PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL COUNSELORS AND ADMINISTRATORS ON LEADING MULTITIERED SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT

by

Mary S. Cabrera

Educational Leadership, EdD, 2025

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Faculty of

College

Texas Christian University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Educational Leadership

May

2025

APPROVAL

Perceptions of School Counselors and Administrators on Leading Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

by

Mary Shaw Cabrera

Dissertation approved:

Major Professor

For the College

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my sweet Mia Grace, I did this for you. You have been my light and my motivation through each step of this journey. May you always know that with love, faith and perseverance, you can accomplish anything.

To Dr. Jimerson, thank you for tolerating my constant multitasking and for believing in me even when I didn't believe in myself. To my committee, Dr. Stark for seeing me through my master's degree as well as this journey, Dr. Quinn for tolerating me in qualitative research class, and Dr. Ezzani for supporting me on this path to becoming an educational leader. Thank you!

To all the principals (Mr. Williams, Mr. Bailey, and Mr. Tedford) who supported me on this journey, thank you for your understanding and encouragement and for allowing me the time and space to pursue this goal.

To my mom, thank you for being my hero. You have shown me the meaning of resilience, leadership, and grace. I look up to you. Pops, thank you for always showing up. I'm blessed to be able to call you dad.

Lastly, my dear husband, DJ. Thank you for enduring this process with me. You've rearranged your schedules so I could achieve my dreams, and I couldn't be more grateful.

This dissertation is a reflection of all of your support. Thank you for walking this journey with me.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF TABLES

ABSTRACT

PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL COUNSELORS AND ADMINISTRATORS ON LEADING MULTITIERED SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT

by

Mary S. Cabrera

Degree, year and source

Advisor's name and rank

This qualitative study explored the perceptions of secondary school counselors and administrators regarding their roles in leading multitiered system of supports (MTSS). Framed through the lens of sensemaking theory, this study investigated how key stakeholders interpret, implement, and navigate the complexities of MTSS within a large suburban school district. As secondary schools adopt MTSS to address students' academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs, the success of this framework hinges on the clarity of roles, collaborative leadership, and alignment with district and schoolwide goals. Semistructured interviews with counselors and campus leaders occurred to understand their experiences, beliefs, and the organizational dynamics that influence MTSS implementation. Thematic analysis indicated several key findings: role ambiguity between counselors and administrators, inconsistent campus processes, and a lack of formal training and communication structures. Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated a shared commitment to student success and recognized MTSS as a proactive, student-centered approach.

PREFACE

When people think of a counselor in a school context, they often think of a guidance counselor. Although I cannot remember my high school counselor, I recall the age-old stories of counselors telling students they would be "unable to achieve their dreams" or encouraging them to "try a different path" because of their grades. I have a different perspective, which stems from two distinct visions of a school counselor. The first memory is of an elementary counselor who worked with my mom when she was an elementary principal. This counselor did all the fun guidance lessons, had the best lighting in her office, and was always there for kids when issues arose. Of course, at that time, the word "crisis" was not used in the same manner it is now. Going to her office was a treat, and I truly enjoyed the environment she created for all students.

My second memory is of my high school counselor, whom I do not remember. What I do recall is going to see them for a schedule change and a sign-off on my graduation requirements in my senior year. Although I have two vastly different memories and experiences with my counselors, I always knew I wanted to become a guidance counselor after serving years in the classroom. I then transitioned to the role of assistant principal, which created a new lens for me to draw upon. I also reflected on my experiences with school counselors I worked with, and now have the opportunity to collaborate with. Just as the title has evolved from "guidance counselor" to "school counselor" to reflect the expanding and multifaceted responsibilities of the role, my mindset has also shifted, embracing the broader expectations of supporting all students and stakeholders in increasingly complex and dynamic educational environments.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In the intricate painting of education, school counselors are artists of students' success, shaping the fabric of their educational journey and well-being. Evolving from their initial role as vocational guides, the contemporary school counselor assumes a multifaceted role, extending far beyond traditional boundaries to encompass crisis intervention, academic support, and holistic student development. Today, most, if not all, counselor duties must fit within one of the four American School Counselor Association (ASCA; 2019) components of a comprehensive counselor program. The four components are guidance curriculum, individual planning, responsive services, and system support. This paradigm shift heralds a new era, wherein counselors guide individual students and lead stakeholders, staff, and families through the multitiered support systems (MTSS) process. MTSS is the preventive, data-based framework for improving all students' academic, social, and behavioral outcomes (Jackson, 2021).

Amid this new endeavor lies a perplexing conundrum: the lack of a clear definition and delineation surrounding the counselor's role in implementing MTSS on secondary campuses. Nowhere is this ambiguity more palpable than in the busy corridors of a large suburban school district in North Texas, where more than 53,000 students navigate their educational pathways. Here, counselors, teachers, and administrators grapple with the enigmatic nature of MTSS, struggling to discern the supports necessary for student success. When clear roles and processes are defined, MTSS can promote early intervention and address student disproportionality (Cartledge et al., 2016).

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the intricacies of school counselors' understandings, experiences, and roles in leading or facilitating the MTSS process in a large suburban North Texas secondary setting. Focusing on the lens of secondary counseling

leaders and administrators through a sensemaking framework could add practical application of academic supports. The sensemaking framework showed the counselor's role in guiding and supporting stakeholders through the MTSS process in educational leadership. This study explored the complexities of the MTSS process, counselors' understanding of administrative roles, and administrators' understanding of counseling roles within a complicated secondary educational setting.

Background

School counselors' titles and roles have transformed over the last decade due to the work of ASCA. ASCA (2012) identified the evolving terms from *vocational* to *guidance* to *school counselor* over the last century. In the early 1900s, the role of a (guidance) counselor was a position without any organized structure (as known today), and the position was strictly for vocational guidance in school systems. Although the term "guidance counselor" is more commonly known, its historic use was to refer to counselors working in schools to guide students through finding a vocation during days of war (Gysbers, 2001). Guidance counselors had a historical reputation of being reactionary and only serving students who were "in need" (ASCA, 2012). Giving vocational advice was delegated to whomever was available on campus (Goodman-Scott & Ockerman, 2019), not a designated staffed position. In these educational settings, guidance counselors were ancillary to school improvement (ASCA, 2019).

The role of school counseling has evolved beyond traditional counseling functions to that of a pivotal leader within the high school setting (King-White et al., 2021). The new language calls for an expanded and evolving counselor role responsive to recent state guidance and policies. As school leaders, counselors should understand the overlap of a comprehensive counseling program and the MTSS process and implement both frameworks to successfully

support students (ASCA, 2014; Goodman-Scott, 2014). Due to the changing role of school counselors and the recent widespread implementation of formal MTSS processes, there is limited literature exploring the intersection of counseling roles within a comprehensive school counseling model and MTSS frameworks.

According to ASCA (2019), 80% of a school counselor's role should be directly engaging in services with students, with 20% dedicated to indirect services. This paradigm shift heralds a new era, wherein counselors guide individual students and lead various stakeholders, staff, and families through the MTSS process. Amid these new roles lies a conundrum: the lack of clear definition and delineation surrounding the counselor's role in these processes (Goodman-Scott, 2014).

School counselors face challenges in academic leadership roles, particularly within the MTSS. First, although the importance of school counselors in MTSS has gained recognition, researchers have only begun to explore the role of secondary school counselors in leading MTSS implementation on their campuses (Goodman-Scott et al., 2022). Second, and the most relevant to the proposed study, there is a notable gap in understanding how key stakeholders perceive counselors' involvement in MTSS. Although "a litany of literature exists discussing the school counseling/MTSS alignment and school counselors' roles in MTSS" (Goodman-Scott et al., 2022, p. 4), there remains limited research addressing school counselors' training in MTSS. Inconsistencies in MTSS-related training compound this lack of clarity and the varying levels of confidence school counselors report in different areas of the framework (Gysbers & Henderson, 2012). Existing studies provide initial insights into counselors' preparation for MTSS. However, these are often narrowly focused on response to intervention (RTI), a component of MTSS that

emphasizes academics, rather than the broader, whole-child approach characterizing contemporary MTSS models (Patrikakou et al., 2020).

Secondary school counselors now help students with academic planning, providing short-term counseling and advocating for them at individual education plan meetings and other student-focused meetings, which are drastic expansions on the work of earlier guidance counselors (Odeleye, 2018; Shepard et al., 2014). This role evolution has also led to counselors' (specifically those in Grades 6–12) placement in formal facilitation or leadership roles on their respective campuses (although they may not always receive the formal authority needed to lead MTSS as effectively as they would like; Shepard et al., 2014). This pivotal shift in how school counselors are viewed and positioned affects how counselors engage in their work, and how leaders (mis)understand the work of counselors, perhaps pointedly when it comes to MTSS guidance (King-White et al., 2021).

Problem Statement

Researchers have shown that administrators, academic leaders (including school counselors), and teachers lack clarity regarding school counselors' roles and responsibilities in general (King-White et al., 2021; Lesh et al., 2021). To further complicate matters, counselors are sometimes acknowledged and included as part of formal school leadership, and sometimes they are left on the margins.

With the introduction of ASCA (2019) mandates and the School Counselor Accountability Act (TAC §61.1073), counselors are now responsible for guiding schoolwide MTSS support for teachers and families and supporting students' academic achievement. This change in counselors' roles and responsibilities has resulted in various challenges, including confusion of their roles and responsibilities (Patrikakou et al., 2020), lack of leadership and

MTSS training (Belser et al., 2016), and negative stakeholder perceptions surrounding school counselors as leaders of MTSS (Dahir et al., 2009). Research indicates that school counseling programs that closely follow the ASCA (2012) model are more likely to implement MTSS effectively and with greater fidelity (Donohue, 2014; Goodman-Scott & Grothaus, 2017a, 2017b).

The challenge behind guiding MTSS at the secondary level has been a question that at this stage in the research, MTSS has been broadly defined as a support system for all kids (Bradshaw et al., 2008; Horner et al., 2005). MTSS is an overarching framework encompassing behavioral, social-emotional, and academic supports, making it difficult for counselors and administrators to decipher who should initiate the process (Freeman et al., 2016). Elementary counselors have historically worked closely with their administrative counterparts, so MTSS is a collaborative effort between principals and counselors (Campbell & Dahir, 1997). Secondary counselors collaborate with external stakeholders to support students' academic and social-emotional well-being, which may create confusion about their specific role in delivering supports within the MTSS framework. Practices such as articulating a strong counseling vision, demonstrating knowledge about guidance curriculum, promoting a positive school climate, partnering with community members, and providing equitable opportunities to develop student strengths are often considered core competencies for school leaders (Dufour et al., 2010), but articulating the shape and scope of the secondary counselor's role in MTSS is lacking. Help with clearly defining counseling roles and minimizing confusion would benefit teachers and counselors significantly.

Further complicating counselors' facilitation and leadership of MTSS, others in the school community (e.g., district and campus administrators, parents, teachers) may not

understand the shape and scope of school counselors' roles. In secondary schools, larger student bodies can make for more struggling students, making it difficult for counselors to monitor and support all students (Durrance, 2023). Whereas most elementary schools are similar in structure, secondary schools can vary widely (Daye, 2019). According to Jimerson et al. (2016), "The biggest barrier to secondary MTSS implementation is a confused or unclear purpose" (p. 6). This lack of knowledge of how to define roles in the MTSS process is understandable when considering the counseling evaluation system and Texas School Counselor Evaluation and Support System (T-SCESS). The lack of a common language becomes evident when examining the T-SCESS evaluation tool. Although T-SCESS outlines domains that encourage counselors to adopt a leadership role, not all stakeholders always clearly understand or consistently interpret these expectations. Due to the significant variation in secondary schools, a survey of counselors on secondary campuses would likely show a lack of common language to define counseling roles for MTSS at the secondary level.

Significance of Study

A school counselor's role is to support all students within the four components of a comprehensive school counseling program. School counselors should spend 80% of their time in direct services with students, while 20% should be in indirect services (ASCA, 2019). Their evolving MTSS role remains unclear, particularly at the secondary level. Despite counselors' increasing encouragement to serve as MTSS leaders, the literature lacks clarity on how they navigate these expectations alongside traditional counseling duties. MTSS studies center on elementary settings or academic interventions, with limited attention to secondary schools' unique organizational structures, role ambiguity, and leadership dynamics. This study addressed a critical gap by exploring how secondary counselors and campus and district administrators

interpret their roles in the MTSS process and how these perceptions influence implementation. By amplifying practitioner voices and applying a sensemaking framework, this study provided much-needed insight into the practical and systemic barriers that affect MTSS alignment at the district and campus level.

Definition of Terms

Administrators: Campus- and district-level leaders. May include an individual or members of the leadership team, such as school counselors.

American School Counseling Association: Professional organization for school counselors in the United States (ASCA, 2022).

Assessment, research, and program evaluation: The research department in the ISD used for this study

Belief: Something that is accepted, considered to be true, or held as an opinion (Merriam-Webster, 2025a).

Capacity for comprehension: Perception (Merriam-Webster, 2025b), or the result of perceiving roles and guidelines for implementing a framework.

Counseling leader (lead counselor): A secondary counselor. I refer to all secondary school counselors as leaders for Grades 6–12.

Experiences: Things encountered or personally lived through, or the conscious events (Merriam-Webster, 2025c) that influence an individual's understanding.

Human Resources (HR): ISD division used for this study.

Multitiered systems of support: An umbrella term for three levels of tiered interventions designed to address student academic, social-emotional, and behavioral needs (Scaletto et al.,

2022; Weingarten et al., 2020). The school counselor or the administrator can provide the tiered support interventions.

No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB): Mandate created to help close the achievement gap, increase accountability in education, and ensure that ALL students, regardless of background, receive a quality education (Dee & Jacob, 2011).

Positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS): Another framework created to support whole-school practices for behavioral interventions (Freeman et al., 2016). MTSS brings the practice and frameworks of both RTI and PBIS and seeks to clarify the ambiguity with the three terms (Dulaney et al., 2013).

Response to intervention: According to the National Research Center on Learning Disabilities, RTI is an assessment and intervention process for systematically monitoring student academic progress and decision making (Buffum et.al., 2010; Johnson et al., 2006). This behavior management system was created to capture students before they fell behind, resulting in the need for a referral to special education services (Johnson et al., 2006). MTSS and RTI have been used interchangeably (Torgensen, 2007).

Secondary grades: Grades 6 through 12.

Texas School Counselor Evaluation and Support System. A framework developed by the Lone Star State School Counselor Association to evaluate and support school counselors in Texas.

Texas Senate Bill 179: A legislative mandate requiring school counselors in Texas public schools to spend 80% of their work time in direct contact with students (Texas Senate Bill 179, 2021). This bill is now known as Texas Education Code §33.005.

Understanding: An agreement of opinion or feeling of one's thoughts regarding comprehending roles, terms, and processes (Merriam-Webster, 2025d) in MTSS.

Theoretical Framework

By applying a sensemaking lens, I drew on phenomenological approaches to uncover how secondary campus leaders navigate ambiguity, reconcile expectations with practice, and collectively implement MTSS as a functioning, effective system within their schools. As discussed by Bertrand and Marsh (2015), sensemaking plays a crucial role in how educators interpret and implement data. The sensemaking framework was the foundation for exploring the role of counselors and administrators in interpreting MTSS and how they approach implementing MTSS on a secondary campus.

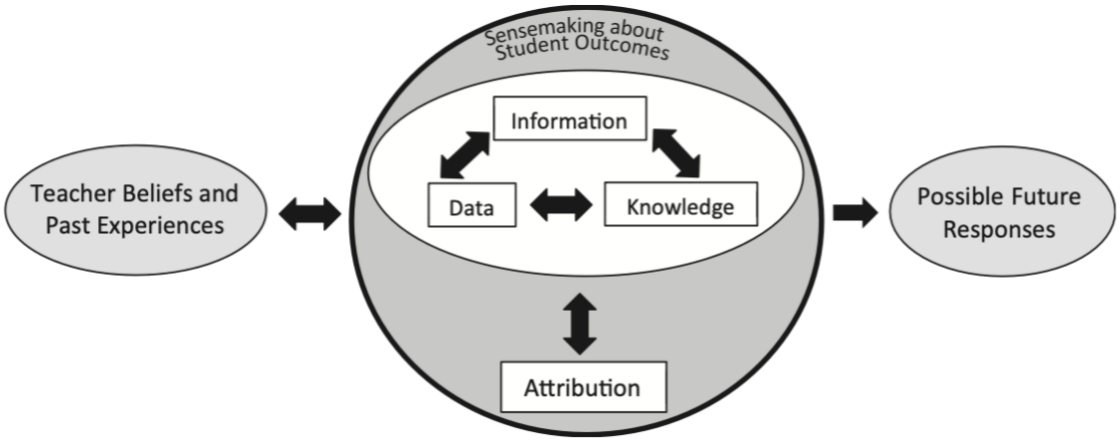
Sensemaking theory suggests that people partially construct their reality by creating meanings for their experiences (Bertrand & Marsh, 2015). In the context of MTSS, counselors and leaders rely on their understandings of student needs and district-wide policies to determine how to implement interventions at the secondary level. For example, if a principal views MTSS solely through an academic lens rather than a comprehensive understanding, they could emphasize academic supports such as tutoring and small-group interventions, but overlook behavioral and social-emotional supports. Similarly, counselors who lack training on MTSS may struggle to fully comprehend the tiered supports and how they impact their daily interactions with students and their assistance in implementing MTSS interventions across secondary campuses.

Beliefs and past experiences can influence future responses based on the idea that one step logically leads to another (see Figure 1; Marsh et al., 2006). Counseling leaders and administrators initially interpret MTSS through past experiences. They then analyze their prior

knowledge and combine that with new data and information to create an evolving understanding. Counselors' perceptions of the implementation process and their roles may not follow a linear rational thought process. The sensemaking lens acknowledges that counselors may use prior knowledge in non-normative ways to target students who should be identified for additional supports (Bertrand & Marsh, 2015).

Figure 1

Bertrand and Marsh's Sensemaking Theoretical Framework



Note. From "Teachers' Sensemaking of Data and Implications for Equity," by M. Bertrand & J. A. Marsh, 2015, *American Educational Research Journal*, *52*(5), 861–893. (https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831215599251)

Sensemaking can create inconsistencies in how student support is implemented. Bertrand and Marsh (2015) found that teachers' attributions of student performance often shape their instructional choices. In an MTSS framework, if counselors and administrators attribute student struggles to fixed behaviors such as socioeconomic backgrounds, rather than gaps in supports offered, less-proactive intervention strategies could be adopted. The unintentional adoption of an inappropriate intervention strategy reinforces the importance of district-wide training and less autonomy for campus implementation.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the intricacies of school counselors' understandings, experiences, and roles in leading or facilitating the MTSS process in a large suburban North Texas secondary setting. Grounded in the sensemaking framework, this study examined how prior experiences, perceptions, and understandings influence MTSS implementation efforts in a large suburban school district, specifically secondary campuses.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following questions:

1. What informs counselors' and leaders' understanding of MTSS?
2. How do counselors and leaders understand their roles, and the roles of other key personnel in the current MTSS implementation effort?
3. What do counselors and leaders identify as successes and challenges as related to the district-level implementation of MTSS?

Conclusion

Counselors have not always been seen as leaders in the secondary setting, unless they have a principal who understands the ASCA model. PBIS, RTI, and MTSS have been used interchangeably in academic settings. However, none exists without the other, and counselors play an important role as leaders in providing the appropriate support for students to succeed academically. Counseling leaders can implement supports for students and lead change in implementing MTSS with fidelity if campus and district leaders understand counselors' roles and how they support administrators, students, and families. Chapter Two presents a review of the literature on MTSS, counseling leadership, and the counselor's role in the MTSS process. Chapter Three describes the methodology for the study. Chapter Four then provides a summary

of the results, followed by Chapter Five, which includes a discussion of the findings, implications, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

MTSS offers a framework for educators to engage in data-based decision-making using instruction and intervention, social and emotional learning, and positive behavioral supports necessary to ensure positive outcomes for districts, schools, teachers, and students (Durrance, p. 1; Patrikakou et al., 2020; Ziomek-Daigle et al., 2016). Counseling leaders are tasked explicitly with navigating mandates to support all students within the comprehensive framework for school counseling programs (ASCA, 2019). Not only are they responsible for representing their offices as counseling leaders, but they are now expected to lead the MTSS process and guide stakeholders through this process to find supports for all students.

In this chapter, I present a review of literature focused on exploring secondary counseling leader roles, past and present, as well as their roles in the MTSS process. First, I provide background and history of the role of school counseling and the evolution to what we know today. Then, I present and critique the literature describing the intersections and tensions of MTSS and how they could successfully overlap. Within the research, I will discuss counseling leadership and how counseling leaders can use their (in)formal leadership roles to support all students. I conclude this chapter by providing my conceptual framework and connecting key literature concepts before addressing the case study design in Chapter Three.

The Evolution of the School Counselor Role

The school counselor's role in American educational systems has undergone a remarkable evolution shaped by societal needs, educational philosophies, and a deeper understanding or focus on supporting all students (Crim, 2023; Dodson, 2009; Lunenberg, 2010; Odeleye, 2012). From humble beginnings as academic advisors, school counselors have emerged as indispensable members of K–12 administrative teams. Counselors serve as advocates,

mentors, and mental health professionals within school communities to help close the achievement gap (Gysbers, 2001). This role evolution reflects a broader recognition of the multifaceted needs of students beyond academic achievement, encompassing their emotional, social, and personal development.

Vocational guidance was the beginning of the evolution of counseling in the 1900s. The goal of vocational counseling was to aid the economy as efficiently as possible due to the state of war (Gysbers, 2001; Wirth, 1983). Vocational needs drove the focus for counseling at the time. No organizational structures were provided, there were no lists of duties (ASCA, 2019), and administrators and teachers occupied counseling positions. Over time, school counseling began to change, shifting focus toward psychological issues requiring more emphasis on creating counseling positions (Picchioni, 1980).

As the vocational counselor advanced, the need for skills in testing and individual counseling emerged. The ability to work with systems and in a coordinating capacity created the structure for vocational counselors to become test coordinators on secondary campuses (Gysbers, 1990, 1992). Vocabulary such as *clinical*, *educational*, and *measurements* was used, with less attention focused on the industry of people and a more clinical approach taken toward student issues. This state was the beginning of an established position to provide guidance for students, including vocational and academic testing, for interpreting and proctoring and coordinating school-wide.

The mental hygiene movement was significant in vocational counseling. The work of mental hygienists in the 1920s focused on the intervention, prevention, and good mental health (Gysbers, 1990). This period led to the Psychometric Movement, which led to intelligence tests, clerical abilities, and a shift to focusing on individual students with a more clinical approach.

The term “educational guidance” was coined by Truman L. Kelly in 1914. By the late 1920s, several terms were used interchangeably to describe counselors’ roles, including vocational counselor, guidance, united guidance programs, educational guidance, organized guidance, and comprehensive guidance programs (Gysbers, 1990).

In the 1930s, pupil personnel services emerged as a new organizational structure, shifting responsibility from a general checklist of duties for administrators and teachers to a more defined set of tasks organized under guidance services (ASCA, n.d.; Ziomek-Daigle et al., 2016). The guidance services began a conversation about the word *counseling* in secondary schools in the 1940s. After World War II ended, the need for counseling services increased in schools. The Vocational Education Act of 1946 and the National Defense Education Act of 1958 were passed, and the ASCA was created in 1952 (ASCA, 2019). In 1960, school counselors were added to elementary campuses with the focus shifting to the social-emotional needs of students. The the National Defense Education Act in 1960 stimulated training practices that set elementary counseling apart from secondary school counseling.

Fast forward to the 21st century, and the idea of roles and functions in a school counseling program emerged to implement comprehensive counseling programs through the work of the Education Trust’s Transforming School Counseling Initiative (1997; see also Ruiz, 2015). The conversation for counseling programs continues to encompass whether counselors’ focus should be educational, vocational, social-emotional, or career-based (ASCA, 2019). All topics have proved important roles for secondary school counselors, making accountability the focal point for counseling services. With the work of secondary school programs implementing direct and indirect services in recent years, the conversation of allowing school counselors to facilitate the monitoring and implementation of MTSS has increased (Texas Education Agency

[TEA], n.d.). Districts have begun to recognize that all students need interventions and supports, and no student should fall through the cracks.

Tracing the historical trajectory of the school counselor unveils a journey marked by progressive shifts in focus from vocational guidance to holistic student support (ASCA, 2006; Ruiz, 2015). This evolution highlights the pivotal role counseling leaders play in nurturing the well-being and success of today's learners. The variety of words used to label, define, and describe personnel and guidance work caused a lot of confusion among stakeholders in the educational setting and the public (Steen et al., 2024). As a result, it is not surprising that there was and continues to be confusion among practitioners regarding their ability to implement guidance through a comprehensive counseling program (Durrance, 2023; Gysbers, 2001).

Roles and Responsibilities of Secondary School Counselors

High school counselors identify and coordinate resources for teachers, staff, parents, and other community members to promote all students' educational, career, personal, and social development. This task can include counselors presenting at PTA meetings and attending or running events for college nights or job fairs. The counselor's role in the community is imperative because the counselor is often the middleman for finding support for students, parents seeking to help their children, and teachers seeking to help their students succeed. The major goals of counseling are to promote personal growth and to prepare all students to become motivated workers and responsible citizens at various stages of growth and development (Lunenburg, 2010). The impact counselors can have on outside stakeholders can be very important, yet requires them to spend a lot of their time outside of work connecting in the community and with families. School counseling has different types of relevance to schools depending on the student population's needs (Herr, 2001).

As the world of education continues to shift, understanding leadership dimensions of school counselors' roles becomes essential for fostering a supportive learning environment (Ruiz, 2015). Counselors are expected to help all students with academic achievement strategies, managing emotions, and planning for postsecondary options (higher education, military, or workforce). The list of duties related to these responsibilities is seemingly endless. The responsibilities of school counselors are extensive and multifaceted. They include short-term counseling, referrals for long-term support, addressing issues such as substance abuse, suicide, eating disorders, and pregnancy, as well as ongoing collaboration with families, teachers, and administrators (ASCA 2018; Lunenburg, 2010). Still, most if not all counselor duties ought to fit within one of the four ASCA-delineated components of a comprehensive counseling program: guidance curriculum, individual planning, responsive services, and system support. An important role of school administrators is to ensure that school counselors have the resources and supports needed to provide high-quality programming in each component area (Mason, 2010).

Guidance

The guidance component of a comprehensive counseling program involves developing (or adopting) and implementing a curriculum to teach students to develop transferable skills for success. The counselor at the high school level is responsible for not only developing this curriculum but also implementing it, which is imperative and requires scheduling and additional time to work around the high school master schedule. Small student–counselor ratios may increase conversations with school counselors regarding college and post-secondary options (Danos, 2017). These lessons are delivered in the classroom through appropriate activities and lessons. Texas requires seven lessons annually, but finding the best way to instruct students on a

campus can be time-consuming and pose a problem for teachers as they feel it takes away their classroom time for content delivery.

According to the TEA (2015), the guidance curriculum is designed to help students develop basic life skills. The curriculum is intended to be the foundation of a developmental guidance program. At the secondary level, a lead counselor (department chair for counseling) in some districts oversees the implementation of these guidance lessons with the administration team. Texas requires lessons on seven topics as part of this program, ideally, small lessons for classroom-sized groups of students, requiring evaluation strategies by the counseling leaders.

1. Self-confidence development
2. Motivation to achieve
3. Decision-making, goal-setting, planning, and problem-solving skills
4. Interpersonal effectiveness
5. Communication skills
6. Cross-cultural effectiveness
7. Responsible behavior

While guidance lessons are created to help students assume responsibility for their decisions and grow in their ability to understand the results of their choices (Eremie, 2014; Lunenberg, 2010), the lessons also provide an opportunity for school counselors to get to know students' goals, aspirations, and abilities. These lessons can also help guide students in their postsecondary journeys. Data may be collected through guidance lessons to determine campus needs and how the district can better serve students. Administrators often use these data to determine needs on their respective campuses. However, data collection tasks can place an

additional burden on counselors to collect data while still trying to attend to student and staff needs.

Individual Planning

Individual planning is a tool used by counselors to assist students in making individual goals for their academic and career futures. Counselors are obligated to have discussions regarding college and career military readiness (CCMR) and conversations regarding schedules, test scores, college applications, and much more (Eremie, 2014; Natividad, 2010). These individual meetings can also include providing parents and guardians with information on postsecondary education. Individual counseling at the secondary level includes social support, educational support, and career planning. Administration must be responsive to state-mandated CCMR score standards, and relying on school counselors to help raise these numbers precludes counselors from doing the work they need to do (ASCA, 2006).

Counselors identify and coordinate resources and activities that indirectly benefit students, including accessing data to support an effective school counseling program. This data pull occurs by accessing College Coard for AP and PSAT scores. Counselors also utilize data to help determine the need for additional testing or academic support in admission, review, and dismissal (ARD) and 504 meetings (ASCA, 2006; Seminerio, 2023). A majority of secondary counselors' job is to complete schedules for students to attend classes, which essentially helps build the foundation of the master schedule for the campus. The students' course selections determine staffing for the upcoming school year, impacting administration regarding funding and course offerings, which affect state CCMR accountability.

Most counselors complete individual planning with students in a 1:1 setting, as discussing college and postsecondary plans with students can require a lot of time, attention, and

discretion (TEA, 2019). This planning may also include conversations with parents/families and additional stakeholders in the student's life, uploading college letters of recommendation, and even auditing transcripts to ensure students have the correct credits for graduation or admission into their next school of choice.

Counselors are also able to help teachers and staff administer and interpret tests. Texas Education Code §33.005, often referred to as SB 179 (the legislation that gave rise to the Code amendment), effective September 2021, states that counselors shall design programs to include the four components of a comprehensive guidance program and that testing should not and cannot be expected of counselors. The interpretation of test data is still expected from counseling leaders as they focus the conversation on individual planning with students. However, organizing, planning, and proctoring testing is no longer an option for Texas counselors. Some districts have yet to transition to this mandate and still require counselors to organize and proctor standardized tests, which becomes a greater conflict in mandating counselors' use of time.

Responsive Services

Responsive services could occupy most of a secondary counselor's time on campus on any given day. The counselor's role is to intervene for students whose circumstances put their educational, career, personal, and social development at risk (ASCA, 2019). Students who are in crisis can include a variety of situations, such as suicidal ideation, suicidal attempts, cutting, homelessness, and food shortage.

Any tasks within the responsive services space are typically reactionary on the counselor's part. Informed of a new student situation for a student, the counselor is then involved in investigating and collecting data, as well as finding a way to support the student and family in need (Dodson, 2009). Administrators rely heavily on counselor expertise in this component, as

counselors receive training on social-emotional and crisis support through graduate work and continuing education. Counselors are responsible for documenting any situations that arise, so the district and state can provide support as needed. This paperwork can be very tedious and require the support of administrators and the collaborative effort of other team members in the counseling office to find the best solution (Wise et al., 2012).

While most of a counselor's daily job is reactionary, their role is intended to be proactive and more inclusive. The conversation regarding how counselors can support their administrative colleagues is pertinent to understand the best ways to remain proactive while also handling the job at hand, which is serving all students through coordination. Coordination activities typically consist of indirect services and activities that are designed to help individual students establish personal goals (ASCA, 2005; Myrick, 1993; Ruiz, 2015)

Paradoxically, while school counselors are dedicated to promoting student well-being, they often fail to prioritize their own self-care (Barnett et al., 2007). As Posluns and Gall (2020) explain, self-care tends to fall to the bottom of their to-do lists, which can lead to significant negative outcomes, including burnout, compassion fatigue, and vicarious trauma. This ongoing neglect not only affects their personal health but also undermines the quality of care they provide. and self-care is typically deferred to the end of a to-do list of the practitioners (Posluns & Gall, 2020). This ongoing neglect not only affects their personal health but also undermines the quality of care they provide. As Guy (2020) asserts, self-care is not a luxury, it is a professional, ethical, and clinical necessity. Self-care is a fundamental part of the helping profession, a human need, a clinical requirement, and an ethical responsibility rather than a luxury (Guy, 2000). The counseling profession has become highly vetted and, for many years, required at least 2 years in the classroom before transitioning to the secondary counselor role. In

recent years, updated requirements allow direct hiring as a counselor (with no teaching experience) if districts have approved this change per the state. Bettney (2017) identified the work-related issues of large caseloads and negative team environments as being additional stressors for those providing mental health services.

System Support

System support is considered the most indirect service for counselors. Indirect student support systems include teacher consultations and implementing relevant research-based standards for counseling offices (TEA, 2020). Counselors can also support parents through parent education programs and community relations efforts. Assessments are utilized in this component to help counselors determine program development and management. System support works within the system, including determining staff development for counselors and implementing statewide guidance activities (TEA, 2015).

School counseling leaders play a pivotal role in ensuring that school counseling programs not only meet but exceed expectations in providing comprehensive services that address the diverse needs of all students. Emphasizing guidance, responsive services, individual planning, and system support, counseling leaders are at the forefront of promoting students' well-being and academic success (ASCA, 2019). As demands for accountability in school counseling intensify, it becomes increasingly crucial for leaders to demonstrate the tangible impact of their programs on student outcomes, thereby solidifying the indispensable role of school counseling in fostering a supportive and inclusive educational environment. State and national standards continue to guide accountability for counseling programs to help make sure that all students have appropriate access to support (Lunenberg, 2010).

State and National Standards

There are four comprehensive components of a comprehensive school counseling program. Each level has unique layers, specifically at the secondary level, that involve supporting the whole student. Counselors are tasked with meeting the needs of all students, although how these duties are divided among counselors at a campus may vary. High school counselors do not work in isolation but are integral to the entire educational program (ASCA, 2019). The ASCA-recommended caseload is 250:1, but counselors are given larger caseloads due to financial restrictions and assignments per district. Educational leaders and policymakers clear insight into how varying counselor-to-student ratios influence both the scope of school counselors' responsibilities and their effectiveness in supporting student success (Goodman-Scott et al., 2018). Before 2023, no researchers had reviewed Texas school counseling programs' impact on student achievement. The TEA, the National Center for Education Statistics, the Stanford Education Data Archive, and the U.S. Census Bureau (Knight, 2023) found that lower school counselor ratios are significantly associated with higher student achievement, lower dropout rates, and higher graduation rates. Knight (2023) also found that low-income students and students of color have inequitable access to schools with low counselor ratios. These findings have important implications for school leaders and researchers (Brown et al., 2023).

The research found not only that smaller ratios (e.g., 250:1) are beneficial for students, but that "hiring an additional counselor will increase high school graduation and four-year college attendance" (Bryan et al., 2022, p. 41). The researchers found that when school counselor ratios were 250:1 or less, school counselors could make more contact points with students, resulting in counseling efficiency, improved test scores, and increased and enhanced college application rates and financial aid assistance. The collegiate advisory component of school

counseling is a quarter of the duties. However, with secondary schools in Texas having an average of 335:1 (EdTrust, 2019), hiring counseling leaders is a less-than-ideal position for staffing.

Counseling Responsibilities

Secondary school counselors play a multifaceted role in supporting their students' academic, career, and social-emotional development. Although secondary school counselors are trained to engage in brief counseling sessions with students, they are often faced with providing students with long-term support (Eremie, 2014). This long-term support may occur via individual counseling or more frequent visits and check-ins with students in crisis. When referrals are imminent, counselors must collaborate with families, teachers, administrators, and community members for student success. Referrals occur via individual education plan meetings, 504 meetings, or student support team (SST) meetings that can lead to additional support for students in their classwork. Counselors' other responsibilities include a range of activities and interventions to foster student success and well-being through their comprehensive counseling programs (Eremie, 2014). The following sections present the appropriate counseling responsibilities according to ASCA.

Academic Counseling

Counselors provide course planning for students and assist them with selecting appropriate courses based on their academic strengths, future goals, and interests (The Education Trust, n.d.). While conducting these meetings individually or through guidance lessons, counselors should provide resources to help students improve their study skills, time management, and academic performance. This support is Tier 1 because it is an expectation to provide for all students. Within the academic realm, counselors constantly support at-risk

students (Ruiz, 2015), working closely with those struggling academically by monitoring their grades and assessments to develop intervention plans and connect students with the appropriate support services.

Career Counseling

Secondary counselors have historically provided vocational assistance to their students, exploring career options, identifying interests and strengths, and understanding career pathways and educational requirements to meet CCMR standards (ASCA, 2005; Natividad, 2010). This task includes assisting students in researching colleges, preparing for standardized tests (e.g., ACT, SAT, and PSAT), and navigating the college application process. Navigating the college process may include writing letters of recommendation, providing guidance on writing college essays, and facilitating college application completion. Writing and preparing college applications is time-consuming. Work-based learning is also facilitated by counselors who create opportunities for students needing internships, job shadowing, or other work-based learning experiences.

Personal Counseling/Advocacy

Secondary counseling leaders provide confidential support to students dealing with personal issues, social challenges, family problems, or mental health concerns. These concerns are often unplanned and can consume a counselor's school day, among other tasks that must be completed (Lunenberg, 2010). Although counselors are equipped to triage incidents, their goal is to provide support and connect students and families with other wrap-around services. Because counselors are familiar faces on campus, students find comfort in working with their school counselor as a trusted adult. Therefore, they visit their counselor consistently to check in and continue managing results.

Some counseling programs also provide group counseling as a Tier 2 intervention. Counselors can facilitate small-group sessions focused on topics identified by campus stakeholders, including grief, stress management, and peer relationships. This Tier 2 crisis intervention is one that counselors are trained to respond to within the school community. School counselors are then trained to facilitate supports and coordinate outside sources necessary to help navigate the aftermath of a crisis.

Counselors also advocate for students' academic and emotional needs within the school system to ensure they have the appropriate resources and accommodations. Counselors represent students in ARD meetings for special education students and 504 meetings to ensure the teachers, administrators, parents/guardians, and other stakeholders have a supportive, inclusive school environment. Counselors can facilitate these meetings by assisting students transitioning from middle school to high school or from high school to postsecondary careers. Counselors wear several hats and learn to manage and navigate all these tasks while managing all students on their caseloads.

Leadership

Counselors are expected to complete data analysis to identify student trending issues and determine students' needs and challenges. The goal is to act as systems change agents for students. All counselors' (Grades K–12) goals should be to make their students' learning opportunities equitable and accessible. This task is often viewed as a goal for school leaders, but counselors are often burdened with extra duties that deter them from doing their jobs as needed. The idea of leading student meetings and advocating for students has become a familiar role for counselors.

Research on school counselor leadership emphasizes the importance of counselors taking initiative to inform others about their responsibilities while also engaging in leadership roles and development opportunities (Mason, 2010). Mobilizing, creating, and impacting change is considered a key skill set in educational settings. Counselors may serve on committees, lead school improvement initiatives and student wellness initiatives, and promote academic achievement. Leadership is a skill set possessed by school counselors in educational settings.

Multitiered Systems of Support: Addressing Student Needs

Navigating MTSS implementation in secondary schools presents several significant challenges to ensure its effectiveness. Interest in MTSS as a process for school system reform is gaining momentum nationwide (Dulaney et al., 2013; Torgensen, 2007). First, the complexity of secondary education systems with diverse student populations and varying academic and behavioral needs can pose a challenge in tailoring interventions that meet the specific needs of all students. Second, the coordination and collaboration required among multiple stakeholders, including administrators, counselors, teachers, and other wrap-around services, can be difficult to achieve consistently across all tiers of support. Quick literature reviews reveal that most current resources pertain to elementary implementation (Brundage et al., 2016; Durrance, 2023).

The resource constraints often faced by secondary schools, such as limited time and personnel funding, can hinder the full implementation of MTSS practices. Confusion regarding roles in facilitating the MTSS process also contributes to the hindrance of implementing support for all students (Durrance, 2023; Ziomek-Daigle et al., 2016). Staff may have multiple responsibilities and a lack of time to address student difficulties systematically. The need for ongoing professional development to equip educators with the necessary skills and knowledge to implement MTSS effectively is crucial. However, implementation can also be a logistical

challenge in large districts serving multiple campuses that operate as individual entities. Aligning MTSS with existing school structures and initiatives, such as comprehensive school counseling programs, and understanding the roles of RTI and PBIS, requires careful planning and coordination and understanding by all stakeholders to avoid duplicating efforts and ensure seamless implementation.

Once stakeholders, specifically counseling leaders for this paper, understand the purpose, facilitating the how would allow stakeholders to commit and adapt effective MTSS practices schoolwide. Logistical and instructional challenges create barriers for secondary counselors to navigate, including finding space for intervention groups to meet, creating an MTSS team structure, lack of curriculum programs designed for small group instruction, and a lack of teacher training in understanding the MTSS process. The biggest barrier to secondary MTSS is a confused or unclear purpose (Daye, 2019; Jimerson et al., 2016).

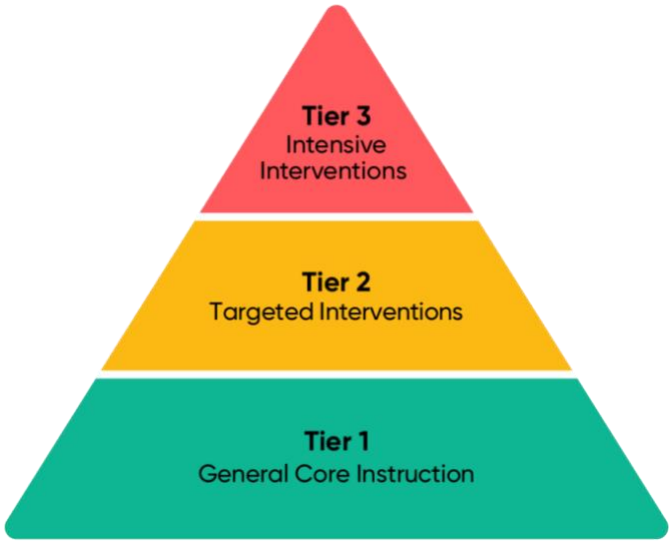
What Are Multitiered Systems of Support?

The fundamental structure of MTSS integrates PBIS and RTI into a comprehensive, schoolwide, three-tiered framework designed to deliver academic, behavioral, and social supports to all students based on their needs (Sugai & Horner, 2009, 2012; Ziomek-Daigle et al., 2016). This approach is a continuum of prevention: Tier 1 (primary), Tier 2 (secondary), and Tier 3 (tertiary). A successful MTSS model is built upon a strong foundation (in Tier 1 supports), typically provided within the general education setting and focused on prevention, early identification, and implementation of referral services (Seminerio, 2023). RTI and PBIS approaches involve targeting specific areas in which students are struggling and applying research-based interventions until the barriers to learning are addressed or removed (Bender, 2009), which makes MTSS a comprehensive framework that allows several frameworks to work

together. Within this framework are the tiers that work together as a continuum of academic and behavioral support designed to provide additional support to learners.

Figure 2

Multitiered System of Supports Tiered Support Model



Note. Adapted from *What is a Multi Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) in Education?* by HMH Staff, 2022, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Tier 1

In Tier 1 intervention, all students receive academic and behavioral support. Systems should be aligned throughout the school, ensuring that all students receive high-quality instruction by using differentiation in the general education classroom (Knoff, 2018; Mitchell et al., 2011; Seminerio, 2023). The expectation is to provide prevention and intervention structured for students in all classrooms who struggle academically and behaviorally. Structured intervention may entail having student expectations listed in hallways and classrooms, and consistent verbiage in reteaching appropriate behaviors (Mitchell et al., 2011; Seminerio, 2023). These interventions are often called PBIS in both primary and secondary campuses.

Strong implementation of Tier 1 supports can help minimize behavioral issues at the secondary level (Marlowe, 2021; Sugai & Simonsen, 2012). PBIS has been a common term at the primary level, but secondary campuses often underuse PBIS due to believing secondary students are not as in need of reiteration of expectations as their elementary peers. This tier is considered core instruction and reflects the idea that all students can learn when teachers differentiate instruction to enhance learning (Durrance, 2023).

School counselors offer services that include evidence-based core curriculum lessons aligned with MTSS goals and objectives (Nese et al., 2014). These services could include the Texas state-mandated guidance lessons required by all counseling programs (LSCCA, n.d.). School data can be utilized to determine additional guidance lessons needed on campuses. However, the main idea of MTSS is to equip teachers and students with the tools needed to help level the playing field for all students.

The use of MTSS offers campuses opportunities to help students find academic success. School leaders are tasked with providing structures for students school-wide to level the playing field. This idea stemmed from PBIS, in which educators provide opportunities for early intervention, quality instruction, and data-driven decisions for all students. This framework was designed to close the achievement gap between low socioeconomic status students and their more advantaged peers. This program impacted teaching and learning and focused on ensuring that states and schools boost their performance with special populations. NCLB also requires that hired teachers be “highly qualified,” which generally meant having a bachelor’s degree in the subject they are teaching and state certification (Sugai & Simonsen, 2012).

Although NCLB helped close the achievement gap with underrepresented students through annual testing, the need to support all students outside the classroom had not been

addressed. NCLB remained a reactionary response to supporting students. MTSS is a proactive and preventative framework integrating data and instruction to maximize student achievement and support students' social, emotional, and behavioral needs (Brundage et al., 2016; Callender, 2014).

Navigating MTSS implementation in secondary schools presents several significant challenges to ensure its effectiveness. First, the complexity of secondary education systems with diverse student populations and varying academic and behavioral needs can pose a challenge in tailoring interventions that meet the specific needs of all students. Second, the coordination and collaboration required among multiple stakeholders, including administrators, counselors, teachers, and other wraparound services, can be difficult to achieve consistently across all tiers of support. Most current resources pertain to elementary implementation (Brundage et al., 2016; Durrance, 2023).

Secondary counselors act as support systems in Tier 1 instruction, with all accommodations implemented school-wide. Grade-level teachers are expected to provide appropriate supports (see Table 1) for students in general classroom settings. Whereas teachers are responsible for implementing schoolwide support for all students, counselors are responsible for monitoring attendance records as a Tier 1 intervention, pending their goal for the ASCA comprehensive data, or grade feedback to prevent students from losing credit each quarter. This review can support the RTI process, and counselors can lead the charge on this initiative as it supports both students and teachers while solidifying their data tracking for indirect services with students.

Facilitation for PBIS is a Tier 1 construct that falls into the counselor realm, which aligns with the idea that counselors can help facilitate and monitor behavioral interventions without

having to provide consequences to students. Behavior data collected from counselors can be anecdotal or through discipline referral dissemination (Donohue et al., 2016). School counselors can present results reports to admin teams and designated PBIS teams to report to the whole staff to make sure staff members are aware of the school climate and help create a climate that uses the same vocabulary and has consistent expectations campus-wide.

Table 1

Guilford Public Schools Pyramid of Instruction, Accommodations, and Intervention – Tier 1

Academic	Behavioral
• Strategic seating • Guided study hall (MS/HS) • Orientation to lab/equipment • Extended time/wait time • Scaffolding • Small group instruction • Flexible grouping • Writers' workshops • Technology integration • Parent communications • Individual feedback • Check/monitor work in progress • Monitor academic performance • File/record review • Differentiated instructional practices • Student choice • Principles of learning • Alternate assignments/assessments • Homework/assessment accommodations • Use of calculator • Use of facts tables/formula charts • Use of rubrics	• Team-building activities • Clear classroom/school expectations • Behavior management strategies • Discipline policy enforcement • Character education lessons • Parent/guardian communication • Teacher–student conferences • After-school clubs/activities • Monitor absences/attendance/discipline log • Planned ignoring (extinction) • File/record review • Minimize transition time • Post daily/weekly schedules (ES/MS) • Organization strategies • Recognition rituals • Positive feedback • Strategic seating

Note. From *Scientific Research-Based Interventions (SRBI) Handbook*, n.d., by Guilford Public Schools. (https://www.guilfordps.org/SRBI_Handbook/)

Tier 2 Supports

Tier 2 interventions are created when students are identified through different sources as needing additional supports. These identifiers include GPA, end-of-course exam performance,

attendance data, and disciplinary referrals (Callender, 2014; Durrance, 2023). Tier 2 supports are delivered with fidelity at an appropriate duration and frequency to ensure students have increased opportunities for practice and corrective feedback (Center on MTSS, 2021). These supports are prioritized for 15–20% of a school's population and occur in collaboration with Tier 1 programming (Callender, 2014; Durrance, 2023). The increase and repetition of practice and feedback are essential for providing specific and curated monitoring for students in need.

Tier 2 can include academic (e.g., RTI) and behavioral (e.g., PBIS) student interventions. Table 2 presents potential Tier 2 accommodations at the secondary level. These interventions are meant to be supplemental, as Tier 1 interventions should continue school-wide to support students. Counseling leaders can work with administrators and teachers to monitor progress for students receiving Tier 2 interventions. More often than not, counselors are used to encourage students to partake in the RTI (academic) interventions as role supporters. Counselors can initiate the process to create a student support plan (SSP) with the SST to facilitate individual or small group accommodations and connect all wrap-around services as needed (Cressey et al., 2014; Goodman-Scott, 2014).

Table 2

Guilford Public Schools Pyramid of Instruction, Accommodations, and Intervention – Tier 2

Academic	Behavioral
• Before-/after-school tutoring	• Conduct observations
• Push-in supports	• Individual conferences
• Multisensory reading instruction	• Early/late class dismissal (MS/HS)
• Homework/organization club	• Participation in mentoring program
• Academic labs (HS)	• Lunch groups
• Assistive technology	• Consult related services staff/specialists
• Peer tutor	• Use of hot pass (MS/HS)
• Flexible schedule	• Collaboration with outside agencies
• Books on tape, CD, Web-based	• Home visits
• Schedule/class change	• Behavior contracts
• Title 1 summer programming (ES)	

Academic	Behavioral
• Schedule a co-teaching environment	

Note. From *Scientific Research-Based Interventions (SRBI) Handbook*, n.d., by Guilford Public Schools. (https://www.guilfordps.org/SRBI_Handbook/)

Understanding school counselors' roles is imperative in students' social development and learning regarding early interventions, as well as in identifying students needing these Tier 2 interventions. This information aligns with the ASCA model of comprehensive school counseling programs and shows the overlap between MTSS and the *ASCA National Model* (ASCA, 2019).

Tier 3 Supports

Tier 3 interventions are a way to target highly disruptive behaviors or to address the needs of students who have significant academic deficits. These students are relatively few, and interventions are personalized intensive supports for students with significant challenges. This third tier is for students with disabilities, an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), or extreme attendance deficits or behaviors (Martins, 2024).

Decisions at this level are data-driven and include conversations with wrap-around services needed to support this small population needing individual services. Martins (2024) described the three phases of Tier 3 interventions:

1. Data collection: All decisions are made after reviewing assessments and data from teachers, parents, counselors, and anyone who supports the student academically or behaviorally.
2. Individualized strategies: Educators and intervention specialists collaborate to create unique plans that work for students individually, hence the term IEP. IEPs are created by a 504 or ARD committee with a team of individuals put together to support the student.

3. Progress monitoring: Progress monitoring information is maintained through the SST, which helps the team adapt their supports and interventions accordingly.

School counselors can be leaders and facilitators in the MTSS process (Cressey et al., 2014; Goodman-Scott, 2014; Goodman-Scott et al., 2016). It is recommended that counseling leaders facilitate MTSS, as the duties involved with facilitating this process can be woven into the comprehensive school counseling program (ASCA, n.d.). Counselors can transition between supporter and facilitator in Tier 3 supports due to the collaboration of their implementation. Table 3 shows examples of Tier 3 interventions.

Table 3

Guilford Public Schools Pyramid of Instruction, Accommodations, and Intervention – Tier 3

Academic	Behavioral
• Pull-out supports • Supplemental reading/math • More intensive schedule/class change	• Functional behavior assessments • Behavior improvement plans (BIP)

Note. From *Scientific Research-Based Interventions (SRBI) Handbook*, n.d., by Guilford Public Schools. (https://www.guilfordps.org/SRBI_Handbook/)

The Counselor's Involvement in Multitiered Systems of Support

Counselors can play a vital role in the MTSS processes when given the opportunity. The ability to contribute their expertise in various ways to support student success across academic, behavioral, and social-emotional domains is vast (McMahon et al., 2014; Patrikakou et al., 2020). Counselor involvement varies across campuses, and facilitating MTSS appears in several ways. RTI allows counselors to support students on the academic side of the educational system. PBIS data are visible to counselors to determine what supports students need and facilitate the meetings and the wrap-around services needed to maintain the interventions.

Counselors often participate in the initial phases of MTSS by administering or coordinating universal screening assessments. These assessments begin when teachers or

administrators identify students who may need additional support or interventions at different tiers of MTSS. Counselors then collaborate with other members of the MTSS team to analyze screening and other student performance data, contributing to the understanding of students' social-emotional needs. Counselors also deliver interventions based on feedback provided by teachers and other school personnel to ensure effective implementation.

Counselors play a key role in monitoring the progress of students receiving interventions. Collecting and analyzing progress monitoring data and communicating with teachers and parent/guardians allows counselors to connect with all stakeholders in supporting students' progress. Monitoring also applies to collecting mandatory data for the comprehensive counseling programs expected in some districts.

Counselors collaborate closely with teachers, administrators, support staff, and parents/guardians to ensure a coordinated approach to student support within MTSS. They can bring all stakeholders together and consult on effective strategies for supporting students' social-emotional well-being and academic success. Secondary counselors assist in students' transition between different tiers of MTSS and from intervention programs back to the general education setting. Counselors provide ongoing support and follow-up to ensure that students continue to succeed after interventions.

Counseling Leadership

District leaders are important facilitators in helping school counselors guide and create comprehensive counseling programs at the campus level. Understanding the impact of a strong counseling program in supporting all students is imperative for district leadership. Facilitation begins with understanding MTSS and its power to change a campus climate, and providing resources for counselors to successfully support and facilitate all stakeholders impacted by the

power of MTSS. Many administrators visualize school counseling as a support service without a clear purpose or a clearly defined view of the school's counselor role (Amatea & Clark, 2005; Perera-Diltz, 2000). This oversight can cause significant conflict in leading counselors from the district and campus lens.

Counselor Leadership: The District Versus Campus Context

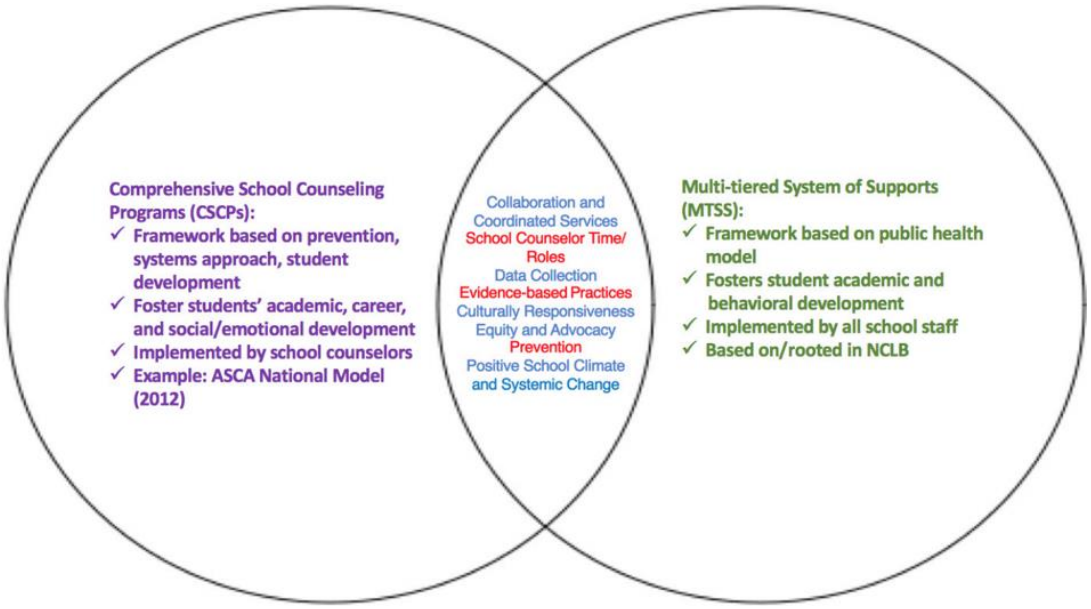
School counseling leaders have begun to recognize the power of MTSS to promote culturally relevant and fair practices in three of the ASCA domains (personal, social-emotional, and career; (Betters-Bubon et al., 2016; Goodman-Scott et al., 2016; Patrikakou et al., 2020).

Leading and Facilitating the MTSS Process

Overlap and similarities between MTSS support systems and comprehensive school counseling programs exist between the two frameworks (ASCA, 2012; Goodman-Scott, 2014; Ziomek-Daigle et al., 2016). School counselors align their work with MTSS to improve student achievement and behaviors. Although the information in Table 3 overlaps, little research exists on implementation with fidelity in secondary programs.

Figure 3

Overlapping Interconnectedness of Multitiered System of Supports and School Counseling Programs



Note. Adapted from "Integrating a Multitiered System of Supports With Comprehensive School Counseling Programs," by J. Ziomek-Daigle et al., E. Goodman-Scott, J. Cavin, & P. Donohue, 2016, *The Professional Counselor*, *6*(3), 220–232. (https://doi.org/10.15241/jzd.6.3.220)

The greatest similarities between MTSS and comprehensive school counseling programs are the abilities to collaborate, coordinate services, and collect and review student data for school-wide change (see Figure 3). The tiered approaches allowed counseling leaders to advocate for students, as well as progress monitoring data, which helps counselors document their direct and indirect hours with students.

The Challenge of (In)formal Leadership

Informal leadership among secondary school counseling leaders presents a unique challenge characterized by nuances and understated impact. Unlike formal leadership roles with designated authority, informal leadership emerges through influence, relationships, and expertise acknowledged by support staff, making it challenging to navigate effectively and efficiently

(ASCA, n.d.; Ruiz, 2015). One of the primary challenges of informal leadership lies in the smaller avenues of influence. Counselors possess specialized knowledge in building trust and credibility among colleagues, administrators, and stakeholders. However, establishing this influence requires time, consistent demonstration of expertise, and effective communication skills to persuade teachers and students on their campus of the value they bring to all students' educational outcomes.

The nature of informal leadership is ambiguous, depending on the school culture, administrative support, and the receptiveness of peers (Goodman-Scott et al., 2014, 2016). Counselors must navigate these dynamics delicately, balancing advocacy for student needs while collaborating with staff and administrators and respecting the hierarchies and decision-making processes of the administrative team. Unlike formal leadership positions with clear roles and responsibilities, counselors in informal leadership roles may find their efforts overlooked or undervalued despite their impact on student success (Cressey et al., 2014). The lack of peer recognition can hinder counselors' ability to effect systemic change and advocate effectively for necessary resources and support. This lack of resources or support can be demanding with the daily responsibilities of counseling.

Counselors must manage their time and energy effectively to engage with students, collaborate with staff, and advocate for all stakeholders while directly supporting students in need (ASCA, 2022). Through the secondary counseling leadership lens, informal leadership offers opportunities to influence student outcomes and school culture positively. However, the lens also presents challenges regarding visibility, recognition, and navigating complex interpersonal dynamics (Shepard, 2013). Addressing these challenges requires counselors to leverage their expertise strategically, cultivate relationships built on trust and respect, and

advocate persistently for the resources and support necessary to foster holistic student development within the secondary educational setting.

Conclusion

Secondary counselors play a crucial role within MTSS, contributing significantly to students' academic, social-emotional, and behavioral success. Their involvement spans various tiers, from universal interventions promoting a positive school climate to targeted interventions addressing specific student needs. As highlighted throughout this chapter, counselors' expertise in assessment, collaboration with stakeholders, and implementation of evidence-based practices are fundamental in fostering a supportive learning environment. Chapter Three will present the research methods employed to investigate the understanding of secondary counselors' roles in implementing the MTSS process at secondary campuses.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the intricacies of school counselors' understandings, experiences, and roles in leading or facilitating the MTSS process in a large suburban North Texas secondary setting. This study analyzed counseling leaders' and administrators' experiences, understanding, and perceptions of their roles in the MTSS process. Additionally, the study examined leadership practices using a sensemaking framework. Three overarching questions guided this study:

1. What informs counselors' and leaders' understanding of MTSS?
2. How do counselors and leaders understand their roles and the roles of other key personnel in the current implementation effort?
3. What do counselors and leaders identify as successes and challenges as related to the district-level implementation?

In this chapter, I describe the research design and the study context. Then I outline the methods used in the study, including the following components: study participants, data collection, and data analysis. I will also discuss research bias and assumptions, validity and reliability, and study limitations.

Design of Study

This research was a phenomenological qualitative study utilizing a sensemaking lens. A phenomenological study explores how people describe and experience a phenomenon (in this case, MTSS) through their senses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Phenomenology focuses on an individual's first-person account of experiences with a bounded concept or event. Sensemaking theory suggests that people partially construct their reality by creating meanings for their experiences (Bertrand & Marsh, 2015).

Throughout this study, I sought to describe, understand, and interpret the experiences and perceptions of counselors and administrators' roles in the MTSS process. Merriam (2009) defined phenomenology as a "study of a people's conscious experience of their life-world" (p.25). The case was bounded to participants in a single school district, and I utilized an interview protocol to collect data from secondary administrators in a single ISD. Yin (2014) identified an emphasis on systems and procedures for generating reliable findings and valid interpretations. This study emphasized the implied systems and experiences of counseling leaders, campus leaders (principals), and district leadership as they navigate who owned the MTSS implementation and processes on secondary campuses. The phenomenon in this study was the lived experiences of secondary counselors and campus and district administrators.

Qualitative research is an approach to understanding the craft, marked by the challenge of doing original research and pursuing three important objectives: transparency, methods, and adherence to evidence (Yin, 2016). The researcher can have social interactions with minimal intrusion and will not be limited to responding to pre-established questionnaires (Yin, 2011, 2016). As the primary instrument of this study, I conducted interviews and analyzed the data using codes. The interviews were used to collect data from counseling leaders, principals, and district leadership to understand their living experiences as they navigated the MTSS process.

The rationale for this design was the understanding that research is a systematic process by which researchers know more about something than before engaging in the process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I collected data through interviews and analyzed them to contribute to the knowledge base in the field of education.

Study Context

This study focused on secondary counselors, principals, and district administrators in a district that serves between 40,000 and 60,000 students; the district, therefore, served to bound the case study. I used only the 24 secondary campuses in this district. Secondary schools in the district encompass 6th–12th-graders in various grade configurations. Approximately 159 full-time counselors are on staff, and each secondary campus averages four counselors or more.

All participants worked in middle or high schools (Grades 6–12), which allowed me to look at the experiences of educators working with the same population. Counselors with elementary experience or Secondary students transition to multiple classes each day and have a different experience with utilizing supports than elementary students who may only see one or two teachers per day.

Based on my lived experience as a former counselor in this district, there is still uncertainty around what the MTSS framework is and how it should be implemented at the secondary level while also trying to determine the appropriate role of stakeholders (counselors, principals, central office leaders) and what that looks like. There seemed to be autonomy on each campus to determine how individual campuses could utilize counselors and administrators in the MTSS process. However, there was district-level confusion when determining the best way to support students. I reviewed this topic by asking about the challenges and successes in the MTSS implementation process for each campus.

Participants

I used purposeful sampling (Yin, 2011) to gain insight into counseling leaders' and administrators' (campus- and district-level) varied experiences of MTSS implementation. The participants were placed in two groups to gain insight into counselors' and administrators' varied

experiences of the MTSS process. School counselors and administrators needed valid State Board of Education certification and to be currently working in their role. Participants were selected from various secondary schools in the same district using their front-facing district contact information. The participants were Grades 6–12 school counselors and administrators.

Nonprobability sampling allows the investigator to generalize study results from the sample to the population (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This approach is also known as purposeful sampling (Patton, 2015). Table 4 presents the criteria for selecting participants. I used purposeful sampling to secure nine participants, and I began by pulling counselor and administrator names from the public-facing district website.

Table 4

Participant Criteria

Participant groups	Criteria for participants		
Counseling leaders	Secondary school counselors of Grades 6–12	Held current position at least 2 academic years	Each counselor participant came from the same district
Administrators	Secondary principals or APs, or district-level support administrators of Grades 6–12	Held current position for at least 2 years	Each administrative participant came from the same district

I emailed potential candidates using their public-facing school email addresses, and participants self-selected after reading the required criteria shared. Four secondary counselors and five secondary administrators responded via email. Each participant was currently employed at a secondary campus in the same district, ensuring that the participants all worked with students in Grades 6–12. All participants had been in their current position for at least 2 school years, and they had only secondary experience. Each group represented counselors, principals, or district-level administrators in the same district to gain the broadest perspectives.

Participant Descriptions

The sample included four counselors and five administrators. The counseling participants came from different campuses with varying student demographics. Of the four counseling participants, one represented middle schools (Grades 6–8), and the other three represented high schools (Grades 9–12). The middle school counselor had worked in a middle school setting her entire career. Two high school counselors started their careers in middle school and moved to high schools in the last 3 years. All counseling participants were female and had educational work experience outside of their current district, but all had worked in this district for the last 2 years.

Of the five administrators interviewed, one was from the district level, and the other four worked on high school campuses. Three of the interviewees were female, and two were male. Three administrators had special education backgrounds, which I learned during interviews to determine their knowledge of transitioning students from Tier 2 to Tier 3 interventions. Tables 5 and 6 show the basic demographic information of the counselor and administrative participants, respectively.

Table 5

Counseling Participant Information

	Pseudonym	School level	Years in current role
Counselor 1	Nancy	Middle school	26
Counselor 2	Jessica	High school	12
Counselor 3	Candace	High school	3
Counselor 4	Staci	High school	19

Table 6

Administrative Participant Information

	Pseudonym	Special education background	Years in current role
Administrator 1	Krystal	No	5–9 years
Administrator 2	Monica	Yes	15–19 years
Administrator 3	Melissa	No	20+ years
Administrator 4	Tony	Yes	5–9 years
Administrator 5	Robert	No	Less than 5

Data Collection

Data collection occurred in two phases: pilot interviews and counselor and administrative interviews. I ran a parallel phase of document review concurrently with the study phases. Interviews ranged in type from highly structured to unstructured. Unstructured interviews consist of open-ended questions, and the interview flows more like a conversation (Yin, 2016). The interview data collected in this study came from one-on-one semistructured interviews. Semistructured interviews are purposeful conversations to learn something specific that cannot be observed (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Interview Protocol

I conducted interviews in two phases. Phase 1 was a means to ensure interview questions were appropriate and aligned with the purpose statement and research questions. After Phase 1, I conducted the counselor and administrator interviews. The intent was to have at least four principals and at least four district leaders. However, I received only one district leader's response to my initial email with informed consent. I shifted to using the umbrella term *administrators* to protect the district office interviewee's anonymity.

In Phase 1 (pilot study), three principals and three counselors reviewed the interview questions, providing feedback via email with changes or revisions. Some participants said the

initial questions were redundant, and I needed to ensure I received the information to answer the research questions. After reviewing the interview protocols, I realized they lacked questions about prior knowledge and experiences. I added these questions to align with the emphasis on sensemaking theory, which underpinned this study. I allowed the participants to lead the conversation. Most interviewees were very forthcoming with information and answered multiple questions in one response. The interviews were easy due to the participants' willingness to share.

All participants could participate via Zoom or in person. All participants chose to complete the interview in person and traveled to my office for the interview. They were notified that the session would be recorded and transcribed after completing the interviews. Participants could present any documents they wanted to share from their campus; however, none shared any documents during their interviews. Before the interviews, I reminded all participants of the research aims and received verbal consent before questioning began. Counseling participant interviews ranged from 60 to 90 minutes, with an average time of 75 minutes. Administrators who chose to participate were also reminded of research aims, and I received verbal consent before beginning. All administrators chose to conduct interviews in person as well.

Counselor questions (see Appendix A) and administrator questions (see Appendix B) began by stating the purpose of the research and receiving participant consent. The interviews began with demographic questions. I asked candidates not to identify themselves and informed them I would use pseudonyms to provide anonymity. All parties appreciated this information, as they did not want their campuses identified. The three sections of questions aligned with the research questions. The interview phases follow.

Phase 1: Pilot

Interview protocols were reviewed during the first phase of the study. This review process helped test and refine the data collection instruments before beginning data collection (Yin, 2016). I used the pilot test feedback in the next phase, editing and using pilot participant responses to create the final interview protocol. During this phase, I used handwritten notes and recordings to reflect on any discrepancies that could arise and how they related to larger issues of the study (see Yin, 2016).

Phase 2: Counselor and Administrator Interviews

I began formal data collection during the second phase with interviews with counseling leaders and administrators. Prior to the interviews, participants received the informed consent documents that provided the purpose of the study. Participants could not email responses to the questions. In the email, I asked participants to share any artifacts that would help them show how they interpret and understand the MTSS process to work on their campus. All interviews occurred in person, with each recorded and later transcribed.

Interview protocols (see Appendices A and B) guided the interviews and allowed participants to share their honest opinions. The interview protocol began with collecting demographic information, including current campus and educational experience, before moving into the interview portion. I asked participants to share their knowledge of MTSS and the district and campus protocols for referring students to the MTSS process and implementing the process on their respective campuses. Participants were also asked about challenges and successes they faced with their personal interpretation of MTSS and the process.

Parallel Process Phase: Document Identification and Collection

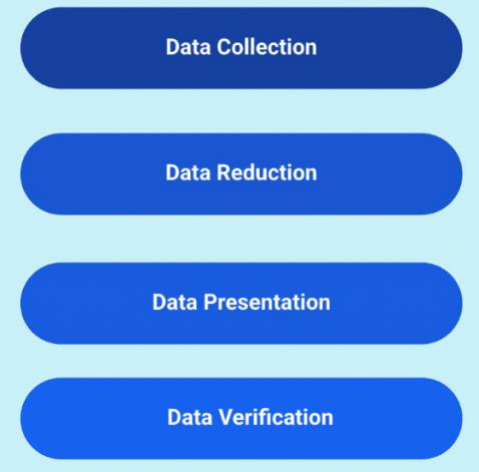
In this parallel phase, I recorded and transcribed all interviews and utilized Dedoose software to manage the data, code the data, and identify themes and common language used by study participants. I used Dedoose for memos and to record notes of my thoughts. Documents and artifacts were not required, but if participants had chosen to share their implementation tools, they could. Only one participant had an artifact to show.

Data Analysis

The dataset for this study consisted of all notes, interview transcripts, and audio/video recordings. Simultaneous data collection and analysis occurred; as I conducted the interviews, I began to analyze the previous ones. The results of the analysis processes were shaped by the entire dataset (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Overall, I used an inductive and comparative analysis strategy. The task was to identify units of information and break down data into bits pertaining to the research phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The data analysis process comprised four phases (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

Phases of Data Analysis



The first data analysis phase included notes, memos, interview transcripts, and audio recordings. These files were then uploaded into Dedoose. After compiling the data, I began analysis in Dedoose using codes (i.e., meaning-based labels; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The next step included combining codes into similar meaning-based groups or themes, a process Merriam and Tisdell (2016) called creating categories. At this point, I began grouping the codes to create categories that aligned with the three research questions. There was a period of intense analysis and tentative findings that were substantiated, revised, and configured (Yin, 2016).

During the last phase, I used the constant comparative method (Turner, 2022), analyzing the data within the groups to identify larger patterns that could help answer the research questions. The emerging similarities and differences allowed me to group the data into categories. After grouping, the categories were analyzed and reviewed to answer the study's guiding questions.

Researcher Positionality

As a former lead counselor at a high school, I recognize that my experiences as a counselor navigating the MTSS process would lead to my own opinions regarding the process for implementing MTSS at the secondary level. During my time as a counselor, I understood that MTSS involved tiered learning and more than just myself as a stakeholder when trying to implement. I created a flow chart for my campus to help other counselors and administrators understand how the process should work at a high school campus and eliminate confusion. In addition to my experience as a counselor, I am fortunate to serve as an assistant principal at a secondary campus, where I attend district-level meetings regarding implementing MTSS in the district where the research took place.

I am also a student in an educational leadership program and completed my principal certification within the last year before serving in my current role. This background gives me additional, varied insight into the participants' perspectives about the implications of leadership practices and challenges leaders may face on campuses each day. My experience in both roles may lead to preconceived notions about the challenges of navigating the MTSS process in my current district.

Throughout the study, I utilized multiple strategies to mitigate my biases and remain objective. Participants were asked to review the interview takeaways (i.e., member checking). This process ensured that participants' statements were not misconstrued and that my biases did not interfere with the interpretation of the data.

In addition to using member checks, I created an audit trail. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described the audit trail as the research describing data collection, category creation, and decision-making throughout the inquiry in detail.

The study was based on the following assumptions:

1. There is confusion in how counselors and principals understand what MTSS entails, as well as the process to provide supports for students.
2. The MTSS implementation process at the secondary level is misunderstood and not always implemented with fidelity; exploratory studies will be beneficial in understanding more about this process at the secondary level.

Trustworthiness

I engaged in multiple strategies to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings. Before conducting interviews, I developed and refined the protocol through peer review to minimize bias and ensure alignment with the research questions. Revisions were made based on feedback

to improve clarity, question flow, and depth of inquiry. During data collection, I incorporated member checking through follow-up clarifications to confirm the accuracy of participants' responses. Additionally, I employed member checks to provide internal validity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Participants were given a summary of key findings and asked to verify the plausibility of interpretations. The multiple methods and diverse participants established a form of triangulation.

I allowed themes to emerge through an iterative coding process across all transcripts (Turner, 2022). I could identify recurring patterns, contradictions, and outliers by comparing data across interviews. These comparisons helped ensure themes were grounded in the participants' words and experiences. I also used memos and created a data display matrix to visually organize and verify relationships among themes (Miles et al., 2014). This process enhanced the credibility and depth of the findings by supporting a systematic and transparent approach to data interpretation. This thematic matrix display showed key themes across participants, accompanied by direct quotes (see Table 7).

Table 7

Themes and Final Codes for Answering the Research Questions

Research question	Theme	Codes	Illustrative quote
RQ1	Training and exposure	• Lack of formal training • Professional development	"We had a little minute bit of training on how to do a plan in Edugence … and that was last year … and that's it."
RQ1	Variability across campuses	• Inconsistency • Autonomy • District guidance	"Implementation across secondary campuses is still wildly individualized. … I've got campuses with 200 support plans and others with seven."

Research question	Theme	Codes	Illustrative quote
RQ1	Policy and accountability gaps	• Lack of district-level accountability • CIP • Campus-wide implementation	"I don't feel like there's an expectation or accountability from the supervisors of the principals to make sure [MTSS implementation] is a priority."
RQ2	Role ambiguity	• Unclear responsibilities • Role expectations • Practical roles	"There was a lot of who [were] supposed to do the actual MTSS. … We eventually had to call people above us to get clarification."
RQ2	Collaboration vs. delegation	• Minimal implementation ownership	"I don't necessarily have to implement anything… I just have to know it's there."
RQ2	Defaulting to traditional roles	• Role overload • Default preexisting • knowledge • Sensemaking	"I still do all the scheduling, test coordination, and college stuff… so I can't really manage all the intervention planning, too."
RQ3	Implementation inconsistency	• Gaps in leadership • capacity • Unwillingness • Noncompliance • Inconsistency	"There has been an unwillingness from the central office to staff for MTSS… I still haven't trained all campus principals."
RQ3	Limited district support	• Siloed implementation • Campus autonomy • Vague guidance	"We don't collaborate with anyone regarding MTSS… our academic specialist meets with others in the district, but not us."

Limitations

Qualitative researchers aim to understand how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This study design was appropriate to explore the unique perspectives and experiences of a small population of educators in a suburban district; their experiences are not representative of others outside the district. Due to the small sample size, the findings in this study cannot be generalized to all leaders. However, the findings may transfer to similar districts searching for ways to support or educate their leaders with the shared knowledge.

Summary

This research was a phenomenological qualitative study using a sensemaking lens to describe, understand, and interpret the understanding of the MTSS process among counseling leaders and administrators in a large suburban district. Semistructured interviews with secondary counselors and principals occurred to explore their perspectives and examine how varying interpretations of implementing MTSS affect students' academic experiences and academic success at the secondary level. Chapter Four will present the data analysis findings.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the intricacies of school counselors' understandings, experiences, and roles in leading or facilitating the MTSS process in a large suburban North Texas secondary setting. This study analyzed counseling leaders' and administrators' experiences, understanding, and perceptions of their roles in the MTSS process. This study was guided by three research questions:

1. What informs counselors' and leaders' understanding of MTSS?
2. How do counselors and leaders understand their roles, as well as the roles of other key personnel, in the current implementation effort?
3. What do counselors and leaders identify as successes and challenges related to the district-level implementation?

The findings emerged from semi structured interviews with secondary counselors, administrators, and district leaders. Each participant was interviewed once. The interview questions were adapted from McAdams's (2007) life story interview protocol. This interview was recorded, and participants could provide exemplars if they chose to after the interview. However, no participants shared documents.

Counselors' and Leaders' Understanding of Multitiered Systems of Support

During the interviews, participants were asked to share their understanding of MTSS, specifically their understanding of their roles and other key roles in implementing MTSS on their respective secondary campuses. All participants were asked to identify successes and challenges related to their campus-level implementation of MTSS. The participants shared a glimpse into understanding and perceptions of their roles and their counterparts' roles in implementing MTSS.

Counselor Understanding of Roles in MTSS Implementation

The interviewees identified MTSS as as a preventative framework to address students' academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs. There was a consensus on this understanding without explicit definitions from each counselor. "The objective of MTSS is prevention. So to prevent labels, prevent special education, prevent students being pigeonholed into subpopulation groups that they do not belong in, as well as preventing gaps, preventing truancy, preventing behavioral placements," said Jessica. Most of her experience with MTSS has been outside her current district, and therefore, she made sense of MTSS through this knowledge. However, her response also suggested that the district has not established clear definitions of MTSS.

Nancy, a middle school counselor, recognized that "MTSS is a framework that is designed to support all students, but PBIS was created as a way to transform behaviors, and in the ISD, counselors have been explicitly told not to address discipline." The district also does not allow counselors to access the discipline student information system (Review360) because they "don't want to blur disciplinary lines. … But the lack of access to this information from the counselors really prevents our ability to support administrators in helping with positive behavior accountability, school-wide." Candace, a high school counselor, argued,

> I often feel left out when trying to support my admin partner because he expects me to help our students, but I don't have the entire story … aka the discipline report … to know where to begin on helping this student.

An incomplete picture prevents counselors from fulfilling their roles as integral members in the RTI process by observing and determining the responsiveness and effectiveness of services needed (Ziomek-Daigle et al., 2016).

Jessica served as a school administrator for the last 10 years, but "7 out of my last 10 years as an administrator, I learned all that I know from my previous district." Candace stated, "MTSS support varies across the district, and it is often seen as a last resort for difficult students to a more empathic approach to support students' academic success." The lack of consistency and understanding causes student support to fall through the cracks on many secondary campuses.

Three of the school counselors expressed a lack of clarity over the relativity of their roles in the MTSS process on their campus. Staci argued,

> We have been told by our counseling triumvirate that we are to lead the process of MTSS because we can impact behaviors and academic support, but our principal counterparts don't communicate the full story of what they need from us.

Candace said she feels "dismissed or disrespected by my alpha-principal because he often tells me 'Don't worry about it' when I inquire for more information on helping my student." Administrators assume that because counselors have been directed not to deal with discipline, they should be removed from all discipline talks.

These assumptions have created barriers to collaborating with counseling and principal offices to work as cohesive administrative teams. Nancy said that her middle school administrator gave her access to information for discipline, but those talks often became disciplinary, which was out of her wheelhouse. Nancy's words lead back to the lack of clarity on who should begin the conversations. Staci argued, "There needs to be a flow chart that could show us what the process looks like if it begins in different areas. If it starts with counseling because it's social-emotional, then where do I go from there?"

Administrators' Understanding of Roles in Multitiered Systems of Support Implementation

The administrators interviewed assumed that their counselors had been trained not only on what MTSS is, but also on how to help implement the meetings. Krystal stated, "There is a need for counselors to understand social-emotional issues that affect academic performance for [all] students." She recognized that the complexity of defining counselors' roles in MTSS begins with understanding their role and how their role supports the administrators. Tony noted, "We need to begin engaging counselors in the MTSS process." All administrative participants agreed that engagement is crucial and could help MTSS implementation, as counselors possess targeted social-emotional information that can help with individual student interventions. Robert discussed the importance of involving all stakeholders in MTSS meetings to ensure a collaborative approach to helping the "whole" student. He stated that "counselors contribute to the success of MTSS initiatives on my campus for academic and mental health reasons." However, he did not know where the mental health resources came from. Krystal, a high school administrator, said, "I feel that our secondary counselors and administrators know what MTSS is, but we don't know what it should look like in our district because there has been no guidance to align all that we should be doing." Similarly, Melissa stressed, "A district this size should not allow as much autonomy as we've been given because no two campuses are alike with their student and staff demographics." To her point, counselors and administrators have varying levels of understanding. However, their knowledge base comes from prior districts, as the study district had not explicitly stated the expectations for all campuses.

Robert felt that an implementation done with fidelity

> starts with the principals setting the expectation for all stakeholders on campus to understand MTSS. Then, creating norms that help everyone understand where the MTSS process can begin and that can be with any stakeholder on campus that recognizes a need for additional student support outside of the first tier.

In the district under study, counselors and administrators must have a common language and support for the process to succeed. Monica stated, "Elementary schools have figured this out; the complexity of secondary schools adds more stakeholders, but the idea of supporting the whole student should not be foreign to educators." Monica believed that with more stakeholders supporting a student, the implementation process should have a positive effect because more wrap-around services and supports are available. All counselors and administrators felt that all stakeholders would find a level of understanding if they could receive guidance from district leadership.

Building Conceptual Clarity: What Informs Counselors' Understanding of Multitiered Systems of Support?

As counselor participants described their perspective of MTSS, they also shared their ideas about their administrative leaders' role in the MTSS process. This section presents the participants' experiences as they discussed their interactions with campus and district administrators and their understanding of the MTSS process. Responses from counseling leaders coalesced into three common themes: lack of understanding, process, and sensemaking and context.

Lack of Understanding

Whereas some counselors were well-versed in MTSS, others struggled to define the framework. Those who could discuss their understanding of MTSS had prior experience working with MTSS, whether in a different district or from experience working on elementary campuses. All counselors spoke from the lens of having previous experience outside of their current campuses. Nancy, a current middle school counselor, stated,

> It's a multitiered support system. So it's a system that has been put in place to help students who need extra assistance, but not quite as confining as special education. So it can serve a lot of different purposes. It has changed over the years. So it's very— it's very interesting, and it seems to be kind of a fluid system. And … it looks different everywhere you go.

Nancy said her "campus does not officially implement MTSS. They provide wrap-around services if a student is in crisis, and they complete an SSP per district guidelines when a student returns from the district alternative campus." She was unclear about understanding the principals' role because her campus does not work together.

Nancy stated that her campus has an academic specialist responsible for implementing and hosting MTSS meetings to implement tiered supports. Staci mentioned the same idea, saying, "My campus only has the counseling team attend SSP meetings if they are initiated by an administrator." This participant did not remember any specific training to give a process on how the meetings should work, and she said the lines are often blurred.

The concept of MTSS being fluid and looking different on each campus is a common misconception in this district because campus autonomy is evident. There is a lack of understanding on several levels. Nancy addressed this topic, commenting,

> The district has given so much autonomy to campuses by not saying anything at all. If we could get face time with anyone from the 504 or MTSS office, it would provide answers that a lot of us need. The resources are there, but no one knows where to begin because too much autonomy has proven to be detrimental for us at the middle school or secondary level.

There is no clear understanding of counselor roles, and counselors are unaware of their administrative counterparts' roles or the newly introduced academic specialist role. Counselors were also unaware of their roles in the system because there had been no district-wide trainings for counseling, causing unclear guidelines and expectations for each campus. This lack of understanding causes the student support systems that should capture students in need to be unsuccessful.

Process

Candace mentioned her campus "has a plan that her principal runs the at-risk list for students and the plan is to meet biweekly … but they (counselors and administrators) are often pulled in a lot of directions, resulting in at-risk reports for students being printed and shared in counselor/admin mailboxes." The hope for the biweekly meeting was that creating a regular time and place for counselors and administrators (campus principals) to meet to discuss students identified as needing additional Tier 2 supports would support consistency of practice. Robert, a campus principal, mentioned that "his hope was that he could initiate the meetings and have all the data ready for his counselors and administrators to discuss biweekly." He felt the process began with getting all leaders in a room together to discuss their students referred for additional support. Robert stated, "I do not believe that counselors need to do the bulk of the work, because on my campus, a lot of the referrals for MTSS came from teachers who did not know or

understand tiered interventions." He felt that the lack of understanding of MTSS was greater than that of his counseling and administrative staff.

Three of the four counselors stated that the lack of understanding created separate islands for counselors and administrators to operate from without collaboration. Jessica mentioned that on her campus, "Counselors handled all social-emotional support meetings, but administration handled all attendance support meetings. We then have our academic specialist (which all campuses have them) handle any academic support meetings by collaborating with teachers, admin and counselors." On this campus, principals, administrators, and the academic specialist are all responsible for running different meetings, yet the assigned counselors are expected to attend. For example, the counselors and administrators are divided by alpha letters at the secondary level with large numbers of students. The counselor and administrator will attend meetings together, but each is responsible for different systems within MTSS.

Although this process seems to allow for inconsistent support for students, there is still uncertainty district-wide regarding the process for implementing MTSS. When discussing the processes in place, Jessica stated, "While counselors are not typically involved in academics at the secondary level, they do support interventions for students not on track to graduate or not meeting CCMR standards." She acknowledged that there is a lot of work to be done, but the opportunity to train principals has not been available from executive leadership levels. She said, "To understand the comprehensive nature of MTSS would require one to be in front of the stakeholders to understand the synonymous nature of MTSS and RTI." District leadership feels that face time with principals and counselors will help enhance the effectiveness of MTSS district-wide.

Sensemaking and Context

Sensemaking refers to how individuals interpret and make sense of complex processes (Datnow et al., 2023). For secondary counseling leaders, this sensemaking process involves understanding their roles in academic, behavioral, and social-emotional interventions. Given the inconsistency of expectations and training, most of the counselors interviewed struggle to understand MTSS and its role in their daily responsibilities. Without clear guidance, counseling leaders default to traditional counseling roles, or what they have known from prior experience, to focus on compliance rather than true tiered interventions. Candace said,

> I think the last couple of years, the secondary level has been just an integral piece. They have been very involved. However, I don't see them as involved in academics at the secondary level. Some are still trying to understand where they fit in.

Candace understood that counselors' roles are unclear, and most try to adjust to the demands without knowing the expectations.

Administrators' Understanding of Counseling Roles for Multitiered Systems of Support

This section addresses the administrators' understanding of their counselors' roles in implementing MTSS. The data present administrators' experiences as they discuss their interactions with their counseling staff and what they feel counselors understand about the MTSS process.

Perspectives of District Leadership

District leadership provided campus autonomy due to a lack of communication in this ISD. Melissa stated, "Implementation across secondary campuses is still wildly individualized for the campus. The level of autonomy that principals and counselors have taken is not at all the level of autonomy that was intended." This disconnect is evident in the lack of structured training

for secondary school leaders. The interviewee reported that campus autonomy has led to inconsistent implementation across the district, with some schools fully embracing MTSS while others remain disengaged. District leaders have asked for reports regarding MTSS. However, campuses do not know where to begin to pull these data, as leaders self-reported that training has not been available for principal or assistant principal meetings.

Although some campuses have implemented MTSS effectively, their counselors may not have been integrated into the process, and very few student support plans have been uploaded into the student information system (Edugence). Participants expressed frustration that district leadership has not mandated MTSS training or implementation, making it difficult to achieve consistency. “There are still multiple secondary campuses where the principal’s boss has never said ‘you will and you must.’” This leader was very frustrated, stating, “I’ve got secondary campuses with 200 student support plans, and I have secondary campuses with seven.” A significant discrepancy does not bode well for accountability and administrative support for all students.

Areas of Agreement

Administrators and counselors agreed that effective MTSS implementation relies on proactive, data-driven decision-making. These data-driven decisions come from a commitment to early intervention strategies that allow counselors to focus on their strengths in supporting students and leadership to help with accountability from all parties on campus. Leaders at the campus and district levels agreed that students’ academic, social-emotional, and behavioral needs should be addressed proactively, but they were unsure where it should begin.

All four leaders agreed that counselors tend to be the first to hear about issues regarding students because they are the most approachable from a campus perspective. Krystal stated,

> My counselor knows about a student crisis well before I do because she is engaged with students from a social-emotional place, and staff reach out to counselors for those kinds of things … whereas I only hear about discipline issues. With that being said, I feel that counselors need to begin the initiative.

Melissa noted, "Counselors should be involved because they always know what's going on, whether it's from a parent phone call, or a teacher … they also know about all things with students because kids stop by to talk to them." Tony said,

> Although the volume of students is significantly larger on a high school campus, counselors always have their ears to the ground because kids are able to vulnerable with them, as opposed to the disciplinary position that us principals are in.

All interviewees agreed that they had to rely on their counselor partners for support with social-emotional issues because they receive separate training from administrators, making them more equipped to respond when kids come to their office.

Areas of Disjoint

Leaders (both district and campus) think that counselors should have a more prominent role in implementing MTSS. Counselors feel as though administrators should lead the implementation. "Principals have access to all of the student information systems, including Review 360 for discipline, Edugence for reports, and Skyward for grades," stated Melissa. She continued, "Most people in central office, if they know what MTSS is, would argue that counselors should start the process, as conversations have been had wanting principals to lead the charge." These conflicting statements show the disconnect in leadership's talks of implementation.

This disjoint is a matter of too much autonomy on secondary campuses without guidance and leadership from the central office. Campuses feel lost due to the ambiguity created by the lack of implementation guidance provided. Principal expectations are also not aligned with a district's expectations, causing campuses to push MTSS to the bottom of campus initiatives. Robert felt "his counselors should handle the bulk of MTSS identification for students because 80% of their role is to work with students and navigate grades, credit checks, and attendance as part of their everyday discussions with their students." The disconnect with counselors often stems from balancing institutional priorities with individual student needs. Three of the four counselors interviewed understand their roles from prior school districts due to the lack of guidance from their current district.

Perceived Successes and Challenges in District-Level Multitiered Systems of Support Implementation

Counseling leaders had varying levels of understanding regarding the roles in MTSS. However, this description variance was not due to a lack of understanding but campus expectations from their administrative counterparts. Staci stated, "So my understanding is like there are student support plans. There's a student support team, SST, SSP. And so my role is to attend the meetings for these kiddos, to add input on the levels of support." This counselor said she had not been trained on implementing MTSS on her campus and has been there for at least 10 years.

Another counselor, Nancy, stated,

> A lot of times, the counselors know the kids, especially in middle school. We've had them for a while, so we have a lot of interaction with them. So sometimes we can provide more input as to what accommodations would be beneficial to the kiddo.

At the middle-school level, Nancy does not remember receiving any training regarding MTSS or running an SSP.

Nancy stated that counselors would benefit from understanding, but she also believes "there is too much autonomy" for campuses to succeed. The participant said, "At some campuses, counselors are supporting the attendance student support plan, so supporting intervention for Tier 2 or Tier 3 attendance. That's great and beautiful, but not necessarily an expectation district-wide." Counselors play a significant role in MTSS, but their level of involvement varies widely across campuses. Staci said, "It would be nice to have it laid out more specifically as to why we're using MTSS versus [special education] versus whatever, and the specific responsibilities of who is responsible for creating what." A better understanding would help campuses know where to begin the process for supporting students under any of the possible MTSS scenarios.

Areas of Agreement

The district-level leader agreed with all counselors and administrators regarding the lack of training for secondary campuses. She stated, "Training is very limited due to the district not allowing face time [for her] during principal meetings or counselor meetings." Her department was moved to being supervised by the district's Special Education department, so she now reports to a new supervisor who "may not have a complete understanding of what MTSS is and how it can lead to Tier 3 Special Education services." The district-level leader agreed that "implementation across secondary campuses is still wildly individualized for each campus." Melissa agreed that this shift gives campuses autonomy based on their size and demographics to support students, but there should be a common terminology used among campuses. She also

stated that “the level of autonomy that principals and leaders have taken is not at all the level of autonomy that was intended,” which comes from the lack of training.

The district-level leader also mentioned a lack of student support plans in the student information system (Edugence). She said, “There are still multiple secondary campuses where the principal’s boss [SLI] has never said ‘You will, and you must. It’s very hit or miss. I’ve got secondary campuses with 200 student support plans, and I have secondary campuses with seven.” This inconsistency was a common thread in interviews with counselors and principals. With the district’s MTSS implementation primarily managed by one person with no additional support staff, the effort is difficult to scale best practices across all campuses.

Areas of Disjoint

Campus autonomy has led to inconsistent implementation across the district, with some schools fully embracing MTSS and others remaining disengaged. Jessica stated, “The only way MTSS will take hold is if every principal leads the work. They don’t have to do the typing or manual pieces, but they must lead the initiative in their building.” Inconsistency has been a significant area of disjoint between campuses as some principals are unaware of the why and how. If they are to take the lead, they must be with a well-informed leader. Some administrators believe that counselors own this for their campus due to SB 179, which could lead to a separate debate. Counselors are to spend 80% of their time working with students, per this Texas initiative to protect counselors’ time. Counselors felt that 80% should be supporting students and talking to them. Jenny, a high school counselor, said, “I don’t necessarily have to implement a lot of it. I have to sit in meetings about it and sit with students regarding it, not necessarily implementing it unless there’s like a counselor check-in piece.” Administrators argued that

running SST meetings and checking in on students fulfills the 80% of the time counselors are to spend with students,

Tony stated,

> My job on a campus is to oversee MTSS implementation, and I disseminate the information to the appropriate parties. My counseling team should be responsible for students' check-ins, as they are typically the common denominator when collaborating with wrap-around services and families.

Melissa reported, "Our district has realigned some of the MTSS structures and moved people under the SPED umbrella, making it harder for us to get in front of principals." She currently serves as the only person executing MTSS in the ISD, but her coordinators are pulled to cover homebound services and other areas of need under special education. The situation has caused frustration because the district leadership has asked for MTSS to have a strong campus presence, but the manpower is unavailable to begin the implementation process effectively. "All of our training to principals and counselors has gone out through Canvas [an online educational platform], and I have to hope that people actually read the guidelines that I've pushed out. I never get face time with admin or counselors." Her experience helped highlight some of the recommendations for district leadership.

Ultimately, the disconnect between counselors and administrators can create challenges in addressing student needs effectively, underscoring the importance of clearer communication and shared goals. Bridging these gaps requires a commitment to collaboration from the district to ensure that counselors and administrators align their priorities for the benefit of students.

Challenges and Successes of the Current Multitiered Systems of Support Implementation

This section presents the challenges counselors and administrators face in implementing MTSS on their campuses. There were no identifiable successes for the current MTSS implementation district-wide due to the areas of growth identified by both groups of participants. The challenges identified by all interviewees were a lack of building-wide knowledge of MTSS, unclear campus expectations, the need for increased staffing at the central office, as well as a lack of training.

MTSS is a complex process requiring an understanding of the definition, the tiered interventions available, and how it can impact students on a secondary campus. Campus autonomy will allow campuses to determine the best process for identifying and implementing MTSS supports. However, this autonomy needs guidance from district support due to the varying levels of prior experience that counselors and administrators bring to the table.

Challenges

School counselor Nancy wished for more training because she felt "if she had more training from the district, she would understand the expectations of the district on the counselors' role in implementing MTSS and feel more equipped to walk her teachers through the best way to support all kids." She also felt this could go a long way with shifting the focus from compliance to authentic intervention efforts that prioritize student support and student growth. Authentic interventions could also foster stronger working relationships with counselors and administrators. The underlying current is a lack of trust from both parties. Counselors want a clear explanation of their roles within the boundaries of Texas Education Code §33.005 (SB 179), and principals are unsure how counselors' support of students should look under the current school bill. District-wide training would ensure a common understanding of MTSS

principles and establish roles for all parties involved so that students do not "fall through the cracks," as Tony, a secondary administrator, suggested. "If staff knew there was a specific form that they needed to use, the implementation process would be so much easier … but, at this current moment, not a single person knows where to begin the process, so we have students falling through the cracks," stated Candace.

Jessica suggested that "increased staffing at the district level to support MTSS implementation could help district-wide improvement." At this time, all training is pushed out via Canvas courses or Google documents that are not always easy to find, or campus leadership may not even know they exist. "Until we're staffed and have access to the right people, we're as good as we're going to get … and that's just a reality," said Melissa. Jessica also felt that "trust from campus leaders and counselors would increase once they have face time with district staff that are aware of the struggles and frustrations," but it would also allow campus leaders to gain real-time feedback about what MTSS could look like with their student populations.

The ability to discuss and set expectations through in-person training would benefit all parties. Discussions surrounding comprehensive school programs and aligning with campus mission and vision would be a foundational conversation that needs to occur. "I don't even know what my school counselors do on a day-to-day basis," Principal Robert said. He did not mean this condescendingly, but in a way, he does not have regular communication with the counselors to be able to articulate what their roles are or should be in implementing MTSS.

Successes

The interviewees identified their counterparts as a valuable piece in working through this process. The common goal for principals, district leaders, and counselors is to support students and find ways to allow the MTSS framework to serve as a preventive method and not a reactive

method in supporting students. Robert stated, “The objective of MTSS as a whole is prevention. So to prevent labels, prevent special education, prevent students being pigeonholed into subpopulation groups that they don’t belong in, as well as preventing gaps, preventing truancy, preventing behavioral placements.”

The common theme was to find a way to support students with social-emotional, academic, and behavioral needs. When I asked interviewees about campus successes, all responded with personal anecdotes of how they had seen the MTSS framework help their students succeed. However, none could provide an anecdote regarding campus implementation. Tony remarked,

> I have stories from my elementary days where we had exemplars of Tier 1 strategies that all teachers were expected to implement, which helped with positive behavior reinforcements. I don’t know how you can make that happen at a high school. We’re just too big.

Melissa shared,

> I have a kid from my previous district who struggled with attendance and my old campus put [Tier 2] supports in place and helped his mom and him understand that attendance was important, and he went from having 120 absences to only two in the last quarter I worked with him and recapturing all his credits.

Counselors and administrative leaders could reflect on MTSS implementations in prior years, but none that would help show successes in their current district. Nancy said, “My admin [doesn’t] know where to begin, so they just give me, as the lead counselor, tasks to complete, and I fulfill those, and we call them MTSS.”

Conclusion

This study's findings highlight an analysis of the potential and the challenges of MTSS implementation in this district. The themes that emerged from the transcripts provide insight into the successes, challenges, and areas for improvement within the district's MTSS implementation. Although some campuses have embraced the MTSS framework, others lack accountability, leading to inconsistent execution. There is room for district-wide growth, and the honesty from counselors and leaders helped identify the implications discussed in Chapter Five.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Researchers have shown that administrators, counselors, and principals lack clarity regarding school counselors' roles and responsibilities in implementing MTSS (King-White et al., 2021; Lesh et al., 2021). Not only are roles unclear for counselors, but counselors are also unclear about their administrative partners' roles in implementing MTSS on secondary campuses where students transition to multiple classes daily. To further complicate matters, counselors are sometimes acknowledged and included as part of formal leadership in this ISD and sometimes left in the margins.

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the intricacies of school counselors' understandings, experiences, and roles in leading or facilitating the MTSS process in a large suburban North Texas secondary setting. Using a sensemaking lens, this study examined how their perceptions and understandings influenced MTSS implementation efforts to date in a large suburban school district, specifically secondary campuses.

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What informs counselors' and leaders' understanding of MTSS?
2. How do counselors and leaders understand their roles and the roles of other key personnel in the current implementation effort?
3. What do counselors and leaders identify as successes and challenges related to the district-level implementation?

The key findings from Chapter Four highlight the critical gaps and challenges in MTSS implementation at the secondary level for the ISD. All participants agreed on the opportunity for meaningful progress with increased administrative support, training, and accountability. Utilizing counseling leaders in implementing MTSS offers school counselors opportunities to impact

student academic success and behavior development while developing a comprehensive school counseling program that aligns with a school's mission and vision (Ziomek-Daigle et al., 2025).

Although some campuses have implemented components of MTSS, a systemic shift is needed to enhance role clarity, progress monitoring, and shape and scope of MTSS in the ISD. When stakeholders recognize MTSS as an integrated framework rather than a compliance mandate, there will be increased support provided to students in need. This study suggests a more structured and collaborative approach, where principals and those in leadership roles (both counseling and central office) receive clearer responsibilities and professional development opportunities, and educators are equipped with the tools to implement MTSS with fidelity. Addressing these challenges will pave the way for a more equitable and effective student support system.

Discussion

Interpretation of Findings

The findings of this study offered a deeper understanding of the campus- and district-level perceptions of implementing MTSS at secondary campuses in a large Texas school district. This qualitative study used a sensemaking framework to determine how counselors and administrators perceive their roles in implementing MTSS at the secondary level. Interviewees served in their roles for at least 2 years as counseling leaders, campus leaders (assistant principal or principal), or district leadership, and all worked in the same district. The findings indicated a universal theme of inconsistent systems for interpretation and application between counselors, campus leaders, and district-level leaders for implementing MTSS. All participants were interviewed using a semistructured interview protocol.

Administrators and counselors shared many overlapping characteristics, and administrators (counselors and principals) can vacillate between the roles of supporter, intervener, and facilitator (Goodman-Scott et al., 2016; Ockerman et al., 2012; Sink & Ockerman, 2016; Ziomek-Daigle et al., 2016). The interviewees emphasized that MTSS is fundamentally a preventative framework designed to address academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs before moving to Tiers 2 and 3 interventions. Several gaps in MTSS implementation became apparent: communication, collaboration, and collective responsibility.

Addressing these challenges will require greater executive leadership buy-in, structured trainings, and increased staffing at the district level. Without these changes, MTSS implementation will remain fragmented and slow-moving, limiting its effectiveness in supporting students at the secondary level. For MTSS to function effectively, a systemic shift is needed to enhance role clarity, common language, and uniformity across secondary campuses. Stakeholders must recognize MTSS as a preventative framework rather than a compliance mandate. This study suggests a more structured approach where principals take leadership roles, counselors receive clear, designated responsibilities, and professional development to equip leadership with a common language to implement MTSS with fidelity.

Communication

After completing interviews with all candidates, the collected data indicated a lack of communication from district leadership, campus leadership, and counseling leaders. Participants revealed that their frustrations stemmed from a lack of communication from the other stakeholders. Campus leaders discussed their frustration with the district office and the lack of information shared regarding expectations for MTSS implementation. The counseling participants said they had not received any training regarding MTSS this upcoming school year,

and they were not aware of their roles within the district lens or who their point of contact was regarding MTSS. District leadership agreed they had not had any face time with counseling leaders this year due to a lack of additional support within the MTSS office.

Collaboration

Counseling and district leaders feel that collaboration is key to implementing MTSS. Because MTSS is a framework created to help all students succeed, collaboration among all parties will help them understand the framework and the roles needed to implement it in large secondary campuses. Counselors can utilize the existing framework for MTSS to enhance, expand, and challenge their comprehensive programs to present new ways to implement or guide principals to view the overlap of a comprehensive counseling program and a solid MTSS framework (ASCA, 2012; Goodman-Scott et al., 2016).

MTSS includes the academic, social-emotional, and behavioral support under one umbrella, which could allow for each stakeholder to own each subsection of the framework. Academic supports for students could include campus administrators coordinating all issues regarding academics. All stakeholders could initiate any communication with students struggling in classes, and know that counselors would begin the implementation process. Once regular meetings are initiated on campus, administrators on each campus could run the data to identify any students who need academic support. Academic supports needed could include monitoring grades and attendance. Campuses can look for ways to provide explicit, systematic instruction in well-recognized dimensions of core classes (Callender, 2014), which would emphasize targeted collaboration with teachers, counselors, and administrators to help students find success.

As for social-emotional support, counseling leaders could lead the implementation of social-emotional supports, as counselors have already received training to support students in

crisis. Crisis support can include PBIS interventions that could include guidance lessons for all students, which aligns with supporting all students. Counseling leaders could collaborate with campus leadership to discuss behavior issues that need to be addressed campus-wide. Counseling leaders can work on discussing and guiding campus changes through guidance lessons to make sure all students know and learn appropriate behaviors.

Collective Responsibility

The three framework components can be supported from the district level with the appropriate continuing education supports and resources to help leaders (district-wide) support all components of the MTSS framework. With all three stakeholders (counselors, campus leaders, and district leaders) working together, implementing MTSS can be a strong framework that creates preventative measures that allow all stakeholders to work together to support all students. Fostering intentional collaboration among counselors, principals, and district leaders is essential for establishing clearly defined roles within the MTSS framework. Ultimately, this ensures cohesive, student-centered support that promotes positive academic, social-emotional, and behavioral outcomes for all learners.

Contextualization

The findings presented in Chapter Four provided a detailed exploration of how counselors and administrators engage with implementing MTSS in secondary schools. This section synthesizes those findings within broader educational leadership frameworks and explores their implications for practice and theory. By applying a sensemaking lens, this study highlighted the complexities of interpreting and enacting MTSS in a secondary school environment. This section discusses the findings within the existing body of research, identifies unexpected results, and outlines key recommendations for improving MTSS implementation.

Transformational leadership is crucial for the successful implementation of MTSS in secondary schools. The emphasis on shared ownership, success for all, data-informed decisions to support all students, and collaboration are all goals aligned with the existing model of transformational leadership (Heavner, 2015). Marzano's (2005) framework for transformational leadership involves equipping school leaders with tools and knowledge to foster better student outcomes. This concept allows for an intersection of transformational leadership and MTSS to co-exist. Effective leadership is necessary for an effective school (Marzano, 2005). Effective school leadership can help implement MTSS in a manner that all stakeholders feel they can own their role in the implementation process. One may ask what this looks like, but it is up to the campus administration to communicate the vision and create a culture of collaboration that will allow student support to become the main goal. Collaboration could imply that everyone understands their roles in the ISD, beginning with the district leadership defining these roles and using common language that allows all stakeholders to begin with a solid foundation of understanding. Needs per campus can be adjusted, but one of the key takeaways from interviews was a lack of collaboration.

Unexpected Results

The most unexpected result from all interviews was the revelation that only one person in central office currently oversees MTSS implementation. The discovery that all coordinators are used in multiple other capacities was eye-opening and gave context as to why campus leaders (counselors and administrators) did not know where to start when campus needs arise. The understanding that support is limited at the district level contributes to a more nuanced lack of understanding of MTSS implementation. Because there was only one district-level interview,

there was no chance to seek clarification around any plans to change this model or seek to provide supporting roles to help with MTSS.

Implications

The findings in this research highlighted the necessity of clear role delineations for counselors and administrators in implementing MTSS. The district needs to articulate structural frameworks to help with collaboration and communication. Best practices for fostering engagement and accountability in MTSS implementation require further exploration.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study provide insights for counselors and principals, offering guidance for leaders to navigate the implementation of MTSS at the secondary level. One of the key takeaways is the lack of understanding of how to apply MTSS efforts on secondary campuses. After the interviews, it was evident that there is a need to establish roles for counselors and principals to understand their contribution to the MTSS process on secondary campuses. Counselors tend to default to their expected roles, but do not understand where those standard roles fall within MTSS implementation. This finding suggests that counselors can identify their roles in MTSS within the T-SCESS framework once counseling roles are defined. Texas Education Code §33.005 (SB 179) states that counselors are to spend 80% of their time in direct contact with students. By understanding their roles in supporting their students, counselors can correlate their interactions within the evaluation system.

The findings also support defining clear roles for principals and how to utilize their counselors as collaborators to support all students on their campus. One assumption is that administrators construct the meaning of their roles based on previous experiences, hence the sensemaking lens. There is a high need to understand roles to reap the benefits of a productive

MTSS implementation. District leaders can take this information to do a deep dive into the current state of each campus. After creating a snapshot of the secondary campuses, leaders can implement practices to create foundational plans for implementing MTSS. This finding may indicate the need for middle school and high school coordinator positions to monitor and report accountability to the superintendent's cabinet.

Recommendations

Drawing on existing research, I propose several recommendations relative to the interview findings. Recommendations for campus, school district, and school counseling leaders focus on practical steps for improving MTSS implementation at the secondary level. Strategies for enhancing counselor and administrator training are crucial, and there is a need for strong collaboration between stakeholders to ensure consistency in MTSS implementation. The findings of this study indicate that all stakeholders would benefit from professional development that establishes individual roles and what collaboration between parties looks like with common language to be used by all secondary campuses. To better support leadership, stakeholders must take actions that will create a collaborative environment for all stakeholders. The following sections outline recommendations for campus, school district, and school counseling leaders.

Recommendations for Campus Leaders

Campus leadership practices can significantly impact how stakeholders (school counselors, in this study) calibrate their roles, process expectations, and create regular communication related to leadership expectations. Educational leaders are problem solvers and facilitators. This facilitation and leadership create protocols and systems for assessing how well their established systems are conducive to supporting all students' success (Hallinger, 2010).

Leaders must develop collaborative structures in schools that ensure students have distinctly enticing educational experiences (Maqbool et al., 2023).

Calibrating Roles

Teachers with clearly defined roles are more likely to achieve productivity and be able to support all students. The same applies to counselors and leadership. Nancy believed that "their roles as counselors are unclear to the new leadership regime due to SB 179" because principals have told her they no longer knew what they could ask counselors to do. By developing a structured framework that explicitly outlines the responsibilities of administrators, counselors, and teachers in MTSS implementation, these stakeholders will know who will begin the process on each campus. Calibrating should be a campus-level decision, not a district one, because each campus has a different setup and varying staff with counselors and principals.

Ensuring consistency in role execution by providing clear district-wide expectations for each stakeholder's contribution should be normalized. If district leaders provide professional development to campus principals, principals will be expected to disseminate the information to their administrative teams based on calibration discussions. Discussing who will begin the MTSS process, what it will look like and district expectations could be a conversation initiated with campus principals.

It is imperative to provide targeted training for staff to help campus leaders and staff understand their roles in academic, behavioral, and social-emotional interventions. By fostering collaborative role alignment, leadership teams can review and refine role expectations to maximize efficiency on each campus. Calibrated roles on campuses facilitate MTSS implementation expectations.

Process Expectations

Developing standardized MTSS protocols on each campus would involve creating a clear, step-by-step process for identifying, documenting, and supporting students through MTSS to ensure uniformity across all campuses. To improve intervention effectiveness, campus principals can implement clear expectations for progress monitoring, data collection, and student intervention tracking.

Robert, a campus principal, stated,

> I have a form that I would be willing to share with the district that would allow principals to identify students based on the student information system Edugence, and then principals could disseminate this information to the alpha counselor/alpha administrator team to identify their students who need tiered interventions.

Creating a committee of secondary campus principals in the ISD to identify best practices would be a strong way to collaborate with the central office to help campuses proactively identify students and foster strong relationships with counselor and admin teams. This process could also clarify the role of leadership in implementation.

A common theme identified through interviews is the lack of clarity of leadership roles in implementation. Counselors are unclear about what the district expects of their roles and have blurred perceptions of administrative roles. Emphasizing that principals must lead MTSS efforts by actively participating in intervention planning, oversight, and accountability measures would begin to establish process expectations, which would help with the efficacy of managing MTSS processes.

Regular Formal Communication

Communication is impactful for leadership, but when working on large secondary campuses, communication is needed to foster strong collaboration among all campus stakeholders. Another recommendation for campus leaders is to require regularly scheduled meetings for MTSS to discuss student progress, review data, and refine intervention strategies. This discussion can include referring students to Tier 2 or Tier 3 supports. This meeting should include campus academic specialists, counselors, assistant principals, and the principal. Meetings could be conducted biweekly or within the parameters established by district leadership to ensure all campuses are compliant and formalized.

The next recommendation is to create clear communication channels. A formalized digital system that is easily accessible for stakeholders to access documented action plans and notes is imperative. This digital platform could be the student information system already developed using a front-facing website with a counselor or administrator login required. Resources such as creating a problem-solving team, when they should meet, or how to utilize resources to capture all kids would be accessible on this platform.

By implementing these recommendations, campus leaders can enhance role clarity, streamline intervention processes, and improve communication structure. These acctions will ultimately lead to more effective and sustainable MTSS implementation on secondary campuses.

Recommendations for District Leaders

District leaders have a larger task as they have primary and secondary grade levels to manage for MTSS implementation. Although MTSS is a simpler process for elementary campuses, some structures should be carried over for secondary campuses. To better support campus leadership, district leaders need to build capacity in the campus leadership, implement

comprehensive professional development, and establish common language across campuses. Research shows that aligned strategies from campus and district leadership efforts improve teaching and learning, but district leadership can help move beyond improvement to transformation (Watterston et al., 2011).

Build Capacity and Distributed Leadership

District leadership has struggled with establishing campus-based MTSS leadership due to one person being the helm of MTSS (Dulaney et al., 2013; Durrance, 2023; Freeman et al., 2016). The current MTSS liaisons or coordinators should have designated campuses to support. These campuses can be designated by feeder patterns or via secondary levels, but these coordinators should serve as the point person for implementation and communication.

The district-level MTSS support team can advocate for additional staffing and provide targeted campus support. This targeted campus support would help create efficient plans, as teams will have an outside perspective to help support the campuses. This campus support could help with articulating next steps for students and serve as a member of the MTSS team when making decisions to support students that could affect district resources (Cressey, 2014; O'Malley, 2019). This support could also help with empowering principals as MTSS leaders. Additional staff could ensure that campus administrators actively lead and reinforce MTSS practices with regular check-ins during principal meetings, or they could monitor the Edugence platform that controls MTSS. The current coordinators seem to delegate responsibilities without any oversight into the process and, as Tony stated, "They never respond to emails because they are pulled in too many directions and utilized in other capacities."

Implement Comprehensive Professional Development

District-wide professional development sessions are imperative to ensure all campus leaders, counselors, and teachers understand MTSS fundamentals. District-created role-specific training to ensure that each group understands their unique roles could help principals determine what MTSS will look like on their campus. Each group would be able to understand and determine its unique responsibility for communicating with all stakeholders. Counselors specifically would be able to collaborate with the district counseling team to determine how to align counselors' roles in MTSS implementation with the T-SCESS evaluation system. This training would minimize confusion for principals, helping counseling leaders connect their support of MTSS to their evaluation system and understand the 80/20 split they must document with the district.

Creating an MTSS digital resource hub could be beneficial as well. The district has a district hub for employees only for other department resources, including Human Resources (HR) and Assessment, Research, and Program Evaluation, so there could be a digital hub with recorded webinars, templates, and FAQs to allow for flexible learning and access to resources. As the process for MTSS grows, the opportunity to build capacity with campus leadership grows. According to Marlowe (2021), "These types of tools can support staff and ensure consistency between teachers, and campuses district-wide" (p. 10).

Another benefit would be providing monthly or quarterly check-in sessions to reinforce training. Implementation changes and best practices could also be shared through principal meeting break-out sessions. This information exchange could help create a network of professional development resources that could be used throughout the year and provide ongoing

feedback each year, thus allowing MTSS to become a common language and expectation across all campuses (Grissom et al., 2013; Sebastian et al., 2012).

Establish Common Language and Framework Across Campuses

There is a district-wide handbook regarding MTSS guidelines, definitions, roles, processes, and expectations, but it was released the summer before the start of the school year. The interviewees identified last-minute release as a common practice because communication has been infrequent, and leaders often forget that updates are available. Although the handbook is updated annually, district-level leaders can reiterate common language when discussing tiers of support, intervention strategies, and progress monitoring to eliminate confusion (Sebastian et al., 2012).

Uniform data collection and progress monitoring are a necessity and highly recommended. For interventions to be effectively tracked and analyzed across schools, district leaders need to roll out the student information system before the start of the school year. The student information system provided in this school district is a constant work in progress, and communication regarding updates is infrequent, if nonexistent. Creating a uniform way to collect the data and monitor the progress of all students before school starts would benefit all secondary campuses.

The last recommendation for district leadership is to ensure MTSS aligns with existing district policies, such as PBIS, and special education support for seamless implementation. This alignment requires district leadership to scrutinize everything implemented to ensure that they spend their time and resources on the work that helps principals support their campuses so that all students are supported and reach their learning goals (Honig et al., 2015). The district can scale MTSS implementation effectively despite limited personnel by implementing these

recommendations. A common framework will empower campus leaders with the necessary training and resources to support student success.

Partnering with state regional service centers like the Region 10 Education Center could help design and implement common language and frameworks on large secondary campuses. This partnership could help implement a district-level problem-solving team to allow campuses to mirror and provide guidance for foundation support for each campus.

A Path Forward

Drawing on existing research, I propose several key areas for improvement. Regular training for campus administrators is needed to establish a common understanding of MTSS principles. This training could also include defining common vocabulary and terms used on campuses for implementing and maintaining MTSS with fidelity. Because all counselors and administrators stated that their prior knowledge guided their understanding and decision-making regarding implementing MTSS, establishing norms for the district and what implementation should look like on each campus is imperative. Creating a method of communication, other than a Canvas course, at the start of each school year will also benefit all stakeholders. This communication would allow those with questions to refer to this document as needed.

The disconnect between prior knowledge and a lack of district guidance creates a need for better communication and collaboration. Counselors have been instructed to create a counseling office model aligning with their administrator's campus goals. However, if the administrator and counselors are not on the same page regarding such a large construct, implementing MTSS will be challenging. Campus leaders will need more guidance from district leadership about what their counseling counterparts can or cannot do within this process.

Outlining this with explicit instructions and expectations as to who initiates each step will help connect this area of disjoint.

Limitations

Because I have a strong interest in MTSS implementations in this Texas school district, my interpretations of the findings may have influenced my beliefs. First, I am currently working in the district. I began this journey as a counseling leader, and during my doctoral studies, I transitioned to the role of campus assistant principal. While interviewing participants, I often referenced my understanding of their struggles, implying I had access to information that may not have been presented. Their responses and my recommendations are subject to biases from personal experiences and anecdotal situations from participants.

Another limitation was the sample size. All recruiting occurred from the front-facing email addresses found on the district websites. I sent emails to all participants through my Texas Christian University email address, which identified me. Some people chose to participate because they knew me personally and were willing to be more open than others who did not. I knew some participants before working in this district, and they were willing to share their prior knowledge based on the understanding that I understood what they were referring to during the interviews. However, there were no prior conversations regarding the interview questions.

When creating my research questions, I intended to have more than one district leader respond to my email request for interview participants. Two district office personnel responded to my email, but only one could complete the interview. I changed the participant wording to encompass district and campus leadership so as not to reveal the administrator who volunteered.

Future Research

After analyzing this research, future researchers could broaden the lens to include teachers, interventionists, and social workers. Principals should be more informed at the secondary level, and providing an opportunity for principals to learn more about comprehensive counseling programs at the secondary level is a significant need. In elementary schools, the administrative teams have proven they can work closely together due to fewer administrative team members on a campus. However, at the secondary level, specifically high school campuses, at least four administrators and five counselors could try to collaborate. Understanding all stakeholder roles within the scope of the MTSS process and their ability to support students could lead to additional information for helping all students and supporting teachers in identifying students in need of additional supports.

Longitudinal studies on the impact of MTSS training could occur. More research is needed to investigate the long-term effects of professional development on staff understanding and application of MTSS at the secondary level in this school district. I want to explore more research on the intersection of the MTSS framework, campus mission, and comprehensive counseling framework to understand their alignment and integration better. Comparative studies at the district level could identify practices for supporting and sustaining MTSS, with potential leadership structures, communication systems, and staffing models district-wide.

Sensemaking and leadership in education reform was an emerging theme, which could lead to exploratory studies regarding sensemaking theory about how educational leaders interpret reform efforts like MTSS (Weick, 1995). Exploring how professionals' personal experiences or leadership styles shape their understanding and implementation of systemic change. This

research could help the district office determine a starting point in this school district to identify gaps in understanding and next steps.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the intricacies of school counselors' understandings, experiences, and roles in leading or facilitating the MTSS process in a large suburban North Texas secondary setting. Based on data analysis from nine interviews, the research yielded three findings.

First, there is a need for clearly defined roles from the top down to provide the foundational structures to implement the MTSS framework. Second, how counseling leaders and administrators understand each other's roles plays a key part in implementing MTSS at the campus level. Third, the absence of successes in implementing MTSS should raise concerns with district-level administrators. The findings supported existing research that defined sensemaking. Sensemaking allows understanding from prior knowledge and experiences, as proven with the MTSS framework. Campuses were implementing what they knew as MTSS as opposed to district leadership's vision of MTSS.

Semistructured interviews provided robust information for understanding participants' sensemaking decisions. The interviews lasted an average of 75 minutes, which resulted in quality reflections that revealed the lack of cohesiveness in this sizeable suburban district, causing confusion and sometimes blatant disregard for implementing such an extensive framework on campus. When the central office of a large school district is faced with large tasks, support for staffing the MTSS office is greatly needed. Establishing organization, resources, and systemic tools could promote knowledge sharing and help create support that captures all students, impacting test scores and behaviors that sometimes seem impossible.

The lack of clear roles revealed that not all stakeholders communicate expectations for implementing a task intended to support all students. Future research in this area would greatly benefit implementing a supporting framework and including the appropriate stakeholders to create a foundational framework that includes communication, collaboration, and accessible resources to guide understanding.

REFERENCES

Amatea, E. S., & Clark, M. A. (2005). Changing schools, changing counselors: A qualitative study of school administrators' conceptions of the school counselor role. *Professional School Counseling*, *9*(1), 16–27. https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759X0500900101

American School Counselor Association. (2012). *The ASCA National Model: A framework for school counseling programs* (3rd ed.). Alexandria, VA: Author.

American School Counselor Association. (2019). *ASCA national model: A framework for school counseling programs*.

Barnett, J., Baker, E., Elman, N., Schoener, G. (2007). In pursuit of wellness: the self-care imperative. Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 38, 603-612.

Belser, C. T., Shillingford, M. A., & Joe, J. R. (2016). The ASCA model and a multitiered system of supports: A framework to support students of color with problem behavior. *The Professional Counselor*, *6*(3), 251–262. https://doi.org/10.15241/cb.6.3.251

Bender, W. (2009). *Beyond the RTI pyramid: Implementation issues for the first five years*. Solution Tree.

Bertrand, M., & Marsh, J. A. (2015). Teachers' sensemaking of data and implications for equity. *American Educational Research Journal*, *52*(5), 861–893. https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831215599251

Betters-Bubon, J., Pianta, R., Sweeney, D., & Goodman-Scott, E. (2022). Antiracism Starts With Us: School Counselor Critical Reflection Within an Multitiered Systems of Support Framework. *Professional School Counseling*, *26*(1a). https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759X221086747 (Original work published 2022)

Bettney, L. (2017). Reflecting on self-care practices during clinical psychology training and beyond. *Reflective Practice*, *18*(3), 369–380. https://doi.org/10.1080/14623943.2017.1294532

Bradshaw, C. P., Koth, C. W., Bevans, K. B., Ialongo, N., & Leaf, P. J. (2008). The impact of school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) on the organizational health of elementary schools. *School Psychology Quarterly*, *23*(4), 462–473. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0012883

Brundage, A., Hardcastle, B., Justice, K., & Jenkins, J. (2016). Implementing a multitiered system of supports at the secondary level [Presentation]. Florida PS/RTI team.

Bryan, J., Kim, J., & Liu, C. (2022). School counseling college-going culture: Counselors' influence on students' college-going decisions. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 100*, 39-55.

Callender, W. A. (2014). *Using RTI in secondary schools: A training manual for successful implementation*. SAGE Publications. http://doi.org/10.4135/9781452290522

Campbell, C. A., & Dahir, C. A. (1997). *Sharing the vision: The national standards for school counseling programs*. American School Counselor Association. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED457463

Cressey, J. M., Whitcomb, S. A., McGilvray-Rivet, S. J., Morrison, R. J., & Shander-Reynolds, K. J. (2014). Handling PBIS with care: Scaling up to school-wide implementation. *Professional School Counseling*, *18*(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759X0001800104

Creswell, J. W. & Poth, C. N (2018). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (Fourth edition.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Dahir, C. A., Burnham, J., & Stone, C. (2009). Listen to the voices: School counselors and comprehensive school counseling programs. *Professional School Counseling*, *12*(3), 182–192. http://www.jstor.org/stable/42732775

Datnow, A., Guerra, A. W., Cohen, S. R., Kennedy, B. C., & Lee, J. (2023). Teacher sensemaking in an early education research–practice partnership. *Teachers College Record*, *125*(2), 66–98. https://doi.org/10.1177/01614681231161391

Dee, T. S., & Jacob, B. (2011). The impact of No Child Left Behind on student achievement. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, *30*(3), 418–446. https://doi.org/10.1002/pam.20586

Dodson T. Advocacy and Impact: A Comparison of Administrators' Perceptions of the High School Counselor Role. *Professional school counseling*. 2009;12(6):480-487. doi:10.1177/2156759X0901200606Donohue et al., 2016

Dufour, R., Dufour, R., Eaker, R., & Many, T. (2010). *Learning by doing: A handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work* (2nd ed.). Solution Tree

Dulaney, S., Hallam, P., & Wall, G. (2013). Superintendent perceptions of multitiered systems of support (MTSS): Obstacles and opportunities for school system reform. *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice*, *10*(2), 30–45. https://cacollaborative.org/sites/default/files/7.2.%20Dulaney_et_al_2013_Superintendent_perceptions_of_MTSS.pdf

Durrance, S. (2023). *Implementing MTSS in secondary schools: Challenges and strategies*. SERVE Center at UNC Greensboro.

Freeman, J., Simonsen, B., McCoach, D. B., Sugai, G., Lombardi, A., & Horner, R. (2016). Relationship between school-wide positive behavior interventions and supports and academic, attendance, and behavior outcomes in high schools. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, *18*(1), 41–51. https://doi.org/10.1177/1098300715580992

Goodman-Scott E, Grothaus T. SCHOOL COUNSELORS' ROLES IN RAMP AND PBIS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION (PART TWO). *Professional school counseling*. 2017;21(1):130-141. doi:10.5330/1096-2409-21.1.130Goodman-Scott & Ockerman, 2019

Goodman-Scott, E. (2014). Maximizing school counselors' efforts by implementing school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports: A case study from the field. *Professional School Counseling*, *17*(1), 111–119. https://doi.org/10.5330/prsc.17.1.518021r2x6821660

Goodman-Scott, E., Betters-Bubon, J., & Donohue, P. (2016). Aligning comprehensive school counseling programs and positive behavioral interventions and supports to maximize school counselors' efforts. *Professional School Counseling*, *19*, 57–67. https://doi.org/10.5330/1096-2409-19.1.57

Goodman-Scott, E., Edirmanasinghe, N. A., Moe, J., & Boulden, R. (2022). Assessing the influence of multitiered systems of support training on school counselors' perceptions of school counseling activities: Results of a national study. *Professional School Counseling*, *26*(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759X221138232

Goodman-Scott, E., Sink, C. A., Cholewa, B. E., & Burgess, M. (2018). An ecological view of school counselor ratios and student academic outcomes: A national investigation. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, *96*(4), 388–398. https://doi.org/10.1002/jcad.12221

Grissom, J. A., Loeb, S., & Master, B. (2013). Effective instructional time use for school leaders: Longitudinal evidence from observations of principals. *Educational Researcher*, *42*(8), 433–444. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X13510020

Guilford Public Schools (n.d.). *Scientific research-based interventions (SRBI) handbook*. https://www.guilfordps.org/SRBI_Handbook/

Gysbers NC, Henderson P. *Developing & Managing Your School Guidance & Counseling Program. Fifth Edition*. American Counseling Association; 2012.Gysbers, 1990

Gysbers NC, Lapan RT. Improving school guidance programs: a framework for program, personnel, and results evaluation. *Journal of counseling and development*. 1992;70(May/Jun 92):565-570.Gysbers, N. C. (2001). School guidance and counseling in the 21st century: Remember the past into the future. *Professional School Counseling*, *5*(2), 96–105.

Hallinger, P. (2010). Developing instructional leadership. In B. Davies & M. Brundrett (Eds.), *Developing successful leadership* (pp. 61–76). Springer.

Hatch, T., & Bowers, J. (2005). The ASCA National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs. Second Edition.

Herr, E. L. (2001). The impact of national policies, economics, and school reform on comprehensive guidance programs. *Professional School Counseling*, *4*(4), 236–245.

Jimerson, S. R., Burns, M. K., & VanDerHeyden, A. M. (2016). From response to intervention to multi-tiered systems of support: Advances in the science and practice of assessment and intervention. In S. R. Jimerson, M. K. Burns, & A. M. VanDerHeyden (Eds.), *Handbook of response to intervention: The science and practice of multi-tiered systems of support* (pp. 1–6). Springer.

Johnson, E., Mellard, D. F., Fuchs, D., & McKnight, M. A. (2006). *Responsiveness to intervention (RTI): How to do it*. National Research Center on Learning Disabilities.

Lesh, J. J., Roberts, C., Cavitt, D., & Morales, D. L. (2021). Urban secondary school administrators and faculty perceptions of multitiered system of supports/response to intervention. *NASSP Bulletin*, *105*(4), 225–249. https://doi.org/10.1177/01926365211060798

Marlowe, A. (2021). *Multi-tiered system of supports: A case study examining effective MTSS implementation at the middle school level* (Publication No. 28543467) [Doctoral dissertation, Gardner-Webb University]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

Merriam-Webster. (2025a). *Belief*. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/belief

Merriam-Webster. (2025b). *Comprehension*. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/comprehension

Merriam-Webster. (2025c). *Experiences*. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/experience

Merriam-Webster. (2025d). *Understanding*. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/understanding

Miles, M.B., Huberman, A.M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Mitchell, B. S., Stormont, M., & Gage, N. A. (2011). Tier Two interventions implemented within the context of a tiered prevention framework. *Behavioral Disorders*, *36*(4), 241–261. https://doi.org/10.1177/019874291103600404

Natividad, L. D. (2010). *The impact of conflicting perceptions on the role and function of high school guidance counselors* (Publication No. 3432064) [Doctoral dissertation, University of California, Irvine, and California State University, Fullerton]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

Patrikakou, E., Ockerman, M. S., & Hollenbeck, A. F. (2020). Perceptions of leadership and clarity of roles within multitiered systems: A structured equation model. *Journal of Counselor Preparation and Supervision*, *13*(4), Article 7. https://research.library.kutztown.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1411&context=jcps

Seminerio, C. (2023). *Examining elementary general education teachers' understanding of Tier 1 in an MTSS framework* (Publication No. 30425193) [Doctoral dissertation, College of Saint Elizabeth]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

Sugai, G., & Simonsen, B. (2012, June 19). *Positive behavioral interventions and supports: History, defining features, and misconceptions*. Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports. https://www.pbis.org/resource/positive-behavioral-interventions-and-supports-history-defining-features-and-misconceptions

Texas Education Agency. (2015, December 7). *Comprehensive, developmental guidance and counseling program for Texas public schools* (4th ed.). https://tea.texas.gov/academics/learning-support-and-programs/school-guidance-and-counseling/school-guidance-and-counseling-guide-for-program-development

Turner, D. (2022, January 7). *Constant comparative method in qualitative analysis*. Quirkos. https://www.quirkos.com/blog/post/constant-comparative-comparison-in-qualitativeanalysis/

Weingarten, Z., Zumeta Edmonds, R., & Arden, S. (2020). Better together: Using MTSS as a structure for building school–family partnerships. *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, *53*(2), 122–130. https://doi.org/10.1177/0040059920937733

Ziomek-Daigle, J., Goodman-Scott, E., Cavin, J., & Donohue, P. (2016). Integrating a multi-tiered system of supports with comprehensive school counseling programs. *The Professional Counselor*, *6*(3), 220–232. https://doi.org/10.15241/jzd.6.3.220

APPENDIX A: COUNSELOR INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

This is an interview about your lens as a secondary school counseling leader and understanding your role in the MTSS process. As a researcher, I am interested in hearing your voice, including parts of the MTSS process you know and the parts that you may not be so familiar with. I am going to ask you to think of your knowledge as a secondary leader regarding your beliefs regarding your role as the facilitator of MTSS, but also how you think others view your role. I will guide you through the semistructured interview so that we finish it all in just over an hour.

This interview is for research purposes only, and its main goal is simply to hear your story as a secondary counseling leader. There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. Instead, I would like you simply to tell me about your understanding of MTSS and describe your role as a leader in MTSS. I would also like to hear what you think school leaders understand your role in MTSS facilitation to be. Everything you say is voluntary, anonymous, and confidential.

Do you have any questions?

Counselor Demographic Questions

Let's start with some simple questions so I can gain an understanding of your counseling experience.

1. How many years have you been a counselor?
2. In that time, how many years have you been a secondary counselor (Grades 6–12)?
3. How long have you held your current role?
4. Tell me a little about the school where you are a counselor in terms of the grade levels, the size, and the student population you serve.

Counselor MTSS Questions

I'd like to hear about your role in the MTSS process on your campus.

1. First, what is MTSS? If you were telling someone from outside of education about MTSS, what would you say?
2. What do you think other educators understand about MTSS?
3. What do you think other educators get wrong about MTSS?
4. How did you first become familiar with MTSS, and what has been your experience in implementing it?
5. Could you outline your role as a counselor within the MTSS framework? What specific responsibilities do you have?
6. How do you collaborate with other school staff (teachers, administrators) in the MTSS process?
7. In your opinion, what are the key contributions counselors bring to the MTSS process, and do these contributions support student success?
8. How would you describe the involvement of school leaders in the MTSS process from your perspective?
9. What kind of support or guidance do you receive from school leaders regarding MTSS implementation?
10. What training, if any, did you receive regarding MTSS?
11. What are some of the challenges you have encountered in your role within the MTSS framework, and how have you addressed them?
12. Can you share a specific example of a successful MTSS intervention or implementation that you were involved in? What made it successful?

13. Looking ahead, how do you envision the role of counselors evolving within the MTSS framework in your school?
14. If you could wave a magic wand and change anything about how MTSS happens in your school or district, what would you change?

APPENDIX B: SCHOOL LEADER PROTOCOL

This is an interview about your lens as a secondary leader and understanding school counselor roles in the MTSS process. As a researcher, I am interested in hearing your voice, including parts of the MTSS process you know and the parts that you may not be so familiar with. I am going to ask you to think of your knowledge as a secondary leader regarding your beliefs as well as a stakeholder within the MTSS process, but also how you think others view your role. I will guide you through the semistructured interview so that we finish it all in just over an hour.

This interview is for research purposes only, and its main goal is simply to hear your story as a secondary administrator. There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. Instead, I would like you simply to tell me about your understanding of MTSS and describe your role as a leader in MTSS. I would also like to hear what you think school counseling leaders understand their roles to be in MTSS. Everything you say is voluntary, anonymous, and confidential.

Do you have any questions?

School Leader Demographic Questions

Let's start with some simple questions so I can gain an understanding of your leadership experience.

1. How many years have you been an administrator?
2. In that time, how many years have you been a secondary administrator (Grades 6–12)?
3. How long have you held your current role?
4. Tell me a little about the school where you work in terms of the grade levels, the size, and the student population.

School Leader MTSS Questions

I'd like to hear about your role in the MTSS process on your campus.

1. How would you define MTSS (multitiered system of supports) and its significance?
2. From your perspective, what are the primary goals or objectives of MTSS?
3. How do you define the counselor's role in implementing MTSS?
4. What is the counselor's role on your campus regarding implementing MTSS?
5. What role do you play as a school leader in the implementation and oversight of MTSS?
6. How do you ensure that MTSS principles are integrated into the overall school strategy and policies?
7. How would you describe the involvement of counselors in the MTSS process from your viewpoint?
8. In what ways do school counselors contribute to the success of MTSS initiatives at your school?
9. How do you foster collaboration among different stakeholders (counselors, teachers, support staff) to support the MTSS framework?
10. Can you provide examples of successful collaborations or initiatives related to MTSS that you have seen or been involved in?
11. What are some of the main challenges you have encountered in implementing & maintaining MTSS at your school, and how have you addressed them?
12. What opportunities do you see for enhancing the effectiveness of MTSS in your building?

13. Looking forward, how do you envision the evolution of MTSS within your school district? Are there any changes or innovations you believe are necessary?
14. What are your priorities for improving the support systems for students through MTSS in the coming years?

APPENDIX C: DISTRICT LEADER PROTOCOL

This is an interview about your lens as a secondary leader and understanding school counselor roles in the MTSS process. As a researcher, I am interested in hearing your voice, including parts of the MTSS process you know and the parts that you may not be so familiar with. I am going to ask you to think of your knowledge as a secondary leader regarding your beliefs as well as a stakeholder within the MTSS process, but also how you think others view your role. I will guide you through the semistructured interview so that we finish it all in just over an hour.

This interview is for research purposes only, and its main goal is simply to hear your story as a secondary administrator. There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. Instead, I would like you simply to tell me about your understanding of MTSS and describe your role as a leader in MTSS. I would also like to hear what you think school counseling leaders understand about their roles in MTSS. Everything you say is voluntary, anonymous, and confidential.

Do you have any questions?

District Leader Demographic Questions

Let's start with some simple questions so I can gain an understanding of your leadership experience.

1. How many years have you been an administrator or in the central office?
2. In that time, how many years have you been a secondary administrator (Grades 6–12)?
3. How long have you held your current role?

4. Tell me a little about the school where you work in terms of the grade levels, the size, and the student population.

District Leader MTSS Questions

I'd like to hear about your role in the MTSS process in your district.

15. How would you define MTSS (multitiered system of supports) and its significance?
16. From your perspective, what are the primary goals or objectives of MTSS?
17. How do you define the counselor's role in implementing MTSS?
18. How would you describe the involvement of counselors in the MTSS process from your viewpoint?
19. What role do you play as a district leader in the implementation and oversight of MTSS?
20. How do you ensure that MTSS principles are integrated into the overall school strategy and policies in this district?
21. Do you feel that central office stakeholders can clearly define MTSS?
22. Are you able to foster collaboration among different stakeholders (counselors, teachers, support staff) to support the MTSS framework?
23. What are some of the main challenges you have encountered in implementing and maintaining MTSS at your school, and how have you addressed them?
24. What opportunities do you see for enhancing the effectiveness of MTSS district-wide?
25. Looking forward, how do you envision the evolution of MTSS within your school district? Are there any changes or innovations you believe are necessary?

26. What are your priorities for improving the support systems for students through MTSS in the coming years?

APPENDIX D: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Informed Consent to Participate in Research

Title of Research: Perceptions of Administrators and School Counselors on Leading Multitiered Systems of Support
Principal Investigator: Dr. Jo Beth Jimerson (TCU College of Education)
Co-Investigator: Mary Cabrera, Ed.D. Candidate (TCU College of Education)

Overview: You are invited to participate in a research study. This research study explores how secondary school counselors, campus, and district administrators understand multitiered system of supports (MTSS), their various roles in the MTSS process, and successes and challenges related to secondary implementation of MTSS. In order to participate, you must be a certified school counselor or administrator in Plano ISD with secondary experience.

Study Details: This study is being conducted at mutually convenient sites (in person or, if the participant wishes, online via Zoom).

The interviews will be conducted at a mutually convenient site (in person or, if the participant wishes, online via Zoom). There is no sponsor for this research. The participants will complete a 60–90-minute interview and will be asked to share exemplar documents pertinent to the MTSS process (collecting and de-identifying exemplar documents is estimated to take approximately 20 minutes). Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. If questions arise during transcription, the student researcher may request a brief follow-up interview (not to exceed 20 minutes) for clarification. Total estimated time for participants may range from 80 minutes (interview and document collection, no follow-up) to 130 minutes (longer interview, document collection, plus follow-up interview)

Participants: You are being asked to take part because you are a certified school counselor or administrator in Plano ISD with secondary experience, or because you are a district administrator tasked with supporting secondary schools. If you decide to be in this study, you will be one of *7-15* participants in this research study at TCU.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation is voluntary. You do not have to participate and may stop your participation at any time. There is no loss of benefits or opportunities if participants decide to stop after starting interviews.

Confidentiality: Even if we publish the findings from this study, we will keep your information private and confidential. Anyone with authority to look at your records must keep them confidential.

The purpose of this study is to explore how secondary school counselors and campus and district administrators understand multitiered system of supports (MTSS), their various roles in the MTSS process, and successes and challenges related to secondary implementation of MTSS.

TCU
IRB#2024-276
Approved on 11-12-2024

What is the purpose of the research?

The purpose of this study is to explore how secondary school counselors and campus and district administrators understand multitiered system of supports (MTSS), their various roles in the MTSS process, and successes and challenges related to secondary implementation of MTSS. This study will be guided by three overarching questions:

1. What informs counselors' and leaders' understanding of MTSS?
2. How do counselors and leaders understand their roles, and the roles of other key personnel in the current MTSS implementation effort?
3. What do counselors and leaders identify as successes and challenges as related to the district-level implementation of MTSS?

What are the risks of participating in this study, and how will they be minimized?

We do not believe there are any risks from participating in this research that differ from the risks you encounter in everyday life.

What is my involvement in participating in this study?

If you choose to participate, you would complete an initial 60–90 minutes, with the potential of a follow-up interview for clarification purposes, not to exceed 20 minutes. You would also be invited to collect and share exemplar documents (e.g., guidance documents, training documents, process flowcharts) that you use to communicate about MTSS implementation. We estimate it will take 20 minutes to determine which documents you wish to share. Therefore, the total time to participate in the study would range from 80 to 130 minutes.

All participants will have their interviews audio recorded. You will be given the opportunity to agree to the recording. Only the Lead PI and I will have access to these recordings, and transcripts will be confidential. A pseudonym will be used to mask any identifiable information, and the records will be maintained for 3 years after the Final Report is submitted to the IRB. All information will be destroyed via shredding or by the deletion of the TCU box, which is a password-protected entity through TCU. We may learn information about your roles on campus, but this will not be shared with anyone.

Are there any alternatives, and can I withdraw?

There is no alternative way to participate in this study, though participation is entirely voluntary.

What informs counselors' and leaders' understanding of MTSS?

How do counselors and leaders understand their roles in relation to other key personnel in the current implementation effort?

What do counselors and leaders identify as successes and challenges as related to the district-level implementation?

You can also withdraw from the study prior to, during, or after an interview. If you decide to withdraw from the study after initially agreeing to participate, you would need to provide written notice that you are withdrawing from the study to the student researcher or lead researcher in writing (i.e., by email). If, after completing an interview, you want to withdraw consent and withdraw your data from the study entirely, you must provide written notice (via email) must be provided to the student researcher or PI within 10 calendar days of completing the interview. If you do not provide notice of withdrawal within 10 days of completing an interview, your data will be used in the study, as disentangling your data from the researcher's analysis and synthesis after writing has begun would not be possible.

What are the benefits of participating in this study?

Although you will not directly benefit from being in this study, others might benefit because it will help our district administration provide common language, as well as unified supports to help our secondary campuses provide support for all students in Grades 6–12.

Will I be compensated for participating in this study?

There is no compensation for participating in this study.

What are my costs to participate in the study?

There will be no additional costs to you as a result of being in this study.

How will my confidentiality be protected?

Every effort will be made to limit the use and disclosure of your personal information, including research study records, to people who have a need to review this information. We cannot promise complete secrecy. Your records may be reviewed by authorized University personnel or other individuals who will be bound by the same provisions of confidentiality.

What will happen to the information collected about me after the study is over?

We will not keep your research data to use for future research or other purpose. Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be kept secure and stored separately from the research data collected as part of the project.

Who should I contact if I have questions regarding the study or concerns regarding my rights as a study participant?

You can contact Dr. Jimerson at j.jimerson@tcu.edu or 817-257-6777 with any questions about the study.

Dr. Brie Diamond, Chair, TCU Institutional Review Board, 817-257-6152 or b.diamond@tcu.edu; or Dr. Floyd Wormley, Vice Provost of Research, research@tcu.edu

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. A copy will also be kept with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I understand what the study is about, and my questions so far have been answered. I agree to take part in this study.

VITA

Plano Independent School District — **August 2021–Present**
Lead Counselor/Assistant Principal

Lovejoy Independent School District — **August 2015–2021**
AP English Teacher and Volleyball Coach
Lead Counselor/Director of College & Career

AVID National Consultant — **September 2016–2020**
Western Division Consultant

Grand Prairie Independent School District — **July 2008–2015**
AVID Site Coordinator
Speech/English Teacher/Coach
Academic Coordinator/Dual Credit Enrollment Specialist/
Learning Experience Coordinator