase with intensity, duration, and frequency, depending on student needs. All these states have also moved RTI under the umbrella of MTSS, and they recognize the need to address academic and behavior through one collaborative framework, bringing educators and administrators together to make effective decisions regarding best practices (Averill & Rinaldi, 2011).

The effort by the states to break down the silos between general education and special education redefines the roles and responsibilities of all educators. The United States Department of Education (USDE) recently promoted the blending and braiding of
IDEA and Title funds, or ESEA funds, to allow the sharing of resources and personnel to meet the needs of students who are not typically qualified for their programs (American Institutes for Research, 2014). This leveraging of federal funding is allowed for districts that conduct needs assessments which determine the level of student needs within their schools. Duplication of services can be reduced through an appropriate needs assessment, and collaborative practices that match the expertise of educators to specific student needs will allow students to be educated by those who have the best level of skill to close the gaps. This new system breaks down the barriers that have existed in education for decades, and it brings the focus back on to student needs rather than funding streams for services.

**Review of Studies**

While the focus of this study was related to the fifth component in the Colorado MTSS model, universal screening and progress monitoring, it is important to review existing research related to MTSS and its combination of academic and behavioral focus within one systemic model. The research relating to the importance of incorporating behavioral, social, and emotional interventions within universal screening and progress monitoring is lacking, opening up this area for further study by those invested in MTSS implementation practices (Haynes, 2012).

Research exists relating to both RTI and PBIS, but little research has been conducted on the overarching MTSS process. Empirical evidence relating to true MTSS models and their effectiveness is scarce; however, as states and districts understand the benefits of using one model to address the needs of all students, practices are increasing, and research is being conducted as this is written.
Currently, the Coleman (2012) study is the only study found that studies a full MTSS model, while other studies incorporate academic and behavioral measures provided concurrently, thus replicating what might be considered an MTSS model. Through a research study relating to superintendent perceptions of the MTSS process, it was found that without a framework for MTSS implementation, districts struggle with systemic change (Dulaney, Hallam, & Wall, 2013). The limited body of research suggests that MTSS is the logical instructional framework that districts should embrace, as it reinforces a positive culture which provides support for academic, social, and emotional growth in students (Coleman, Steinberg, Pereles, Miller, & Jorgensen, 2012). Supports provided in a tiered model for academic and behavioral interventions have proven to be effective in the reduction of negative behavior and an increase in academic success (Kalberg et al., 2010). By combining both academic and behavioral interventions into one model, results showed a reduction in office discipline referrals (ODRs) and suspensions and increase standardized academic scores (Lassen et al., 2006). Reports are positive for increased student confidence as well as a reduction in the stigma associated with special education services within an MTSS framework (Coleman et al., 2012). Results also are encouraging for educators who seek improved results in behavior through academic interventions (McIntosh et al., 2012; Nelson et al., 2004).

Research indicates that the success of an MTSS framework is due to the preventive measures that are implemented system-wide, which includes direction from the district to schools, and from the school administrators to the teachers, who set the culture within a building (Sanetti & Collier-Meek, 2015). The very nature of MTSS focuses on a proactive approach that avoids waiting for students to fail; MTSS
emphasizes specific practices such as universal screening and progress monitoring in order to identify needs prior to students experiencing a lack of success (Telfer, 2014).

As educational agencies are now recognizing, we can no longer evaluate a child for academic or behavioral difficulties in isolation. Therefore, systemic approaches that discuss and combine academic and behavioral data together are creating success in schools (Bohanon et al., 2009). A multi-tiered system of supports is a fairly new initiative that aligns with the IDEA 2004, providing a system that supports RTI and PBIS. It is important that school districts work toward a common and consistent approach for the MTSS model to be utilized district-wide (Averill & Rinaldi, 2011).

The importance of implementing MTSS in our schools is driven by the need for clarity of purpose and the lack of implementation of fidelity within the RTI process, as districts struggle with definition, appropriate interventions, and consistency in the membership of their teams (Johnson et al., 2006). The structure of PBIS includes rigorous practices with a solid data system which systematically tracks behaviors. Across the nation, PBIS data have shown whether schools are on track and appropriately using practices. States are realizing the importance of tracking academic progress in a similar manner as behavioral progress and are concluding that one system that can address both academics and behavior is “working smarter, not harder” (Sugai, 2006). With evidence indicating that academic failure can be due to behavioral issues, MTSS has been determined to be the new systemic approach that will meet the needs of all students (Lassen et al., 2006; Tobin & Sugai, 1999). Identifying the perceptions of teachers toward the MTSS process will enable districts to address issues that inhibit the success of one model.
Research Studies Summarized

The studies involved in this literature review all focus on the relationship between academic and behavioral interventions in a multi-tiered model, with two studies emphasizing that an increase in academic skills reduces behavioral issues (McIntosh et al., 2012; Kalberg et al., 2010) and two studies emphasizing that by addressing behavioral issues first, an increase in academic skills will be the result (Lassen et al., 2006; Nelson et al., 2004). The Coleman study did not discuss whether academics or behavior was the driving factor, but focused on a root cause analysis, identifying underlying causes that created success in the Thompson School District in Colorado after implementing MTSS (2012).

The purpose of the Coleman study was to determine how the needs of students with disabilities were being met within combined RTI and PBIS models in an elementary school, middle school, and high school in the Thompson School District in Colorado, the 16th largest school district in Colorado at the time of the study. Research to intervention and PBIS were combined to create a system of supports for academic and behavioral needs, which defines MTSS. Each school created teams to implement the MTSS model. These teams identified implementation goals, monitored the implementation success, and made recommendations for improvement. The buildings also promoted the use of objective data collected through universal screening and progress monitoring measures (Coleman et al., 2012). The goal was to improve outcomes for all students.

The measurements for success of the Coleman study were the use of the Colorado State Assessment Program, or CSAP, graduation and dropout rates, student enrollment, office discipline referrals, out-of-school suspensions and focus groups. The targeted
CSAP data were in the areas of reading and math for overall school performance as well as the performance of students in special education. The CSAP data were taken over a three-year period, from 2008-2011, and included the 2008 and 2011 years for four years of data. These data showed an improvement in the overall school performance in reading as an increase of 6.1% for the elementary school, 2.4% for the middle school, and 10.2% for the high school. The CSAP data in math showed an increase of 8.2% for the elementary school, a decrease of 1.7% for the middle school, and an increase of 11.4% for the high school.

The CSAP data for special education students in reading showed a decrease in performance of 0.1% at the middle school level and an increase of 3.8% at the high school level. The data in math decreased by 1.8% for the middle school and increased by 2.8% for the high school. The elementary school did not have a large enough data set to achieve a score in reading or math.

Graduation rates over the three-year study period increased at the high school by 0.1% for the total population, but decreased by 10.8% for students with disabilities. The dropout rate decreased at the high school by 1.0% for the total population and decreased by 1.5% for students with disabilities.

Enrollment is an area that needs to be taken into account when reviewing the Coleman study, as a decrease in enrollment can affect the outcome of the study. The enrollment at the elementary school declined by 75 total students over the three-year period and declined in the special education population by 22 students. The middle school’s enrollment declined by 69 total students and declined by 6 students in special
education. The high school’s total enrollment declined by 107 students, and the special education population increased by 1 over the three-year period.

Reported out-of-school suspensions decreased in all three schools, with a .20% decrease at the elementary school, a 4.6% decrease at the middle school, and a 3.8% decrease at the high school. It was noted that while results may not be totally accurate due to a decline in enrollment, it is not likely to be the only reason for the change.

The overall data show success in the three schools in the areas of measurement. The success of the Coleman study was evident by an overall sense of acceptance of all students and an attitude that promoted a positive climate and culture of the schools. Within the positive culture of acceptance, stigma for students in special education was reduced and support was evident for social and emotional growth. Students experienced an increase in self-confidence, and parents reported more satisfaction with the academic and behavioral results of their children. The root cause analysis identified that the success of the Thompson School District was due to shared leadership, objective data that informed educational decisions and interventions, collaboration which created common goals, stakeholders believing that all students can succeed with appropriate supports, and the understanding that to achieve successful student outcomes, strong family partnerships are necessary.

The Kalberg et al. (2010) study focused on supporting students with reading and behavioral challenges by integrating academic and behavioral measures. The study described how one elementary school, which had an integrated three-tiered preventive model that incorporated academic, behavioral, and social supports, implemented progress monitoring through curriculum based measurements, or CBMs, with behavior screeners
to identify students who were non-responders to prevention efforts. These efforts were used universally throughout the school and considered to be part of the first tier of a three-tiered model of intervention and supports. The purpose of the study was to provide information about using multiple data measures, such as CBMs and behavior screening data, to analyze what students should be targeted for interventions and for future decisions regarding academic, behavioral, and social components of programming. The study described how one elementary school implemented universal screening through curriculum-based measurements, or CBMs, with behavior screeners to identify students who were non-responders to prevention efforts.

A total of 129 students in kindergarten through fifth grades who attended Piedmont Elementary in Tennessee were part of the three-year Kalberg et al. study. The study was named Project PREVENT: Screening and Intervening to Prevent the Development of Learning and Behavior Problems (Kalberg et al., 2010). The purpose of the project was to determine the most effective means of identifying students who may be at risk for learning or behavioral issues in the early years of elementary school. A team of school staff, including the principal, two general education teachers, a special education teacher, a parent, and a student attended a set of trainings for a year. The team created a three-tiered model of prevention for the school which focused on academic, social, and behavioral components and also used the school-wide positive behavior support plan as the framework for addressing behavior.

Students in the Kalberg et al. (2010) study were screened using academic, behavior, and social measures, and the data were placed within four quadrants. The measures used included a curriculum-based measurement for reading, a screener for
behavior disorders, and another screener for antisocial behaviors. Reading scores for students were first graphed into the quadrants, and behavior data were then added to the graph by circling the reading data to show students who were identified as being in the high-risk category for behavioral issues. Students who were in the moderate-risk range for behavioral issues were then identified by placing a dash through a circle to identify the risk, but to distinguish this risk from the high-risk category. The students placed in Quadrant I were labeled as being responders who started off in the fall as being above the year-end goal and continued to perform above the year-end goal and titled, “Responders High to Grow.” Quadrant II labeled students who were also responders, but scored below the year-end benchmark in the fall and progressed to score above the year-end benchmark in the winter. Quadrant II students were labeled “Responders Low to Grow.” The students placed in Quadrant III were labeled as being non-responders, due to the fact that they performed below the year-end benchmark for both the fall and winter. These students were labeled as “Non-responders Low- No Grow.” Students placed in Quadrant IV were also non-responders, but had declining growth. They scored above the year-end benchmark in the fall, then scored below the benchmark in the winter. To include social data, additional shapes were added to the quadrants next to the other scores for students. The single graph then identified academic, behavioral, and social data, emphasizing the importance of viewing all three in making appropriate decisions for students.

The results of the screenings indicated that students in Quadrant I needed enrichment activities in advanced concepts. Students in Quadrant II were responders that made growth with the current reading program and did not require additional supports. The students’ performance in Quadrant III were making some gains, but needed more
targeted supports. These students also scored in the high-risk category for behavior and needed additional supports in that area. None of the students placed in the Quadrant IV category, indicating a need for the educators to focus on the types of interventions that are not as intensive. Kalberg et al. (2010) stated that for students in the Quadrant IV category, educators should provide whole-group instruction and additional intensive small-group or one-to-one instruction in the skills that interfere with fluency.

The importance of describing the quadrant graph above is to give an example of how educators can plot academic, behavioral, and social data for students within one visual. Educators, over time, have used academic, behavioral, and social data in isolation, and this provides a comprehensive approach to reviewing combined data to support a multi-tiered system of supports (Lane et al., 2009).

The Lassen study (2006) examined the relationship of school-wide positive behavior support, or PBS, to academic achievement. This three-year study was implemented in multiple schools in an inner-city area in the Midwest; however, the data were reported as a case study representing one middle school of 634 students within the multiple schools studied. Data were collected in relation to suspensions, office discipline referrals, or ODRs, standardized test scores in reading and math, and whether or not interventions were implemented with fidelity. The hypothesis stated that reductions in problem behavior and an increase in standardized test scores would be shown each year of the study with the school’s commitment to using a PBS system.

School-wide PBS training for all staff continued over the three-year period which focused on using three to five behavioral expectations, appropriate classroom management strategies, and ways to deal effectively with student behaviors that are
challenging. Supports were added to classrooms, non-classroom areas, and group levels as needed for more extreme behavioral issues. Supports were defined as reinforcing direct instruction of expectations and adding other classroom management strategies, not necessarily adding more staff. The administration of PBS was embedded into the existing groups within the school, mainly the School Improvement Team (SIT), who also directed and monitored the school-wide PBS work. The SIT used data showing the numbers of referrals, suspensions, and positive rewards given to monitor how effective PBS efforts were within the school and made changes as necessary to the structure when improvement seemed to decline.

The results of the Lassen study indicated that a correlation exists between the implementation of a PBS system and an increase in reading and math scores at the middle school reported in the study. The implementation with fidelity data revealed that the school increased from 24.97% to 69.64% in adhering to the PBS procedures over the three-year period. Standardized test scores showed an initial drop in scores from the baseline to year one; however, from years one to three, there was a steady increase in the scores. Math scores showed a significant increase from the baseline to the third year. Regression analyses were conducted to determine the impact of disciplinary actions and the correlation between PBS and standardized reading and math scores. The analyses indicated that the number of office discipline referrals (ODRs) and the number of suspensions a student received predicted standardized scores in reading and math. The students with fewer ODRs scored higher on the standardized tests in both reading and math, and the students with fewer suspensions also scored higher on standardized tests.
The study found that instructional time lost for every office discipline referral can be as high as 45 minutes (Horner & Sugai, 2003).

The McIntosh et al. (2012) study correlated with the Lassen study in that reading skills were measured while implementing a PBS model; however, it also differed in that the McIntosh study hypothesized that a low pre-reading ability level was a predictor of chronic problem behavior in fifth grade, whereas the Lassen study indicated problem behavior was the causal factor for low reading ability and that a true PBS model would correct many problem behaviors. The McIntosh study investigated the effect of pre-reading skills at the beginning of kindergarten and how these skills changed over a five-year period while using a school-wide PBS system.

The study by McIntosh et al. (2012) involved a mid-sized urban school district next to a large metropolitan city in the northwest region of the United States. The district had a total enrollment of 12,500 students with 16 schools. Ten of the schools were at the elementary level. During the entire course of the study, the district used an integrated reading and behavior support initiative through a school-wide model. The 473 students involved in the study were in fifth grade and had been enrolled in the district for five years. Students who transferred into the district during those years were not included in the study. The data for reading scores were taken from the kindergarten fall, winter, and spring dynamic indicators of basic early literacy skills (DIBELS) assessment, with interventions implemented after the first assessment as needed (Good & Kaminski, 2003). Office discipline referrals were used to measure problem behaviors in the fifth grade. The ODR was used to track serious incidents of problem behavior and provide information regarding individual and overall school discipline issues. The ODR signifies
a behavioral chain of the problem behavior, the observation of the behavior by school personnel, the decision as to whether the behavior meets the ODR criteria, and the completion of the ODR form (Sugai et al., 2000).

Dynamic indicators of basic early literacy skills data from the fall assessment in kindergarten directed the need for reading intervention and the change in the risk status were measured at each assessment during the winter and spring assessments. The students were categorized into the specific groups of low risk, some risk, and at risk at each assessment marking period.

The data collected over the five years revealed that students in kindergarten who were at a low risk for reading issues also showed a low level of ODRs in fifth grade. Those who showed some risk had an increase in ODRs, but not significantly. The most significant data are shown by the students who were identified as being at risk in kindergarten as having a marked increase in ODRs at the fifth grade level. McIntosh et al. (2012) stated that “in a three-tiered model, low risk indicates that Tier I (universal) support may be sufficient, some risk indicates that Tier II (supplemental/targeted) support may be required, and at risk indicates that Tier III (intensive) support may be required” (p. 20). It is important to note that if the students responded to interventions in kindergarten and their scores moved to a low risk category during that year, the likelihood of experiencing problem behavior in fifth grade dramatically decreased. McIntosh et al. used these results to emphasize that early intervention is crucial to prevent problem behaviors in the later grades.

The Nelson et al. (2004) study hypothesized that students with emotional and behavioral disorders show academic deficits. It also analyzed specific types of problem
behaviors affiliated to academic achievement. One hundred fifty-five students in a midwestern urban school district in grades K-12 who were identified as special education students receiving services for emotional and behavioral disorders were included in this study. The students were randomly selected from a total of 260 students receiving special education services for emotional and behavioral disorders. All students included in the study had an average intelligence quotient (IQ).

As this study was cross-sectional, the data were taken from one given point in time. Data were gathered using a child behavior checklist completed by teachers, academic achievement assessments from the Woodcock Johnson assessment, WJ-III (Woodcock, McGrew, & Mather, 2001), and IQ scores using the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, Third Edition (WISC-III; Wechsler, 1991).

The findings from this study indicated that students with emotional and behavioral disorders experience greater academic deficits compared to the norm group of typical peers, or those in the general education population without emotional and behavioral disorders. These students also experienced deficits in all academic content areas; however, as the children aged, the deficits in the area of math increased. Nelson et al. (2004) stated that this may be due to the fact that students with emotional and behavioral disorders do not necessarily take higher-level math courses in middle and high school. He and his colleagues anecdotally obtained this information from a special education coordinator, and they did not confirm this through a review of specific data. Nelson et al. applied this to the overall underachievement of students with emotional and behavioral disorders and, referring to a study by Greenbaum, compared this information to longitudinal studies (performed over time) that indicated students with emotional and
behavior disorders do not tend to improve academically as they age (Greenbaum et al., 1996).

Another purpose of this study was to identify the types of problem behaviors that are associated with academic achievement. This study identified that the particular externalizing behaviors such as aggression, delinquency, and attention that the students in the study exhibited were related to their decline in academic achievement in all academic areas. Nelson and his colleagues (2004) also compared this information with multiple previous studies that discovered the same information. The authors noted that the results were not particular to any gender, and both boys and girls continued to show academic deficits into adolescence, especially in the area of math. Findings also indicated that it is crucial that special educators and the special education process identify the appropriate measures for the instruction of academics and remediation for existing deficits.

The perceptions of superintendents and educators are crucial in implementing systemic change, as a lack of understanding and consistency can create obstacles which spur confusion. Dulaney, et al. (2013) addresses this issue in his study of superintendent perceptions regarding MTSS models. This case study identified the perceptions and obstacles of implementing MTSS in a school district. Twenty-seven superintendents in one state in the southwest region of the United States participated in a survey, and 9 superintendents were chosen to interview after their survey results revealed a deeper knowledge of or readiness to implement the MTSS process.

The survey included questions relating to collaborative processes, data-based decision making, and evidence-based practices. The perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of MTSS implementation within districts were then identified from the
results of the survey. The interviews with the nine superintendents addressed the areas of knowledge of MTSS and readiness culture, the capacity to build MTSS within the district, opportunities for MTSS implementation, and the obstacles relating to MTSS implementation.

Using a mixed methods approach, the Dulaney study included quantitative data derived from the survey and qualitative analysis from the nine interviews. The grounded theory approach of beginning with specific categories as mentioned above, provides coding opportunities to effectively analyze shared perceptions, bringing forth themes that can be further analyzed (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Corbin & Strauss, 1998).

The Dulaney study identified three findings: (a) an MTSS framework must first be developed by the district, and common language expectations need to be embedded; (b) a collaborative culture must be established and exist to implement with fidelity; and (c) to sustain best practices, professional learning communities (PLCs) must be provided to build the capacity of staff (Dulaney et al., 2013). Ideally, a state plan surrounding the implementation of MTSS should exist; however, if one does not exist, superintendents should move forward and create a plan for their districts. Dulaney indicated that a lack of statewide direction on MTSS was the reason many of the superintendents interviewed were struggling with the process. Dulaney (2013) stated that the superintendents did not seem to understand MTSS and how the components improved systems, and that only two superintendents had developed a formal plan for MTSS implementation. This study identified the importance of common language and the development of PLCs to establish collaborative culture in order to build capacity and align resources for successful educational outcomes (Fullan, 2009).
As the Dulaney study indicated, school personnel struggle to implement an MTSS framework with fidelity. The Sanetti study confirmed this and added that this results in a negative impact on the effectiveness of interventions (Sanetti & Collier-Meek, 2015). This study focused on the effect of intervention supports that were provided through a multi-tiered implementation supports (MTIS) framework, which provided a proactive, tiered approach that addressed the integrity of the treatment, or intervention. The study references MTSS and states that implementers have difficulty with the consistency of interventions due to a lack of systematic follow-up (Sanetti & Collier-Meek, 2015). Based on this study, Sanetti and Collier-Meek (2015) stated that a lack of treatment integrity is the cause of reduced student outcomes and these outcomes will not change without appropriate and high-quality professional development.

Another mixed methods study relating to universal screening and progress monitoring revealed that the attitudes teachers have to the process were related to the amount of professional development in which they participated and the level of experience they had using particular tools (Rowe, Witmer, Cook, & daCruz, 2014). Rowe et al. (2014) stated that the evaluation of student levels using curriculum-based measurements and progress monitoring techniques were not areas of strength for teachers and additional support was necessary for this component to be effective. The researchers implied, however, that the efforts teachers made in using systematic universal screening and progress monitoring techniques were effective in increasing student success (Rowe et al., 2014).

Sanetti and Collier-Meek (2015) included six elementary school teachers from three suburban public schools in the Northeast. These particular teachers had requested
support in their classrooms for behavioral issues and classroom management. Implementation of intervention steps within classroom management plans was evaluated, and each teacher received a baseline in which to create specific plans. Direct training was provided for each intervention step within the classroom management plan. The teachers then practiced the interventions while being observed. Repeated training occurred to ensure the teachers could generalize the interventions to their classrooms.

Four of the teachers completed the entire implementation planning training, with all four showing an increase in integrity data. Consequently, negative student behaviors decreased. Sanetti and Collier-Meek (2015) concluded that it is important to consistently evaluate and support treatment integrity for effective outcomes through an MTSS framework.

Morrison, Russell, Dyer, Metcalf, and Rahschulte (2014) approached their research from the perspective that little information is available about structures and processes needed for technical assistance for individual districts to implement an effective MTSS framework. Sugai and Horner (2009) discussed the elements of a multi-tiered system that are important for educational success. These include focusing on implementation with fidelity (consistency and using interventions as designed), frequent progress monitoring, a data-based problem-solving process, universal screening, and the use of evidence-based practices. The Morrison study emphasized that technical assistance is necessary to support these elements and sustain school-wide MTSS practices.

The participants in the Morrison study included 10 technical assistance providers who were part of Michigan’s Integrated Behavior and Learning Support Initiative
(MiBLSi), the state’s term for MTSS. The qualitative study included the use of a focus group in the first year and individual interviews during the second year. The questions focused on individual expectations for being part of the technical assistance team and how well they felt the structure for supporting districts was working. Other questions asked about the successes of MiBLSi, how well their unit functions, and the collaboration between the technical assistance center and the professional learning unit.

As others have determined, communication, defined roles, and implementation with fidelity were themes that emerged from the Morrison study (2014). Problem-solving processes for specific districts were difficult, and the technical assistance staff struggled to resolve challenging situations. Many technical assistance providers do not have defined roles and are often not part of the development of systems; therefore, they do not always have the information necessary to support district staff when issues with MTSS arise. Due to individual district customization of processes, it was difficult for them to always provide assistance when districts were not implementing the MTSS framework with fidelity (Morrison et al., 2014).

Through their study, Harn and colleagues identified a need for a true MTSS model that incorporates behavioral interventions (Harn, Basaraba, Chard, & Fritz, 2015). They conducted a longitudinal study of students in first through third grades who were at-risk for reading difficulties. Through the implementation of the Schoolwide Reading Model (SWRM), which has three main components: (a) establishing a system that supports the needs of individual students, (b) implementing a prevention-based approach which provides interventions, and (c) using a data-based decision-making practice (Harn et al., 2015), the researchers were able to identify additional needs that extend beyond
academics alone. Under the umbrella of the three main components, the SWRM houses seven essential components which cover: (a) schoolwide practices that focus on reading, (b) assessment data collection, (c) scheduled reading instruction time, (d) evidence-based instruction, (e) differentiated instruction, (f) evaluation of implementation of the program and interventions, and (g) high quality professional development (Harn et al., 2015).

Using the SWRM, 84 students were identified in first grade to participate in the study. These students were at-risk for reading issues and were tracked through third grade to identify if the SWRM was effective in meeting their reading needs. Five elementary schools in two different districts in the Pacific Northwest were a part of the study, and the students were selected using the dynamic indicators of basic early literacy skills (DIBELS) (Good & Kaminski, 2003) that identifies reading concerns in the areas of oral reading fluency, phonological awareness, knowledge of letters, and alphabetic principles through one minute assessments (Good & Kaminski, 2003). The Woodcock Reading Mastery Test--Revised (WRMT-R) addresses the identification of words, word attack skills, and passage comprehension ability (Woodcock, 1987) and was also used for identification purposes. Intervention times were increased by 30 minutes at the tier two level, above the regular 90 minutes of reading instruction at the universal, or tier one level. Students who did not respond to tier two interventions were provided an additional 30 minutes of reading instruction at the tier three level.

The students receiving additional interventions in reading increased their skills better than similar students in the previous year; however, the overall results were not as promising as the researchers had hoped they would be. The authors noted that the integration of academic and behavioral systems of support would have increased the
results for the students (Harn et al., 2015). They acknowledged that some students had attention and behavioral issues that were not addressed, and focusing only on the academic component of MTSS did not impact the students’ outcome to provide them greater success.

In this particular article, Harn et al. (2015) mentioned an issue that educators often do not understand, that being evidence related to comorbidity of attentional/behavioral issues and academics. With students often experiencing multiple issues, it is important to integrate academic and behavioral systems to increase the development of academic, social, and emotional skills, considering the overall needs of students (Harn et al., 2015). In order to address the overall needs of students, Harn and colleagues (2015) stated that effective collaboration between all educators, including interventionists, behavior specialists, and general educators is required.

Dissertation work regarding MTSS is slowly entering the field. The study conducted by Haynes (2012) analyzed a schoolwide RTI/MTSS model for reading intervention in 32 elementary schools. Using the data from the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) during a six-year period, this study identified student success using the mean scores of students prior to and after the implementation of reading interventions. Scores were compared to those of 30 schools, similar in demographics that were not practicing RTI/MTSS. The research was an interrupted time-series that compared results of interventions for students in general education to those in special education. Overall, third grade reading results improved; however, for students with disabilities, the results were less appealing. It was not evident as to the reasons why the students with disabilities did not show better growth and/or whether or not the specific
interventions were evidence-based and measured for effectiveness of students with disabilities.

The interesting fact is that the study began in 2002 with reading baseline data. In 2003, the TRFI, or Texas Reading First Initiative, was implemented which included many components of MTSS. Research to intervention did not appear in the law until 2004, and the law went into effect in July of 2005 (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). This quasi-experimental design evaluating the effectiveness of MTSS is an example of studies that were conducted prior to effective implementation of systemic models that include academic and behavioral interventions through one framework (University of South Florida, 2011). Implementation with fidelity of the MTSS models was not identified among the 32 schools in this study, making it difficult to make appropriate comparisons. Although MTSS terminology was in existence in different parts of the country, many studies used the terms MTSS and RTI interchangeably, not in alignment with the definitions today.

A secondary issue with this type of research is that it used state standardized test scores only and did not include local and formative assessment data. The accuracy of this data is questionable, depending on the alignment with classroom instruction and the percentage of participation rates (Ballard & Bates, 2008). The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) stated that research has indicated that formative assessments need to be in continuous motion in order to have data that reflects student levels and needs (NCTE, 2013). Today, educators focus on reviewing a body of evidence, and research should do the same to make appropriate determinations for effective practices.
Implications for Practice

Implications of the included studies indicate that early and ongoing interventions are crucial as well as frequent review of progress monitoring data (Coleman et al., 2012; McIntosh et al., 2012; Nelson et al., 2004). Scores during the early grades can indicate risk for failure, and interventions need to be provided as early as possible to prevent the academic and behavioral gaps from expanding (McIntosh et al., 2012; Nelson et al., 2004). Schools that combine early screening and progress monitoring provide the best outlook for improving student success (Fuchs et al., 2008).

Students identified with emotional and behavioral disorders tend to experience academic deficits very early in their schooling, and this indicates the need for preventative programming (Nelson et al., 2004), such as the universal supports in an MTSS model. However, in rural school districts, this programming may be problematic due to the lack of resources, including physical materials, educators, and other personnel (Dulaney et al., 2013).

The integration of academic and behavioral data is important for educators to effectively screen students to identify achievement, behavior, and/or social issues and analyze the correlation in the different subject areas (McIntosh et al., 2012; Kalberg et al., 2010; Harn et al., 2015). Isolation of academic and behavioral support systems indicated a prevention of reading growth, emphasizing the need for the development of one systemic model that uses a proactive approach to teaching academics and behavior (Harn et al., 2015; Haynes, 2012). Technical assistance can guide processes that lead knowledge to action, providing consistency, and supporting MTSS implementation with fidelity (Morrison et al., 2014). There is a delicate balance between district
customization and implementation with fidelity, as centralized efforts are crucial to national MTSS practices (Morrison et al., 2014).

Multi-tiered system of supports is shown through these studies to improve academic and behavioral performance, addressing both concurrently (Harn et al., 2015). It also allows students with appropriate interventions and behavioral support to spend more time in the classroom, giving them access to instruction (Lassen et al., 2006; Kalberg et al., 2010). Kalberg and his colleagues (2010) stated that in their conversations with educators who practice RTI separate from PBIS models, they have heard that students are not making progress nor are they responding to the interventions provided, indicating that the use of an MTSS model will more efficiently aid students in responding positively to all interventions, whether they are behavioral or academic. It is also necessary to provide performance feedback to educators and conduct in-depth training on implementation of interventions. Without this training, consistency of interventions is lacking, and students will not show improvement through the leveled supports (Sanetti & Collier-Meek, 2015).

**Limitations**

The results of the studies are clear as to the direction schools should take and are favorable towards implementing MTSS with fidelity. The limitations include the fact that there are few research studies that involve true MTSS models due to the fact that MTSS has made a very recent entrance into education (Haynes, 2012). We can derive the success of MTSS through studies that show the implications of the use of RTI and PBIS simultaneously in a school; however, we do not know if the collaboration and implementation are practiced through one system and whether they are practiced with
fidelity, indicating the need for further research. Within these studies, measurement errors were reported (McIntosh et al., 2012) as well as a lack of control schools for comparison of data and sample size (Lassen et al., 2006; Nelson et al., 2004; Kalberg et al., 2010). Nelson et al. (2004) reported that his study did not show a direct causal link between emotional disabilities and academic performance, but did note that students with emotional disabilities struggled academically. Other limitations include the lack of use of a body of evidence instead of using just standardized measures (NCTE, 2013). Fewer students may have had deficits if the assessments were linked more to the classroom curriculum (NCTE, 2013; Nelson et al., 2004).

Directions for Future Research

Directions for future research, indicated by the studies reviewed, include identifying schools that are implementing MTSS models with fidelity and conducting longitudinal studies which carefully review how behavioral performance changes over time in relation to academic shifts (Kalberg et al., 2010). Careful review of the quality of instruction and how that might affect the risk for problem behavior should also be conducted (McIntosh et al., 2012). The relationship between academic success impacting behavior, and vice versa, needs to be further studied as little research is available at this time (Lassen et al., 2006; Harn et al., 2015).

Finding a school or district that implements MTSS with consistency and fidelity is currently a challenge, as staff changes and administrative direction can change from year to year (Sanetti & Collier-Meek, 2015). It will be important to conduct further research in districts that have attributed student growth to MTSS models, integrating the expertise of behavior specialists (Harn et al., 2015). Further research could identify which student
groups are most successful in an MTSS model. Additional research could also determine the benefits of subgroups within an MTSS model such as students with disabilities, students who are gifted, and English learners (Haynes, 2012).

The importance of continuing research in relation to MTSS is critical for the future success of students in schools today. Action needs to be taken to address academic and behavioral challenges within a multi-tiered system with all professionals collaborating for each student. Waiting until behavior improves or waiting to address behavior until the content is learned will drive the process in reverse, making it too late to positively impact student success (Kalberg et al., 2010).

**Chapter II Summary**

The application of an MTSS model seems very involved, but identifying strengths from the RTI and PBIS processes and utilizing existing cultures within schools to provide best practices for meeting the needs of all learners has shown marked success for students (Kansas Department of Education, 2010). In this era of educational reform, it is necessary for all educators to collaborate within the MTSS team to review academic and behavioral data within all components, including universal screening and progress monitoring, for all students whether they are gifted, average, or needing support to catch up (Harn et al., 2015). Many acronyms are used and much confusion exists surrounding our processes, but the creation of common language and understanding will create a system that provides security for learners and an environment that allows students to take risks and advance to the next level of learning (University of South Florida, 2011).

Students with disabilities and those who need interventions to improve are not
intimidated by this type of culture and the facilitation of learning is always present, creating success for all.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to identify the perceptions teachers had relating to the MTSS component, universal screening and progress monitoring, and how they perceived these practices as impacting student academic and behavioral success. The long-term intended purpose of this study was to impact the field in a way that recognizes the importance of universal screening and progress monitoring within an MTSS model as a key and crucial component for student success, both academically and behaviorally.

Using implementation science as a conceptual framework that emphasizes the study of influences that impact effective use of innovations in practice, this study was conducted using a qualitative focus group approach (NIRN, 2015). Data collected from a focus group was created from the interaction of participants within the group, and a constructivist perspective defined this social interaction for data collection (Merriam, 2009). This qualitative approach revealed perceptions of the factors that affect the fidelity of the process that are not evident using quantitative methods. It was important to identify whether or not teacher perceptions were indicative of a lack of consistency, training, and focus, or were indicative of the opposite, supporting practices in their schools. By focusing on perceptions, this qualitative research gives a voice to teachers
who feel they cannot speak their minds about processes and practices (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005).

**Implementation Science**

In determining whether practices are effective in moving students toward success, it is important to determine the perspective of those implementing such practices. The focus of implementation science is to study current practices, determine strengths, and collect enough information to plan the best direction in order to maximize the capacity of the system (NIRN, 2013). While a great deal of attention is given to interventions that are used daily in educational settings, the same level of attention has not been given to the actual implementation of the interventions (NIRN, 2013). The term, implementation with fidelity, is defined as using interventions, or programs, as they were designed to be delivered. When validated, or research-based programs are implemented with fidelity, the likelihood of achieving results similar to the creators of the programs is greater (American Institutes for Research, 2015).

The National Implementation Research Network uses a formula for success to ensure successful implementation of practices (2015). This formula includes effective innovations, effective implementation, and enabling contexts, all of which must be present for educationally or socially significant outcomes. If any component within the multiplication table is missing, significant outcomes will not be attained. Effective innovations, or interventions, refer to the program that is being utilized (the what), how the practice will be carried out and who will be implementing the practice defines effective implementation, and where the innovations, or interventions, will be implemented describes the enabling contexts. This formula is often overlooked when
schools implement new programs or practices, and the potential for success is therefore weakened by the lack of components. The perceptions of teachers regarding practices are also weakened due to the breakdown of the formula, and when negative perceptions prevail, implementation with fidelity is damaged.

**Figure 5.** The National Implementation Research Network’s formula for success, 2015.

To analyze whether a program, system, or interventions, are being implemented with fidelity, it is also important to identify where a school is at in the implementation process. The National Implementation Research Network (2013) identified four stages of implementation, which include exploration, installation, initial implementation, and full implementation. Recognizing where a team is at in the process can aid in supporting them in moving to the next stage, with the goal of achieving full implementation.

Identifying the perceptions of teachers and gathering their feedback of where they are at in the process aids in determining the hindrances within the stages of progression.

Difficulties that arise in the implementation of programs have not consistently been studied, as the length of time to review and determine success deters educators from analyzing their processes (Van Meter & Van Horn, 1975; Greenhalgh, Robert,
Three categories of implementation drivers that support districts in their analysis of effective implementation include competency drivers, organization drivers, and a leadership driver (Blasé, Fixsen, Naoom, & Wallace, 2005). Competency drivers are mechanisms that improve the ability to implement an intervention. Organization drivers are mechanisms that sustain systems and environments in order to provide appropriate services. A leadership driver supports leadership strategies in order to handle the challenges associated with leadership such as making decisions, guidance, and support of those implementing the interventions (Blasé et al., 2005). When these drivers are integrated, a system is able to support coaching, training, technical assistance, data systems that drive decisions, and administration. It is important to focus on these drivers as well as the stages of implementation when determining perceptions that may inhibit implementation with fidelity and systemic change.

**Focus Group Research**

Focus groups are group interviews that allow researchers to understand how people think, providing a deeper understanding of the particular subject of study (Nagle & Williams, 2013). For this study, a focus group study approach was chosen to be the method for collecting research data due to the comprehensive collective nature and the ability to gain more information through questioning more than one person at a time (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Participants who are not as verbal or expressive contributed more due to making connections to specific concepts expressed during the discussion (Nagle & Williams, 2013). A focus group provides the opportunity to participate through a natural discussion without needing to speak the entire time.
The use of focus groups to collect data provides the opportunity for participants to discuss what is happening on a daily basis that they would not otherwise have the chance to do within their work setting (Macnaghten & Myers, 2004). Focus groups allow the researcher to gain perspectives of the larger group of people that the participants represent (Clark & Estes, 2008). In my professional experience, educators often will discuss topics more deeply when they are part of a discussion rather than singled out for information. Organizational barriers can be detected through a focus group approach through the sharing of formal or informal policies, processes, and/or levels of available resources (Clark & Estes, 2008). This is crucial when addressing gap closure in education, as the focus group provides the awareness of potential gaps.

By using more than one focus group in research, the possibility of confirming or duplicating findings from one group to another is higher (Remler & Van Ryzin, 2015). This study included five focus groups which provided more data that confirmed the duplication of themes. The benefit to bringing participants together in a group regarding this topic will be prevalent in their comments surrounding daily work life, and their discussions will prompt thoughts in each other that I, the researcher, would not be able to do so otherwise (Remler & Van Ryzin, 2015).

**Research Questions Restated**

Stating again the research questions that were addressed in this study are:

Q1 What are the perceptions teachers have relating to the specific universal screening and progress monitoring practices in each elementary school?

Q2 What are the perceptions teachers have about the impact universal screening and progress monitoring has on student achievement in both academics and behavior?
Q3  Do the teachers perceive that they have adequate training and knowledge of universal screening and progress monitoring practices for both academics and behavior?

Q4  How do teachers define their work in relation to universal screening and progress monitoring for both academics and behavior?

**Researcher’s Stance**

In order to conduct effective qualitative research, it is important that the researcher be knowledgeable about the topic and have experience related to the focus of the research (Brantlinger et al., 2005). Having been in the field of education for 35 years, with the majority of those years working with educators, families, and students with disabilities, I have interacted with many programs designed to aid in the success of students who struggle. Many programs have failed to close the gap for these learners, and from my perspective, buy-in from the educators was not sought prior to the implementation of the programs. I have also witnessed some very successful programs in which educators were allowed to review, practice, and make decisions regarding programming. Teacher perceptions were determinant factors in both types of situations.

My stance regarding the implementation of MTSS is that it combines two best practices helping educators “work smarter, not harder” (Sugai, 2006). As a previous district administrator, it was important for me to determine where educators stood regarding MTSS in order to provide appropriate support and communication to move the district forward. The information from this study identified areas of concern and current areas of success, helping determine the next steps in implementation. It is inherent to have some bias, and having worked in the area of MTSS professionally for over five years, I certainly have opinions about the components of MTSS and the best methods of implementation. What I did realize after conducting this research was that there are
multiple ways of implementing best practices and that what is important is that leadership and educators continue to focus on data which guides the implementation with fidelity.

I am disclosing my passion and perspectives with the desire that those reading will understand my bias, as it is not possible to be neutral or fully objective given my past experiences; however, seeing the need is what drives the research (Brantlinger et al., 2005). Passionate about the MTSS component, universal screening and progress monitoring, and seeing an intense need for clarification in the districts, I am putting forth an effort to bring this component into the limelight, to provide educators with a continual focus of its necessity that drives appropriate instruction and interventions. While the focus of this component is embedded into the five current components at the state level, the visual focus is not present, possibly leading educators to not understand the significance of screening and monitoring practices.

Per my perspective and in my experience, educators do not consistently screen or monitor the progress of their students, and by removing this component from the visual model, educators will not sense the urgency to continue strengthening their practices in this area. This study was imperative due to the fact that staff often feel that because the students perform well, they do not need to screen or monitor progress as frequently. Even in light of rising mental health issues, many district MTSS committees do not see the need for a common behavioral and/or mental health screener for all students. Therefore, I am hoping to bring more of an awareness of this critical component to the forefront through this study.

My passion has been influenced by those in the field who have determined the success of RTI and PBIS and who have recognized the need for educators to view
academic and behavioral needs through the same lens, creating what is now known as MTSS. The research of George Sugai, Douglas Fuchs, George Batsche, Rob Horner, and Anne Todd have enabled districts to implement best practices in working with students with differing needs by teaching about the layered continuum of services. Having taught in general education as well as all areas of special education, their work synchronizes my experiences with what has been proven to be best practices.

In viewing the larger picture of success in the state of Colorado, this information is also helpful to other districts that are in the early stages of implementation and emphasizes the importance of using appropriate screening and monitoring of progress. It is imperative that guidance for MTSS implementation be provided to districts. Having provided leadership for MTSS processes in a district, frustration stems from the inability of the state to provide direction due to local control. Defined processes will support districts in their implementation of MTSS and will move it from “just another initiative” to accepted practices that increase student achievement and behavioral growth.

**Participants and Setting**

The target population for this research study was educators within two school districts in Colorado north of the Denver metro area. District One educates approximately 30,000 students, which includes an English learner population of 7%, a free and reduced lunch population of 29%, a gifted and talented population of 12%, and a special education population of 8%. District Two educates approximately 22,000 students, which includes an English learner population of 25%, a free and reduced Lunch population of 65%, a gifted and talented population of 4%, and a special education population of 10%.
The participants for this study included 24 educators in total, from five elementary schools within the two districts, representing general education, special education, English learner (EL) educators, and MTSS team members. Three elementary schools were represented from District One, and two elementary schools were represented from District Two. The teachers were chosen for their particular positions (general, special, or EL educators, and MTSS team members). One member of each focus group also represented behavioral instruction, or one that guides behavioral work in the school. The definition of special educator is a member of the special education team that provides direct services to students. Due to the nature of EL educators serving more than one school, it was requested that the EL educator answer the questions specifically for the individual school’s focus group. One member of the focus group was also a member of the building MTSS team; therefore, some participants represented dual roles. The MTSS building team member had the leadership knowledge of MTSS expectations and practices within the school.

All 24 participants signed an informed consent prior to the research being conducted (see Appendix A). Teachers were interviewed in their respective schools during the time their teams typically met. Questions were asked regarding perceptions related to the MTSS component of universal screening and progress monitoring. Eleven questions were asked during each focus group (See Appendix B).

The process for obtaining participants included requesting permission from the two school district administrators in charge of research through a detailed application process. A letter explaining the research was sent to the principals (see Appendix C). Principals of the five elementary schools also provided permission for staff members to
participate in the study. The principals were consulted as to who met the participant
criteria stated above. Principals were intentionally not included in the focus groups to
allow participants to be as candid as possible when answering questions; however, two
focus groups asked to include their principal due to the nature of involvement of the
principal within the MTSS process (Eliot & Associates, 2005).

Focus Group Process

The process for conducting the focus groups was as follows (Eliot & Associates,
2005):

1. Secure consent to participate from each participant.
2. Schedule focus group sessions after school, for one hour in length during a
   school week.
3. Hold the focus groups at the school the participants are representing for
   convenience and comfort.
4. Provide a sign-in sheet in which participants indicate the pseudonym they
   would like to use to ensure confidentiality.
5. Provide food for participants to enjoy prior to beginning the focus group
   session. Offer a beverage and a light snack to honor everyone’s time.
6. State purpose of focus group and clarify researcher involvement, establishing
   trust prior to questioning. Request that participants be honest in their answers and remind
   them that all information is confidential.
7. Let participants know that there will be four other focus groups that will be
   conducted using the same questions and that the information gathered will be compiled to
determine common themes. This will aid in establishing comfort, knowing that their information will not be singled out in any way.

8. State that the focus group session will be recorded and that their pseudonyms will be used during the session.

9. Introduce the moderator (researcher) and the assistant moderator. The assistant moderator will take notes and ensure that the entire focus group is recorded.

10. Establish ground rules that allow for everyone to participate, that they may be asked to answer a question if they have not volunteered information, and that there are no wrong (or right) answers.

11. Remind participants that the setting is confidential and that they should not repeat what others say outside of the focus group session.

12. Begin questioning, mindful of the one-hour time constraint.

13. Thank everyone for attending and provide them with a gift for their participation.

**Credibility**

Credibility of the questions that were asked in the focus groups was established through a review by experienced researchers, or experts in the field. These researchers were also university professors, with years of educational qualitative research experience, and they understood the MTSS process and its components. To avoid the use of misleading questions, the questions were vetted by these experts prior to becoming final.

Threats to the credibility of this study included the potential of a misunderstanding of participants’ responses, leading to inaccurate conclusions. Analyzing the findings were inhibited by my own personal knowledge and
understanding. Therefore, it was imperative that I be transparent in my findings, thoughts, and how I have dealt with this particular threat to the validity of the study. To ensure the quality of this study, I focused on credibility, confirmability, consistency, and applicability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

To ensure that the data collected from the focus groups were valid, a building of trust with the participants, an understanding of the culture in each building, and continuous checks for misinformation was necessary (Creswell, 2013). This occurred through member checks, or validation from the respondents. Member checking supported ruling out misinterpretation of information and validated the data collected, especially in light of particular biases that were present (Merriam, 2009). A clarification of researcher bias was also necessary at the end of the study. A peer researcher that audited the work was also arranged to contribute to the validity of information. This peer researcher is defined further in the confirmability section.

**Member Checking**

Member checking is a method used in qualitative research to validate the responses participants provide during a focus group session. It is a technique that improves the accuracy and validation of the information being collected (Creswell, 1994). Establishing rapport with the participants aided in obtaining honest responses, providing an environment that is open for follow up questions, restatement, or summarization. Member checking occurred during the focus groups through asking clarifying questions, or repeating information to ensure correct understanding. Member checking also occurred at the end of each focus group, stating a brief synopsis of the information shared. The participants were then able to clarify their responses or affirm
that the information they stated is accurate and understood. Credibility of the study was
determined through the participants confirming that the information received reflects
their thoughts and opinions (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006).

The member check for this study also included:

1. Restating information to some of the participants, asking if the information is
   accurate according to their thoughts.
2. Asking if any corrections are necessary.
3. Conducting multiple checks as needed through appropriate follow up questions.

Confirmability

By obtaining extensive information during the focus groups through note taking,
electronic recordings, and accurate transcriptions, confirmability was enhanced
(Creswell, 2013). The use of an electronic coding system, MAXQDA software, provided
accuracy of identifying categories and themes, increasing the confirmability of the study
(MAXQDA, 2017). The electronic coding system was used after manual coding was
completed to double check the identified categories and themes. The coding process that
was used for this study is defined in the Data Analysis section. A peer researcher was
also used to cross check the data obtained as a second set of eyes, or the “four eyes
principle,” which aided in determining a misunderstanding of information, which can
concur during interpretation of the data (Eppler, 2006). This peer researcher also
volunteered to be present during the focus groups to aid in note taking to ensure that
accurate representation was portrayed within the documentation. The definition of “peer
researcher” is a colleague who has also researched MTSS, but is not an employee of the
districts.
**Trustworthiness**

Exposing my bias above, it is crucial that I prove the trustworthiness of my research. To ensure that I fully understood the answers to the questions asked, I included a peer researcher who has not been employed by the districts to take notes during the focus groups and aid in the daily interpretive analysis of the notes.

My credibility included researcher reflexivity, or my attempt to disclose my biases, perceptions, attitudes, and values (Brantlinger et al., 2005). The peer researcher also provided an additional examination of themes identified. This peer researcher debriefed with me daily, and she provided the critical feedback necessary in order to correctly identify common themes. An audit trail tracked the focus groups, and field note descriptions gave the evidence necessary to determine conclusions (Brantlinger et al., 2005). An audit trail is a transparent description of the steps taken during research, from the start to the completion of the study. It is, in essence, good data collection, or keeping records of daily activities, focus group notes, and daily interpretation of those notes.

While I developed a good rapport with the participants, I also ensured that they were able to share their stories and answer the questions without hesitation, and I was careful to not cut short anyone from fully answering the questions. I believe they provided their honest opinions to every question asked.

**Data Collection Procedures**

After receiving Institutional Review Board approval (see Appendix D) data from five one-hour focus groups were collected using a tape recording method with extensive note taking. A structured group interview process was conducted to maximize the information collected within the given time. This structure consisted of a greeting, the
signing of the consent form, the choosing of a pseudonym, and explanation of the study and its use. Demographic information regarding each participant included the number of trainings participants have had relating to MTSS and whether the trainings were at the district or college level. Participants were also asked the number of years they have taught and the number of years they have worked in the district.

The focus group questions were asked of the entire group, and all were encouraged to respond. Because of my experiences as an MTSS lead in a district, I prevented questioning that lead to specific answers, and standard follow up questions included:

1. Can you clarify that?
2. Can you tell me more about that?
3. Anything further you would like to add?

In order to ensure that the questions asked during the focus groups were appropriate and provided the greatest amount of information, additional experts in the field of MTSS reviewed and provided feedback on the questions. Experts are defined as those who are not just familiar with the MTSS process, but those who have worked on the development of MTSS at the state level, at the district level, and at the university level. Those that were included in the review of the questions were university professors who have vested their time towards the development of MTSS and state personnel from the Office of Learning Supports at the Colorado Department of Education who focus specifically on supporting districts in their implementation of MTSS.

Saturation level was attempted by using follow-up questions for clarification of answers to obtain further clarification. Saturation is defined as the point at which the data
are determined to be valid through the repetition of information stated, verifying that the conclusions are correct. I was able to determine that the five focus groups were enough to reach data saturation. Additional interviews were not necessary to reach saturation (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Saturation, while not easily defined due to the variability of qualitative studies, was met when there were no new data or themes that emerged after the five focus groups were completed (Guest et al., 2006). Data saturation was also determined by looking at the depth of these data and not just at the numbers of participants who contributed (Burmeister & Aitken, 2012). Due to the experience level of the participants, the information collected was rich and meaningful, contributing further to the validation of the study.

A standard form was utilized to record notes from the focus groups (see Appendix E). This form provided basic information such as date, time, location, and the role and description of the participants. Pseudonyms were used to protect confidentiality. Ongoing reflections were noted on the data collection forms and notebooks in the form of journaling. This aided in the daily interpretive analysis that occurred after each focus group.

**Data Analysis Procedures**

Transcribed data and interview notes were interpreted through an interpretive analysis and aligned through the use of the MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software program (MAXQDA, 2017). This analysis included coding to identify major categories and commonalities between participants. The identification and analysis of themes may indicate the need for appropriate training within the schools and identify whether common language is embedded into the process. Notes taken during the focus groups
identified mannerisms, facial expressions, and voice intonations to aid in the understanding of the message of the participant. A daily interpretive analysis included written and taped notes, analysis, and conclusions. These data provided the background information as to the perceptions of the universal screening and progress monitoring within their schools.

Coding involves labeling, compiling, and organizing data, which lends to efficiency in summarizing and synthesizing any meaning from data. An appropriate coding process is, in essence, analysis (CER, 2012). By identifying common themes, a storyline that gave the answers to the research questions was developed. Starting with the purpose of the study, open coding brought to light the categories and themes that aligned with the purpose. The coding software was used to identify a list of pre-set codes from notes taken during the focus groups. The software supported the identification of any emergent codes, or codes that were revealed through the transcripts, providing the ability to determine connections (CER, 2012). The redundancy of themes answered the research questions and “told the story.”

Axial coding, which is the refinement of the categories identified through the open coding process, began the next stage in this qualitative analysis. Through axial coding, there was further narrowing of the categories, with many of the categories aligning with each other. Conclusions or “assertions” were determined from the data for the support of the inclusion of universal screening and progress monitoring into the state MTSS model, or for movement towards future research to further the study of universal screening and progress monitoring (Creswell, 2013).
The coding process included the following steps to identify major categories:

1. Using the research questions as a guide, identify any information that aligns with the key components of the study and the redundancy of that information.

2. Identify other themes that emerge from the data and determine if they relate to the research questions or whether they are appropriate for future research.

3. Identify words and phrases that are used frequently. Organize these words into concepts.

4. Place the concepts into major categories.

5. Ensure the confirmability and credibility of data by conducting member checks as well as including a peer researcher review of the data. The peer researcher also aided in identifying codes which was compared to the original list of codes.

Appropriate data analysis was not taken lightly, as it accurately answered the research questions and identified new avenues in which to study. Findings from a study can contribute to accurate processes in a school district; therefore, the difficult process is necessary. Marshall and Rossman (1995) stated, “Identifying salient themes, recurring ideas or language, and patterns of belief that link people and settings together is the most intellectually challenging phase of the analysis and one that can integrate the entire endeavor” (p. 214).

**Role of the Peer Researcher**

The peer researcher (PR) that was chosen to support this study was a peer that had, since 2012, focused on the development of MTSS and research surrounding systemic practices. She possessed experience in public education, having previously held a position as a reading interventionist. The PR was involved in the initial stages of the
research, from the development of the focus groups to the final analysis of all data collected. The PR used her expertise and experiences to aid in the understanding of information provided by the participants. The PR took extensive notes and managed the recording during the focus groups. The PR was briefed on the focus group process and the purpose of the study. The PR kept detailed notes of her experiences which aided in determining the efficacy of the process. I did not advertise or interview for a peer researcher, as the number of those that have experience with MTSS is very limited. This PR had more knowledge relating to MTSS and could be considered a subject matter expert. This helped in identifying key categories and themes during the study.

While I was the primary researcher for this study, the PR shared ownership of the research process and may write about her experience in future work. Because of the shared ownership, the PR was more supportive of quality research and worked to ensure the fidelity of the data collection. This innovative study was a rewarding experience for her, validating her own work in the field of MTSS.

The MAXQDA Qualitative Analysis Software

The MAXQDA software program is one that supports qualitative research by supporting the identification of categories and themes within transcripts from interviews and focus groups (MAXQDA, 2017). I chose to use this software to prevent key information from being lost in the data collection process. This research was conducted to support public education for all students, and, in particular, students who struggle. It was a timely study, and by using a software program that manages themes and makes connections in the data, insights were arrived at in a somewhat timely manner, enabling
the data to reach the schools within a reasonable amount of time. This software was used in conjunction with manual coding in order to confirm findings.

Chapter III Summary

This qualitative study focused on teacher perceptions in relation to the MTSS component of universal screening and progress monitoring within two school districts in Colorado. It is necessary to determine perceptions in order to address misconceptions about processes and practices. The influence of perceptions on these practices will be instrumental for the school districts, as they will help support future direction in implementation. This study identified common categories and themes that may be interfering with appropriate practices and hopes to provide information for further professional development on this component. The findings of this study will be provided to the districts and to the CDE to open a discussion relating to the importance of this MTSS component in the hopes of providing educators with additional resources and support in appropriately identifying the needs of students and planning for effective interventions. It is also hopeful this study will bring awareness to the importance of the MTSS component of universal screening and progress monitoring, enough to keep it in the forefront, as accurate screening and monitoring of progress will drive appropriate interventions for students, ultimately increasing their success in school.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was twofold: (a) to identify teacher perceptions regarding universal screening and progress monitoring within a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS); and (b) to reveal the importance of consistent screening and progress monitoring to encourage the use of the implementation with fidelity of this vital component. As perceptions drive practices, it is crucial to understand what teachers believe and feel about the practices they are asked to follow. In asking specific questions of focus groups from five elementary schools, the research questions were answered and will be further discussed in Chapter V.

The participants for the five focus groups included representatives from general education, special education, English learner education, gifted education, interventionist roles, coordinators, and administrators. The participants were selected based on the district they worked in, working in an elementary school, and principal approval. District approval was gained through an application process for both District One and for District Two. Three principals approved the participation of their teams in District One, and two principals approved the participation of their teams in District Two.

The focus groups were all conducted within the range of one to one and a half hours, before or after school hours or after directly working with students. To establish rapport with the participants, I shared my background and experience as an educator who
developed a MTSS system within a school district. I shared my passion for MTSS and my hope of informing the field of effective strategies and solutions for building a systemic model.

Eleven questions were asked of each focus group, with the same questions asked of each focus groups. Each focus group was digitally recorded, and each recording was sent to Rev.com for transcription. Transcripts were received within 24 hours of each submission. A fellow researcher and doctoral candidate supported the focus groups by taking detailed notes. These notes supported findings and understanding of the transcriptions, enabling a cross checking process to ensure that accurate themes were developed. Member checking occurred during the focus groups through asking clarifying questions or repeating information to ensure correct understanding. Member checking also occurred at the end of each focus group, stating a brief synopsis of the information shared. All focus groups were responsive to the questions, and I do not believe that any participants were not interested in participating.

Transcripts were thoroughly reviewed, and key phrases and terms were highlighted through an open coding process. The identified codes were submitted into the MAXQDA qualitative analysis software program, and each transcript was checked for the initial codes or terms (MAXQDA, 2017). Codes were then placed into larger categories, and themes developed from these categories. Five final categories emerged, and the visual tools from the MAXQDA software were used to represent the findings visually (see Appendices K-N). The following are detailed descriptions of the focus groups, identification of categories and themes, and the data that aligned with the themes.
Focus Group Descriptions

School One, District One

The focus group for School One included Rose, a third-grade teacher, Leanne, a kindergarten teacher, Melody, the English learner teacher, Beth, the special education teacher, Carol, the gifted teacher, Elaine, the instructional coach, and Lynette, the principal. The instructional coach was also the school’s MTSS coordinator. The majority of the team worked at the school for multiple years.

The school educated approximately 440 students, with 37% classified as free and reduced lunch (FRL) eligible, 7% identified as gifted and talented, 1% identified as English language learners, and 10% identified as receiving special education services. School One had a relatively high passing rate on the state standardized assessment, Colorado Measures of Academic Success (CMAS), with a 44.5% passing rate compared to the Colorado state average of 29.9% (CDE, 2017).

**Universal screening.** School One had used a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) for three years, and continually tweaked their processes based on the data collected each year. They universally screened all students three times a year in academics using the Northwest Educational Assessment (NWEA), Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) assessment, and the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) (NWEA, 2013; Good & Kaminski, 2003). Progress monitoring occurred every two weeks for students who were part of specific intervention groups.

Along with the NWEA, MAP, and DIBELS assessments, the expectations for universal screening included a separate math screening called easyCBM (Curriculum Based Measurements), which screens students on grade level math expectations (Alonzo,
Tindal, Ulmer, & Glasgow, 2006). It also provided progress monitoring tools to measure students’ growth throughout the year. The easyCBM was added in the 2016-2017 school year, and they were identifying whether this progress monitoring tool gave them the information they needed regarding the students’ growth in their core curriculum.

While they felt that they had the appropriate resources to screen for reading and math, Lynette, the principal, stated:

We haven’t found great resources for writing benchmarking or progress monitoring tools, so I’d say that’s a little less formal than the reading and math. We use formative classroom data measures to determine growth for all students, but it is less formal, and we need to identify better screening and monitoring tools in writing.

Progress monitoring. This school placed the responsibility for progress monitoring on the general education teacher rather than the interventionist who provided additional services for students struggling in a specific area. Initial gaps were identified using a gap analysis formula. The formula consisted of the expected level divided by the actual level. For example, if a student is expected to read 90 words per minute and is only reading 40 words per minutes, the gap is a 2.25. Anything over a 2 is considered to be significant, which then constitutes the need for intervention.
Behavior. In the area of behavior, the school used positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) and incorporated the 7 Habits of Highly Effective People approach (Covey, 2013), and they had also incorporated an eighth habit (Covey, 2014). These habits (Appendix F) included:

1. Being Proactive
2. Begin with the End in Mind
3. Put First Things First
4. Think Win-Win
5. Seek First to Understand, then to be Understood
6. Synergize
7. Sharpen the Saw
8. Find Your Voice, and Inspire Others to Find Theirs

These habits were taught universally to all students on a regular basis and emphasized and encouraged through positive responses to students as they exhibited the habits, or
behaviors. The principal reported that the students were able to recite all of the habits and the meanings of each habit. While this is a universal approach, it did not provide a social, emotional, or behavioral screening. Data regarding the behavioral issues were recorded in a software program called SWIS, which stands for school-wide information system (Todd & Horner, 2001). Behavioral data were retrieved through SWIS for sections of the building, time of day, and by student. The school-wide information system provided data that support team decisions regarding behavioral instruction, where and when to increase support in a building, and what students need behavioral interventions. This system is considered a progress monitoring tool.

Specifically regarding their PBIS team, Rose, the third grade teacher, commented,

I would add, for the PBIS team, that we’re split into two areas. One part of that team works on the universal aspects and tier one students, and the other part works on tier two, tier three, and how to also support teachers with implementing those behavior plans, giving teachers some support.

**Multi-Tiered system of supports.** Every staff member in School One was part of an MTSS team that met consistently. Sub-groups worked on specific processes within the MTSS team which supported buy-in from the staff. The MTSS teams identified specific needs of students, reviewed data, and made determinations regarding interventions. All staff had access to current data within a computer system in order to identify how all students are progressing.

Communication that included a schedule for progress monitoring dates was provided to all staff, and a review of the MTSS team work and processes was conducted at the beginning of the year. Carol, the gifted education teacher, stated,

As far as progress monitoring goes, Elaine sends out a schedule at the beginning of the school year that states the progress monitoring dates for the entire year, so everybody on the staff is aware of when those are happening.
Elaine, the instructional coach, added,

I would say another piece of it, too, is that everyone has access to the data so they can get it real time and see how their kids are doing, even if they’re not in their particular intervention group, but they’re part of their class. This is very helpful.

This school had determined that consistent processes and procedures were crucial in meeting the needs of their students. The overall perceptions indicated that collaboration with team members was indicative of student success, and this collaboration ensured effective universal screening and progress monitoring measures. They identified that their consistent communication validated their professional opinions and helped students receive interventions before failure occurred. Rose, the third grade teacher, added,

As a classroom teacher, I appreciate having a team that I can bring a student to and have some other ideas, some other input before going to testing, then completing further testing to be able to find interventions that I haven’t thought of, so having everyone on board is helpful.

Their challenges continued to be in the areas of writing and math and identifying appropriate screening and progress monitoring tools. The team continually sought out new methods to support students in these curricular areas. With an adoption of a new math curriculum, they felt unsure as to what would effectively monitor students’ progress in this area.

The team identified an area of improvement that included the pacing of their processes of identifying students who were in need of interventions. They felt that towards the end of the school year, teachers had a high level of concern that certain students were not ready for the next grade level. Carol, the gifted education teacher, expressed:
When I think about the pacing of MTSS, we get a little busy towards the end of the year. I think sometimes what happens is that we reach February and March, and people have a high level of concern, like the year is coming to a close and I’m still really concerned about this student, worried about passing them on to the next grade level without something official in place. So, I think about ways of catching kids earlier, or along the way, so that we don’t have a backlog of students needing help, and integrated services [special education] would also appreciate catching kids earlier for support.

During the focus group, the team began problem solving around the area of identifying students needing interventions within a reasonable time after the school year begins. Beth, the special education teacher, suggested that,

Maybe having teachers look at the prior year’s data at the very beginning of the next year and say these kids were of concern last year, so let’s get on it right away! That might help us all a bit.

It was evident that natural teaching occurred at School One when they described their processes. Natural teaching, as Fred Jones defines, occurs when a teacher inherently knows how to differentiate for students, but is often not able to define what he or she is doing. It is an automatic response to a student’s needs, and when asked how the teacher knows what to do, the response is often, “I don’t know” (Jones, Jones, & Jones, 2014). The team repeatedly used forward thinking, problem solving as to how to make their system better for students.

The team didn’t discuss the social emotional aspect of universal screening and progress monitoring; however, they incorporated the language that indicated they care deeply about the whole child. They included families in discussions related to their students, and the teachers in the building were part of many discussions relating to all students they have taught, will teach, or just interact with in the halls. They stated their “whole community surrounds a child.”
School Two, District One

School Two’s focus group included Hailey, the English language learner teacher, Julia, a third grade teacher, Natalie, a fourth grade teacher, Daisy, a special education teacher, Rosie, a first grade teacher, and Kristin, the assistant principal. All were members of the school’s MTSS team. The school also had a PBIS team that met at different times than when the MTSS team met.

The school educated approximately 335 students, with 38% classified as free and reduced lunch (FRL) eligible, 3% identified as gifted and talented, 18% identified as English language learners, and 7% identified as receiving special education services. School Two rated higher than average on the state standardized assessment, Colorado Measures of Academic Success (CMAS), with a 39.2% passing rate compared to the Colorado state average of 29.9%.

As with School One, School Two described their universal screening and progress monitoring procedures as academically focused, using the DIBELS assessment for screening and progress monitoring of reading. They focused on a tiered approach to determine what students needed additional progress monitoring, with students identified as needing intensive interventions assessed every other week, and those identified as needing strategic interventions assessed once a month. The team placed a lot of emphasis on ensuring that students needing interventions do not miss a progress monitoring assessment using DIBELS.

Universal screening. Universal screening for reading benchmarking occurred three times a year, once two weeks after school begins, once before winter break, and once at the end of the year. Natalie, the fourth-grade teacher, stated,
We benchmark three times a year, and give our initial benchmark within the first two weeks of school, so every child has been checked. And then we do it again right before Christmas break, and then again at the end of the year, so we watch that progress and we also can catch each child that might not be progressing as fast as we want them to. Our kiddos that we have concerns with in other areas besides reading, we used Aimsweb.

For other academic areas such as math and written language, the school used Aimsweb (Pearson Education, Inc., 2014). Although the school used Aimsweb for math screening and progress monitoring, the team stated that a new math curriculum, enVision, had been enstated by the district, and it did not provide an appropriate progress monitoring tool (Pearson Education, Inc., 2016). The Northwest Educational Assessment’s MAP assessment was also used to assess reading and math at the beginning and the end of the year for second through fifth graders (NWEA, 2013). Julia, the math teacher at School Two, expressed that,

We’re still learning things about enVision and what it’s about, but we’re not finding a great progress monitoring tool, so it’s balancing testing with teaching, and realizing that you have to have that balance and not want to assess all the time.

**Progress monitoring.** While the team followed the benchmarking schedule, they felt that for some students, they needed to assess more often to identify whether they were making progress. Julia, the math teacher, emphasized that,

Progress monitoring only at the benchmarking times made me a little uncomfortable. Because if I benchmark students at the beginning of the year and they are barely at benchmark, then I wait until mid-year to benchmark them again, we could lose them.

The benchmarking drove the flexible grouping process, which allowed students to move from group to group depending on their needs. Determinations were made during the MTSS work within PLC time each week.
School Two used a block of time for language that was the same across grade levels. During this time, reading checks were completed on all students as well as universally screening and progress monitoring through initial assessments and unit end assessments. Hailey, the English learner teacher, stated,

We have a school-wide systematic language block every day. We have quick checks throughout reading and then give a unit assessment after we’re finished. This is an ongoing part of progress monitoring for our language block, and it works really well.

Students were included in data reviews on a regular basis at School Two. Students were presented with visual information regarding their progress monitoring scores, which indicated whether they improved or declined. They were asked what they thought made the difference in their scores, providing an opportunity to self-reflect and take ownership of their work. The students were then allowed to participate in their own goal setting to improve their performance over time. The team stated that students knew they were being held accountable and that this increased their commitment to try harder with each assessment. They felt that with the student’s investment, the assessments were more accurate than in the past.

This particular school valued vertical articulation which allowed the different grade levels to meet on a regular basis in order to communicate with students’ future and past teachers to better prepare and provide appropriate interventions using cumulative data. The process took roughly three to four years; however, they felt that the efforts were valuable towards implementing processes that increase student success.

**Behavior.** In terms of behavioral screening, the school used a behavioral tracking form that identified behavioral patterns in students. Behavior was pinpointed to the time of day on the form, possible causes of behavior were noted, and, if necessary, behavior
plans were written for students. Trends were easily analyzed through the use of this form. The guidance counselor consulted with teachers in determining behavioral interventions for students, and behavior referrals that sent students to the office for inappropriate behaviors were secondary to the use of the behavioral tracking form.

A method called Check-in, Check-out (CICO) gave students the opportunity to connect with staff who collected behavioral data (Todd, Kaufman, Meyer, & Horner, 2008). It was a targeted intervention that ensured staff interaction with students who struggled, and it also provided a visual for students to see their goals and success rates at exhibiting positive behaviors. A targeted behavior was written on the chart, which keyed staff as to what to specifically track. School Two’s English language learner teacher, Hailey, specifically used this method with a student who had more intense behavioral needs (see Appendix G).

The perception of teachers at School Two was that decisions were made by the district for the schools without much input from the individual schools or a consensus of teachers. The feeling was that they were forced into a specific program for math, and specific processes for reading did not create the buy-in necessary for implementation with fidelity. School One, however, being in the same district, embraced the program given to them and began collaborating as to how to make it work. School Two’s focus group did not feel that they were as involved in the development of the processes for universal screening and progress monitoring practices as they would have liked; however, they stated that they were involved in professional learning communities (PLCs) and that they had a lot of conversations about the process. They felt that the district placed them in a situation where the choices were not theirs, hindering positive perceptions. Daisy, the
special education teacher, emphasized the need for communication which she felt would help increase her knowledge of the process.

While School Two stated multiple approaches for academic and behavioral screening and progress monitoring, underlying perceptions of their involvement within the development of the processes seemed to have hindered their ability to move forward individually as professionals. The assistant principal stated that she relies heavily on the counselor for her behavioral knowledge and that she herself “doesn’t know that much about behavior,” which created a more siloed approach to working with students. The reliance on specific expertise to move forward or develop plans can weaken sustainability over time.

School Three, District One

School Three’s focus group included Michelle, an English language (EL) teacher, Erin, the MTSS coordinator for the school, Fred, a fifth-grade teacher, Kim, a second-grade teacher, and Pippa, a special education paraprofessional. The school educated approximately 670 students, with 4.2% classified as free and reduced lunch (FRL) eligible, 17% identified as gifted and talented, 2% identified as English language learners, and 3% identified as receiving special education services. School Three rated significantly higher than average on the state standardized assessment, Colorado Measures of Academic Success (CMAS), with a 66.5% passing rate compared to the Colorado state average of 29.9%.

As most of the other schools in the district, School Three conducted universal academic screenings through the use of the DIBELS assessment for literacy for grades kindergarten, first, and second and the NWEA MAP assessment for reading and math in
grades third, fourth, and fifth. They also used the district-prescribed enVision math program which provided screening data. While these assessments were used with all students in the respective grades, each grade level also conducted additional assessments, such as the San Diego Quick Word Assessment, which was given in first grade. The Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) was also given in many grades when teachers felt the need for additional information. The STAR reading and math assessment was used universally as a screener as well as to progress monitor students needing interventions in reading (Renaissance Learning, 2017). The school recently started using the Every Child a Writer (ECAW) program universally to address writing needs, and they felt that this closed a gap in meeting the writing needs of students, as they did not have a solid writing program previously. The ECAW provided a systematic way of teaching writing as well as progress monitored students within the curriculum (Johnson, Rochester, & Clare, 2013).

**Universal screening.** The process for identifying students needing interventions was unique to School Three, as they began using cut points in the 2016-2017 school year. Staff agreed to using a 35th percentile cut point, meaning that when students fell below that cut point on assessments, their need was addressed within the school’s PLC process, and a plan was created to prevent the student from “falling through the cracks” if interventions were not successful.

The focus group stated that the grade level teams, or PLCs, began the discussion regarding student needs, and when the student was not responding to universal interventions or interventions provided by the teacher in the general education classroom, the discussion then was elevated to the school’s MTSS team which then created a specific
plan to provide more intensive interventions. Targeted learning objectives, or TLOs, were written into the individual student plans. Erin, the MTSS coordinator, stated that,

Targeted learning objectives, or TLOs, were essentially a logic model with a smart goal saying here’s where they [students] are, here’s where they need to be, and here’s the first step we’re going to take to get them there. It also states the resources we’re going to use to get them there, the time, the minutes, etc.

Intervention groups were created and provided during a specific block of time each day. The school called this WIN time, with WIN standing for “What I Need.” The groups were then rotated every six weeks, with each group focusing on a specific academic skill. The TLOs were followed within this WIN time, and staff worked on teaching the specific skills within the TLO. Teachers understood that they couldn’t shift up and use different activities, but that the TLO, which may have directed them to differentiate between short i and short e, needed to be followed for six weeks. The EL teacher stated this helped all educators involved in the process to stay focused on the specific needs of the student.

School Three implemented a “flooding model,” meaning all educators, including grade level teachers, grade level paraprofessionals, the EL teacher, the MTSS teacher, and the MTSS paraprofessional provided interventions at the same time during the day. This provided the most amount of staff members during crucial instruction time.

Progress monitoring. Erin, the MTSS coordinator, expressed that they worked hard to change perspectives regarding progress monitoring practices.

I think that one of the shifts that we made over the last four years is really kind of a recognition that progress monitoring is not an intervention. There was not a consistent understanding. The progress monitoring now is tied specifically to the targeted learning objective (TLO), so whatever it is that we’re saying that the child needs to increase and we’re going to know they increase by using this progress monitoring data.
School Three prided itself on being a PLC-focused school. Their administration structured the master schedule to allow PLCs, or grade level teams, to meet regularly. Time was also provided for committees that had different grade level representatives to also meet on a regular basis. Committees formed included MTSS, Teacher Advisory Group (TAG), and PBIS, among others. They believed that the use of committees increased the opportunity for teachers to have a voice in the decision-making processes.

Behavior. Behaviorally, the school used PBIS, and their expectations included the use of the motto, ROAR, which stands for Respectful, Organized, Attentive, and Responsible. These positive behaviors were taught in the classrooms, as well as through assemblies, which recognized specific students in each grade and class who showed these positive behaviors in an exceptional way. The teachers reported that this was very positive feedback for the students, and the reinforcement of positive behaviors increased the success of students. Positive behavior intervention supports was used universally for all students and was considered a preventive approach for deterring negative behaviors.

When students did not respond to universal behavioral expectations and instruction, they used a check-in, check-out process, as well as targeted behavior objectives, or TBOs, which were written into a plan. Parent input was crucial for writing the plan, and the MTSS coordinator stated that this was the difference between the TLOs and the TBOs. With the TBOs, they focused heavily on including parents in the process which supported reinforcement of behaviors outside of school as well as within the school.

Prior to writing TBOs, student needs were brought to the attention of the MTSS team and previous behavioral interventions were discussed and reviewed and the
determination was made regarding changing out simple interventions such as using a sticker chart, tokens in a jar, etc. A member of the team then conducted observations of the student to identify behavioral patterns, documenting what was observed. The team then reconvened, and a TBO plan was written if necessary, with the parents present. With the behavioral focus defined, School Three still believed this was an area of growth for the school. Erin expressed,

I think the reason that behavior continues to always be a problem is that it’s harder to pin down. It’s less concrete. If a child can’t read CVC [consonant-vowel-consonant] words, you teach them how to read CVC words, and then later they can read CVC words. If they can’t add two-digit numbers, they teach that, and then they can do it. With behavior, it’s different.

With consistent communication and conversations among all staff regarding processes, they felt they were moving in the right direction and not as many students were getting lost in the system. They wanted to improve their behavioral data collection system, as they felt this was lacking. Erin continued,

I guess the discussion we’re having is great right now because we’re sort of putting shape to it by saying we’re really noticing as a staff that this child was in so and so’s class and didn’t have any problems, and now he’s in this class and having problems, so what is this a function of, and what did the previous teacher do that worked?

Multi-Tiered system of supports. This team felt that their system was functioning more successfully than in the past. Within the past four years, they changed their MTSS process from meeting every other month to meeting twice a week regarding student needs. Within the last three years, the TLO and TBO processes were implemented, and overall processes were revamped monthly; however, they felt they were fairly settled into a new structure, using processes well. Teachers knew they could
meet with their PLC teams about their top five student needs and that they were able to discuss all student needs within a reasonable amount of time.

They felt that collaboration and communication had made a difference in the success of students, and with everyone working and bringing their expertise together to create solutions for students, they felt the system was better enabled to meet the needs of students. Having a full time MTSS coordinator in the school made a difference in terms of collaboration and communication. Erin, the MTSS coordinator expressed:

Having somebody in my role as a full time MTSS coordinator is, I think, is essential. Without this, it’s more like telling everyone that we’re going to start this thing, then say good bye, good luck, and now it’s on you. The complexity of our system requires that somebody be there in a coaching role to help transfer that over time and into authentic situations.

Through the collaborative process of including all teachers on committees and on PLC teams, School Three’s focus group believed that the old perception of MTSS as the gatekeeper to special education services had shifted to meeting the needs of all students, whether they had a label or not. Erin felt that the shift happened when they changed the model from being top-down, or administrators making all decisions, to a more collaborative discussion, allowing teachers to brainstorm solutions for individual students.

We’re a team meeting to talk about what’s next for this child, to talk about what we can do. The last step, the last puzzle piece that fell into place that really made that a functional system that we have now was that instead of having just one person from fifth grade come to these meetings, and have an MTSS-rich discussion then go back and try to tell their team about it, we now have everyone talking about it together.

School Four, District Two

The focus group for School Four consisted of two RTI coaches, Rachel and Katie, the assistant principal, Wendy, and Samantha, a special education teacher. This school
was structured differently than the other four schools in this study. It was a charter school that educated approximately 1570 students, kindergarten through 12th grade, with 750 students enrolled in the kindergarten through fifth grades. This focus group included only staff who worked with elementary students. The total numbers following reflected the entire school’s percentages. These included 16.9% classified as free and reduced lunch (FRL) eligible, 4% identified as gifted and talented, 3% identified as English language learners, and 5% identified as receiving special education services. School Four scored a relatively high passing rate on the state standardized assessment, Colorado Measures of Academic Success (CMAS), with a 28% passing rate compared to the Colorado state average of 20.6%. This state average was different than noted with the other schools, since it was a charter school serving students in grades K-12; therefore, it was compared to other schools similar in nature across the state.

**Universal screening.** Universal screening at School Four included using the DIBELS assessment for reading for all students in grade kindergarten, first, second, and third. The DIBELS was then used for screening students in the fourth and fifth grades who had shown some variability in scores or lower scores on other assessments (standardized and classroom) or for students who had been on some type of plan previously. The data indicated that a little less than half of all the fourth and fifth graders were assessed using the DIBELS assessment. Universal screening also included the use of the NWEA MAP assessment for all students, kindergarten through fifth grades, in reading and in math. The team felt that they still did not have an appropriate screener for math, as more information than what the NWEA MAP assessment provided was needed. Rachel, the RTI coach, stated that,
We screen everybody, first graders through fifth graders in reading, and we’re trying to find a good screener for math because we didn’t have a good math universal screener, and we still don’t have a good math universal screener. So, other than math, we feel we have good screeners in academics.

By using both DIBELS and the NWEA MAP assessments, the school felt that they had more of a body of evidence to suggest where a student was functioning and where to focus interventions in areas other than math, if needed. These assessments provided benchmarking data which could be compared to progress monitoring scores after interventions were implemented.

**Progress monitoring.** Progress monitoring occurred weekly for students who were determined to be in the red zone, or those that showed significant deficits, in reading, using the DIBELS assessment. Those that showed deficits, but not as significant, were considered in the yellow zone, and were progress monitored every two weeks. AIMSweb was used for progress monitoring in the area of math, but the teachers felt it was too confusing, not user-friendly, and not report-friendly so they opted out of using AIMSweb and switched to using the Saxon math curriculum’s placement tests to determine where students were at in math. They moved to using Saxon assessments for math on a weekly basis to guide instruction in the general education classroom.

Specifically, for tier two interventions in math, the school was piloting the easyCBM program; however, they felt that there was still a “guessing element,” as students chose their answers based on multiple choice responses. Wendy, the assistant principal, said,

There’s still a guessing element to it, because it’s multiple choice. A large component is, and it’s three choices, too, so then the odds of accidentally choosing the right answer are that you could get something close. It makes it feel skewed.
The school had a math committee that was addressing this issue. The committee was also researching to identify which progress monitoring tools for math would be the best.

The involvement of the team during the development of the universal screening and progress monitoring process was limited; however, the assistant principal led the initial work in developing universal screenings for the school. She stated that,

It was a long process. We’ve been through many iterations of the plans, the process. We’re in a pretty good place now, which is why we don’t have a standing student resource team, or RTI team, but it took seven years to bring educators to a place where they were developing interventions on their own and not waiting for a team to tell them what to do.

Previously, the RTI team wrote and monitored plans, managed meetings, and developed and defined the process. The team built sustainability by setting up the process of meeting to review data at every benchmark period with every grade level and developed intervention groups, then directed the teachers to move forward with connecting to parents, setting up their own meetings, and monitoring interventions for students. The teachers then had responsibility for the plans, the paperwork, and the meetings, bringing data back to the team at a later date. Because of this, the old RTI team did not exist at the time of the focus group discussion, but the work was in everyone’s hands.

Parents were also included at a much earlier date than previously, and the time to resolve student issues was shorter. If special education was consulted or a referral to special education for eligibility was being considered, parents had information sooner than prior to being included. The team felt that the teachers who had data could make decisions more easily and that the process was more data-driven than previously.
Wendy, the assistant principal, again reiterated the fact that the process works better with teachers driving the decisions.

Before, the team had to define everything. Like we managed the oversight of it, the plans, the process, how to set up meetings, when to set up meetings with parents, what paperwork to fill out. Now, it’s we have data meetings at every benchmark period with every grade level, and from that we determine who are the groups they’re going to pull for reading and math. From there, they walk out of the meeting knowing these are the parents I need to contact and set up meetings. That’s what we’re in the heart of right now. We’ve had all the data meetings, now the teachers have gone back to set up the parent meetings. The teachers then define what happens for the next six or eight weeks. They know the process.

School Four also had, as School Three, more “hands on deck,” meaning, they had more interventionists that worked directly with students in the classrooms, collaborating with teachers on a daily basis. Being reflective, the focus group often discussed where they were and the progress they had made in the universal screening and progress monitoring process. They used the word “evolution,” and they felt it was truly an evolutionary process, moving from little support to having three paraprofessionals and two teachers solely supporting classes and students by providing interventions. They felt that all of the students’ needs were being met, with roughly 120 students served through intervention groups.

The identification of students who were at risk for academic difficulties was a continuous process, which began after conducting universal screenings. Intervention groups were developed, data were revisited every six to eight weeks, and the students moved between groups, depending on their needs. The fluid process also allowed for students who exhibited difficulties and who were unidentified at the beginning of the year to also receive interventions as needed. Students who gained necessary skills through intervention groups did not remain in the groups, but moved back to the general
education classroom in order to use the obtained skills. The flexibility of the process was evident in the fluidity of the makeup of the groups, with the ultimate goal being that students received instruction in their general education classroom.

Along with the use of universal screeners, the general education teacher’s data, perceptions, and information were crucial in determining student needs. Teachers kept data relating to any accommodations provided and the success with those accommodations. These data were then brought to MTSS meetings to determine whether an intervention plan was necessary. The school placed a heavy emphasis on classroom data in order to make effective decisions. On the flip side, if a student did not perform well on the universal screeners and was doing very well in the classroom, this information was then used to reinforce what the teacher was doing in the classroom, and an intervention group was not assigned for that student. A body of evidence was used in making all decisions for students.

Behavior. Identifying students who were at risk for social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties included putting a system’s approach in place through the school’s PBIS model. The special education teacher stated that the Second Step curriculum was used throughout the school to address social skills deficits (Committee for Children, 2011). Each grade level developed their own token economy system to reinforce positive behaviors in the classroom; however, when students showed they were still struggling, the grade level teams conducted their own ABC (antecedent, behavior, consequences) observations, documenting what happened prior to the negative behavior, what the specific behavior was, and what the consequences for the behavior were. This helped determine the motivation of the student for that particular behavior, the function of the
behavior, which gave the teacher data to determine instructional accommodations or interventions. Again, this work was conducted within grade level teams, and not within a school-wide MTSS team meeting.

According to Katie, one of the RTI coaches, the school had just begun the process of addressing behaviors that didn’t respond to the school-wide PBIS model. She stated:

We are trying to weave in a problem-solving model for behavior, like RTI. Our behavior work has been separate from our academic work. We’ve done a lot of work around behavior and school-wide PBIS, but as far as working through a problem-solving model, we’ve only talked about it. Luckily, this team meets with the special education team on Wednesdays, so this group is always in communication.

They were moving towards using the same problem-solving approach as with RTI, identifying what the issues were, what interventions needed to be in place, and what instruction looked like to support behavioral education. What was still in place was that a student was disciplined, a counselor may have been involved, and plans were developed later; however, Katie felt that by addressing behavior within their existing system for academic difficulties, they would be able to address how behavior impacts academics and vice versa. She said, “We still need to dive in and make sure we’re doing for those kids just like we do for everyone else.” The assistant principal chimed in and stated that teachers had often thought student issues were academic issues, and then, after discussion, realized that attention, focus, trauma, or family issues were really at the heart of the issues.

There’s certainly times where teachers have thought an issue is an academic issue, whereas in discussion we’ve focused on attention or focus issues, trauma, or family, and that’s kind of come up as a piece of it. If there’s not an academic impact, they don’t think of coming to the team as quickly, you know?
The RTI coach stated that in these cases the teachers “tend to wait a little bit too long to really try to put in place some accommodations that would try to eliminate behavior.”

The school-wide PBIS model used the 8 Keys of Excellence, and these were defined on the school’s website as Integrity, Failure Leads to Success (we learn from our mistakes), Speak with Good Purpose, This is It (give 100%), Commitment, Ownership, Flexibility, and Balance (8 Keys of Excellence, 2017). The 8 Keys of Excellence is the character education the school used, and they “define our school culture and are expected behavior for our students.” Paper slips with the different keys of excellence written on them were handed to students when they showed that expectation. For example, Samantha, the special education teacher, stated that,

A child may receive a key that reads, ‘Wow, I really saw you showing integrity today,’ so then the child puts their name on the slip and then gets to take it to the office and gets a little key that’s a charm key, and then adds it to a bracelet.

This supported both the visual and tangible reinforcement. Wendy said that the teachers were nominated as well for following the expectations.

We even have it for teachers. Like the 8 keys are reinforced through rewards. Anyone can nominate a teacher who exemplifies the 8 keys, then we have a drawing once a month, and whichever teacher’s name if pulled receives a gift card. So, the 8 keys are reinforced at all levels.

Progress monitoring for behavior was fairly consistent, once a child was on a behavior plan. The plan included baseline data, interventions, and goals based on the function of behavior identified. The progress monitoring for behavior plans included regular observations and data collection of these observations and information from the classroom teachers. With these data, the plan could be changed to reflect new information, whether it be increasing or decreasing interventions, deleting interventions that weren’t effective, or adding new interventions that were more appropriate.
The processes for universal screening and progress monitoring were reviewed on a regular basis, weekly, in most cases, or when the teams met. The teams focused more on progress monitoring data to tweak the groups according to student needs, reviewing student data with parents every six to eight weeks. Universal screening processes were discussed on a regular basis, as well, but changing the system and screeners took longer than expected.

Staff were taught processes through professional development which was more frequent in the initial stages of implementation, seven years prior to the focus group discussion. The group stated that the processes were currently reinforced through monthly meetings. Samantha stated it was a slow process, similar to coaching, but Rachel, an RTI coach, said the grade level teams worked with teachers within their team meetings.

We leave a lot up to teams to do amongst themselves. We do meet with new teachers or teachers that are in the induction program to help them through our process that we have in the school, but we really leave it up to teams to support and help each other.

New teachers received training through their induction program; however, veteran teachers worked with each other to hold their teams accountable. It was a sustainable process that didn’t rely on specific people to deliver the information. Through the use of team leads who had attended training, new information was disseminated, conflict issues were addressed, curriculum changes were presented, and problem-solving strategies were taught. The team led communication continuously kept the teachers current and provided support making it a sustainable and seamless model for this school.

**Multi-Tiered system of supports.** The team contributed a lot of the MTSS success to the consistency of the processes for universal screening and progress
monitoring. A schedule was set for the year regarding benchmarking dates, and students were added to the schedule for progress monitoring dates. If students were absent when the progress monitoring was to occur, they were checked as soon as they returned. Every teacher followed the schedule for screening and progress monitoring, and the process was well-embedded, giving teachers ownership for student success. The consistent schedules for screening and progress monitoring included using the same adults to screen and monitor. This provided consistency for students as they were familiar with staff and had already developed a rapport with them.

Universal screening and progress monitoring had helped the school with decision-making practices. The structure created more understanding of the process and more accountability for interventions. Samantha expressed that the system improved their practices.

I think it’s made decision-making more concrete, and clear-cut. It’s not just people’s gut feeling, but it’s data driven. It’s also more consistency across grade levels, and the conversations that we’re having about why kids are in groups and how that’s decided. It’s more black and white.

What the team was hoping for during the current school year was to increase their ability to universally screen and progress monitor in math using more consistent programs that were evidence-based. They also wanted to continue focusing on screeners and progress monitoring for behavior; however, with using ABC (antecedent, behavior, consequences) data, they did feel they were moving in the right direction.

This focus group stated that consistency, research-based programs, appropriate staff, and the number of staff were most valuable to their work in moving students forward. Wendy commented that it’s crucial “having the right people in the right positions,” and Rachel said, “It’s a journey.”
**School Five, District Two**

In contrast to School Four, School Five was strictly an elementary school and displayed different demographics throughout the years. School Five’s focus group was small in numbers, and only included Bob, the principal, and Xander, the special education teacher. While the school staffed five interventionists through Title funds, Bob and Xander seemed to have a pulse on what their teachers and teams were focused on as well as the processes developed and followed in the school. The school educated approximately 530 students currently, having lost about 100 students from the previous year due to the discontinuation of busing services. The percentage of students classified as free and reduced lunch (FRL) eligible was 94% during the year of this focus group, 1% were identified as gifted and talented, 70% were identified as English language learners, and 8% were identified as receiving special education services. School Five was rated with a Low Passing Rate on the state standardized assessment, Colorado Measures of Academic Success (CMAS), with a 12% passing rate compared to the Colorado state average of 29.9%. Bob indicated that their scores were climbing due to the push for all students to receive universal instruction for the majority of their time in school.

**Universal screening.** The procedures for universal screening at School Five included assessing all kindergarten students prior to the start of school. Classes were then created based on the assessments, which, as Bob stated, constituted more balance in each class of students who had all abilities. In grades second through fifth, a DIBELS benchmark screening was given as soon as school started. Reading lesson plans were adjusted based on the data from the DIBELS screener. This screener was given three
times a year, and students were progress monitored between screenings, every four to six weeks. Again, lesson plans were tailored according to student needs based on the progress monitoring data. In conjunction with the DIBELS assessments, an additional phonics assessment was given to identify the holes in reading ability. The data from the DIBELS assessment, the phonics assessment, and classroom data were then triangulated to ensure students were moving forward in their reading ability. In addition to universal reading screeners, School Five also used data from common assessments based on curriculum in math. This provided teachers with some progress monitoring tools that aided in identifying whether gaps were closing.

**Progress monitoring.** Xander stated that, as a special education teacher, she focused more on the progress monitoring of students using specific research-based assessments within the SIPPS (Systematic Instruction in Phonological Awareness, Phonics, and Sight Words) and the DIBELS programs (Shefelbine & Newman, 2004; Good & Kaminski, 2003). If students were not showing growth, the interventions were increased, and assessments were repeated in additional areas to identify where the issues were. She continued,

So, in looking at the groups, we will go off of grade level, or assess at a lower grade level to see where the holes are, and then, either through SIPPS or another program, we help them fill the holes. For example, we also do DIBELS off grade levels, so if they’re a second grader they may not take nonsense words, but we would use nonsense words to see if they don’t have their sounds in blending.

The SIPPS is a phonics program that provides instructional materials to teach strategies to systematically break down multi-syllabic words. Bob and Xander both felt that this program supported students in their reading growth. Progress monitoring using these programs in reading occurred bi-weekly for students who received intensive
interventions. Other students who received targeted interventions, which were not considered intensive, were progress monitored every three weeks, and those students just needing additional support were progress monitored every six weeks. Progress monitoring in math occurred daily, with data taken during an independent block of time in order to adjust instruction the very next day. Data teams at each grade level met weekly to review progress monitoring scores, and they made instructional decisions as well as decisions that would move a student towards a special education evaluation if the data showed a lack of appropriate growth.

In terms of Bob’s and Xander’s involvement in the development of the universal screening and progress monitoring process in School Five, Xander said that she had not been involved, because

> It sort of comes down from the district what you have to do. You have to give DIBELS, you have to do phonemic benchmarking. But, I have helped in progress monitoring to help the team decide what’s best for each kid, to know how to do that by looking at their needs.

Bob, as a principal, had been more involved in the process and was included in district-level meetings regarding the processes. He worked at the district level identifying the academic standards to be used in assessments, honing in on the main standards in order to create common assessments. The work was completed through vertical teams over the course of a summer, and the work was aligned with specific benchmarks which then drives instruction. The curriculum guides were then designed, based on the work this team completed. The DIBELS assessment was not used in creating curriculum guides and was deliberately used as a stand-alone assessment.

**Behavior.** Addressing the social, emotional, or behavioral difficulties of students began at School Five with observations. A climate coach within the school supported the
teachers in determining how to create an environment that supports social emotional growth. For students who didn’t respond to what was provided universally for all students, interventions were put in place in the general education classrooms. These included sticker charts to address specific behaviors or additional time with the climate coach for individualized behavioral instruction. A check-in, check-out process was also used for students to touch base with the climate coach and help focus on appropriate behaviors. Specific charts showing the positive rewards students were working towards were also used, providing a visual tool that increased motivation in students. Frequent rewards were initially used, weaning students to longer periods of time without rewards.

Xander said this built the stamina of students, increasing their independence.

We have ‘I’m Working For.’ They may have five boxes on the sheet, and when they’re caught doing something right, they get a smiley face, or a star, or whatever, depending on what the kid wants. Then they might be working for quiet time with a book or just a quiet time period, or they might want to play with Legos. When they fill the five boxes they then get to play Legos for a few minutes, just to keep them going to get back on task. Then, over time, we make it longer to build stamina so that they can work longer.

Universally, School Five used a PBIS system that included the school motto, SOAR. The school mascot was the eagle, and the school-wide expectations were tied into the SOAR motto; SOAR represented Safety, Organized, Achievement, and Respect. When students followed these expectations, they received tickets which could be exchanged for items at the school store. Xander expressed the fact that students on her caseload in special education were reinforced more frequently as they had a tendency to struggle with behavior more often than other students. Other students needing more motivation also received additional tickets when they exhibited positive behavior.

If the kids are on task and doing what they’re supposed to do, or if they’re going above and beyond, they can get SOAR tickets and then they can exchange them in
at the school store. So, obviously, some of my kids, we will load them up a lot more to motivate them, whereas other kids really don’t need that kind of reinforcement.

Processes for universal screening and progress monitoring were taught to the staff at the beginning of the year and continually, as necessary, over the course of the year. The leadership team in the school met every two weeks, and this team touched base regarding the knowledge and growth of all the teachers in the building, then retaught processes to remedy misperceptions about interventions, data collection, and next steps for students who were not making appropriate growth. The leadership team emphasized the importance of appropriate and consistent interventions as well as collected enough data to drive decision making, whether it’s moving students forward towards a special education evaluation or adjusting the existing interventions.

**Multi-Tiered system of supports.** One of the misconceptions teachers had at School Five was that the MTSS process was the pathway to special education, stated Xander. She said,

> It’s not the roadway to special education, and just because you started in an intervention group doesn’t mean you end up there. We have five interventionists that support grade levels, and I meet with them to discuss the kids that are struggling. We talk about how we can help them, and what’s the root cause of their struggles. There’s a kindergartener that just started at school, and he doesn’t have visual discrimination, so we’re looking at what intervention can we do for him, to help him grow. We talk about that every week, too.

Bob and Xander emphasized that consistency was crucial in the implementation of universal screeners and progress monitoring. One of the interventionists created calendars that were color-coded for each assessment/screener. Xander said:

> Our friend that just walked in the door is up at 3:00 in the morning making sure calendars are color-coded and sent out, and she makes sure that we know what’s going on. I already have them in my book and I know what’s there. If you’re asking consistency, yeah. We’ve got it nailed. We’ve got the year planned.
Along with consistency, Bob added that reminders were sent out automatically from the mClass program, which is a universal screener for the DIBELS assessment (Amplify, 2017). If a teacher missed a data entry point on a student, the system would create a flag, which then prompted itself to send a reminder to the teacher. mClass also created reports which indicated which students were missed during the administration of assessments. School City is a program that houses progress monitoring data entered by the staff (School City, 2017). This program can run reports regarding all data and will also flag which teachers missed entering data on their students.

Xander discussed the fact that the structure put in place for universal screening and progress monitoring had given staff more focus on moving students forward. She stated,

I think for some of us, it’s given us more focus on how to move kids and what to do. I think for some other people that don’t get interventions and the process, I think it’s like hair-pulling for some people. But for most of us, we like it.

Bob referred to an example of a student struggling in class due to the fact that he didn’t like to do the work, and the material was difficult for him. He said,

And a poor example of that, was a teacher we work with, and just the other day she had a student in a culture that’s difficult, doesn’t like to do the work, the work is hard for him. She was sending students already that had an IEP for math, or for reading, down to a supported independent practice group to get extra smaller group attention. She wanted to send this student, who doesn’t have an IEP, with them and I asked her what she has done to try to help him in this classroom. I think with this whole process is not about extra support until you’ve tried some interventions in your classroom.

Bob reminded the teacher that the intervention data drives the decisions as to what each student needs. He emphasized that the general education teacher was responsible for all students and that all interventions first happen in the general education classroom.
prior to determining other needs. Bob also stated that the majority of situations like this were based on behavioral issues that were not manageable by the general education teacher; however, they were required to put interventions in place for academics and behavior, and the data showing growth or lack of growth would be used in identifying students for intervention groups held outside of the class.

This school’s belief was that teachers needed to try more universal levels of support prior to putting heavier levels of support in place. Bob said that this approach of keeping students in general education was new and was providing all students access to the general education curriculum needed for them to grow. In the past, students were automatically pulled out of the general education classes when they needed any interventions, and they were never exposed to what their fellow peers were learning. The school’s achievement data declined, which drove Bob to alter the system towards a total inclusion approach to education, including all students in all classrooms.

We used to pull everybody out of their classrooms, and it seemed like when we pulled them out automatically that is was so much easier to put them at a lower level. They were then never exposed to grade level instruction. Our data really started to slide. I think some of the improvements that we have made recently, in the last two years, includes a total inclusion approach. I would say 90% or more of our kids are included.

The other percentage of students that had the most significant needs received support in the special education classroom for a small portion of the day. Xander did not keep students in special education out of the classroom, but rather, pushed her services into the general education classroom to allow her students access to grade level material. Between Xander and the five interventionists, the school was able to provide a co-teaching model within a fully inclusive setting, with two adults in every classroom.
The worry was that during the 2018-2019 school year, the support was to be reduced because of fewer students during the current year due to busing services across the district being eliminated. The Title funds that the school received for the current and previous years would be greatly reduced, and the interventionists were currently paid for with Title funds. Bob’s worry was that sustainability of the best practices they developed would not be easily maintained. Co-teaching would not occur the next year due to the reduction of staff that would be necessary with the funding cuts. It would be an adjustment, and Bob was hoping that they would still be able to meet student needs.

We’ve lost a lot of students this year because we were unable to pass our mil levy and so we lost all of our busing. We lost 88 students since last year due to busing. There are a lot of schools where these kids live. Their school’s two blocks from where they live, and I’m a mile and a half from them. Where would you go? So, they’ve taken half of our Title money from us already, that’s the side effect. My total budget for this year was allocated based on my last year’s numbers. So next year, my budget will reflect this year’s population. I have five interventionists now. Next year I’ll be happy if we have three.

In order to show need to the district, Bob was planning on comparing student data from the co-teaching years to the following year when they would not be able to provide a co-teaching model. He believed these data would show a significant difference in student achievement. He hoped this would be enough data to rehire support.

In spite of future needs, Xander believed that collaboration within and among teams was most valuable to her work, with all teachers working together to meet the needs of all students. Bob felt that the shift that happened two years previously, pushing all students back into the general education classroom and providing them all exposure to grade-level curriculum, had been most valuable to his work. Without appropriate universal screeners and progress monitoring, this would have been much more difficult, as interventions were created based on screening and monitoring data. Bob stated,
We owe it to our kids to make sure everybody’s on grade level and gets grade level instruction, or at least as much as possible. Let’s just treat them all like they’re students and put them in the classroom, expose them to high levels of rigor, and just support them all. Let’s just support them all.

**Categories Identified**

The focus groups provided rich data surrounding the perceptions educators hold regarding universal screening and progress monitoring practices for academics and behavior in each of the five schools. Through the process of open coding with the MAXQDA qualitative software program, the transcribed data were divided into commonalities that could possibly reflect categories or themes. The open coding used in the analysis of the focus groups’ information included examining, labeling, and categorizing the five focus group transcriptions. The initial categories that emerged are as follows, with all schools pointing to the importance of these categories for successful implementation of best universal screening practices and progress monitoring processes.

- Benchmarking
- Interventions
- Professional learning communities (PLCs)
- Progress monitoring
- Universal Screening
- Math
- Reading
- Behavior
- Testing
- Grade levels
- Needs of students
- Time
- System of supports (MTSS)
- Data
- Consistency
- Teams
- Student plans
- Language
- Scheduling
Time

Benchmarking was a term the schools used to determine what level students are at during a given point in time, and specific assessments were given to identify these data points. Interventions were specific supplemental programs for students who were at risk or were considered below grade level.

Axial coding, the refinement of the categories identified through the open coding process, supported the further narrowing of the categories, with many of the categories above aligning with each other. The categories aligned with each other as follows and naturally developed into the main categories listed. Each of these main categories are discussed in length following the list. Themes within the categories are also listed and discussed, as they were evident within the focus group statements.

- Systems: District: Math, and Reading, and MTSS: RTI and PBIS
- Leadership: Guidance, Implementation, Resources, Time, Training, Consistency, Balance, Culture, Decision-making, and PLCs
- Intervention: Behavior, Flexibility, Coaching, Intensive Interventions
- Data: Testing, Benchmarking, Screening, Progress Monitoring, Tracking, and Data Collection
- Collaboration: Grade Level Meetings, Teams, and Schedules

Systems

As systems drive the work in schools, it is important to recognize what comprises the systems and what functions are within those systems. For the sake of this study, systems are defined as organizational structures that create processes for programming. The systems identified in this study were the district and MTSS. The theme of district included math and reading, which specific universal screeners were mandated by the districts. Multi-tiered system of supports, being a systemic framework for addressing academic and behavioral screeners and progress monitoring, is the second identified
theme under the systems category. Under the umbrella of MTSS are RTI and PBIS which define the academic and behavioral work and interventions.

**District and multi-tiered system of supports.** The systems that were addressed include what the districts had mandated for all schools in the areas of math and reading, and the MTSS system that was prevalent throughout the districts, but was not universally mandated, except in the area of RTI. The RTI system mandates interventions for students under IDEA to identify students for special education in the areas of specific learning disabilities and serious emotional disabilities. The PBIS approach falls under the umbrella of MTSS, addressing universal behavioral expectations for all students. As PBIS is a systemic approach under MTSS, this also was identified as a theme falling under the systems category.

Four of the schools used the term MTSS, and one did not; however, all schools used MTSS practices within their buildings. School Four did not use the MTSS language in their focus group; however, they described their universal screening and progress monitoring practices. It was evident that they had a streamlined approach, taking the “middle man” out of the process, with the general education teachers using a systematic method to identify the needs of students and implement interventions on their own without a team dictating what or how they were to work with students. The general education teachers involved the parents of students earlier, rather than waiting to bring a child’s issues to a building problem-solving team. Before they shifted to this model, the process was cumbersome, and parents were not in the loop at an early stage. Teachers would have to wait to share data with the building team, and interventions for students took longer, to the point that many were then referred for special education evaluations.
School Four has had fewer referrals to special education because the interventions were starting earlier.

Using a different approach, School Three emphasized the common language associated with MTSS, and all knew the MTSS terminology and processes expected in the school. They agreed to use cut points for flagging students who had specific needs to prevent them from falling through the cracks. Fred, a fifth-grade teacher, stated that the organization of the system was most valuable to his work, and that,

The system gave an opportunity to have great conversations about all of the students, providing a wide variety of methods for meeting the needs of students, and to me that’s huge. I don’t think you see that at every school.

All five schools found value in a universal system which structures screenings and instruction for academics, and all but one mentioned universal screening to identify whether students were in green, yellow, or red zones, with green indicating that students were responding to general education instruction and meeting benchmark expectations. Yellow indicated that students needed some targeted interventions when they showed some difficulty in a specific area, whether it be academics or behavior. Red signified that students needed intensive interventions, when they were showing great gaps in academics or behavior. These colors were representative of where students are after universal screening measures; however, the schools did not use them in terms of tiers, as often used in the past in educational settings. While the color terms were used, they were not the main focus of discussion regarding universal screening and progress monitoring for any of the schools. This shows a shift in the mindset of our country, as it was common in the past to track students and hear “he’s a red zone kid” (Burns, Riley-Tillman, &
This shift also indicates progress in moving towards full use of people first language (The Arc, 2016).

A universal system that is proactive regarding the instruction of positive behavior includes PBIS practices (OSEP, 2017). Every focus group addressed behavioral practices when asked; however, they were not stated first in any group when asked about screening. They all indicated that they used PBIS practices, with four schools using the term PBIS; however, PBIS practices are not screening practices. School Five did not use the term, but then showed their expectations on the wall, revealing that PBIS practices were in effect at that school (see Appendix H). As mentioned earlier, School One incorporated their Seven Habits of Highly Effective People universally, with all staff and students understanding the habits (Covey, 2013). Systemically, School One taught these habits, or expectations, through what they call “Habit Boot Camp,” emphasizing the value of the habits.

Good dialogue occurred within the focus groups regarding universal screening and progress monitoring in the areas of math and reading. The interesting piece about this is that the schools had extensive reading screeners in which they discussed, and more comments were made about math due to the schools emphasizing they did not have adequate math screeners or progress monitoring tools. Lynette, the principal at School One, expressed:

For sure, we’ve been paying attention to math. Having a progress monitoring tool for math continues to be challenging. Easy CBM is what we’re using this year and we are continuing to evaluate whether that meets our needs or not. It’s giving us some data about our students, but whether it actually matches the intervention is kind of iffy. So that continues to be an area of just research, and trial and error of what are some different processes, and what different tools are appropriate. We have a new math adoption, and so we are seeing what can be aligned to the instruction, what can’t be aligned, and where we can find those norm-referenced
tools. It’s been a process throughout this year, but I think we’re continuing to get a little bit closer to something that feels like we could do systemically.

Leanne, the kindergarten teacher at School One, expressed that:

Kindergarten does have a math (progress monitoring) assessment. It’s not a formal assessment, but the district created one for kindergarten that follows along with the standards exactly recreating the questions, and it’s been really nice for kindergarten. They say you only have to give it once a year, but we give it probably every month, just to make sure the kids are following along with it. Most of our kiddos, except for the few outliers are right in the green where they should be. If we didn’t have this assessment tool to work with throughout the school year, we wouldn’t have known this information. You generally get a feel for this anecdotally, but it’s nice to have this set formula that every kindergarten teacher is utilizing, but it’s only for kindergarten.

District One adopted a new math curriculum called enVision that was mentioned in all three of District One’s focus groups (Pearson Education, Inc., 2016). While they admitted the program was still new, they shared frustration over a lack of progress monitoring tools within the curriculum. The schools also expressed dismay regarding district direction and mandated curriculum and would have liked to be included in district decision-making practices.

Leadership

The focus groups barely mentioned the word “leadership.” However, many terms and actions aligned with a shared leadership model, meaning the administration within the schools brought educators into decision-making practices. The definition of leadership is “an act or instance of leading; guidance; direction” (Dictionary.com, 2017).

Guidance. School Two mentioned multiple times the guidance that was necessary to move from inconsistent practices to embedded practices school-wide, starting with universal screening and progress monitoring. Rosie, a first-grade teacher in School Two, mentioned that the leadership and clarity from the district level was crucial
in changing their RTI system from one classroom teacher directing processes to everyone understanding what was necessary to meet the needs of all students. She stated,

> For a period of time, we had a teacher who was also the RTI coach half time. When we really started setting a more-clear set of guidelines and processes for MTSS, we were able to continue with our RTI steps. We don’t have that position anymore, but we have continued with the processes.

They also found that leadership occurred at all levels, and with the guidance from team members, the processes were more sustainable. Taking a step further, School One used the Leader in Me model, which included students in their leadership definition, providing leadership notebooks for each student to track their own progress and identify when they were struggling on their own (Summers, 2017) (see Appendix I). It enabled them to take ownership for their growth and needs, and students were more willing to accept interventions when they understood the need. Beth, the special education teacher for School One, said, “It’s not just the staff, there’s student buy-in as well to help close the gap.” This aligns with Colorado’s MTSS component of Team-Driven Shared Leadership, defined as:

> Teaming structures and expectations distribute responsibility and shared decision-making across school, district, and community members (e.g. students, families, generalists, specialists, district administrators, etc.) to organize coordinated systems of training, coaching, resources, implementation, and evaluation for adult activities. (CDE, 2016)

Overall, leadership was also addressed by School Three, with Michelle, the EL teacher, stating,

> The fact that administration is always at those [MTSS] meetings, you really are held to it and they’re the ones who are constantly looking at the guidebook and saying, okay, we said we’re going to do this, because it’s all written in the flowchart.

Erin, the MTSS coordinator, stated that they held each other accountable by often saying, “Hey, you said you were going to do these three things. Where is the follow-up
on all three of those things?” Kim, the second-grade teacher at School Three, said, “The team members hold each other accountable within their PLCs, when they review class data from all grade levels.” The accountability ensured that the system doesn’t become stagnant.

**Implementation.** Implementation with fidelity was another important part of the leadership theme derived from the focus groups, as leaders drive the expectations for implementation of all universal screening and progress monitoring practices. Every focus group discussed implementation practices and the expectations from their leaders. They all conversed about implementing interventions for students, determining how to implement practices, and sharing the implementation accountability as a team. While true implementation lies in the hands of those providing interventions for students, leadership defines what the implementation will look like, when it occurs, and where it takes place. This structure defined by leadership was crucial in maintaining consistency and practices. By including all stakeholders in the discussions, the expectations of implementation with fidelity were naturally embedded in the process.

**Resources.** The schools all addressed the importance of resources in providing appropriate universal screening and progress monitoring tools. While the actual term “resources” was not mentioned more than once in three of the focus groups, discussion regarding programs, staffing, time, and support occurred in all five focus groups. I listed resources under leadership, as school leaders are the ones who drive appropriate resources into their buildings. They are the true advocates for what students need, and they provide staff with the resources to meet those needs.
School One stated they valued the collaboration of all staff including support staff, the psychologist, the counselor, the art teacher, the music teacher, the PE teacher, and all other staff who brought ideas into the room. Beth, the special education teacher at School One, said, “It’s just this global way of thinking about a child which is so beneficial.” School Two valued the collaboration within their teams and the ability to have conversations regarding what type of interventions will best meet the needs of students. School Three valued the expertise of their teachers and having an organized system. School Four valued the support staff which allows teachers to focus on instruction, and School Five valued the support from interventionists through Title One funds. The values these focus groups had center on the resources available, whether it be additional staff, appropriate programs, or resources to support the additional time needed to make the system work, it all ties into resources.

**Time.** Tied into resources, and under the leadership theme, was the time needed to complete tasks, provide screenings, implement interventions, and progress monitor students’ growth. Of the five focus groups, three discussed heavily the importance of having the right amount of time to meet the needs of all students. School Five expressed angst over the fact that they might be losing staff the next year due to a reduction in students and, therefore, a reduction in Title funds. With these reductions, the time needed to continue best practices would not be available for staff who will be stretched thin. Because the structure of time was driven by the leadership in the building, this aligns with the leadership theme. Building administrators, and those involved in the shared leadership in a building, drive the scheduling and timing component to create a well-oiled machine, or school, that differentiates for student needs. Leadership ensures that all parts
of the machine, or school, are functioning properly, and without the vision from leadership, there would certainly be parts that are not functioning, impacting the whole to address all student needs.

**Training.** Leadership determines the needs of educators, and leadership drives what training is provided for all staff. It is common to see different buildings within one district focus on different skills and providing different trainings from each other. School One placed a heavy universal emphasis on the 7 Habits of Highly Effective People and used the Leader in Me model to educate students and staff, providing training that supports that model. School Two looked to the district leadership to provide training based on district-mandated curriculum. School Three stressed the importance of PLC work within the building, bringing teachers together within their grade levels to problem solve, and school-wide training emphasized the PLC model of collaboration and teamwork. School Four trained staff on the systems approach and what happened universally for all students, working heavily on school-wide behavior supports (PBIS). School Five trained all staff on a full inclusion model, keeping all students in general education to the maximum extent possible, stating that they had seen an increase in student scores based on this focus.

The training of specific programs, assessments, processes, and interventions is driven by the leadership structure as it is defined by the main leader in each building. This training increases knowledge development that supports the use of data to determine rates of progress to ultimately change programming for students (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2008). Leadership is key for the provision of appropriate training. The heart of what happens in every building rests on leadership.
Consistency. As described above, the leadership within a school drives the structure and expectations, and it also determines the consistency of when universal screening and progress monitoring occur. Four of the schools discussed how the consistency of practices was crucial in meeting student needs. School Four’s special education teacher, Samantha, described consistent meetings every six weeks to discuss student needs.

Our meetings are set up very consistent, every six to eight weeks. During the meetings we set up our next meeting to where it’s not something that gets pushed aside. The meetings come about very consistently, and we have very few parents that aren’t involved.

School Three described their process of consistently reviewing their progress monitoring probes to make sure they were using the best approach in identifying student progress. It had become an expectation to review the probes at every meeting, and Erin, the MTSS coordinator of School Three, stated that,

It’s really nice to have those progress monitoring probes, and we consistently look for better progress monitoring probes that say this is what we want them to learn, this is what we’re going to do to teach it. The progress monitoring probe has to match our instruction and our goal. What we’re finding, more often than not, is that there aren’t progress monitoring probes that are valid.

Leadership drives the scheduling of progress monitoring at School Two, and Kristin, the Assistant Principal, stated that,

The process is so consistent, like clockwork. I put out a schedule for everybody, I send out email reminders to all teachers, and I let everyone know that it’s progress monitoring week, so please monitor all of your intensive children.

School One placed value on the consistent benchmarking opportunities the educators had three times during the school year for reading. They used the new easyCBM math curriculum and were hoping for consistent progress monitoring tools to use with that program, but currently they did not have them.
While School Five did not discuss the need for consistency, it was evident that they rely on consistency within the building. The interventionist created the universal screening and progress monitoring schedule and adjusted it with data from teachers as student needs changed. During the focus group, I could feel the buzzing of what was happening in the building. Students were moving from place to place, the interventionist double checked the intervention schedule, and the special education teacher was very aware of the time of day and what was happening next. Student needs were at the center of the work, and most likely were every day.

**Balance and culture.** Leadership determines balance and sets cultural expectations within a school. Julia, a math teacher at School Two, emphasized the need to balance assessments with teaching.

We do use MAP testing, and we benchmark for both reading and math at the beginning and the end of the year. Midyear testing depends on the grade level, and some of what we’ve chosen to do, but it’s about balancing testing with teaching. It’s what we’re here to do. You have to see that you have balance so that you’re not assessing all the time.

Since many assessments were district driven, this could be tricky for leadership to ensure that schedules were appropriate and that instruction occurred to address needs identified through assessments. The assistant principal Wendy, at School Four talked about the balancing act, as well, and aligning appropriate interventions to support student needs.

It seems that the kids are always missing something else, whether it’s counting money, patterning, etc. We try to provide computer program interventions, but then it’s hard to have kids that can’t work independently on a computer, or it’s not the right type of intervention. So, it’s just finding that right balance of what a good intervention looks like.
The direction of balanced processes is part of the art of leadership and doesn’t just involve balancing academics, but addresses the needs of the whole child, including social, cultural, and work ethic competence. Balanced accountability generates balanced outcomes (Rothstein, Wilder, & Jacobsen, 2007).

**Decision making.** Decision-making is at the core of leadership. Knowing when to screen and progress monitor, and knowing what to do with data that are presented, can make the difference in successful outcomes for students. Knowing how to prioritize decisions is key. With consistent processes in place that allow for shared leadership, decision-making becomes a team effort. Beth, at School One, expressed the importance of using data to drive decisions, which lessened the need for a leader to make the decision, but next steps were evident when reviewing data. She emphatically articulated,

> I think that when we eventually get to the point of looking at a kid and whether they are eligible for special education services, we have this whole background of data and whether they’ve responded to interventions. We know what interventions have been tried and what the gap analysis is, so it’s not just, hey I think this kid needs to be tested. We’ve got documentation to back that decision up, which is huge!

Decision-making at School Three was made through a shared process, with the staff reviewing data and contributing the development of practices throughout the school. They had two teams, the core MTSS team that handled school-wide processes and then a larger MTSS team which included teachers from an entire grade level to share information about students and how to drive practices that would support those individual students.

Designated leaders, which in elementary schools are the principals, have some options in making decisions. They can make school-wide decisions on their own, they can seek participation and input, they can develop collaborative decision-making
practices, or they can let others make the decisions. Through the MTSS process, the five focus groups indicated they minimally participated and gave input, with Schools One, Three, and Four expressing that they had developed and were continually developing collaborative decision-making practices.

**Professional learning communities (PLCs).** Professional learning communities (PLCs) are directed by leadership and are necessary for the sustainability of universal screening and progress monitoring practices. They are defined as teachers meeting together to learn from each other, review data, and brainstorm as a whole group to make effective decisions for students, either individual students, or for all students school-wide. For all important decisions, a wise leader uses collaborative strategies that values participation and input from all staff members (Martin, Danzig, Wright, Flanary, & Orr, 2017). This increases the likelihood of positive perceptions which also increases the implementation with fidelity for universal screening and progress monitoring practices.

The importance of PLCs within schools was discussed in most of the focus groups. Kim, the second-grade teacher at School Three, expressed the sentiment of the focus groups:

> Within our PLCs, I think our team members all keep each other accountable, because we’re not just looking at our own classes’ data. I’m looking at everyone’s data. I’ll say, ‘hey, Lily, you have this kid, what’s the plan? Are you doing something right now to address the issues?’ Again, I think that the PLC time is well spent. We’re not looking at our own class, but the whole grade level. The accountability is important.

**Intervention**

The category of intervention is really defined by what the schools had put in place to close the gaps students were exhibiting, either in academics or behavior. The focus groups discussed the use of plans that included specific interventions. The most
interesting aspect of interviewing the focus groups was that when asked the question regarding procedures for universal screening and progress monitoring, every group had detailed information about academic procedures, specifically reading; however, information on behavioral screening was either not included or not well-defined.

**Behavior.** Behavior information was provided when the specific question was asked relating to how they identified students who were at risk for social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties. This confirms what I have witnessed in schools for decades, that behavioral impact is always an afterthought. In fact, in a great deal of literature that discusses overall screening and monitoring practices, the social, emotional, and behavioral focus is addressed last.

All focus groups indicated they had PBIS models in place in their schools, which universally teach school-wide expectations. They taught the habits (School One), the 8 keys (School Four), and PBIS mottos (School Two, School Three, and School Five) which were three to five expectations that make up a word that may reflect their school mascot. For example, School Three used ROAR, which stood for Respectful, Organized, Attentive, and Responsible. These four expectations made up universal behavioral instruction.

In terms of behavioral interventions, what the schools used as behavioral screeners would not necessarily be called screeners in the field; however, they did state specific interventions they used for behavior. School One used SWIS that tracks behavioral data such as major discipline referrals. The data from SWIS were then used to write behavioral goals within a behavior plan for a student, and the interventions might include a check-in and check-out plan to help the student remember behavioral goals that
were in focus. The check-in and check-out plan was then used to progress monitor the student goals. Lynette, the principal of School One, discussed SWIS as part of their tier one, or universal practices.

One of the tier one systems that we have is SWIS. We put our behavior data into SWIS and we can look at the re-teaching that needs to happen at tier one, the universal level. Then, we can also look at who has more frequent, major discipline referrals, which may be used for goal-setting for a particular student. But then it usually becomes some sort of a check-in and check-out plan as part of a tier two intervention. That is the tool that we use for progress monitoring for that child related to specific target behaviors that we’re trying to improve upon.

School Two had a specific behavioral tracking form that teachers used when a student was not responding to the PBIS instruction. The form included the time of day, and they used it to track patterns of behavior. The school relied on the counselor for guidance in using and interpreting the form. Kristin, the assistant principal, felt that behavior was an area for growth, as she indicated they could not move forward without the help of the counselor. She emphasized,

I don’t know that much about behavior, and so I think over the past year with the counselor’s help and guidance, we’ve been able to probably better meet some of the needs of our higher behavior kids because of her expertise. I think, though, that we can get better in the area of behavior.

When students didn’t respond to the PBIS system, School Three also used a check-in and check-out plan. Pippa, the special educational instructional paraprofessional for School Three, supported individual teachers with the check-in and check-out process. She said:

There’s some things we do like check-in, check-out to support our students with targeted behavior objectives. That would be just a basic support, but each individual teacher also has whatever it is that they would use in their classroom. Our PBIS school-wide expectations are taught in the classroom.
Samantha, the special education teacher at School Four, explained the process they used for behavior. Along with teaching the eight keys, they used ABC data, or antecedent, behavior, and consequences data. This included an observation of students in the classroom who were not responding to universal behavioral instruction. The ABC form was in development, and Samantha and the school counselor were the point people for behavioral interventions, which also included a program called Second Step in every classroom to help with additional social skills instruction (Committee for Children, 2011). Samantha expressed:

Each grade level has currently come up with their own type of token economy system to help really focus on that positive reinforcement of behavior. Then for those kiddos that are still struggling and still seeing some of those big behavior issues, that’s where we use the ABC data in the class and start tracking those kinds of things.

They emphasized that behavior was an area of growth for them as well. It started with an observation said Bob, the principal at School Five, and these observations happened in the classroom and were conducted by the general education teacher. School Five had a climate coach that worked directly with teachers to support students who were not responding to universal PBIS instruction and still struggled with behaviors. Interventions at School Five for behavior included sticker charts, a check-in and check-out process, and time with the climate coach. If students were caught doing something right, they could earn time to play with a game or toys, whatever motivated them. All schools indicated they had behavior intervention plans (BIPs) for students needing specific behavioral goals, and a more formalized method was in use for students in special education, as required by law.
It was very clear that behavior was an area in which schools are not absolutely certain what to do when students were not responding to universal behavioral expectations. Comparing behavioral interventions to reading interventions, the schools had a set path for interventions for reading difficulties. They could quickly outline screeners, progress monitoring, and interventions they used for reading; however, they couldn’t list behavioral interventions as quickly as they could academic interventions.

Erin, with School Three, summed it up beautifully when she said,

> I wouldn't be able to put my finger on how we progress monitor our behavior. I would say that we have a lot of discussions about progress monitoring behavior, we have a lot of frequent check-ins with teachers; we have times where I'm going in and I'm providing more observations. I just finished a coaching cycle with a second-grade teacher where we were talking about different ways that we could just set up the room to make things flow a little bit easier. We have a lot of discussion, but not a lot of data.

Screeners for behavior are necessary to address issues as they arise, and preventive systems such as PBIS support prevention. However, in my past experience, I have learned that behavioral issues are a much more sensitive topic for families. Many screeners are available such as the Student Risk Screening Scale (SRSS) that aids in identifying students who are at risk for internalizing and externalizing problem behaviors, but some families do not want behavioral information written or tracked, creating issues when a district wants to use a screener (Drummond, 1994). Today, issues have arisen statewide regarding personal identifiable information, or PII, and data privacy issues. Colorado recently passed legislation to increase the security of online data. The Colorado Student Data Privacy Law requires transparency regarding all data processes and what student information is stored and shared (State of Colorado, 2016). This will inhibit
some schools from using online programs, and many behavioral support programs are online today.

**Flexibility.** Flexible grouping was discussed in three focus groups, with this term being defined as moving students into different intervention groups as they show growth or need more supports relating to different skills. The other two schools described the process for meeting student needs, but did not use the term “flexible grouping.” School Four said they have about 120 students who were in intervention groups. The number and makeup of a group might change as often as every six to eight weeks, as the students flowed in and out of the groups frequently. As students gained skills, they might not need specific skill groups. The goal was for them to utilize the skills learned in the general education classroom and not be placed in a group the entire year unless needs dictate otherwise. The expectation of fluidity ensured flexibility to meet the changing needs of students. School Two used flexible grouping for what they called their IE block, which stands for intervention and extension. Natalie, a fourth-grade teacher at School Two, stated the regular data reviews supported the flexible grouping. She said the team meetings supported this process, and,

> So, if we’ve got a child who started out and had a lot of weaknesses and is catching up, he may or may not be in the same group the entire year. We talk about that and make those adjustments, if necessary, and we make sure everybody’s on the same page when the child transitions.

**Coaching.** Four schools specifically discussed the importance of coaching, which provided direct support for general education teachers. As coaching was an intervention for teachers, this fell under the theme of intervention for this study. School Two used their RTI coach to aid teachers in interventions and best instruction. School Five had five interventionists who worked directly with students, but also supported general education
teachers, and they also had a climate coach who worked directly with teachers in supporting a positive learning climate. Coaching for Schools Three and Four was provided through administration and through peers during grade level team meetings. The grade level teams supported each other in addressing specific situations for individual students as well as for the classroom as a whole.

**Intensive interventions.** Intensive interventions were provided in all of the schools when students were needing additional support after data indicated the need for increasing the duration, frequency, and intensity of previous interventions. The schools used these data for documentation to support moving towards a special education referral. Two schools discussed their intensive supports, in particular. School Three explained an issue with students who were in intensive interventions without an appropriate progress monitoring tool. They described a student who had been in intensive intervention for 15 weeks without making progress; however, since they didn’t have an appropriate progress monitoring tool, they didn’t have the accurate data to support either changing interventions or moving to a special education referral. They shifted their progress monitoring tool to align with the curriculum, and they could better identify her needs. Every teacher at School Two monitored students who were in intensive interventions every two weeks, keeping track of their data more frequently than for other students. This created a shared responsibility for all students as well, with all working towards student growth. School Five tracked students in intensive intervention groups on a school-wide chart, with each group focusing on different specific skills. The skills were progressive, so their goal was to move students from one end of the chart to the other by
the end of the year, with the right side of the chart showing students needing more intensive intervention (see Appendix J).

Data

Data for this study were defined as information used to make decisions for students. Data can include summative or formative assessments scores, informal classroom data, or any documented information that indicates the level or levels in which a student functions. The focus groups discussed the use of multiple data points to provide a body of evidence as to what a student needs. The themes within the data category include testing, benchmarking, screening, progress monitoring, tracking, and data collection, all of which are interwoven and express the importance of data. These are all intertwined in the writing below.

_Data_ was listed as the fourth category in this study, but in no way did this indicate that it was of less importance than the other categories. In fact, if the categories were listed in order of importance, data would be at the top of the list, as data drive decisions in all that we do in education. Without data, educators would be “shooting in the dark,” as Wendy at School Four stated. The participants of School Four’s focus group were in agreement that the data were most valuable to their work, but in order to gather the data, Samantha said that the school needed the staffing to not just take the data, but to meet about the data, to get the right instruction, and to give the right support to students.

I think having the staffing is most important. Because without having the staffing that includes the right people to provide support, gather the data, have the meetings, give the right instruction, and give full support. It’s the support that’s important.

School Three talked about the “tons of data points” they had and used to determine what students need. Data points from NWEA MAP testing, DIBELS data, and
STAR data were all reviewed on a regular basis to benchmark and progress monitor students. Elaine, an instructional coach and MTSS coordinator, expressed how crucial the data were for students at School One:

And another layer of that, too, is the common understanding of what the data means. So, when we say a data point about a child, everyone in the room knows what that means for that child. Where, the degree to the discrepancy of where they should be, and then we can use that as our springboard to figure out what we're going to do.

Elaine made an excellent point about the understanding of data. As educators, we administer assessments and receive results; however, many of us don’t have a lot of training in what the scores mean, yet we are to reveal scores to parents and explain exactly how they indicate levels, success, or lack of success. This is where district support and other administrative support can aid educators in learning how to analyze the data to make it meaningful. Teachers would benefit from learning how to train others on the use of data. This would enable them to understand data better, realize that data is more than scores obtained once a year, view data in an investigative manner that answers questions about their students, and have rich data discussions about the revelations that emerge from the data (Morrison, 2008).

Data for School Two told a story about their students, as they combined multiple years of data, comparing students’ growth. Teachers from previous years joined in on the conversations to answer any questions the new teachers had about a particular student. This occurred at the beginning of the school year, providing a jump start on interventions, different than in previous years. Julia, the math teacher, expressed that this proactive approach “keeps things moving,” and students received what they needed much sooner than in the past. The key for School Two was that most of their teachers had longevity in
the school, which made it easier for them to share pertinent information about student needs.

Bob, with School Five, emphasized multiple times that the data regarding student growth began to slide a few years back, which drove the school to move towards a full inclusion model. With the high percentage of students who were English learners, they realized that the exposure to grade level material and curriculum was crucial for not only these students, but all students. Using the data, they altered their pull-out model for students and pushed support back in to the general education classes. Bob said that the most recent data show marked growth in their students, with fewer needing intensive interventions.

As data encompasses assessment scores, benchmarking scores, screening, progress monitoring data points, and tracking, data collection defines the combination of all scores for students in all of these areas. Progress monitoring is a large component of the data collection that educators take and use on a regular basis. Interestingly enough, progress monitoring was talked about in all of the focus groups more than any other terms within the data theme, and this was an area they felt they do not have the best tools with which to monitor the students needing the most support.

**Collaboration**

The last main category that emerged from the focus groups’ data was collaboration. Collaboration is defined as working together towards meeting the needs of all students. The focus groups focused on sharing ideas, solutions, and the work load, emphasizing the importance of grade-level meetings, teaming, and scheduling. The
themes that developed within the collaboration category include grade-level meetings, teams, and schedules. These are all avenues to support collaboration.

Overall, School Two stated that collaboration was most valuable to their work. Julia, a math teacher, excitedly talked about collaboration and the importance of not feeling that everything rested solely on her shoulders.

I’ve been doing this awhile, and I have a lot of experience, but that doesn’t mean that I ever feel like I know everything to do, and it’s been really helpful for me to have a larger group to collaborate with to meet the needs of students.

**Teams.** Xander, at School Five, expressed that the collaboration among teams was most valuable to her work. As a special education teacher, she valued the vertical teaming that occurred regularly, knowing how valuable it was when more people strategized about what worked best for students.

To support sustainable solutions, Lynette, the principal at School One, expressed that the ability to collaborate with the MTSS team to meet student needs was most valuable for her work. She voiced,

The great thing about our MTSS meeting is you will hear a fifth-grade teacher say, ‘Oh, I have a way that I could help you with your kindergarten student that you’re having a hard time with in your class.’ Or, ‘I’ve got a student who that would be a great leadership opportunity to address a behavior goal by helping a kindergarten student with their reading,’ which also builds some missed phonics instruction for the fifth grader. The school focused on providing time for previous teachers to meet with current teachers to understand student needs in order to better prepare interventions and lessons to differentiate for those needs.

Supporting collaborative work were the teams the teachers belong to and met with weekly in some schools and bi-weekly in other schools. Leanne, at School One, stated her team was most valuable to her work. She continued:

For me it’s my team. Because they help me when I do have a kiddo that I might have an issue with, and when I feel like ‘oh my gosh,’ I don’t know where to go
from here. Or, they can give you ideas. My team is essential. I really think that without my team, I would probably not be as successful as I am with them.

Pippa, at School Three, reiterated what others had said about teamwork. She said,

From my perspective, I love to see the teamwork between the teachers, and the willingness for the teachers to put that effort in because, like Erin said, once you have that target and you specifically know what you’re teaching, it makes it a whole lot easier. It’s great to then feel that success for that child and how excited that child is to finally be able to read.

During these focus groups, the importance of teamwork bounced off the walls, and it was evident that teamwork was not optional in an effective school.

**Grade-level meetings.** In alignment with effective teaming, most of the focus groups discussed grade level teams, which allowed teachers to work with other teachers who taught the same grade, sharing resources, ideas, strategies, and helping develop intervention plans for students based on the curriculum they were teaching. School Three discussed grade-level meetings the most, and this is an area they focus heavily on each day. Within their grade-level teams, the teachers discussed students who rose to the top in terms of needing interventions. Each grade level then determined who the “top five” students were needing support, and they strategized together about how to support the students and who would support them. The term “top five” was part of the common language in the building, and teachers knew how to identify the top five and work with grade-level teammates regarding the needs of the top five. Erin described it as,

> The teachers come and share about their students who are in their top five concerns. They say that these are their kids, the concerns they have, and this is what they’re doing, or this is what they need help with. Then the whole team will listen, share ideas, and brainstorm new ideas, which helps everyone stay on the same page. That was a pivotal approach in our collaboration.

Most of the schools discussed PLC meetings, where teachers worked on the many different needs of the school, but mainly focus on student data and how to improve the
system, structure, interventions, etc. The teachers at School Two attended the larger PLC meetings in which they reviewed school-wide data, then took the data for their grade levels and reviewed those data within their grade-level team meetings to then make decisions based on interventions for particular students.

**Schedules.** Scheduling is an area that can impede collaboration; however, when used effectively, it can improve communication among teams. Every focus group mentioned the use of schedules to keep everyone on a team on track. Along with schedules, some of the schools sent reminders about specific tasks teachers were required to complete prior to the next meeting. Within teams, schedules were also created for student interventions, keeping all up to date. A great deal of teamwork was involved in creating schedules, as a school had many providers that might overlap and work with the same students. Special education teachers, interventionists, psychologists, speech language pathologists, and others all required collaboration to appropriately schedule students without interfering the exposure to universal curriculum. Bob, with School Five, determined that additional providers were needed to push into the classrooms and work with students during universal instruction to support skills for access to general education. Providing visual schedules for staff and students placed a priority on intervention times, assessment dates, and grade-level meetings. School Four provided every teacher with a schedule as to when their class would be assessing and when interventions would occur. Samantha stated that schedules were posted on doors showing when school-wide assessments were to be given for each class. She added, “and everyone does it.” Schedules for individual students receiving interventions were given
to teachers at School Four, and weekly progress monitoring dates were included. If a student was absent, they knew who needed to be assessed.

The importance of scheduling student and adult meetings can’t be overstated. Schedules maximize time for learning, and they have been proven to be pertinent in reaching student outcomes (Brown-Chidsey, 2016). Schedules also provide routine for students who have difficulty following verbal instruction. Every focus group discussed the need for schedules, and all stated they had schedules in place for assessments and progress monitoring. Fred, a fifth grade teacher at School Three, felt that,

In fifth grade, we don’t have a tight WIN schedule as some of the other grades, and it’s not set up the same way. We’re just not doing it that way right now. I think it’s just not as concrete.

Time is limited in education today, with additional assessment demands and standards expectations. Schedules are tools that aid in communication as to when universal screenings and progress monitoring dates are to occur, preventing the incidents of not having data to make decisions for students. Schedules increase the ability to collaborate well, ultimately benefiting students who need additional support from our universal screening and progress monitoring practices.

**Areas for Growth**

As with all research studies, we identify what is working well and what can be adjusted for improvement in the field. The five focus groups identified many things that were working well for students, and all groups showed an intense passion for meeting the needs of all students. They all emphasized the importance of their universal screening and progress monitoring practices and that without them, they would not have appropriate data to make effective educational decisions for students. Having taught
special education back in the 1980s, I can attest to the fact that without specific standards, screeners, and progress monitoring tools in place, education for our students who are most in need would be severely lacking. Using grade-level standards for all students sets the bar where it should be, as we can’t ever measure a student’s true potential, and we never know when they will change and develop to the point of learning a new skill that can support them later in life. The PEAK Parent Center in Colorado Springs uses the term “presume competence” and with this in the forefront of our minds, we will certainly use the tools we have to help each student reach their potential, whether they be on grade level or one year or more behind grade level.

A major area of improvement the schools indicated was in progress monitoring, particularly in the areas of math, writing, and behavior. The schools from District One expressed concern over an appropriate progress monitoring tool for math. They used the enVision math curriculum which was a new curriculum for the district. The focus group for School Two stated they were not finding a good progress monitoring tool within the math curriculum, so they were trying to find a tool that aligned with what was being taught.

School One felt they had appropriate screeners for math; however, they continued to look at what would give them the best information on student growth for math. Carol, the gifted education teacher, said they were not secure in knowing they were progress monitoring accurately according to the math curriculum, so they continued to revisit this area until they could find the tool that worked in the same way the reading progress monitoring tools worked. Neither had they found good resources for benchmarking and progress monitoring in the area of writing and were continually seeking out the best tools.
School Three would agree with these comments, as they felt that there weren’t progress monitoring probes that were valid, and that they were not able to identify where a child was at within one specific skill. Kim, the second-grade teacher at School Three, expressed the time teachers were spending on creating their own progress monitoring tools for math. It was evident that progress monitoring tools for math were not consistent or standard across grade levels. She said,

A couple of weeks ago we got a test creator generator through enVision, and we’ve had only one day to play on it as a team. I think, hopefully, we’ll be using that next year to create our own progress monitoring. Maybe that’s a summer project I’ll do.

In District Two, School Four also felt that they did not have a strong progress monitoring tool in math, and Katie, one of the RTI coaches, feels that,

Math is a high-risk area. I think teachers are making the right decisions, but then if we just had a really strong progress monitoring tool for math, students wouldn’t be falling behind, and I think we would move forward faster.

Wendy, the assistant principal, agreed, saying progress monitoring in math was a scattered approach as it needed to be more consistent and clearly defined. Samantha, the special education teacher, shared her concerns with the fact that math didn’t have the same developmental progression as reading, which made it more difficult to determine appropriate levels. As they continued to try to find what worked best, they were piecemealing together components of old math programs to gain as much information about students as possible.

Behavior was an area of concern for most of the schools in this study. For School Four, behavior screening and progress monitoring was a work in progress, and during the 2017-2018 school year, it was a focus of development. They were focusing on identifying what students needed earlier, as the first contact tended to be disciplinary.
They stated that when behavior affected academics, it was easier to address that in RTI meetings. However, when it was more of a social and emotional issue that was not impacting the students academically, that was when they were not sure what to do in those situations. Katie, at School Four, shared that when general education teachers were having issues with behavior, they tended to wait too long to put accommodations in place as they were not sure what to try.

The teachers tend to wait a little bit too long to really try to put in place some accommodations that would try to eliminate the behavior. So, we focused this year a lot on that individual classroom with the token economy and group contingencies, and then the use of the Second Step program, re-teaching skills that might not be there.

School Two tended to rely on the counselor for behavioral interventions, and they struggled with determining what to do in situations without her support. They had identified a need for improvement in the area of behavior. Kristin, the assistant principal, expressed that the school had a strong process and understanding for what they do for academics; however, they did not have that same foundation for behavior.

School Five emphasized the fact that some teachers were not comfortable working with specific behaviors, and not having the tools to work with behavioral issues, they tended to rely on academic intervention groups or special education teachers to take the students into their group to remove them from the classroom. The need for behavioral interventions in the teacher’s tool kit was necessary for students to access the general education curriculum, and access for all was a big push for School Five. School Three would agree that behavior was harder to teach than academics as “what bothers one teacher, doesn’t bother another,” stated School Three’s MTSS coordinator. She also expressed that “behavior was an area they are still working on.”
As discussed earlier within the intervention theme, all schools were not quick to discuss behavioral screeners, interventions, or progress monitoring of behavior, and it was evident that behavioral tools were still a mystery for many. Many schools still held the siloed approach regarding academics and behavior, as they did not see the impact that social, emotional, and behavioral needs had on academics and vice versa. The schools’ RTI and PBIS teams that addressed behavior and academics met separately.

District direction and the mandating of specific programs can bring consistency to schools. The benefits include that when students transfer from one school to another in the district, they are not transferring to a new curriculum which can set them back educationally. The issues that arose during the focus groups in District One was that the teachers felt they didn’t have input into the decision-making regarding the choice of curriculum or how it was to be implemented. While the curriculum may have been appropriate in meeting educational standards for students, the implementation with fidelity could suffer greatly because teachers did not have the buy-in to create positive perceptions regarding the curriculum. In this case, the use of the math program, enVision, was mandated by the district, and teachers did not feel they had input into the process. When perceptions turn negative, implementation suffers, impacting fidelity. This turns our focus towards the MTSS component, Team-Driven Shared Leadership, which can positively impact the perceptions teachers have regarding new programming, as their thoughts are included in the decision-making process.

In terms of overall areas of improvement, the pacing of MTSS was raised and how to catch students early on in the school year to provide success by the end of the year. Responding to data in “real time” and identifying student needs earlier to put
appropriate interventions in place was an area in which School One would like to improve. School Five expressed the need to continue building sustainability, where all teachers would know the processes and procedures, and students’ needs would be met universally in the general education classroom.

During the focus group discussions, participants brainstormed new ideas with their teams. Comments such as, “good idea,” “let’s try that,” and “that might help a bit,” were made, showing an openness to new ideas and to using a problem-solving model. Wendy, with School Four, discussed trying to weave a problem-solving process into the work as well as trying to combine RTI and PBIS as they develop one MTSS system. Beth, with School One, suggested that teachers consistently review student needs with the next year’s teachers prior to the start of the school year. The interaction within each focus group indicated a sense of cohesiveness, and even within the groups that included their principals, there wasn’t an indication that any participant was “holding back” from expressing their thoughts.

**Chapter IV Summary**

Summarizing these rich data is a task that I challenge everyone to make, as when educators consider the categories of systems, leadership, intervention, data, and collaboration through the lens of meeting the needs of all students, one may decide to adjust their own practices. Aligning this information with a school’s work provides a framework to identify best universal screening and progress monitoring practices, ensuring that it remain in the forefront of that work. All five categories are not to be viewed as separate entities, but as interwoven threads that create the appropriate environment (systems), bring everyone into the decision-making process (leadership), design appropriate supplemental instruction (intervention), keep track of how students are
performing (data), and work together on discussion-rich teams, whether they be grade-level teams, PLC groups, or MTSS teams (collaboration). When these practices occur, appropriate universal screeners will develop out of identified needs. Appropriate progress monitoring practices will be identified, as the need for data to make decisions will drive this work. Keeping in mind that students are whole beings with not just academic needs, but social, emotional, and behavioral needs, we can use all five categories and the multiple themes within them, or threads, to address both behavioral and academic needs. Weaving all of this together will support positive perceptions of the systems, leadership, interventions, data, and collaboration, and positive perceptions drive positive behavior, leading to implementation with fidelity of practices, ultimately meeting the needs of students.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The long-term outcome of this study was to create an awareness of the importance of focusing on universal screening and progress monitoring for behavior and academics, to improve consistent practices and to plan appropriate professional development at the state, district, and school levels. By understanding teacher perceptions surrounding practices and processes, we can clarify purposes, revisit how we structure participation for teacher buy-in, and identify how to build a team-driven shared leadership model that incorporates teachers in to the decision-making process. The research questions developed prior to the study are answered in detail below. Implications for the field will discuss the impact of the themes, limitations of this study, and final recommendations will also be discussed within the body of this chapter. It is important to note that this study merely scratches the surface of perceptions across the field, and it will be necessary for researchers to continue to study this area and keep it continually in the forefront.

Research Questions Answered

The research questions that were addressed in this study are:

Q1 What are the perceptions teachers have relating to the specific universal screening and progress monitoring practices in each elementary school?

Q2 What are the perceptions teachers have about the impact universal screening and progress monitoring has on student achievement in both academics and behavior?
Q3 Do the teachers perceive that they have adequate training and knowledge of universal screening and progress monitoring practices for both academics and behavior?

Q4 How do teachers define their work in relation to universal screening and progress monitoring for both academics and behavior?

Research Question 1

Research Question 1 asked: What are the perceptions teachers have relating to the specific universal screening and progress monitoring practices in each elementary school? It was very evident that all five focus groups approached universal screening and progress monitoring practices from an academic viewpoint. Behavior was not addressed until the specific question was asked, “How do you identify students who are risk for social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties?” Until this question was asked, not one participant in any of the focus groups mentioned a behavioral component. In every focus group, reading was the first academic area to be discussed, as this was well defined within the public-school system, and while each school may have used different reading screeners and progress monitoring tools, they were all evidence-based.

The perceptions of the academic practices in use were very positive, with exception to math. Four of the schools felt that they had appropriate screeners, but were lacking progress monitoring tools in math. Lacking so much, some teachers described spending their summers creating their own progress monitoring tools for math. Within the MAXQDA data, math was discussed more frequently than reading, and the discussion showed this was an area they were very concerned about.

Writing screeners and progress monitoring tools were strong in some schools and were not discussed or discussed briefly, and perceptions regarding writing practices were not expressed in a negative or positive manner. School Four, in particular, emphasized
the Every Child a Writer (ECAW) program that they had recently initiated. This program had screening and progress monitoring tools embedded within it, making it a user-friendly program in the eyes of the teachers.

Reading screeners and progress monitoring tools were well defined in all schools. The focus groups all mentioned the reading screener DIBELS, which was also used for progress monitoring. The NWEA MAP assessments were also used in all schools related to this study. These assessments provided some reading and math screeners; however, MAP was not used for progress monitoring as it didn’t correlate with what was being taught specifically in the curriculum. The perceptions relating to the reading screeners and progress monitoring tools they did have were all very positive. The teachers felt they were getting valid reading information, and the tools were consistent. I did not hear once that the teachers wanted different screeners or progress monitoring tools in reading. They indicated this was a solid area, and they knew exactly where their students were and what they needed to teach in reading.

Interestingly enough, while behavior was not initially discussed, when the question relating to behavior screeners and progress monitoring was asked, every school had a great deal to say, revealing negative perceptions about the ability to screen for behavior, the lack of progress monitoring tools for behavior, and the lack of instructional materials and interventions relating to behavior. While this is a qualitative study, I found it interesting to note that within the coding process, behavior was the theme under the intervention category that was discussed the most (see Appendices K and N). Since behavior was addressed mainly in discussion about interventions and plans, it was coded under the category of intervention. This was very indicative of the concern, yet the focus
groups did not have a solution for what could be accomplished in this area. They all recognized that it was crucial to address behavior and social and emotional needs of students, and the majority of participants indicated that behavior impacts academic growth.

Although behavioral screening, interventions, and progress monitoring were of great concern, every school used a PBIS model and addressed behavioral expectations universally through PBIS. While PBIS was a preventive approach and emphasized positive behaviors, it did not necessarily screen for behavioral difficulties, nor did it provide specific individualized interventions or progress monitoring tools. The teacher perceptions related to PBIS were positive, and they felt that this supported most students providing reinforcement for positive behaviors that were exhibited.

**Research Question 2**

Research Question 2 asked: What are the perceptions teachers have relating to the impact universal screening and progress monitoring has on student achievement in both academics and behavior? In terms of the impact universal screening and progress monitoring had on student achievement in both academics and behavior, the focus groups indicated an understanding of the impact behavior had on academics and vice versa. As stated previously, they expressed significant concern regarding the lack of behavioral screeners and progress monitoring tools, indicating students not being able to access education in the general education classroom due to behaviors as well as teachers trying to remove students for negative behaviors due to not having the appropriate interventions or accommodations. Support was also mentioned, and the lack of it. Every school had some behavioral support through a counselor, psychologist, or climate coach (School
Five), but the needs outweighed the available support. It was evident that other than PBIS, there was not a systemic method of addressing behaviors that rose above what the general population exhibits, either in tiers one or two. Behavior plans were being implemented in every building, and often, special education referrals were a result of students not responding to the plans. School Five mentioned that some students who exhibited behavioral issues were fast tracked towards special education services as the general education teachers didn’t have the expertise or knowledge to differentiate for behavior.

All focus groups expressed the need for appropriate screeners and progress monitoring tools for academics. They indicated a realization that best first instruction relied on knowing what to teach, and benchmarking provided teachers the place to start.

**Research Question 3**

Research Question 3 asked: Do the teachers perceive that they have adequate training and knowledge of universal screening and progress monitoring practices for both academics and behavior? Every focus group discussed their methods for screening in reading, and Schools Two and Three stated they had specific PLC meetings that provide staff training regarding universal screening and progress monitoring practices. School Four focused beginning-of-the-year training on what new teachers need to know to get up to speed on screening and monitoring practices. All schools had grade-level meetings that provided the opportunity for teachers to discuss their student needs and gain some skills from their fellow teachers. Other training was provided in the schools, such as training centered on PBIS practices (e.g., training on the 8 Keys at School Four and training on the 8 Habits at School One). School Two felt that more training was needed
from the district, and their perception was that only specific people were allowed to
attend necessary training, with many staff not having the exposure or training necessary
to implement best practices relating to universal screening and progress monitoring.
Each school represented in the focus groups indicated a strong administrative presence in
their school, and the training the teachers received was often determined by the
administrator, unless it was a district directive.

**Research Question 4**

Research Question 4 asked: How do teachers define their work in relation to
universal screening and progress monitoring for both academics and behavior? In the
schools that struggled with appropriate progress monitoring tools, the teachers expressed
that they used a great deal of personal time to create assessments that monitored student
levels of growth. A comment was made regarding math progress monitoring tools at
School Three, as the new curriculum did not provide what they felt were appropriate
tools. A teacher stated that working on the assessments would be her “summer project.”
This was the case in all three schools in District One, and they were hoping this would
change soon since the curriculum, enVision, was new to the district. In the meantime,
teachers were struggling to identify how students were responding to instruction in math.
Positively, the majority of teachers responded that their work relating to universal
screening was well-defined through the use of scheduling for assessments and through
consistent expectations regarding screenings. While assessing was time consuming, the
teachers felt it was a good use of time, as they identified the levels students were at in
academics. They felt that academically, they had adequate screening tools for reading
and math. Not all felt the same about work being well-defined in writing. Overall,
behavioral screeners were needed, and the teachers felt less certain that they had adequate information regarding behavior. They did not feel their work was well-defined in the behavioral area. Progress monitoring in the area of reading was well-defined for teachers, with a regular schedule for when to check progress and how to use data to drive decisions. In the math, writing, and behavioral areas, they felt that they needed better progress monitoring tools as well as professional development to better define their work. The teachers would define their work as being driven by collected data and a review of the data within their grade-level team and PLC meetings.

Discussion of Findings

As stated earlier in these writings, teacher perceptions were impacted by the level of buy-in, and implementation with fidelity of universal screening and progress monitoring practices can suffer when perceptions are negative towards processes. Processes need to be well defined and understood for implementation to be successful. When educators do not have specific tools to address areas they are not considered experts in, this also impacts the academic and behavioral growth of students.

The perceptions discussed in this study were centered on the main categories identified and the themes within each of these categories. These categories were systems, leadership, intervention, data, and collaboration. The age of individual participants was not asked or considered; however, the participants shared their experiences, and all but one focus group consisted of veteran teachers. The focus group that had a younger participant was still a teacher of a few years and had some previous knowledge of practices.
Of the five categories identified, School Three emphasized the importance of leadership, intervention, data, and collaboration more than the other schools, and School Four stressed the use of appropriate systems at a higher level than the other schools. This, I believe, is because School Three places importance on allocated personnel for addressing MTSS and has hired an educator to be the MTSS coordinator for the building. Her job is to focus on MTSS, and she does not have a dual role within the building. School Four indicated they have deliberately worked on bringing all staff on board, and through their elimination of a school-wide MTSS team and placing the responsibility on all grade-level teams, the transcripts reveal greater discussion regarding systems.

**Implications**

The findings of this study can direct school-wide teams toward an assessment of their own universal screening and progress monitoring practices. Through introspection, teams can identify what is missing, what needs improvement, and what direction needs to be taken. This study will support future discussions regarding the categories and themes identified, and hopefully, open the doors for further communication and collaboration as to how to improve systems in order to increase not just student achievement, but to increase the social and emotional wellness of all students.

The implications of this study were divided into the five main categories of systems, leadership, intervention, data, and collaboration. In order for teachers to implement effective universal screening and progress monitoring practices, these five wheels in the cog are indicated as important.
Figure 7. Categories identified.

**Systems**

The systems category includes the codes of MTSS universal, MTSS RTI, MTSS PBIS, overall district, district reading, and district math (see Appendices K and M). Because the district directs reading and math universal screeners, this was important to address the impact the district has on the systems within the schools. Many perceptions, and particularly indicative of the teachers in the School Two focus group, were negative towards district direction regarding math curriculum and the lack of progress monitoring tools. The teachers felt that they were not included in the decision-making process, and since they did not have buy-in into the process, they felt the district mandated something that make them feel “put upon.” However, in discussing mandated reading universal screeners, such as DIBELS, the teachers felt that they obtained valid information regarding the reading ability of students. I believe this is due to the fact that schools have been using DIBELS for years, and it is an accepted screener and progress monitoring
The new math curriculum, however, had been implemented more recently, and teacher perceptions were fresher; therefore, they had more opinions. Because of the lack of gaining teacher input, the implementation with fidelity was impacted.

Universally, MTSS was viewed as a systemic approach that addresses academics and behavior in both school districts. District One had five MTSS facilitators at the district level, and they support the focus within the schools. It was evident that the term, MTSS, was common today, unlike five years ago. Prior to the start of this research, I had a discussion with the director at the district level who oversaw MTSS and who supervised the district MTSS facilitators. While she felt that the district had made great advancements, she felt that some schools had not adjusted to true MTSS practices. Those true MTSS practices included viewing the system as a whole, with the leadership team addressing academics and behavior, and the practices for both intertwined throughout the school. In other words, the siloed approach to education still exists in many of our schools.

Every focus group discussed what was expected of educators universally and the academic focus for universal screeners. It was very evident that systemically, in every school, universal screening was scheduled and completed for every student in reading and math. In writing, the expectations were not as well defined, and in behavior, the screeners were almost non-existent. In light of this, the focus groups were consciously aware of what screeners they were providing and what screeners were missing. Guidance relating to the missing screeners was also expressed as lacking, leading back to leadership.
RTI practices were evident in every school, with problem-solving teams addressing academic struggles for students and interventions identified. Progress monitoring in the RTI process was also high for reading in all schools, high for writing in one school, and low for math. Behavior was not mentioned within the RTI process, but was mentioned when the PBIS process was discussed. Within the PBIS realm, all schools universally defined behavioral expectations and taught these expectations regularly to all students. Behavioral instruction was evident from the focus group conversations; however, behavior discussion regarding specific screeners for students who were at-risk did not occur, other than to use behavioral data from SWIS to determine the students who had more major referrals for behavior.

**Leadership**

The category of leadership arose through discussion related to the themes of guidance, implementation, resources, time, training, consistency, balance, culture, decisions, and PLCs, with a heavier emphasis on implementation, time, consistency, culture, decisions, and PLCs (see Appendices K and M). Four of the five focus groups included an administrator, and each administrator attended not to oversee or hear what the others in the group had to say, but rather to participate in the rich discussion that was had by each group. In these situations, it was my perception that the administrators valued a team-driven shared leadership approach, and they clearly indicated that every person had a role on the team, which drove the decisions for the building practices. At the beginning of the focus group for School Two, there was some indication of the rest of the team looking to the administrator for the answers; however, this subsided as all began to participate. In essence, I felt that full participation was had by all, indicated by the
lengthy transcripts that revealed that every focus group participant spoke up many times. Along with time for specific activities, an allocated position that focuses on a building’s MTSS practices was found to be very successful in School Three, which had a dedicated MTSS coordinator. This focus was clearly a shared leadership decision, supporting the improvement of MTSS practices within the building.

Within the focus group discussions, it was evident that the implementation of universal screeners and progress monitoring practices were driven by the leadership within the schools, which was represented by the focus groups. The groups fully shared their implementation practices, and they also attempted to problem solve during the focus groups regarding how to better schedule and align assessments with curriculum and what they hoped they could accomplish with progress monitoring issues. Without the direction of leadership, implementation with fidelity of universal screeners and progress monitoring practices would not be consistent.

Under the guise of leadership is a time factor, as leaders structure the time within a day for screening and progress monitoring practices. Teachers spent a lot of their own time creating progress monitoring tools or color coding schedules for interventions. While this was not perceived as an expectation of leadership, time during the day was limited for completing those tasks, with teachers stating they worked on tools for their summer projects, and that they would be up at 3:00 in the morning to work on intervention schedules which changed regularly. It was very clear that for all five schools, the time allotted for screening and progress monitoring expectations set by leadership was why they felt accomplished and why they believed they had enough data to make decisions in reading and math for screenings and in reading for progress
monitoring. Time for training and PLCs was also structured by leadership, with most schools satisfied with their PLC times, but a few schools felt they did not have enough trainings, particularly around district-mandated curriculum. Due to this factor, it was also clear that the leadership in the buildings was also affected by district direction, which was common between districts.

Consistent expectations of leadership impacts many factors in education, and in particular, the focus groups felt that the consistency of when students were screened and when they progress monitor provided the data to make effective decisions for students. The teachers perceived that they all had very consistent expectations, and they all were able to answer when they screen, how many weeks they implement interventions before progress monitoring, and when they review the data. In response to how often they review their practices, the groups did not respond as quickly, and they were not all sure if, indeed, that happens in their buildings.

Leadership also sets the cultural tones of the school according to the focus groups, which includes the acceptance of students with disabilities or those needing interventions. Four of the focus groups talked about the culture that included grade-level meetings that addressed student data and what to do next for students. School Three went further and talked about the shift that happened over four years of time, bringing all teachers into the student discussions, rather than just working with grade-level representatives. They compared it to putting the last puzzle piece in place to make the system totally functional. Through their PLCs, they reviewed data and made decisions together, using more of a shared decision-making practice.
**Intervention**

Intervention is at the heart of universal screening and progress monitoring practices, or actually, sandwiched between them. After appropriate screeners are conducted, determinations are made from the data that indicates the need for interventions, which are then implemented and progress monitored for growth.

Every school discussed the interventions they provided, whether they included small reading groups using supplemental curriculum, interventionists and special education teachers “pushing in” to the classrooms in a co-teaching model (School Five), or to supplement what the general education teacher was providing through appropriate accommodations. The tracking of interventions through progress monitoring was the main area of concern in math, and in writing for some. Interventions for behavior were lacking overall, as behavioral screeners were not in place; therefore, data for behavioral interventions were not available.

Along with behavior, which was discussed more than any other theme, the other areas within the intervention category that were of importance include the development of plans, the specific tiers of interventions, and the needs of students. A lot of discussion occurred in all five focus groups regarding the specific plans for students, how the schools track those plans, and how they monitor the plans. Again, with the creation of behavior plans, specific universal screening data were not available due to the lack of appropriate behavioral screeners. Other plans discussed were RTI plans that specifically addressed academics; however, the focus groups did not go into detail about where the plans were housed electronically, nor who was the keeper of the plans. The focus group questions did not specifically ask this information.
Each school used different terminology for the specific tiers of intervention, with three schools calling the tiers green, yellow, or red, with red being the most intensive level, and the other schools using the terms tier one, two or three, with three being the most intensive tier. As discussed in Chapter II, the term tier one describes what happens at the universal level, or general education classroom setting. This is the tier that all students receive.

Referring also to Chapter II and the layered continuum of support visual provided by the Colorado Department of Education, tier two (or the targeted level) adds additional support for students who do not respond to universal instruction, and tier three (or the intensive level) adds even more support on top of the other layers, reflecting that every student receives universal instruction, and supports are provided in addition to that instruction. While the terms that the focus groups used were different, not one group mentioned the layering of supports or indicated that they used a layered continuum of supports; therefore, the assumption was made that additional training was necessary for schools in Colorado regarding first best instruction, or universal instruction, and then targeted and intensive supports that supplement, not supplant, general education instruction. This supports the individual needs of students, which is what all five focus groups stressed--the importance of identifying and meeting student needs.

Data

Data are the most important factors of universal screening and progress monitoring. This was highly expressed in the transcripts, showing one of the highest levels of discussion relating to progress monitoring (see Appendices L and N). The themes within the data category that emerged from the focus groups were testing,
benchmarking, screening, progress monitoring, and tracking and data collection. Testing was defined as any assessments that provided scores for students, whether they were curriculum-based measurements or standardized assessments. The importance of testing was emphasized by School Three, using assessments to determine cut points for students to determine appropriate interventions. Benchmarking, a form of assessments, included regular checks during the year to identify whether students needed to change groups for interventions. Screening was referred to as the very initial assessments, which may or may not include assessments that are standardized. The data from these measurements play a vital role in identifying what areas students needed support in, and they drove the instruction for all students.

With screening identifying what students need to learn to close any identified gaps, progress monitoring is equally pertinent in determining whether the gap is closing for students. During the focus groups, progress monitoring was discussed twice as often as other forms of assessment, with a growing level of concern in the area of math and, for some schools, writing. By the time the focus groups were conducted, progress monitoring had already reached a heightened level of concern in the behavioral area, which was almost non-existent. Four of the schools also differentiated tracking from progress monitoring, stating that tracking data feeds into the overall progress monitoring process. When the focus was removed from the areas of universal screening and progress monitoring, which must go hand in hand, educators also lose focus, once again giving way to the guessing game in education, guessing where a child is at, and guessing what a child needs.
Collaboration

The last main category identified in this study was collaboration, which was discussed in the focus groups through the themes of grade-level meetings, teaming, and scheduling. Grade-level meetings were considered a necessary component for reviewing screening and progress monitoring data, with teammates aiding each other in making decisions regarding interventions. All of the schools valued the practice of grade-level meetings, and two of the schools emphasized that was how they do business. The teams believed that grade-level meetings build sustainability, with School Four taking it to the ultimate level of giving all data-based decision making to the grade-level teams and using the building-wide MTSS team for support and training.

The teaming process was also heavily relied on for making student decisions, but also for making building-wide decisions. The definition of teaming was the inclusion of all teams, including vertical teams, which were used to prepare the upcoming grade-level teachers to meet student needs during the next school year. The transcripts showed a high number of statements made regarding teaming (see Appendices L and N). Teachers valued their teams and grade-level meetings, and they felt valued by not having to “go at it alone.” Limited discussion was had in all focus groups regarding scheduling; however, the quality of scheduling was expressed as a necessity for the successful flow of a student’s day and communication regarding interventions and assessments.

Teaming also included parent participation, with three schools mentioning the inclusion of parents in the teaming process. While parents were part of the individual planning process for students, these schools specifically addressed having parents present at the start of the processes.
Referring back to the effective timeline for implementation of MTSS written in the implementation science section and created by a neighboring district, the steps to successful implementation can include:

Year 1. Develop common language and common understanding, create professional learning communities (PLCs) to review current data and make decisions, hold data dialogues, and teach behavioral expectations to students.

Year 2. Maintain practices from Year 1, refine teaming structures, review current interventions, and determine additional interventions based on academic and behavioral progress monitoring.

Year 3. At all tiers, effective teaming and problem-solving practices should be in place, and 80% of the student population is responding to tier one instruction. Interventions at the tier two and tier three levels are refined using existing progress monitoring data.

Year 4 and Beyond. Continue refinement of teaming structures, interventions, and the monitoring of progress, identifying existing obstacles. Consistency across all schools is evident, and decisions regarding the MTSS process are made quickly (St. Vrain Valley Schools, 2013).

Comparing this list to the findings of this study, all five categories and themes identified aligned with these process steps. The emphasis is on creating systemic structures, with all staff knowing and understanding the processes aligned with the systems category of this study. Ensuring discussion and decision-making practices through professional learning communities (PLCs) was also revealed in this study within the leadership category. The findings of this study indicate that collaboration was crucial
in creating effective practices, including grade-level meetings and school-wide teaming.

Teaming was necessary to review data and use appropriate problem-solving processes.

This study indicates that collaboration and teaming are contributing factors to successful universal screening and progress monitoring practices.

**Recommendations for Future Practice**

**Systems.** In light of the development of the five categories within this study, recommendations for practice within the field of education include reviewing what the state has in place to support the systems within districts and schools. Identification of the system of MTSS, its components, and how these components are addressed at the district and school levels is essential. Within the MTSS framework, it is important to include universal screening and progress monitoring practices. Through this study, the implications lead to the importance of a visual reminder and specific strategies and tools for successful universal screening and progress monitoring practices within a separate component. This became very evident through not just the identified themes, but through the inconsistencies of specific screeners for writing and behavior and through progress monitoring tools for math, writing, and behavior.

In my experience, districts struggle with the use of one system to address the needs of all students. We have continued to silo our processes and programs, making it more difficult for collaboration, teaming, and leadership to ensure consistent practices. We often have a person responsible for a specific process, and without that person at the table, that process is not addressed. By using MTSS as the overarching framework, or umbrella, for all processes and practices within a school district, we can begin to ensure:

(a) that educators will be having the discussions necessary to appropriately review data
and to determine effective interventions for all students, and (b) that the ownership of the processes and practices belong to all educators, not just the ones with a specific title.

**Leadership.** A recommendation in the area of leadership is for schools to assess their own leadership structure and move towards a team-driven shared leadership model that allows every teacher to provide input into school-wide decisions. Along those lines, districts need to also be cognizant of including educators from all buildings in reviews of curriculum, feedback loops on new curriculum where they can also provide student data to drive those decisions, and professional development to support implementation with fidelity of curriculum, universal screeners, and progress monitoring tools for academics and behavior. Buy-in and implementation with fidelity is increased when teachers’ knowledge and expertise is valued.

In my experience as an administrator in a public school district, leadership is often revered and held close by the title one holds. Team-driven shared leadership is not always a natural direction for leaders, as the position one holds may be threatened by others making decisions. The recommendation to assess leadership structures and how they impact implementation with fidelity is driven by my experiences.

The IRIS Center’s Fidelity of Implementation model reflects the statements made in all five focus groups. Within a circular model, leadership provides the support for creating, implementing, and evaluating plans, which then inform staff of best instructional practices (see Figure 8) (Vanderbilt University, 2017). The recognition of the importance of shared leadership prevents disengagement from previous “top-down” models (NAESP, 2013).
Figure 8. Fidelity of implementation (The IRIS Center, Vanderbilt University, 2017).

**Intervention.** Intervention is critical in meeting the needs of students who show significant gaps in academic and behavioral growth. A recommendation in this area is to conduct an evaluation of all interventions used and, by reviewing data, determine what might be interfering with student achievement in academics and behavior. Including a body of evidence is recommended as well as including a needs assessment survey, discussions within PLCs during review of data, plotting data on graphs to identify where the gaps and school-wide growth exist, and a review of intervention schedules including the personnel involved.

**Data.** Data reviews are pertinent to making any determinations regarding student programming. It is recommended that these be conducted during grade-level team meetings, during school-wide MTSS meetings, and during PLC and staff meetings. A recommendation in this area is to always visit the data prior to making decisions about programming. By beginning each staff meeting with a data review, the discussions will
change and become more data-driven discussions. Again, it is critical to review both academic and behavioral data equally. If there are not enough behavioral data, it is an indicator that behavioral screeners and progress monitoring tools need to be reviewed or implemented.

**Collaboration.** The last recommendation regarding the category of collaboration is to use a “working smarter, not harder” matrix (see Appendix O) (Sugai, 2006). This process identifies what teams, or committees, are meeting in a school, to detail what function each committee serves and who the committee serves, and then to list why the committee exists. Often, a school will have multiple committees that address similar topics. The purpose is to streamline the school’s committees into as few as possible. For instance, a behavior committee and an academic intervention committee can be combined into the school’s MTSS committee, enabling members to review both academic and behavioral data to determine if school-wide processes need to be adjusted or changed to accommodate both. The data review will also reveal whether behavior is impacting academics or vice versa. This process will move towards the elimination of silos that can significantly impact students’ achievement as well as support appropriate universal screening and progress monitoring practices.

**Unexpected Findings**

Knowing that there is a lack of appropriate universal screening and progress monitoring for behavior, it was interesting to note that specific screeners for writing were not clearly defined, nor were progress monitoring practices identified for writing or math in most of the schools. I had previously expected that all academic areas were solid for screening and progress monitoring; therefore, this was an unexpected finding. The
perceptions relating to behavior were also an unexpected finding. While behavior was an area of great concern, solutions were not yet identified as to how to change the practices relating to behavior. The schools did not have appropriate data for behavior, math and writing to make effective decisions. This ultimately informs me that without these data, appropriate decisions for students are at risk. Finally, implications for practice take into consideration of the identified themes that can inhibit the MTSS process or increase its success, depending on the priority of the leadership within a school.

**Limitations**

A limitation of this study was the inability of generalization to other schools and settings. Other schools and settings may have different views due to the fact that the teams vary, directives vary, and the population of students differs from other schools and areas of the state. The focus groups included in this study were all from the northern Colorado region. Comparing the findings of this study to another region may not be valuable; however, they provide other districts with information as to what they could begin to investigate within their own schools.

Limitations also included the fact that one school’s focus group had only two participants. Availability of all staff in that school was limited due to factors that prevented the teachers from attending. The intent was to include all or most members of the school’s MTSS team; however, in order to complete the study, I needed to be flexible and hold the focus groups when the teams stated they could meet. Scheduling the entire team to meet at the same time was out of my control.

Even though the study was approved in two districts by the main administration, it was difficult to obtain the five focus groups within the same school year. I had hoped to
complete all of the focus groups within the 2016-2017 school year, but I had to extend my study into the 2017-2018 school year. The study included three focus groups from District One and two focus groups from District Two, making it difficult to compare districts, even though the two districts vary greatly in demographics. I previously suspected that the relationships between principals and teachers might affect teacher perceptions of the processes, as educators may not want to indicate an issue with leadership during the focus groups with a principal present; however, I did not find this to be the case, as the responses to questions were very forthcoming.

While my credibility is fairly established in the field, there may have been concerns, as I am now working for the Colorado Department of Education in the Exceptional Student Services Unit, although I was not able to detect that this was the case. I do not believe this limited the findings of the study.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Recommendations for future research include comparing universal screening and progress monitoring practices across the state in relation to behavioral data that are kept at the state level as well as at the district level. While this study did not compare universal screening and progress monitoring practices with academic data, this would be a next step in delving deeper into this need through mixed methods designs. Another recommendation is to further conduct a bounded case study or ethnographic research identifying teacher perceptions regarding team-driven shared leadership in comparison with academic and behavioral scores of students. A study that hones in on the effectiveness of behavioral screeners may also benefit the field, especially in light of the fact that behavioral screeners were nearly non-existent in the schools that participated in
this study. As this study focused on schools within suburban districts, it would add to the research, to the knowledge base, and to the professional literature to conduct case studies that are bounded by rural school districts or urban school districts.

A full comparison of the two districts was not conducted, which might also be an effective study in the future. The demographics between the two districts are stated, however, not compared, and this study can be used to review and create new findings. By using an equal number of focus groups from each district, a comparison would be an applicable study.

**Final Thoughts**

Within all five categories, the themes that stand out the greatest are: (a) math in the systems category, (b) time in the leadership category, (c) behavior in the intervention category, (d) progress monitoring in the data category, and (e) teaming in the collaboration category. This emphasizes the perceptions teachers have regarding the creation of appropriate universal screening and progress monitoring practices. It also reveals what the teachers feel are direct needs in their districts and schools today in order to implement MTSS, and specifically, universal screening and progress monitoring practices with fidelity.

What do the findings of this study mean for the field of education? It is important that districts identify appropriate universal screeners and progress monitoring practices for all academic areas as well as for behavior. Research indicates that universal screening and progress monitoring increase reading ability, and together, they are a critical component of an MTSS framework (Sherman, 2017). Research also shows that
behavior and academics cannot be separated, and they have an impact on each other. Therefore, they need to be addressed through the MTSS framework.

The concerns noted in this study regarding behavioral screeners are not to be ignored, as the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students impact their ability to succeed in life. With five elementary schools representing two districts not showing the consistent use of behavioral universal screeners, one can assume that schools throughout the state are in similar situations. Also concerning was the fact that academic areas other than reading were also in need of appropriate screeners or progress monitoring practices. Without the appropriate data, trying to meet student needs is definitely a hit or miss game. Parent involvement is limited if appropriate data are not provided, as it is difficult for teams to communicate appropriate student levels. With this information, why wouldn’t we, at the state level, at the district level, and at the school level, make it the utmost priority to ensure every area in education is addressed through appropriate universal screeners and progress monitoring practices, while emphasizing the importance through the visual statewide model?
REFERENCES


Drummond, T. (1994). *The student risk screening scale (SSRS).* Grant Pass, OR: Josephine County Mental Health Program.


*Pennsylvania transition from RtI to a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS).*


Retrieved from https://docs.google.com/document/d/1JojwuVq2bRlCCU4VRAVzCPl2yCUJNnP-o-nm2ukv22tE/edit


APPENDIX A

CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS
IN RESEARCH
CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Project Title: Universal Screening and Progress Monitoring within a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)

Principal Investigator:
Mary Anne Fleury
Doctoral Candidate, School of Special Education
Phone: 720-351-6303
E-mail: fleu1027@bears.unco.edu

Research Advisor:
Harvey Rude, Ed.D.
Phone: (970) 351-1659
E-mail: harvey.rude@unco.edu

Purpose and Description: The primary purpose of this study is to gather information regarding your perceptions and experiences with the individual component of the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) model, Universal Screening and Progress Monitoring. In an hour long focus group, you will be asked a series of questions which will enable you to share the experiences you have had with this component of the MTSS process. The information you share during the focus group process will be used to help inform future MTSS implementation efforts.

Here is a sampling of the types of questions you will be asked during the interview:

- How are the procedures for Universal Screening defined in your building?
- How are the procedures for Progress Monitoring defined in your building?
- How do you identify students who are at risk for academic difficulties?
- How do you identify students who are at risk for social/emotional/behavioral difficulties?
In order to ensure that your answers to these questions are accurately reported in the final report, the focus group will be tape recorded. The taped conversation will be transcribed after the focus group is completed. The interviewer will take every precaution to protect your confidentiality. During the focus group, a pseudonym chosen by you will be used to protect your identity. The focus group data collected and analyzed for this study will be securely kept in a file cabinet in the locked office of the Principal Investigator. The information you provide during the interview will only be accessible by the Principal Investigator.

There are no foreseeable risks by participating in this focus group. If you start feeling uncomfortable during the focus group, let the Principal Investigator know and further questions will not be asked.

A light meal will be provided for you on the day of the focus group for appreciation of your time. A gift card will also be given to thank you for your participation. Your participation will help future research regarding the implementation of MTSS.

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you agree to participate in this research. A copy of this form will be provided to you for future reference. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact Sherry May, IRB Administrator, Office of Sponsored Programs, 25 Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-1910.

Participant’s Signature       Date

Principal Investigator’s Signature       Date
APPENDIX B

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS
FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. Describe the procedures for Universal Screening and Progress Monitoring used in your building.

2. Describe your involvement during the development of the Universal Screening and Progress Monitoring process.

3. How do you identify students who are at risk for academic difficulties?

4. How do you identify students who are at risk for social/emotional/behavioral difficulties?

5. Describe the Progress Monitoring process in your building for academics and behavior.

6. How often are the processes for Universal Screening and Progress Monitoring reviewed in your building?

7. How are the MTSS processes presented and taught to the staff in your building?

8. How consistent are the implementation of the processes for Universal Screening and Progress Monitoring in your building?

9. How has this MTSS component affected your building?

10. Think back over the past year of the MTSS work on universal screening and progress monitoring. What went particularly well? Were there any areas of improvement made?

11. Of all the things discussed today, what is the most valuable to your work?
APPENDIX C

LETTER TO PRINCIPALS
Dear Principals,

I am connecting with you to discuss research that may support you in your work with MTSS in your schools, and to request your support in the completion of research for my Ph.D. program at the University of Northern Colorado. The topic of my dissertation/research is Universal Screening and Progress Monitoring within a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS). I will be conducting a qualitative study, identifying teacher perceptions of universal screening and progress monitoring. You may know that this component is now embedded within other components in the state’s visual model, and this has fueled my desire to determine the perceptions of teachers and whether this component needs to continue to be in the forefront of the work at the state level.

I am focusing on the elementary level, and would like your permission to include your staff members in a one-hour focus group to be held after school hours. I am looking for representation from gifted, special education, reading intervention, general ed K-2, general ed 3-5, and EL. I am also looking for one of the representatives to have a behavioral focus, and for at least one to be a member of your building MTSS team. It would be acceptable for you to choose the members for your focus group.

Please let me know as soon as possible if I will be able to conduct a focus group with your staff. I hope that you find the information from the study helpful for your work and for the work in the district. All names, school relation, and district relation will be kept confidential in my writings, and my dissertation will focus on perceptions. If you have any questions, please ask, and I will provide you as much information as you need!

Thank you, and I look forward to meeting you and working with your staff!

Sincerely,

Mary Anne Fleury
fleu1027@bears.unco.edu
720-351-6303
APPENDIX D

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL
DATE: November 7, 2016

TO: Mary Anne Fleury
FROM: University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB

PROJECT TITLE: [972924-2] Universal Screening and Progress Monitoring Within a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)

SUBMISSION TYPE: Amendment/Modification

ACTION: APPROVAL/VERIFICATION OF EXEMPT STATUS
DECISION DATE: November 7, 2016

EXPIRATION DATE: November 7, 2020

Thank you for your submission of Amendment/Modification materials for this project. The University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB approves this project and verifies its status as EXEMPT according to federal IRB regulations.

We will retain a copy of this correspondence within our records for a duration of 4 years.

If you have any questions, please contact Sherry May at 970-351-1910 or Sherry.May@unco.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB's records.
APPENDIX E

FOCUS GROUP NOTE-TAKING SUMMARY
The assistant moderator will use this form to take notes in addition to the recordings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date of Focus Group</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Location of Focus Group</td>
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<td>Number of Participants</td>
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<td>Roles of participants</td>
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<td>Pseudonyms of Participants</td>
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<td>Moderator Name</td>
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<td>Asst. Moderator Name</td>
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Responses to Questions

(Use the following for each question asked)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brief Summary/Key Points</th>
<th>Notable Quotes (note initials of participant)</th>
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<tr>
<th>Nonverbal Cues (note initials of participant)</th>
<th>Follow Up Questions Asked</th>
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APPENDIX F

7 HABITS OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE PEOPLE:
SCHOOL ONE, DISTRICT ONE
APPENDIX G

CHECK-IN, CHECK-OUT FORM (CICO):
SCHOOL TWO, DISTRICT ONE
**Summary Page to be completed by CICO Provider each day and copied to coordinator each week.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Check-Out (points earned/points possible)</th>
<th>Check-Out (%)</th>
<th>Check-In</th>
<th>Delivered Contract</th>
<th>Signed Parent Copy of Home Report</th>
<th>Reward chosen or points banked?</th>
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APPENDIX H

POSITIVE BEHAVIOR INTERVENTION SUPPORTS
EXPECTATIONS FOR CLASS AND HALL:
SCHOOL FIVE, DISTRICT TWO
S- Sit up straight
T- Track the speaker
A- Ask and answer questions like a scholar
R- Respect at all times
H- Hands by side
A- All eyes forward
L- Lips zipped
L- Legs walking safely
S- Stick together
APPENDIX I

LEADERSHIP IN ME, LEADERSHIP NOTEBOOK:
SCHOOL ONE, DISTRICT ONE
My Leadership Notebook helps me keep track of my academic and personal progress. I am in charge of my life.

- **Paradigm of Leadership**: NOT THIS - BUT THIS
  - Leadership is for the few.
  - Everyone can be a leader.

- **Paradigm of Potential**: NOT THIS - BUT THIS
  - A few people are gifted.
  - Everyone has Genius.

- **Paradigm of Change**: NOT THIS - BUT THIS
  - To improve schools the system needs to change.
  - Change starts with me.

- **Paradigm of Motivation**: NOT THIS - BUT THIS
  - Educators control and direct student learning.
  - Educators empower students to lead their own learning.

- **Paradigm of Education**: NOT THIS - BUT THIS
  - Help Students achieve academically.
  - Develop the whole person.
APPENDIX J

INTENSIVE INTERVENTION CHART:
SCHOOL FIVE, DISTRICT TWO
APPENDIX K

IDENTIFIED THEMES USING MAXQDA:
SYSTEMS, LEADERSHIP,
INTERVENTION
### LEADERSHIP

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>Resources</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Training</th>
<th>Consistency</th>
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APPENDIX L

IDENTIFIED THEMES USING MAXQDA: DATA, COLLABORATION
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APPENDIX M

IDENTIFIED THEMES USING MAXQDA:
SYSTEMS, LEADERSHIP
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APPENDIX N

IDENTIFIED THEMES USING MAXQDA:
INTERVENTION, DATA,
COLLABORATION
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<td>School Three, District One</td>
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APPENDIX O

WORKING SMARTER, NOT HARDER MATRIX
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Initiative, Committee</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Target Group</th>
<th>Staff Involved</th>
<th>SIP/SID</th>
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<td>Attendance Committee</td>
<td>Increase attendance</td>
<td>Increase % of students attending daily</td>
<td>Students</td>
<td>Eric, Ellon, Marlee</td>
<td>Goal #2</td>
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<td>Character</td>
<td>Improve</td>
<td>Improve character</td>
<td>All students</td>
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<td>Goal #3</td>
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<td>Education</td>
<td>character</td>
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<td>Safety Committee</td>
<td>Improve safety</td>
<td>Predictable response to threat/crisis</td>
<td>Dangerous students</td>
<td>Faye, Ellen, John</td>
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<td>School Spirit Committee</td>
<td>Enhance school</td>
<td>Improve morale</td>
<td>All students</td>
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<td>Improve behavior</td>
<td>Decrease office referrals</td>
<td>Bullies, antisocial students,</td>
<td>Ellen, Eric, Marlee, Otis</td>
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<td>Prevent drug use</td>
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<td>Drug users</td>
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<td>EBS Work Group</td>
<td>Implement 3-tier model</td>
<td>Decrease office referrals, increase attendance, enhance academic engagement, improve grades</td>
<td>All students</td>
<td>Eric, Ellen, Marlee, Otis, Emma</td>
<td>Goal #2, Goal #3</td>
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