UCLA

CA Multi-Tiered System of Support Implementation Pilot Program

Title

Scaling Equity: Unfulfilled Promises and Lessons From California's MTSS Initiative

Permalink

https://escholarship.org/uc/item/82b6b80n

Authors

Huff, Brian
Bishop, Joseph

Publication Date

2025-06-11

Supplemental Material

https://escholarship.org/uc/item/82b6b80n#supplemental

Data Availability

The data associated with this publication are available upon request.

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

SCALING EQUITY:

UNFULFILLED PROMISES AND LESSONS FROM CALIFORNIA'S MULTI-TIERED SYSTEM OF SUPPORT (MTSS) INITIATIVE

Final Summative Report

Brian Huff, Ph.D.

Joseph Bishop, Ph.D.

UCLA Center for the Transformation of Schools

CALIFORNIA MTSS

CONTENTS

03 **Introduction**

11 **CA MTSS Phase II School Characteristics**

Suspension Rates

Chronic Absenteeism Rates

Enrollment Rates

Achievement Rates

24 **Year 5 Qualitative Findings**

Social-Emotional Supports

Behavior Supports

Academic Supports

Race-Based Inequities

31 **Year 5 Challenges**

Time

Rural/Urban Differences and School Size

Funding and Staff Capacity

33 **2018-2023 Longitudinal Qualitative Findings**

Baseline Data: Key Themes

Pilot Years: Key Themes

36 **CA MTSS → CA Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP)**

38 **Recommendations**

40 **Conclusion**

41 **References**

INTRODUCTION

This report shares findings from qualitative data collection and analysis of the California Scaling Up Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) Statewide (SUMS) for Phases 2A and 2B during the school years (SYs) 2018-19 through 2022-23. It presents findings based on publicly available data and approximately 60 administrator interviews conducted by the UCLA Center for the Transformation of Schools (CTS) research team over the first two phases of the CA MTSS pilot.

CA MTSS is a "comprehensive framework that aligns academic, behavioral, social and emotional learning, and mental health supports in a fully integrated system of support for the benefit of all students."[1] CA MTSS Phase II was centered on collaboration between county offices of education, coaches and school sites to help them implement different components of the framework at scale guided by implementation science. Research suggests this not a new idea, but California's investment is unique in its size and scale (Freeman et al., 2015). Earlier research on CA MTSS (Phase I) implementation has explored the relationship between fidelity in implementation and its potential impact on student achievement (Choi et al., 2022). However, that research was limited in scope.

Previous studies did not assess whether MTSS implementation influenced school climate outcomes—such as chronic absenteeism or out-of-school suspensions—for specific student groups, particularly students of color, as this paper does. They also lacked qualitative insights from administrators working to scale MTSS across entire school systems. While Choi et al. (2022) included an analysis of individual student outcomes for participating schools, the earlier phases of CA MTSS were designed to support system-wide adoption of the framework, rather than implementation at the individual school level.

The analysis for this report was guided by a desire to understand the implementation process of the CA MTSS pilot program and its potential impact on student learning and school climate outcomes (e.g., attendance, suspensions) from the 2018-19 to 2022-23 SYs. Since 2016, California has invested more than $200 million in scaling and sustaining the CA MTSS framework through direct grants and aligned initiatives supporting academic, behavioral, and social-emotional development (California Department of Education, 2023; Orange County Department of Education, CDE, 2024; Legislative Analyst's Office, 2023). This paper analyzes findings from a Phase II of the initiative, a $15 million investment.

Findings from this report are relevant for current and future California large-scale educational equity efforts, such as the California Community School Partnership Program (CCSPP), a $4.1 billion statewide initiative, or smaller scale efforts like the Genuine Empathy & Nurturing Intellect of Underserved Students (GENIUS) Initiative, also known as the Equity Lead Grant. The Equity Multiplier funding has allocated approximately $300 million across 57 of California's 58 counties to 1,008 schools to support qualifying schools in closing opportunity gaps for our most marginalized students.

Suggested Citation: Huff, B., & Bishop, J. P. (2025). *Scaling equity: Unfulfilled promises and lessons from California's Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) initiative.* Center for the Transformation of Schools, School of Education & Information Studies, University of California, Los Angeles.

1 The CA MTSS Framework can be accessed at https://drive.google.com/file/d/1jvy6fZpSshkn7K7YG_Ql1Fd-gxspbLM8/view

Table 1. California State Investments in Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS), 2016–2024

Year	Amount	Purpose	Lead Agencies/Notes
2016	$10 million	Initial investment to scale CA MTSS framework	Orange County Department of Education and Butte County Office of Education
2018	$15 million	Expansion of MTSS infrastructure and district implementation	State allocation
2021–2022	Not specified (COVID relief)	One-time COVID funding aligned with MTSS for social-emotional learning (SEL) and learning acceleration	Included in Governor's Education Recovery Strategy
2022–2023	$100 million+ (one-time)	Continued scaling of MTSS focused on equity, whole-child supports, and inclusive practices	Included in enacted state budget
2023–2024	$100 million+ (estimated)	Equity Multiplier and community schools initiatives referencing MTSS-aligned frameworks	Statewide equity and systems transformation funding

The Role of UCLA's Center for the Transformation of Schools in CA MTSS Phase II

UCLA CTS served as the lead research entity for CA MTSS during an unprecedented time for California schools, not only as a result of state wildfires (especially during the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 SYs), but also the pandemic for almost two school years (Bishop & Howard, 2024). However, the Center's role was much larger than that. CA MTSS Phase II was conceptualized with CTS leadership and then Governor Brown as a direct response to state policy changes around willful defiance. The most recently adopted legislation linked to willful defiance, Senate Bill (SB) 274, represents several legislative efforts to permanently ban suspensions for "willful defiance" as a justification for suspending students in all grades in all California public schools, including charter schools. Historically, willful defiance has disproportionately impacted young people of color in the state. According to the new law, teachers may remove a student from a specific class for unruly behavior, but the youth would not be suspended from school; instead, school administrators will determine appropriate and timely in-school interventions or support for the student.

The idea behind CA MTSS and the concept of systems of support was that, even as state policy mandates represented a shift away from exclusionary practices (i.e., SB 274), educators and school systems still needed the tools and resources to change adult mindsets and mental models, moving away from an over-reliance on suspensions specifically and exclusionary practices more broadly. What began as a white paper from CTS leadership on an iterative, co-designed school improvement science model to help local school sites implement systems of support later evolved into a state budget allocation of $15 million for UCLA CTS to co-lead CA MTSS Phase II with the Orange County Department of Education and the Butte County Office of Education. CTS had never previously collaborated with either county office before CA MTSS. However, both were identified by the state as the lead MTSS county offices of education as part of the statewide system of support.

CA MTSS Seed Network

UCLA CTS not only co-designed the CA MTSS Phase II model, but also facilitated a network of schools called the Seed Network. The CA MTSS School & Community Transformation Seed Grants were distributed to individual educators, grade-level teams, and community organizations partnering with schools and districts to test innovative models or to better understand the efficacy of existing efforts that align with the CA MTSS framework and the CA School Climate and Conditions Work Group. The network comprised over 22 schools over two school years (2021-22 & 2022-23). Network meetings were structured to enable grantees to evaluate and enhance their efforts using the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) problem-solving model (PDSA Collaborative, n.d.). Additionally, the network meetings facilitated "mini" consultancies, with a participant serving as a presenter–providing updates on their site's improvement efforts, followed by sharing a specific question or area of need (if applicable). Fellow network participants would respond in real time to the question or area needed and, due to time constraints, would often continue the dialogue virtually through the chat box.

The problems of practice identified by network participants touched on an array of educational issues. These issues included:

- Increasing graduation rates for Black and Latine students
- Increasing enrollment of Black and Latine students in AP courses
- Decreasing disproportionality in special education referrals
- Supporting pregnant and parenting students
- Culturally relevant curriculum

2 The underlying theory of change and school based-implementation model based on the work of a collaborative statewide design team can be found here: https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1GFFBpogbOEgQ-AxM4v0foy7m2u0o-bRWGiqmGLlAZSv4/edit?slide=id.g5fadb27848_6_0#slide=id.g5fadb27848_6_0

Overall, grantees were able to make slight progress toward meeting their goals. However, in their year-end summaries, many grantees stated how the work done with the Seed Network was a catalyst for advocating for policy changes in their schools and districts. Providing grantees with support to track and monitor their progress with relevant data was seen as an invaluable tool by many grantees. For example, one grantee who aimed to decrease the percentage of students requiring Tier 2 and 3 support commented,

"The process of collecting data for this grant project and our PBIS training work brought about a better understanding of what we needed to collect in our incident reports, which, in turn, led to a 59% increase in incident reports from the first data set to the final set and an 85% increase from the second and final sets." (Grantee)

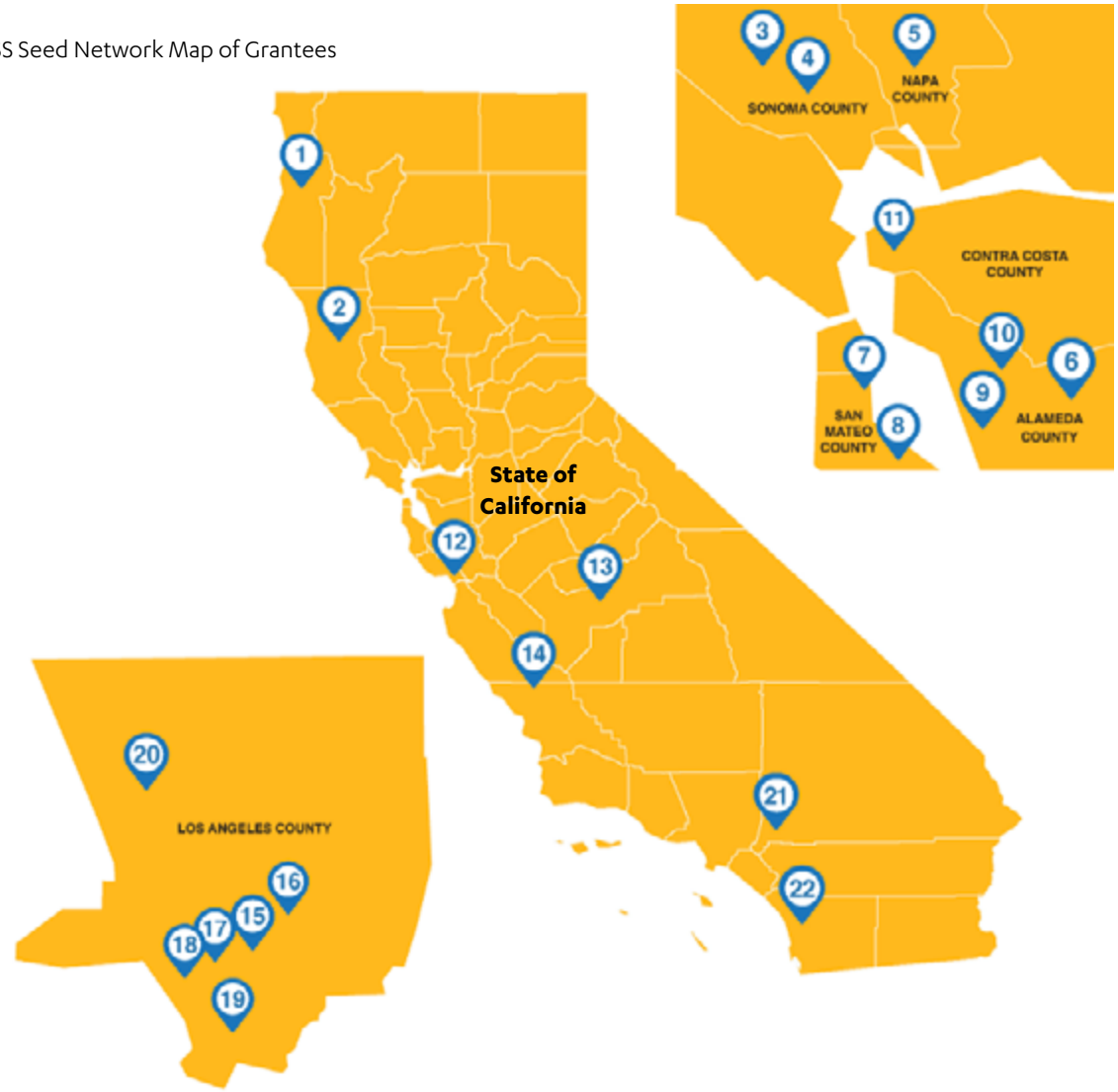
Grantees felt that the network provided them with resources (time and money) to intentionally engage in efforts to disrupt inequities within their school communities. Grantees who participated in the network for both years were able to scale their efforts in the second year and solidify the infrastructure required to engage in transformative work that supports historically marginalized students holistically. One grantee shared,

"Over the course of two years, over 200 students participated in credit recovery in small class sizes, receiving more intensive support from teachers and both breakfast and lunch. The grant also supports our "AP Success Cohort" initiative in which we invited African American, Latinx, and/or students from socioeconomically disadvantaged families to sign up for AP classes and receive support on Saturdays to continue in them without dropping." (Grantee)

CA MTSS Research Consortium

UCLA CTS also led a national research consortium of scholars and universities examining the impact of CA MTSS. That work led to 13 separate publications, exploring MTSS implementation on key populations like multilingual learners or foster youth, and evidence-based models like EQUIP, a classroom-based tool to collect data on student engagement.

Figure 1. CA MTSS Seed Network Map of Grantees



Humboldt County
1. Captain John Continuation High School

Mendocino County
2. Brookside Elementary School

Bay Area (see exploded map)
3. Hillcrest Middle School
4. Gravenstein Elementary School
5. Napa County Office of Education
6. Pleasanton Unified School District Office
7. The Bayshore School
8. Hillsdale High School
9. Tyrrell Elementary
10. Proctor Elementary School
11. Chavez Elementary, Dover Elementary, Lake Elementary

Santa Cruz County
12. E.A. Hall Middle School & Amesti Elementary

Fresno County
13. Sunnyside High School

San Luis Obispo County
14. Almond Acres Charter Academy

Los Angeles County (see exploded map)
15. Theodore Roosevelt Senior High School
16. Pasadena High School
17. UCLA Community School
18. Culver City High School
19. Magnolia Science Academy-3
20. Mission View Public Charter

San Bernardino County
21. Almeria Middle School

San Diego County
22. Orange Glen High School

The COVID Context & MTSS Implementation

Year five implementation of CA MTSS Phase II took place during the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years, representing two years when COVID-19 infection rates were at their highest. In-person instruction ended for most school sites between March 2020 and the following spring, equating to over 200 lost in-person instructional days (Bishop & Howard, 2024). Remote learning became the main means of instruction overnight and site coaching for CA MTSS was done virtually. Research suggests that remote learning conditions were inequitable for low-income students and students of color across the state during that period (Bishop & Howard, 2024; Davis et al., 2020; Fahle et. al., 2023; Horsford et al., 2021; Tai et al., 2021). It's important to acknowledge that the data and findings provide a window into the challenges associated with remote learning and broader efforts focused on school system transformation like CA MTSS.

The beginning of the pandemic, in March 2020, saw an unprecedented and unparalleled reality in the United States—the closure of public schools for safety concerns related to the virus. Within a matter of days upon recognizing the high transmission rate of the virus, students who attend public schools in the US were required to learn remotely due to the closing of schools—indefinitely. Without much notice or any significant advanced communication, schools were required to radically transform how they delivered educational services to students. This was true for participating CA MTSS school sites and systems as well.

This paper identifies patterns and findings around implementation of CA MTSS across all years of the initiative, based on UCLA CTS' qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis. The CA MTSS Phase 2A and 2B pilots included 35 schools from 26 districts across California as they implemented the CA MTSS framework at the school site level, focusing on school climate, positive behavioral supports, and social-emotional learning. The Phase 2A cohort consisted of 14 schools from seven districts, while the 2B cohort comprised 21 schools from 19 districts (see Table 2, Figures 2 and 3). The Orange County Department of Education, Butte County Office of Education, and UCLA CTS co-led the project.

Table 2. Schools and Districts across Phases of CA MTSS Implementation

Phase	Schools	Districts
2A	14	7
2B	21	19
Total	**35**	**26**

Figure 2. CA MTSS Phase 2A Map of Grantees

Mendocino County
1. Fort Bragg USD

Contra Costa County
2. Pittsburg USD

Los Angeles County
3. Pomona USD

San Bernardino County
4. Morongo USD

Kern County
5. Oroville City ESD

Sacramento County
6. Center Joint USD

Madera County
7. Madera USD

Figure 3. CA MTSS Phase 2B Map of Grantees

Mendocino County
1. South Bay Union Elementary School

Sonoma County
2. REACH Charter School
3. Forestville Academy
4. Windsor Middle School

Contra Costa County
5. Freedom High School

San Mateo County
6. The Bayshore School

Santa Clara County
7. Monroe Middle School

Monterey County
8. Rancho San Justo Middle School
9. North Monterey County High School

Los Angeles County
10. Purche Avenue Elementary School
11. Woodland Hills Elementary School

Orange County
12. La Paz Intermediate School

Lassen County
13. Johnstonville Elementary School

Shasta County
14. Anderson New Technology High School

Yuba County
15. Lindhurst High School

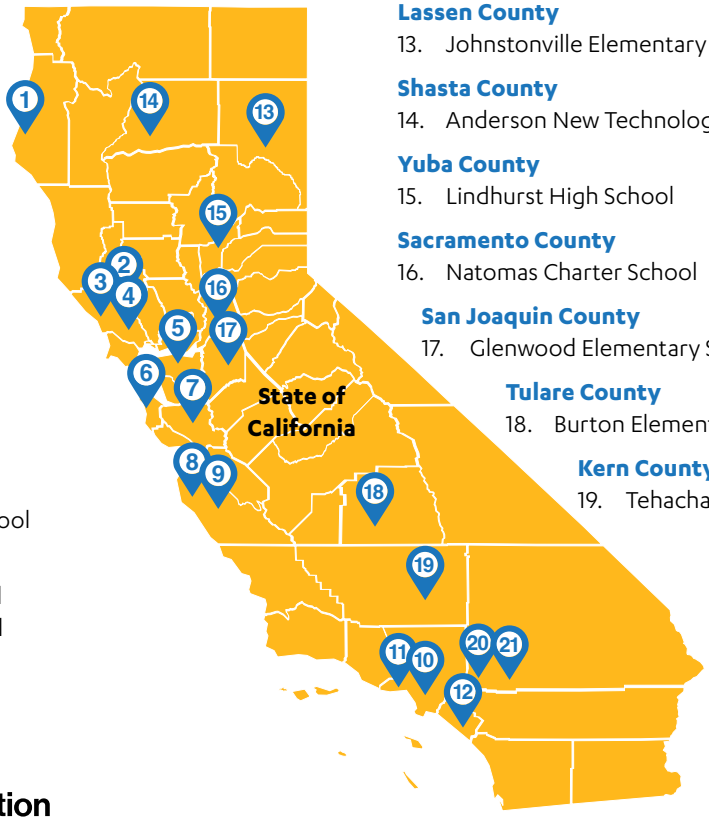
Sacramento County
16. Natomas Charter School

San Joaquin County
17. Glenwood Elementary School

Tulare County
18. Burton Elementary School

Kern County
19. Tehachapi High School

San Bernardino County
20. Kordyak Elementary School
21. Eisenhower High School



MTSS & Evidence on Exclusionary Practices in Schools

Education scholars and practitioners have suggested MTSS as a component of a framework for increasing school equity, particularly regarding in-school discipline (Gregory et al., 2017). An MTSS approach to student behavior combines Tier 1 supports—universal supports designed for all students—with more focused and intense Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports, utilizing prevention and intervention methods. Research has demonstrated that tiered systems of support (such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports [PBIS]) effectively address overall school discipline issues (see Welsh & Little, 2018, for a review).

Extensive evidence shows that exclusionary discipline practices (e.g., suspension, expulsion) can lead to adverse student outcomes in both academic and behavioral domains (Noltemeyer et al., 2015; Skiba et al., 2014). Such disciplinary responses remove students from the classroom, excluding young people from learning opportunities and perpetuating a cycle of underachievement (Skiba & Noguera, 2006). Nevertheless, suspensions and punitive responses remain common school responses to student behavior (California Department of Education [CDE], 2019).

Research has demonstrated that racial stereotypes influence teachers' perceptions of students' behavior and that negative stereotypes can shape teachers' responses to student behaviors across races, prompting them to respond more punitively to Black students (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). Exclusionary disciplinary responses are disproportionately applied to Black and American Indian students compared to their white and Asian counterparts. Nationally, Black students are three times more likely to be suspended than their white peers (Office for Civil Rights, 2016). In 2018–19, Black students comprised 5% of California's K–12 enrollment but accounted for 14% of all suspended students. American Indian students represented 0.5% of the state's enrollment but 1.1% of its suspended students. In contrast, white students comprised 23% of the enrollment but only 19% of those suspended. In the 2021-22 SY, Black students in California lost instructional days due to suspension at a disproportionate rate (30.7 days). This indicates that Black students lost approximately 20 more instructional days due to suspension than the average days lost for all students (10.3 days) (Civil Rights Project, 2023).

Research has also shown that schools must explicitly address issues of culture and race to decrease racial and ethnic gaps in discipline. Scholars suggest that a culturally conscious implementation of MTSS, coupled with approaches that explicitly target racial inequities (e.g., bias-aware classrooms, data-based inquiry for equity, culturally relevant and responsive teaching, inclusion of student and family voices on behavior causes and solutions), is necessary to decrease race-based inequities (Gregory et al., 2017; Welsh & Little, 2018).

Our research aimed to understand the processes, successes, and challenges schools faced in implementing the CA MTSS framework, a pilot model developed for a school-based approach to improving school climate conditions. We were also interested in determining whether and how school staff explicitly addressed issues of race and culture in their implementation of CA MTSS. We drew upon existing research related to the implementation of systems of support and promoting alternatives to exclusionary practices and policies.

CA MTSS PHASE II SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS

In this section, we present publicly available quantitative data from the California Department of Education to describe the characteristics of participating schools. We compared data from the 2018-19 and 2022-23 school years to examine changes in enrollment, suspensions, achievement (represented by California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress [CAASPP] scores for Math and ELA), and absenteeism during the pilot schools' participation in the CA MTSS Pilot. Each characteristic is also presented disaggregated by race. The 2018-19 SY was the year before the first year of Phase 2A schools' pilot year. Phase 2B schools' first year of participation in the CA MTSS Pilot was the 2021-22 SY.

Table 3. CA MTSS Phase II School Year Participation

School Year	Phase 2A	Phase 2B	Seed Network
2018-19	Baseline	Baseline	-
2019-20	Year 1	-	-
2020-21	Year 2	-	-
2021-22	Year 3	Year 1	Year 1
2022-23	Year 4	Year 2	Year 2

Out-of-School Suspension Rates

Suspension rates decreased statewide for most schools throughout both phases of the CA MTSS pilot. However, in 2020, CA Senate Bill 419 effectively banned suspensions for willful defiance in elementary and middle schools. This new law took effect in July 2020. The baseline rates reported in this document are from 2018-19 SY, one year before the new law went into effect, compared to 2022-23 SY, which is two years after the law became effective. Consequently, the change in suspension rates presented in the following section also reflects the impact of the enactment of CA Senate Bill 419 and cannot be solely attributed to the implementation of CA MTSS.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
SUSPENSION RATES

Suspension rates decreased for all groups across both phases for elementary schools in the CA MTSS pilot from 2018-19 to 2022-23, except for Black students in 2A elementary schools, where rates increased by 1.7%. However, the rates for Latine and white students declined at a similar rate across 2A elementary schools. The suspension rate for Black students rose from approximately 5% to 7% in Phase 2A. Consequently, Black student suspensions were more disproportionate in 2022-23 compared to white (3.7%) and Latine (2.1%) students in 2A elementary schools.

Suspension rates decreased across all groups in 2B elementary schools. However, the most significant decline occurred among Black students. While the overall suspension rate dropped by 1.2%, the rate for Black students fell by 2.5%.

Figure 4. CA MTSS Pilot Phase 2A Elementary School Suspension Rates, 2018-19–2022-23 SYs*

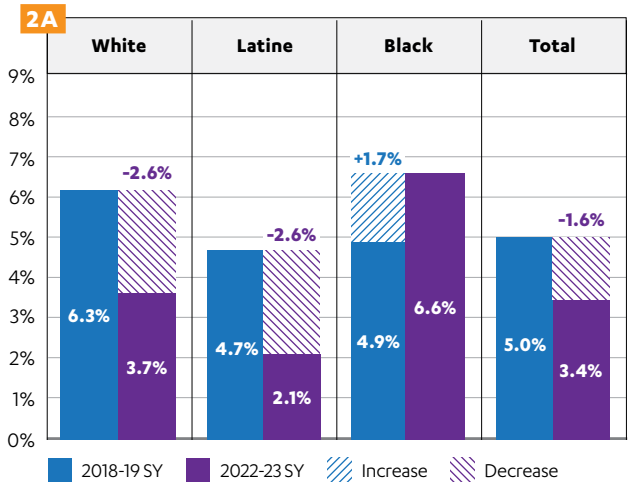
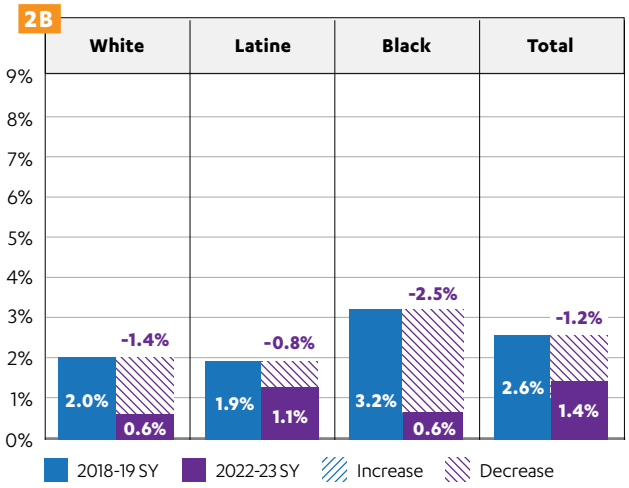


Figure 5. CA MTSS Pilot Phase 2B Elementary School Suspension Rates, 2018-19–2022-23 SYs*



*Percentages have been rounded to the nearest tenth of a decimal point.

SECONDARY SCHOOL SUSPENSION RATES

Black students continued to be suspended at a higher rate compared to their peers in the 2022-23 SY. The suspension rates were more disproportionate across groups in Phase 2A secondary schools than in Phase 2B. In 2A secondary schools, the suspension rate decreased for Latine students (-1%). However, the suspension rates for white (2%) and Black students (9%) increased in Phase 2A schools. Black students were disproportionately suspended at higher rates than the overall suspension rates in the 2018-19 (17%, 12%) and 2022-23 (26%, 11%) SYs. Conversely, Phase 2B schools suspended students at similar rates in both years.

Figure 6. CA MTSS Pilot Phase 2A Secondary School Suspension Rates, 2018-19–2022-23 SYs*

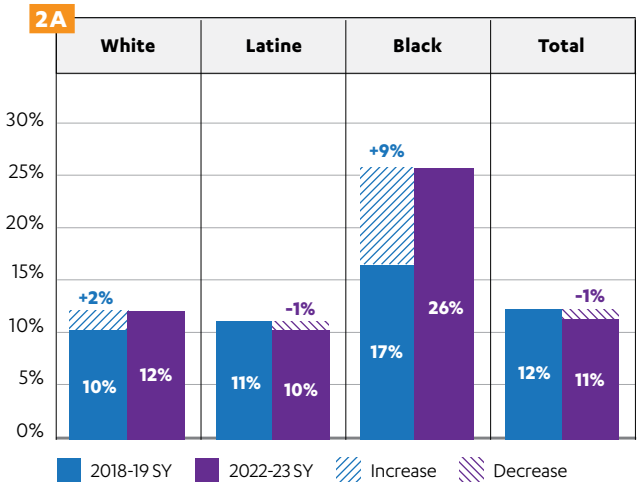
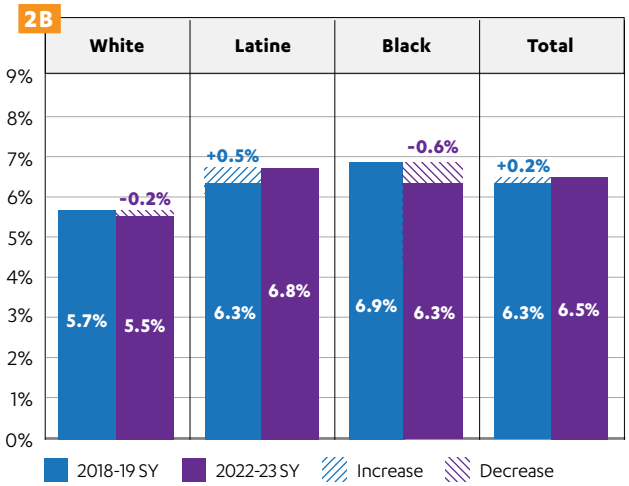


Figure 7. CA MTSS Pilot Phase 2B Secondary School Suspension Rates, 2018-19–2022-23 SYs



*Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

Chronic Absenteeism Rates

Chronic absenteeism rates increased across all schools from the 2018-19 SY to the 2022-23 SY.

2A ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM RATES

Elementary School 5 experienced the greatest increase in absenteeism rates, rising from 15% to 41% over a five-year period, while Elementary Schools 1 and 2 had the smallest increase (10%). Overall, Elementary School 1 maintained the lowest chronic absenteeism rate throughout the pilot.

While Latine (13.3%) and Black (16.1%) students had the lowest chronic absenteeism rates for phase 2A elementary schools during the 2018-19 school year, the opposite was true for the 2022-23 school year. Latine and Black students each had an absenteeism rate of approximately 36% for the 2022-23 school year, compared to 31% for white students.

Table 4. Statewide & CA MTSS Pilot Phase II Absenteeism Rates, 2018-19–2022-23 SYs*

Phase	2018-19 SY	2022-23 SY
Statewide	10.1%	24.3%
2A Total	14.6%	31.7%
2A Elementary	13.5%	31%
2A Secondary	15.7%	32.3%
2B Total	19.3%	18.6%
2B Elementary	11.8%	23.6%
2B Secondary	26.8%	13.6%

Figure 8. CA MTSS Pilot Phase 2A Elementary School Absenteeism Rates, 2018-19–2022-23 SYs*

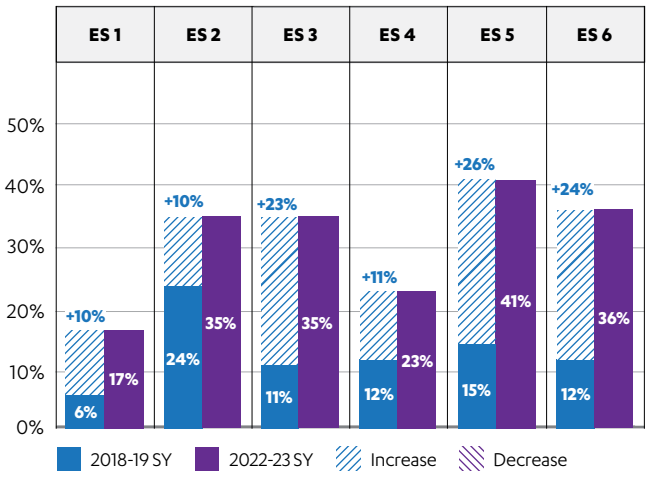
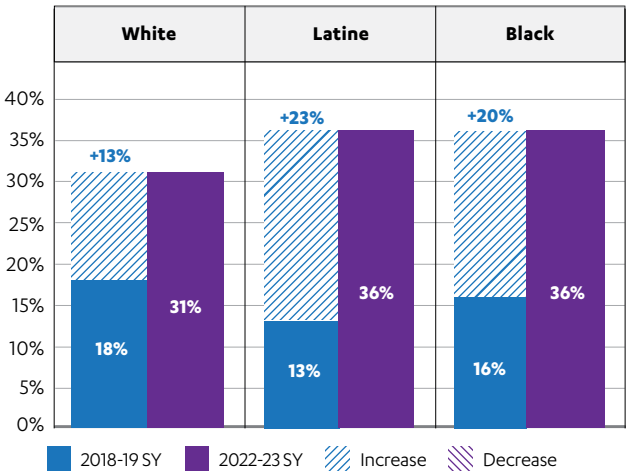


Figure 9. CA MTSS Pilot Phase 2A Elementary School Absenteeism Rates Among Black, Latine, and White Students, 2018-19–2022-23 SYs*



*Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

2B ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM RATES

There was a marked increase in absenteeism rates across all Phase 2B elementary schools. The average chronic absenteeism rate among Phase 2B elementary schools doubled from 11.8% to 23.6%. Chronic absenteeism rates saw the most significant rise at Elementary School 9, increasing from 21.4% to 42.4%. In contrast, the rate increased the least at Elementary School 8, growing by only 2.8%. However, the lowest rate was recorded at Elementary School 16 at 7% for the 2022-23 academic year.

Chronic absenteeism rates rose uniformly across groups for Phase 2B elementary schools. The chronic absenteeism rate increased the most for Latine students, rising from 10.7% to 24.2%. However, while Black students had the highest chronic absenteeism rate in 2018-19 (12.1%), their rate increased the least (8.7%) compared to Phase 2B white (11.2%) and Latine students (13.5%).

Figure 10. CA MTSS Pilot Phase 2B Elementary School Absenteeism Rates, 2018-19–2022-23 SYs*

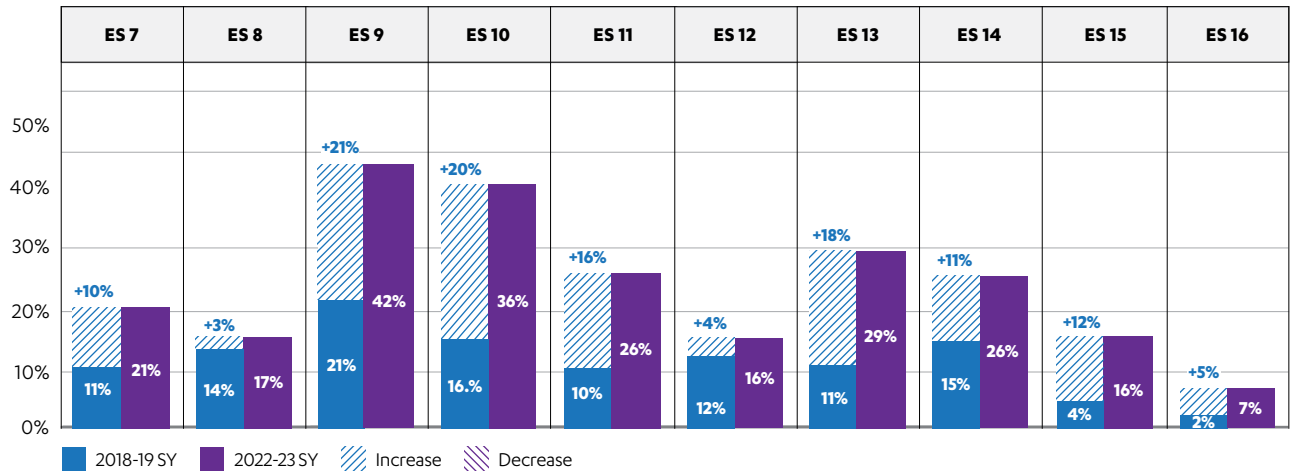
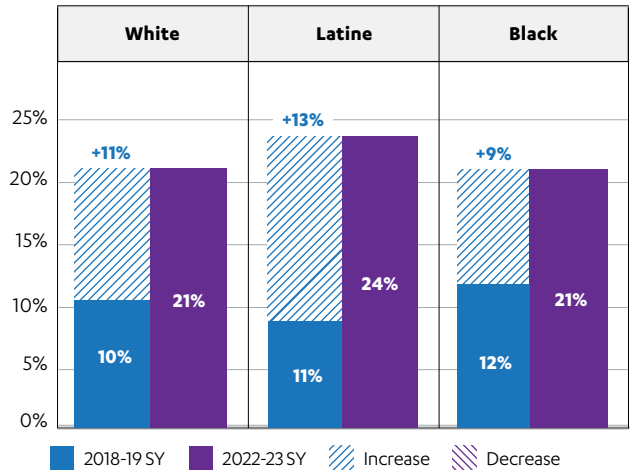


Figure 11. CA MTSS Pilot Phase 2B Elementary School Absenteeism Rates Among Black, Latine, and White Students, 2018-19–2022-23 SYs*



*Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

2A SECONDARY SCHOOL CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM RATES

Phase 2A secondary schools experienced a similar trend of increased absenteeism rates compared to elementary schools. The average chronic absenteeism rate was 15.7% for the 2018-19 SY, rising to 32.3% for the 2022-23 SY. Secondary School 4 saw the most significant increase in chronic absenteeism, climbing from 14% to 40%, while Secondary School 1 had the smallest rise from 15% to 27%.

For Phase 2A secondary schools, the chronic absenteeism rates for Black students doubled, rising from 20.1% to 41.4%. Although the increase for white students was the smallest at 13.8%, Latine students still had the lowest absenteeism rate across all groups in Phase 2A secondary schools at 31.3%.

Figure 12. CA MTSS Pilot Phase 2A Secondary School Absenteeism Rates, 2018-19–2022-23 SYs*

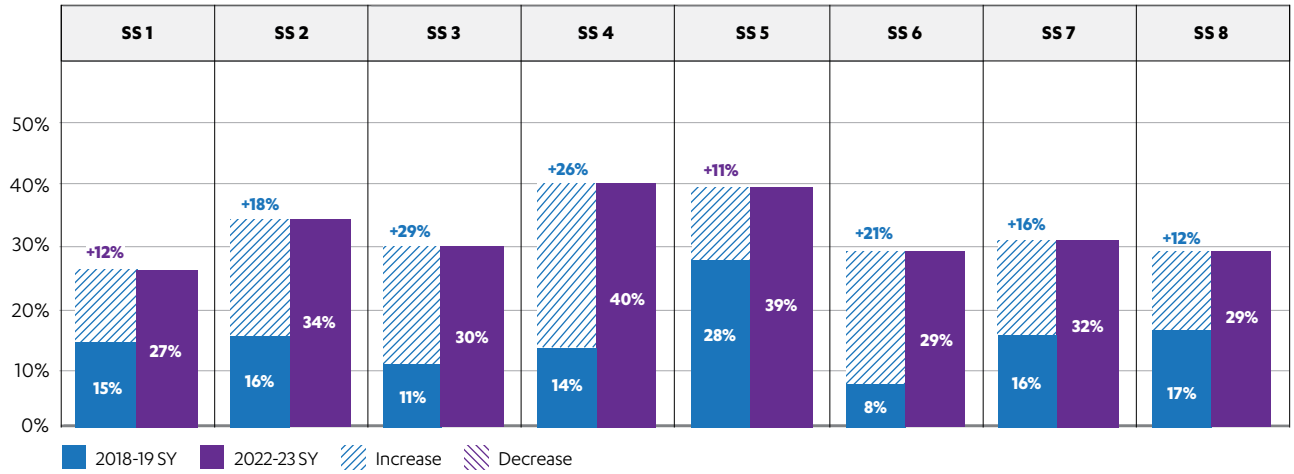
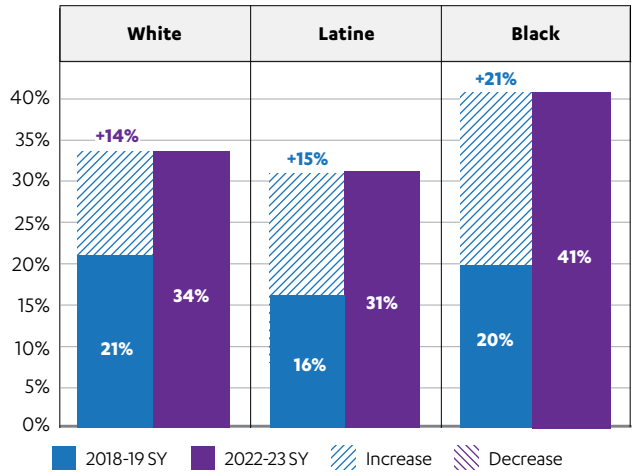


Figure 13. CA MTSS Pilot Phase 2A Secondary School Absenteeism Rates Among Black, Latine, and White Students, 2018-19–2022-23 SYs*

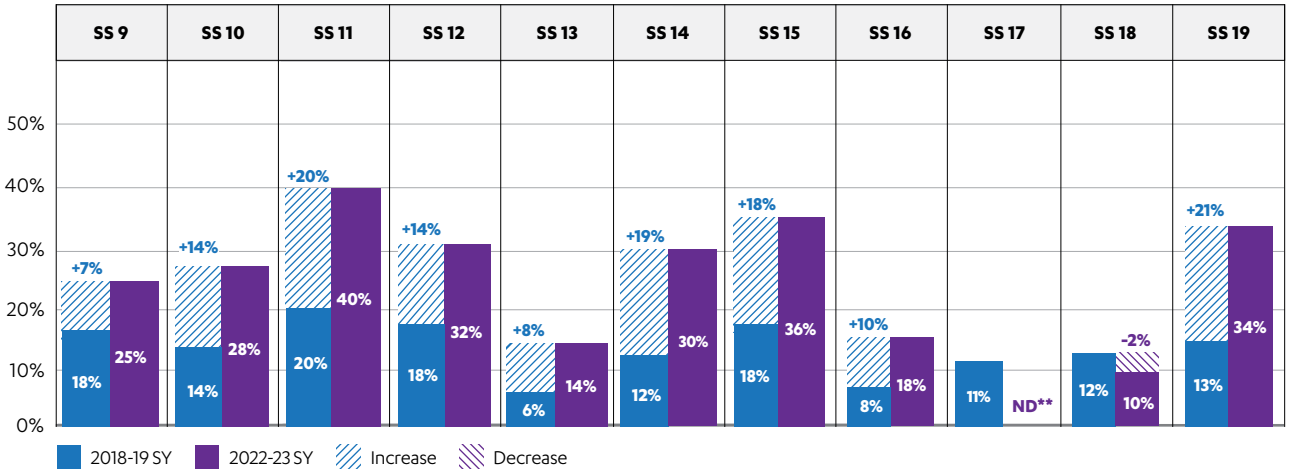


*Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

2B SECONDARY SCHOOL CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM RATES

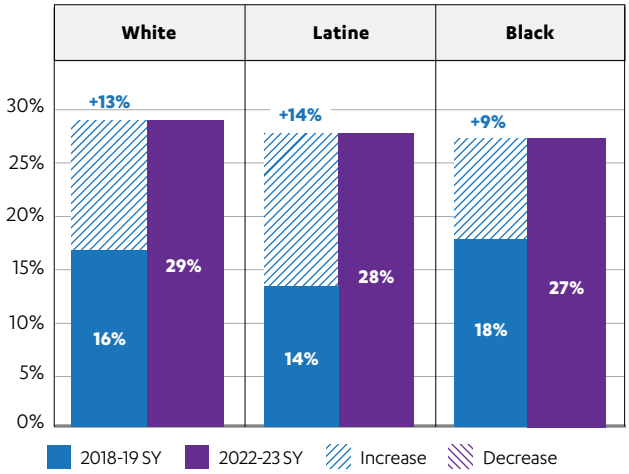
The average chronic absenteeism rate increased for secondary schools in Phase 2B compared to Phase 2A. However, the rate rose across most Phase 2B secondary schools. The chronic absenteeism rate decreased for Secondary School 18, while Secondary School 19 experienced the most significant increase, rising from 12.7% to 33.9%. In contrast, Secondary School 11 recorded the highest chronic absenteeism rate for the 2022-23 school year at 39.6%.

Figure 14. CA MTSS Pilot Phase 2B Secondary School Absenteeism Rates, 2018-19–2022-23 SYs*



For Phase 2B secondary schools, the chronic absenteeism rate for Latine students increased the most, doubling from 13.7% to 27.9%. However, the rate for Black students saw the smallest increase at 9%. Similar to Phase 2B elementary schools, Black students shifted from having the highest chronic absenteeism rate in the 2018-19 year (18.2%) to the lowest chronic absenteeism rate in 2022-23 (27.2%).

Figure 15. CA MTSS Pilot Phase 2B Secondary School Absenteeism Rates Among Black, Latine, and White Students, 2018-19–2022-23 SYs*



*Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.
**No data was available for Secondary School (SS) 17 2022-23 SY.

Enrollment Rates

Overall, CA MTSS reached approximately 5% of K-12 students enrolled in California during Phases 2A and 2B with an overall representative sample across race. However, due to the overall low enrollment of Black students in CA schools, intentionally oversampling Black students would lead to more generalizable findings. Oversampling would reduce variability, shrink error terms and lead to a more precise understanding of group characteristics and trends.

Enrollment declined in most schools across both phases from the 2018-2019 SY to the 2022-2023 SY, with notable differences when disaggregated. Enrollment rates decreased for white, Latine, and Black students across Phases 2A and 2B. This trend suggests reduced enrollment but emphasizes the need to examine the specific impacts on different student groups.

Table 5. Enrollment by Race Across CA MTSS Pilot Phases Compared with Statewide Enrollment, 2018-19 SY

Subgroup	Phase 2A	Phase 2B	Statewide
White	2,236 (24.9%)	4,577 (25.5%)	1,422,844 (23%)
Black	754 (8.4%)	1,206 (6.7%)	334,059 (5.4%)
Latine	4,840 (54%)	9,928 (55.4%)	3,377,708 (54.6%)
Total Enrollment	8,969	17,928	6,186,278

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
ENROLLMENT RATES

Enrollment rates decreased across both phases of elementary schools in the CA MTSS Pilot from the school years 2018-19 to 2022-23. Rates fell for white, Latine, and Black students in both phases of elementary schools. However, there were differences between Phase 2A and 2B. The enrollment trend for white students was similar in both phases. The enrollment of Latine students in 2A elementary schools decreased more significantly than that of Latine students in 2B. In contrast, Black enrollment remained steady in 2A elementary schools, whereas the enrollment of Black students declined at a greater rate in 2B elementary schools.

Figure 16. CA MTSS Pilot Phase 2A Elementary Schools Census Enrollment, 2018-19–2022-23 SYs

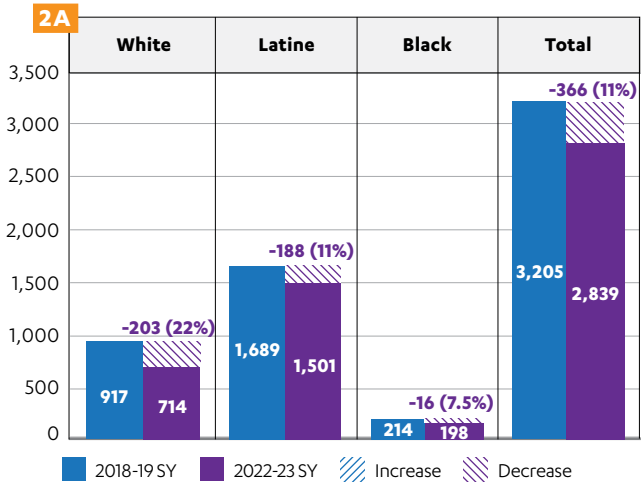
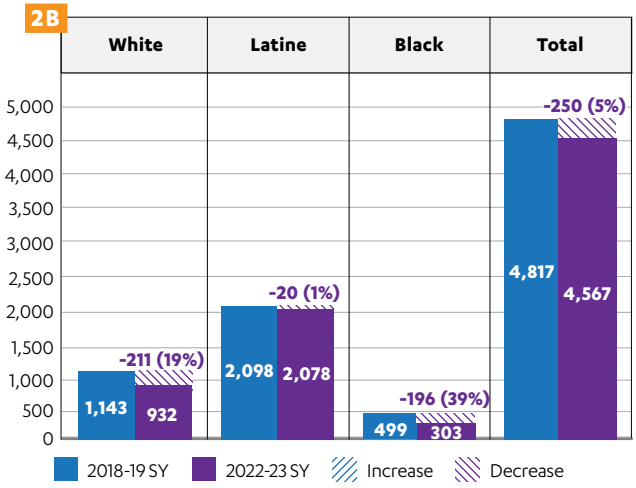


Figure 17. CA MTSS Pilot Phase 2B Elementary Schools Census Enrollment, 2018-19–2022-23 SYs



SECONDARY SCHOOL
ENROLLMENT RATES

Overall, secondary school enrollment declined at similar rates across both phases between 2018-19 and 2022-23. However, there was a notable difference in the enrollment of Latine students, who were the only group in Phase 2A secondary schools to increase enrollment.

Figure 18. CA MTSS Pilot Phase 2A Secondary Schools Census Enrollment, 2018-19–2022-23 SYs

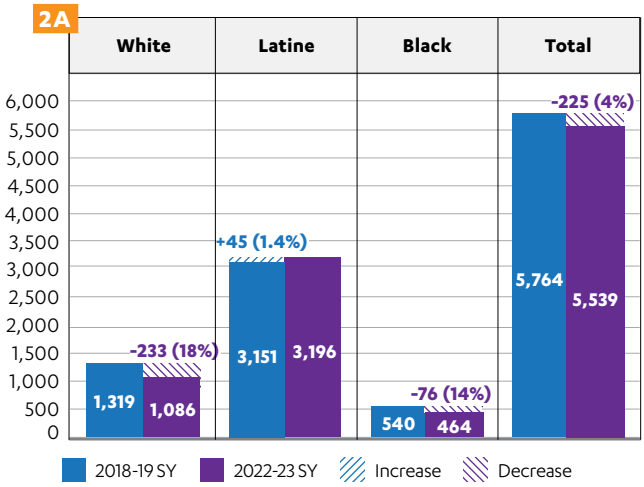
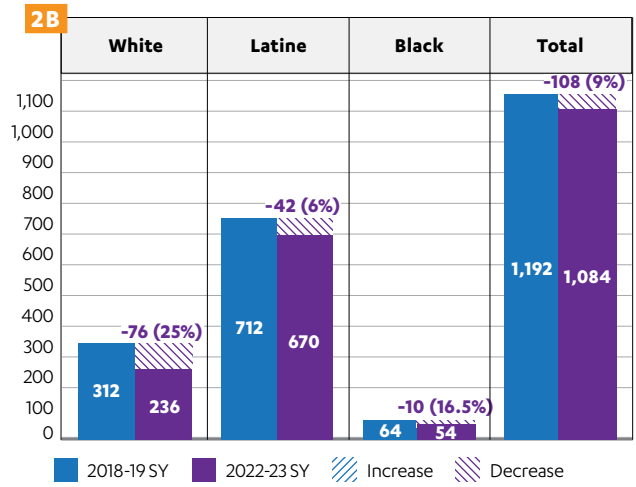


Figure 19. CA MTSS Pilot Phase 2B Secondary Schools Census Enrollment, 2018-19–2022-23 SYs



Achievement Rates

ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS (ELA) SCORES

This section presents differences in California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASSPP) scores for participating pilot schools for the school years 2018-19 and 2022-23 in the subject area of English Language Arts (ELA). The following charts illustrate the percentage of students who met or exceeded standards for each academic year, disaggregated by student groups of interest.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

ELA SCORES

The total percentage of students meeting or exceeding ELA standards decreased across both phases. However, there was a sharper decline for 2B elementary schools (-14%) compared with 2A elementary schools (-3.5%). In 2A schools, rates remained steady for white students (31%) but fell for Latine students (-6%). Additionally, the percentage of 2A Black students who met or exceeded ELA standards increased (6%), changing from the lowest percent in 2018-19 (26%) to the highest percent in 2022-23 (32%).

In 2B elementary schools, the rate of meeting or exceeding standards dropped across all groups, with the most significant decline for Black students (-33%). However, in 2023, Latine students had the lowest percentage of students meeting or exceeding standards (27%).

Figure 20. CA MTSS Pilot Phase 2A Elementary School ELA Achievement (% met or exceeded standards), 2018-19–2022-23 SYs*

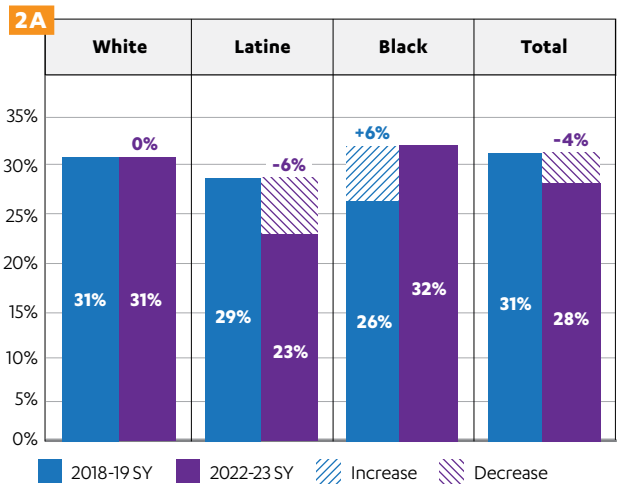
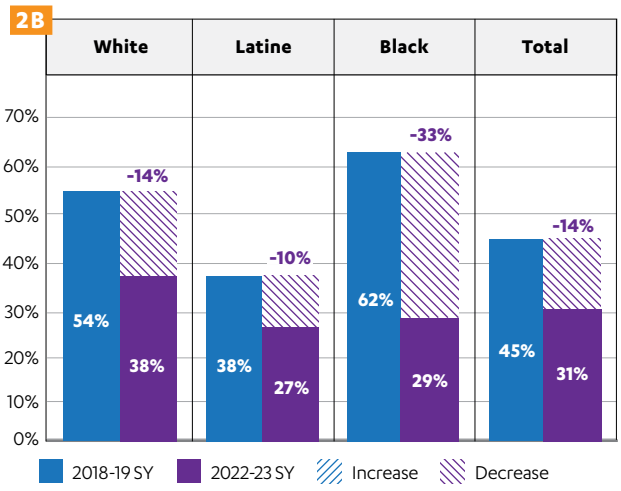


Figure 22. CA MTSS Pilot Phase 2B Elementary School ELA Achievement (% met or exceeded standards), 2018-19–2022-23 SYs*



*Most percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

SECONDARY SCHOOL

ELA SCORES

ELA rates fell similarly for most secondary schools in the CA MTSS pilot. In both years, the percentage of students meeting or exceeding standards was higher in 2B schools than in 2A schools for all groups except Black students. However, Latine and Black students declined more in 2A schools (-8%, -11%) than in 2B schools (-4%, +1%). Black students performed better overall in 2A schools (26%) than in 2B (15%) secondary schools.

Figure 23. CA MTSS Pilot Phase 2A Secondary School ELA Achievement (% met or exceeded standards), 2018-19–2022-23 SYs*

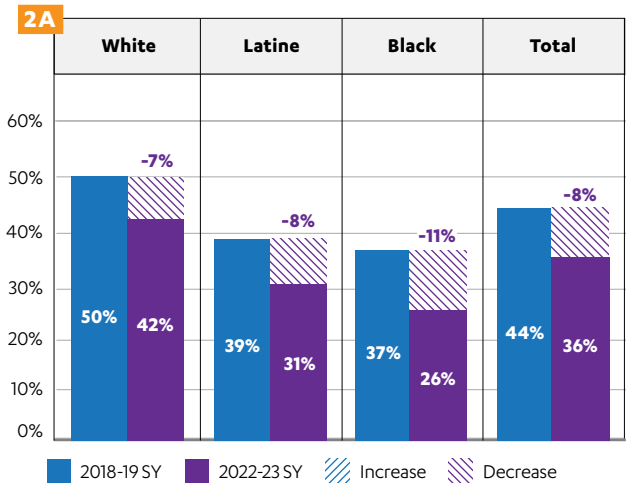
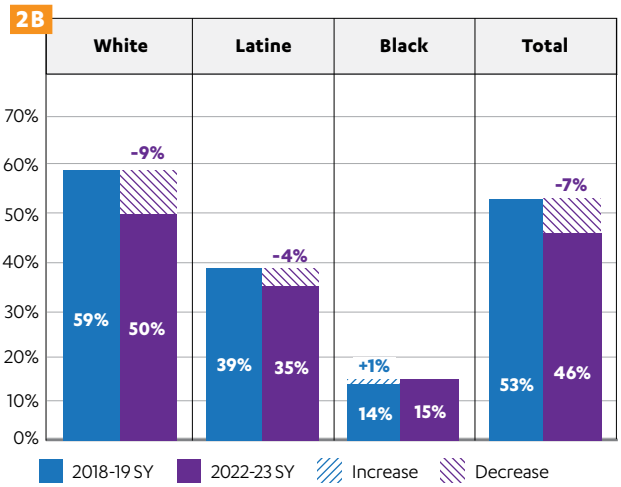


Figure 24. CA MTSS Pilot Phase 2B Secondary School ELA Achievement (% met or exceeded standards), 2018-19–2022-23 SYs*



*Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

MATH SCORES

The following section presents the differences in California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASSPP) scores for participating pilot schools in math during the academic years 2018-19 and 2022-23. The charts below illustrate the percentage of students who met or exceeded the standards for each academic year, disaggregated by the relevant student groups.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

MATH SCORES

The percentage of students meeting or exceeding math standards declined for all groups across both phases, except for Phase 2A Black students. The percentage of students meeting or exceeding standards grew by approximately 2.5% for Phase 2A Black students; however, they still had a disproportionately smaller percentage of students who met or exceeded standards compared to the overall percentage for 2A elementary schools in 2023. The percentage of Phase 2B Black students meeting or exceeding math standards declined at a notably disproportionate rate (-16%) compared with the overall decline (-5%) for Phase 2B schools.

Figure 25. CA MTSS Pilot Phase 2A Elementary School Math Achievement (% met or exceeded standards), 2018-19–2022-23 SYs*

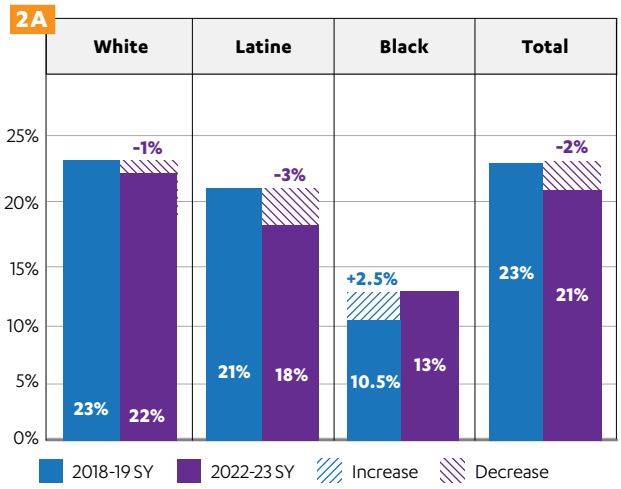
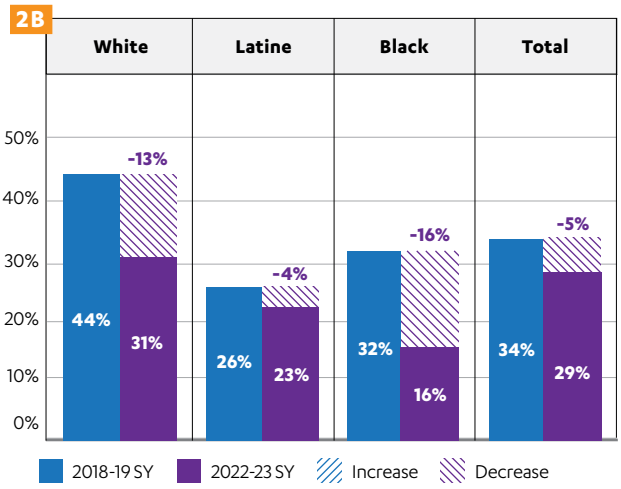


Figure 26. CA MTSS Pilot Phase 2B Elementary School Math Achievement (% met or exceeded standards), 2018-19–2022-23 SYs*



*Most percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

SECONDARY SCHOOL

MATH SCORES

The percentage of students meeting or exceeding math standards decreased at a similar rate across Phase 2A (-10%) and 2B schools (-8%). However, Black students in Phase 2A secondary schools met or exceeded standards at a higher rate compared with 2B schools for both years. In Phase 2B secondary schools, the rates of Black and Latine students meeting or exceeding standards were disproportionately lower than the totals for both academic years.

Figure 27. CA MTSS Pilot Phase 2A Secondary School Math Achievement (% met or exceeded standards), 2018-19–2022-23 SYs*

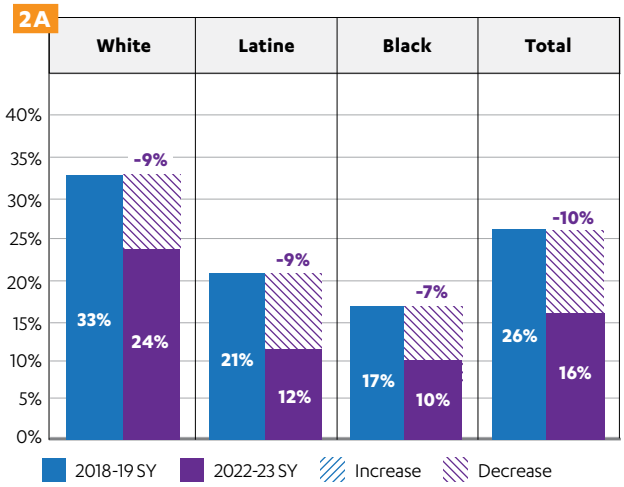
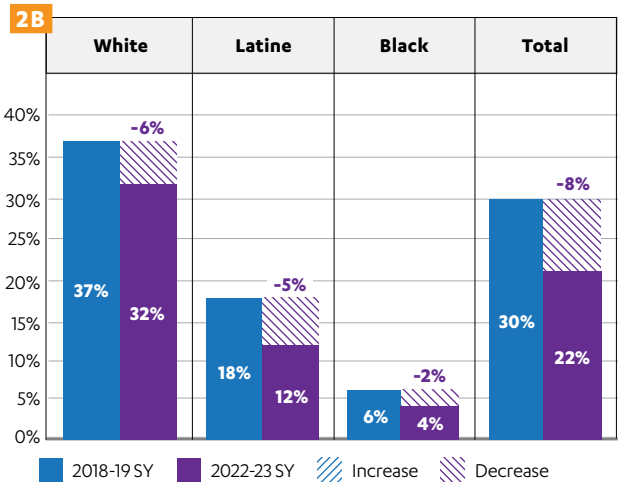


Figure 28. CA MTSS Pilot Phase 2B Secondary School Math Achievement (% met or exceeded standards), 2018-19–2022-23 SYs*



*Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

YEAR 5

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

Methods

In February and March of 2023, UCLA CTS researchers interviewed 16 principals and coaches from participating 2A and 2B schools to gain insights into implementing the CA MTSS Pilot, tiered supports, and schools' responses to student behavior as a follow-up to similar research conducted annually by the UCLA research team. Semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 30 to 60 minutes were conducted with each participant via Zoom and transcribed using Rev.com. An inductive analytic approach was applied in Dedoose to analyze the transcripts. The research team followed a stepwise process during the analysis: significant topics related to the research questions, such as MTSS implementation procedures, challenges, and gains were identified through collaborative coding. Identifying emerging themes was followed by individual coding, after which the research team derived themes both individually and collaboratively.

Research Questions

Our team developed four guiding research questions that address the diverse issues facing schools today. Through these questions, the team created a protocol focused on how education professionals utilize CA MTSS to tackle critical challenges faced by educators in California.

Four main research questions drove interview protocols and analyses:

1. What tiered student supports do pilot schools have to support student behavior, social-emotional well-being, and learning?

2. What are pilot schools' responses to student behavior? Are schools moving away from traditional practices to alternative approaches?

3.Do pilot schools implement changes to address race-based inequities?

4. What factors pose challenges to MTSS implementation?

FINDING 1

Social-Emotional Supports

Most administrators discussed the presence of school-based supports across all three MTSS tiers in academic and behavioral areas. In contrast, support in the social-emotional learning (SEL) domain was notably less prevalent.

1a. There was a correlation between schools with greater access to resources and the presence of tiered supports in the social-emotional learning domain. However, all administrators expressed a need to prioritize the social-emotional needs of students in their schools. Many administrators emphasized that addressing social-emotional learning was essential for tackling issues concerning academics and behavior. One administrator stated,

"We struggle to keep up with the level of social and emotional needs that exist here on our campus. This year, I told our staff that if we don't address the social-emotional piece, the other stuff is never going to happen. The academics and all the other stuff are not going to come." (Principal 71)

1b. Schools lacking strong social-emotional support invested efforts in developing universal screeners to better understand their students' social-emotional and mental health needs. Administrators often discussed using the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) to develop their screeners. Schools that mentioned using third-party dashboards for their social-emotional screeners most frequently cited Panorama as their primary dashboard. Even with plans to adapt or create their own SEL screeners, schools reported feeling hesitant about their capacity to address the needs that SEL screeners may reveal. One administrator stated,

"If we surveyed all our kids and 1,000 of them said they need to talk to somebody, we won't be able to do it. So, I'm not trying to say let's avoid surveying everybody. Because we don't have the capacity to meet that need, it's going to come off that way. If we find out that 80 of our students are struggling and we need to get them counseling—I don't have the resources to do it. I'm not trying to turn a blind eye. It's just, how do we do that?" (Principal 89)

1c. When not explicitly identified as Tier 1 support, relationship-building strategies were noted as crucial for ensuring that teachers and staff address students' social-emotional learning needs. Schools with Tier 2 solid social-emotional learning supports often emphasize identity development and self-concept for historically marginalized groups of students. There is a correlation between schools with limited resources and the utilization of pre-developed curricula, community partners, or peer support models to deliver Tier 2 supports in the social-emotional domain. The Second Step® social-emotional curriculum was cited as an example of a pre-developed SEL curriculum. Additionally, peer mediation is frequently mentioned as a Tier 2 support for social-emotional learning and behavioral domains.

FINDING 2

Behavior Supports

Almost all administrators shared a common goal of reducing suspensions and safeguarding students' opportunities to learn. Significantly, most administrators outlined a thorough process for addressing student behavior.

2a. Classroom Management and Tiered Support

Administrators highlighted the significance of classroom management when discussing behavioral goals and supports. Many administrators expressed that returning to in-person learning exacerbated the challenging behaviors students developed during school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, many administrators perceived a decline in teachers' effectiveness in addressing challenging behaviors at the classroom level. Therefore, numerous schools prioritized classroom management and expectations around tiered responses to student behavior as part of their CA MTSS implementation. As one administrator stated,

"There is an expectation that Tier 1 interventions will take place within the classroom. They will reach us after about the third attempt to correct the behavior within the classroom. Once they reach us, we try to be as non-punitive as possible...doing what we can to prevent students from being sent home." (Principal 92)

2b. Many administrators also realized that, while setting expectations for tiered responses to behavior was necessary, professional development priorities should include customizing training to meet the needs of newer and less experienced teachers.

"... but we do have to support our inexperienced teachers. You know, they don't have the skills that they need. And we need to work on giving them those skills." (Principal 92)

Overall, administrators reported an increased focus on student behaviors since the return to in-person learning. While many schools had to enhance their focus and resources devoted to addressing student behaviors, several administrators cited a goal of reducing their use of exclusionary discipline practices within their MTSS in the behavior domain.

2c. Administrators recognized the importance of gaining buy-in from teachers and parents to implement restorative practices effectively. As in previous years, relationship-building remained a priority for most schools. Trusting relationships with families were crucial when trying to implement restorative practices as part of MTSS. Some schools devised strategies to secure parent buy-in for restorative practices by leveraging support from parent-teacher associations. One principal stated,

"So [a lot of work has been around] really helping our community understand, the restorative process is something that we will be doing more of next year...we will be running circles in the Harvest Hour. We're planning on doing circles in our PTO meetings. I've already talked to my [PTO] president. So that they understand the culture and the process." (Principal 71)

Although most schools implemented restorative practices as a significant support in the behavior domain, the impact on outcomes took time to reveal. When asked whether they noticed a decrease in disciplinary referrals due to restorative practices, one administrator responded,

"It's hard to answer because I also think that with post-COVID and kids coming back and having a lack of understanding of how to interact socially... the biggest thing I'm seeing now is it's not just with kids, but with adults, too, people think that the more poorly you treat somebody, they're going to change." (Principal 88)

2d. Administrators struggled to find adequate restorative practices training for teachers.

During interviews, administrators emphasized the importance of finding adequate professional development in restorative practices for educators. Schools that offered their teachers multiple professional development sessions on restorative practices could integrate them into their tiered supports more effectively. Moreover, administrators in these schools perceived that their teachers demonstrated a more profound comprehension and commitment to implementing lower-tier restorative practices. One administrator noted this, stating,

"We've done whole-class restoratives with about five teachers this year that have shown an impact. Those teachers have requested to go to training themselves for restorative practices. We've also brought in and done a whole staff training around restorative practices and how it is not just giving kids a pass, because that was a big misconception...It's just kids aren't getting held accountable anymore. We just let them do whatever they want. So, bringing in someone for staff training helped." (Principal 73)

2e. PBIS was the most commonly reported Tier 1 support by pilot schools. Schools that cited using PBIS to establish schoolwide expectations for behavior and celebrate positive behavior were most successful when they integrated their PBIS teams with their MTSS implementation team. These integration efforts were most effective when administrators found ways to align their MTSS focus with other district initiatives. One administrator emphasized the importance of aligning initiatives by stating,

"MTSS is obviously an LCAP [Local Control and Accountability Plan] focus for our district. And so, we are really trying. It's hard to link and not have isolated PBIS groups and MTSS groups. This year, we are moving away from the PBIS name and really making it MTSS. (Principal 74)

While most elementary schools effectively used PBIS to establish behavior expectations and reward positive behaviors, some schools needed to adapt their PBIS model for older students. To effectively implement PBIS as behavioral support for these students, administrators had to seek out student voices for insights to help redirect their efforts.

"We put a student on our MTSS team for PBIS this year. We did it, which helped our sixth graders because they felt like they didn't like the [PBIS incentive]. The sixth-grade teachers don't [often] give it (a chance)...just that the concept of PBIS, the word, they don't like, but having a kid on the team has looped us in and been a good voice. They report to the student council and bring information back to our team." (Principal 83)

FINDING 3

Academic Supports

Schools reported **more robust implementation and a wider variety of strategies in the academic domain** compared to social-emotional, and behavioral supports.

While most administrators indicated having supports at all tiers in the academic domain, their engagement with these supports was shaped by factors related to their local and community context. Additionally, staff turnover and funding issues affected the availability of certified staff to assist with more intensive academic supports. While many interviewees identified small group instruction as tier-two academic support, its effectiveness depended on the presence of support staff and access to professional development. Schools with greater access to resources reported using programs such as AVID (Advancement via Individual Determination) to provide teachers with professional development and resources to enhance their tier-one and tier-two academic supports. Intervention specialists, academic counselors, and certified instructional aides were heavily relied upon to deliver Tier 3 academic supports in most schools.

3a. Some administrators prioritized the implementation of behavioral supports before concentrating on a curriculum with Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Goals communicated by the district office often dictated these priorities. As one administrator explained,

"The district has been pushing with trying to implement PBIS and other things. I haven't pushed UDL yet. I've tried to get PBIS established before bringing that part in." (Principal 88)

While many schools in their first year of implementation chose to prioritize behavioral supports, others were excited to begin implementing UDL and recognized the benefits it would provide to their students. One rural administrator stated,

"UDL will hold us accountable for looking at the individual student and seeing how we can meet that need and ensure choice. I can't express that enough in a rural area, giving them multiple opportunities to use data and computers and getting that technology piece because it takes them out of such a limited environment." (Principal 99)

Schools that felt strongly about their UDL implementation identified their local education agency (LEA) as a source of support through training and resource development.

3b. Many schools focused on and dedicated themselves to finding strategies and resources to incorporate culturally relevant and responsive teaching. Efforts to implement this approach began with analyzing data and listening to student voices. Some administrators at middle and high schools discussed revisiting their assumptions about appropriate strategies following feedback from students. In schools that effectively implemented these strategies, administrators held themselves accountable for ensuring that teachers had the resources necessary to understand and apply culturally relevant and responsive teaching to connect with their students. In these cases, principals viewed culturally relevant strategies as more than an academic feature, seeing them as a means to build stronger relationships with their students. One administrator stated,

"Whether our teachers feel connected to our kids, we still have a portion of our population that doesn't feel connected to an adult on campus. So next year, that will be our focus, and to help support that, we are going to do a book study on culturally and linguistically relevant teaching styles and strategies. So, I got a book that's going to be for all staff and we're going to go through that together. But that's going to be a focus for implementation next year." (Principal 71)

3c. Some schools approached culturally relevant and responsive teaching by introducing materials and library books. In these cases, when administrators did not prioritize implementing these strategies, there was uneven application, leading to more problematic situations around race. One administrator explained,

"We just got a whole bunch of books. The district bought these big bundles, right, and they kind of just came into the library and were just there, and then they're kind of lined up. But there's been no instruction or conversation, and so some kids have kind of laughed about some different pictures. I think there's one about African American girls' hair, and there's a lot of conversation about it, but it's not used as an instructional tool or a conversation starter. So, we've talked about like, what's our plan for that?" (Principal 83)

FINDING 4

Race-Based Inequities

Some administrators claimed not to have issues with inequities or disproportionality at their schools due to low enrollment of specific minority groups. However, **some did report incidents where they intervened with a teacher,** despite the urge to downplay the situation due to a lack of data.

One administrator said,

"[We decided to] talk to that teacher and point out what we're seeing, and you know, [understand] what does she think about in her room? And through teary eyes, she was like, "Wow, I didn't realize, and I didn't see," and you know, because not so much me but the MTSS [coach] was saying, "You know I've seen some other behaviors in your classroom from other students in there but they're not as documented as this student, you know." (Principal 99)

4a. Many administrators utilized data to address and monitor race-based inequities in their schools. The schools that experienced the most success integrated discussions about disaggregated data into their team and MTSS meetings.

"We've been very intentional about looking at our data through the lens of student groups. That is a very long-standing practice. And having those conversations about disparities that have been in place. Have we been able to hone in on a set of strategies that start to shrink that disparity? I wouldn't say we're there, with the exception of reading instruction and early primary. But we have those conversations. And teachers do not blink when they get the data chart. And it's by student group. And we're identifying very specifically." (Principal 95)

4b. Some administrators identified a correlation between disproportionality in behavior and academics. In these cases, schools that focused on providing supports to address racial disproportionality integrated across all domains were able to respond to these issues with a more holistic approach. One administrator shared,

"It's very interesting. We have noticed patterns of targeted groups that are struggling both with behavior and academics. This is why culturally linguistically relevant teaching is important." (Principal 73)

YEAR 5

CHALLENGES

While the statewide expansion of California's MTSS framework aimed to promote greater equity and access across schools, this study identified three significant and recurring challenges that hindered consistent implementation: **time constraints, rurality and school size, and funding and staff capacity.**

First, educators reported that the time required to complete essential training—such as the MTSS Pathways certification—posed a major burden, often demanding work beyond contracted hours and straining already limited professional development schedules.

Second, schools located in rural areas or serving small student populations faced limited access to critical resources and support staff, often sharing personnel across sites or lacking key roles like school counselors entirely.

Lastly, ongoing staff shortages, coupled with inconsistent or restricted funding, made it difficult for schools to sustain MTSS efforts, particularly for students requiring tier-two and tier-three interventions. These three challenges—individually and collectively—highlight the systemic barriers that continue to shape the scalability and fidelity of MTSS in diverse educational contexts across California. Each will be explored in more detail in the sections that follow.

---

1. Time

Administrators expressed concerns about how long it took to complete the Pathways certification course. Interviewees cited various strategies to address this issue, including financial incentives, the restructuring of professional development, and meeting time to facilitate completing the Pathways course. However, many administrators felt that these strategies were short-term solutions to the problem. One administrator shared,

"Last year I was able to provide additional money for our teachers because they had to work outside their contracted time to make this training happen. So, we used most of the grant money on that, honestly. Also, this year, I built an MTSS PLC [Professional Learning Community] into our schedule on our short days. We have staff meetings, department meetings, grade-level meetings. This year, we had specific MTSS PLC meetings, and so on. That day was focused on understanding the MTSS training as part of what we do." (Principal 76)

2. Rural/Urban Differences and School Size

Schools in more rural settings often cited rural and urban differences, along with school size, as impediments to connecting with additional resources via community partners and training to help grow their MTSS. Additionally, schools in smaller districts often had to share support staff with other schools. As mentioned previously, support staff played a crucial role in schools, and many administrators relied on certified staff to support their Tier 2 and 3 academic and social-emotional supports. One administrator shared,

"In our district, elementary schools do not have counselors. So, a lot of that had to be outsourced. And again, being in a rural area, you know, they can only see X number of students, and before you know, there's a turnover of those who know the SEL needs of our students. Going in and finding out what was, what is the trigger behind that at this ever been addressed?" (Principal 76)

3. Funding and Staff Capacity

Staff turnover and funding issues negatively impacted MTSS implementation across schools. Many administrators reported that staff and teacher shortages have hindered the return to in-person learning. Numerous schools felt unable to adequately support their more intensive academic initiatives due to instability with teachers and funding. Some schools managed to blend funding from other initiatives and receive support from their district and county offices. However, limitations on the use of those funds sometimes dictated their capacity to address issues they considered priorities in their school communities. One administrator shared,

"We've teamed up with our county mental health clinician. Now, there are limitations on who the clinician can work with. I want to say it's MediCal or Medicare. It's a small population. We have some things in place of Tier 2, like the social workers doing groups. So, we have students who are caught with, you know, drugs, paraphernalia, and that kind of stuff. We're looking at doing interventions of groups before suspension. We're trying to put some of those things in place for students with more severe needs." (Principal 87)

2018-2023

LONGITUDINAL QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

During the first year of CA MTSS implementation, the UCLA CTS research team examined sub-themes across three focus areas: problems of practice, implementation strategies, and common challenges. The following section reviews the findings in these areas over the years to better understand the trends and patterns that emerged throughout the five-year implementation research.

BASELINE DATA: KEY THEMES

THEME 1

Problems of practice

During the baseline year of data collection, three sub-themes emerged regarding problems of practice: **1) developing a positive school culture, 2) fostering social-emotional competence, and 3) establishing consistent and sustainable practices.** These sub-themes highlight areas that administrators recognized as needing attention to implement the CA MTSS model with fidelity.

Developing a positive school culture was linked to the grantees' desires to foster a caring school environment and climate. Grantees often emphasized the need to address student behavior and strengthen relationships. During year two, administrators recognized the necessity of a broader equity lens in their work and acknowledged the disparities present in their schools. However, in the third and fourth years of implementation, administrators considered it their responsibility to ensure that mindfulness strategies were implemented. Schools with limited resources likely integrated social-emotional, mental health, and behavioral resources. Additionally, administrators—particularly those in communities with higher poverty levels—were more likely to recognize the connection between social-emotional needs and the challenges students faced at home. The fifth year of implementation saw schools with limited social-emotional resources forming strategic relationships with community partners and developing screeners to assess and address these needs.

Establishing a foundation for the consistent and sustainable implementation of supports and practices was a priority for most schools at the beginning of MTSS implementation. During years two through four, school site teams and data usage emerged as common themes related to sustaining practices. Disaggregated data use was a strategy to start addressing discipline disparities, while COVID presented an obstacle to discussions about race and diversity. During the second follow-up, administrators supported their teachers in consistently collecting and employing data to enhance academic support. Building relationships between support staff and teachers was also crucial for implementing academic supports. In the fifth year of data collection, the schools that reported the most success actively integrated discussions on disaggregated data into their team meetings.

Schools that addressed their problems strategically developed partnerships with community partners to fill gaps in their tiered supports. Additionally, these schools consistently use disaggregated data to make decisions about supports that address problems of practice.

THEME 2

Implementation Strategies

During the baseline year of data collection, three sub-themes emerged around implementation strategies: **1) utilizing the framework to organize more fully the implementation of other programs and practices, 2) implementing and building upon behavior programs and SEL curriculum, and 3) developing school identity through an inclusive process.**

Grantees viewed the framework as beneficial for organizing and reestablishing existing programs and practices. During the initial year of implementation, grantees perceived MTSS as an opportunity to reestablish programs and practices that they had previously been unable to prioritize before the initiative. School staff also highlighted the significance of building on existing positive behavior and social-emotional learning curricula to enhance their MTSS implementation.

In the second year of implementation, grantees frequently mentioned PBIS as a program that supported data use and tiered responses. Moreover, during the fifth year of implementation, grantees often pointed out how PBIS served as a complementary and grounding program for implementing MTSS. Schools believed that integrating PBIS teams with their MTSS teams was an effective strategy for executing CA MTSS. However, school site staff also acknowledged that the socioeconomic mismatch between students was a significant contextual factor when implementing MTSS in the behavior domain.

Schools that aimed to shift toward alternative practices to address student behavior found that this transition necessitated strong collaboration among teachers, support staff, and the community. Additionally, many administrators noted how the pandemic intensified social issues that disproportionately affected certain communities and emphasized the need to tailor their supports to the unique needs of their student body. During the fifth year of implementation, schools recognized the importance of incorporating student voice to better align their strategies regarding student behavior and school identity.

THEME 3

Common Challenges

During the baseline year of data collection, common challenges included: **1) developing school-wide buy-in and self-efficacy, 2) building effective school-family connections, and 3) providing social-emotional learning and support for teachers.**

School-wide buy-in and self-efficacy were supported by professional development and capacity-building opportunities. These opportunities fostered greater ownership and understanding among teachers, particularly regarding lower-tier restorative practices.

The MTSS coaches fostered effective connections between schools and families in communities they understood well. In smaller communities, administrators and teachers felt overwhelmed by the permeable boundaries between parents and teachers outside school hours. However, in the fifth year, administrators recognized the importance of these strong relationships, especially for implementing restorative practices.

Providing social-emotional support for teachers was essential as they became overwhelmed by the out-of-school factors affecting student behavior after returning to in-person learning. More broadly, staff burnout from the pandemic presented a significant challenge for implementation. Coaches with strong relationships within the school community were able to alleviate some of the burnout experienced by administrators. However, in the fifth year of implementation, it became clear that administrators viewed the decrease in teachers' ability to respond to challenging behaviors as a top priority, prompting many to focus primarily on implementing CA MTSS in the behavior domain.

PILOT YEARS: KEY THEMES

THEME 1
Positive relationships are essential

Strengthening relationships within the school seemingly ensured that disparities within the school were consistently at the forefront of developing school improvement strategies. Relationship building was an essential part of addressing problems of practice over the first five years of CA MTSS implementation. Schools that found gaps in their tiered system of support built strategic relationships with community partners to address areas where support was missing. Building relationships between teachers and support staff aided in the development of referral systems. Additionally, building relationships between school, family, and community was an effective strategy to increase buy-in and move toward alternative practices to address student behavior. Principals who felt a strong connection with their MTSS coach were able to integrate and implement strategies to scale up their MTSS more effectively, especially when the coach had a connection to the community or geographic region.

THEME 2
Local context

When administrators were able to situate their schools in the context of their community (including socioeconomic factors, political issues, race, and competing priorities and initiatives), there was a noticeable increase in buy-in. Acknowledging contextual factors that might affect how an initiative or what parts of an initiative are prioritized seemed to lead to more realistic goals for implementation. Understanding that the reality of the school extends beyond the school walls can significantly increase the ownership of an initiative. These contextual factors were vital for understanding the effectiveness of this initiative in addressing the differences between schools that often make implementing education policy a challenging endeavor.

THEME 3
Governance and sustained leadership

Diverse school site teams were often highlighted by administrators who were strongly committed to their implementation efforts. School site teams and leadership were essential for implementing CA MTSS. The effectiveness of school site teams was complemented by the relationships developed between members of the teams. Schools that prioritized having diverse representation on their school site teams felt strongly about the utilization of these teams to increase oversight of goals and develop strategies and solutions for roadblocks that might occur. Additionally, schools that felt strongly about their shift away from traditional responses to student behavior, ensured that students had a voice in the process of creating alternatives.

THEME 4
Disaggregated data use

The use of data, particularly disaggregated data, was frequently noted as a positive factor for MTSS implementation and for addressing school-based inequities on a larger scale. Disaggregated data use was championed by the majority of grantees. Ensuring that there were consistent practices about data use across the school community was seen as an antecedent to effective implementation of CA MTSS. Data use was essential for teachers and administrators to understand what tier of support students needed. However, it was clear that administrators also felt that data use was essential for having difficult conversations about inequities in their school community. Administrators even shared examples of using data at the classroom level to address potential biases held by teachers. Understanding that classroom-level referral data was an entry point for having difficult conversations helped administrators feel supported in addressing inequities in their school communities.

These four themes were significant for CA MTSS implementation during the five years that UCLA CTS was a research partner. While these factors were not all explicit elements of the CA MTSS framework, they arose when schools authentically attempted to use the CA MTSS framework to improve their school communities. Across the years of implementation research, it became apparent that these four factors are most likely the antecedents to the successful adoption of any school improvement initiative. Any California education initiative should acknowledge that these four factors are the scaffolding for successfully adopting any policy or practice.

CA MTSS ⇒ CA COMMUNITY SCHOOLS PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM (CCSPP)

Three of these four themes are consistent with the California Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP) framework. Relationships, context, and governance are all addressed throughout the CCSPP framework (see Table 6).

The California community schools model is centered around the inclusion of all stakeholders in the school community to address the needs of our students. Therefore, the interplay between leadership, relationships, and context is baked into the framework. However, while there were more guidelines around the use of data in previous iterations of the framework, it is noticeably absent in the current version of the CCSPP framework as it relates to the school community. While collecting and analyzing data is acknowledged as a function of the CCSPP Regional Technical Assistance Centers and an area of focus for the California Department of Education, there are no guidelines for how school sites themselves are expected to use data.

Table 6. CA MTSS and CA Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP) Crosswalk

CA MTSS KEY THEMES	CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY SCHOOLS PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM (CCSPP) FRAMEWORK
1. Relationships	**Family and Community Engagement (Four Pillars of Community Schools)** Involves actively tapping the expertise and knowledge of family and community members to serve as true partners in supporting and educating students. **Four Key Conditions for Learning** Supportive environmental conditions that foster strong relationships and community. These include positive, sustained relationships that foster attachment and emotional connections; physical, emotional, and identity safety; and a sense of belonging and purpose **Community Asset Mapping and Gap Analysis (Four Proven Practices)** An essential element for successful community school efforts is strategies to engage school and community interest holders in a coherent process of identifying and curating assets and wisdom throughout the community. This process should also allow for school and community members to identify gaps in programs, services, and resources that inhibit student achievement and community coherence.
2. Context	**The Four Cornerstone Commitments** While recognizing and appreciating the vast diversity of our state in every way, the CCSPP is an explicitly equity-driven initiative in statute, principle, and practice. As such this Framework also identifies the following four commitments as essential components to all California community schools. These commitments are aligned with consistent themes expressed in the initial phase of our community engagement process: • A commitment to asset-driven and strength-based practices. • A commitment to racially just and restorative school climates. • A commitment to powerful, culturally proficient, and relevant instruction. • A commitment to shared decision making and participatory practices.

3. Governance and Leadership

The Four Proven Practices

The Community School Coordinator: There are many models for staffing community schools for success. All of these models include a coordinator who is responsible for the overall implementation of community school processes, programs, partnerships, and strategies at the school site. While districts and schools will approach budgeting and staffing differently, the essential practice is that a discrete position is a threshold for community school success.

Site-Based and LEA-Based Advisory Councils: Authentic shared decision-making is a hallmark of the California community schools approach. Similar to the school coordinator position, LEAs and school sites may design shared decision-making models differently in terms of their composition and scope, but both school site-based and LEA-based shared decision-making councils are also a threshold mechanism for implementing the California community schools model.

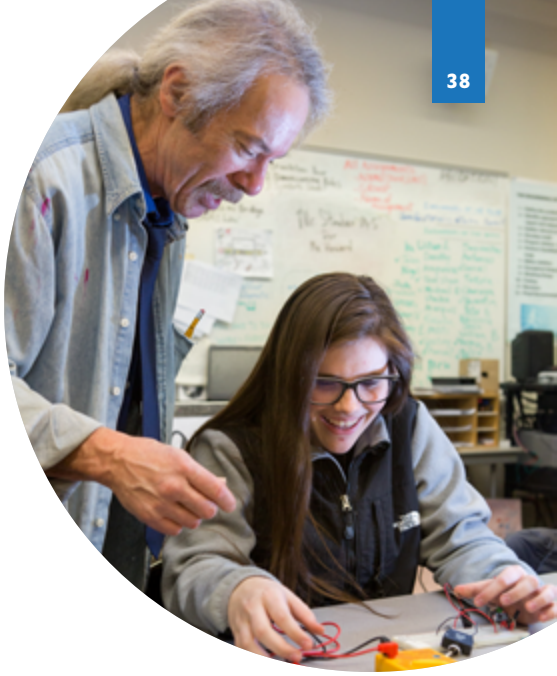
The Four Cornerstone Commitments

A Commitment to Shared Decision Making and Participatory Practices: California's community schools all share a commitment to authentic and dynamic shared leadership in all aspects of school governance and operations. All school interest holders, including students, families, staff, and community members, must have genuine engagement in decision-making about school climate, curriculum, and services.

Collaborative leadership and practices for educators and administrators that establish a culture of professional learning, collective trust, and shared responsibility for outcomes in a manner that includes students, families, and community members. Statute defines this as including "professional development to transform school culture and climate that centers on pupil learning and supports mental and behavioral health, trauma-informed care, Social Emotional Learning [and] restorative justice."

4. Disaggregated Data Use

There are no specific guidelines for the use of disaggregated data in the current CCSPP framework.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Implementation challenges of CA MTSS at the school site level can aid state leaders and practitioners in understanding how the state can better equip school sites and systems for success in large-scale efforts like the California Community Schools Partnership Program. Themes of staffing, time, and funding are expanded upon here as ways to organize recommendations for future work.

1. Prioritize staffing and capacity to ensure fidelity in implementation.

Issues related to staffing were viewed as a barrier to implementing CA MTSS across all domains. In the behavioral domain, administrators expressed their desire to reduce punitive responses to student behaviors that adults found challenging. However, staff turnover and new teacher preparation were recognized as obstacles to providing behavioral support at the classroom level. The need for professional development for new teachers was deemed a crucial prerequisite for decreasing exclusionary discipline in classrooms.

Nevertheless, schools in smaller districts with fewer resources often struggled to find time or funding to deliver what they considered adequate professional development in this area. In the academic and social-emotional learning domain, classified and certified staff were important factors in implementing CA MTSS. Many smaller and under-resourced schools found providing more intensive support with limited staff in these areas challenging. Many schools only had part-time support staff in these areas. While grateful for the additional support, administrators noted that having these staff only part-time limited their ability to fully integrate intensive support in the academic and social-emotional learning domains.

2. Ensure that competing priorities or requirements of state initiatives aren't overly burdensome for practitioners to balance.

Time was an issue for many sites when implementing CA MTSS. Specifically, many sites noted that the time required to complete the CA MTSS Pathways certification course posed a challenge and felt unrealistic given their other responsibilities. Administrators reported that gaining teacher buy-in to complete the course was difficult since it required time away from other important school duties or encroached on their personal time.

While providing some financial incentives for teachers to complete the course proved effective, the impact was limited due to the restricted availability of funds for this purpose. Additionally, for deep change to occur, many administrators felt that building relationships and having meaningful conversations were crucial. Both strategies require designated and protected time, which was difficult to find in some sites, especially while prioritizing other day-to-day issues associated with school site leadership.

3. Prioritize predictable and sustainable funding for school sites over one-time dollars for initiatives.

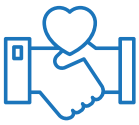
Funding was an issue that proved difficult to decouple from time and staffing. Many administrators believed that an additional source of stable funding would help alleviate issues related to these factors. While braided funding was employed at numerous school sites, the scope of use for those funds was often limited. Moreover, navigating additional resources and funding from local and state support required an in-depth understanding of external systems to implement and utilize those resources fluidly.

4. Center efforts to address racial disproportionality in a holistic and intentional fashion.

School sites that implemented supports across all domains targeted at racial disproportionality provided some of the most promising examples of how CA MTSS can disrupt disproportionality. In schools where administrators identified a correlation between disproportionality in academics and behavior, they were better able to engage their teachers in conversations about implicit bias and keeping students in the classroom. Additionally, these administrators were more equipped to support their teachers through culturally relevant and responsive teaching strategies.

5. Align and integrate efforts when appropriate.

Aligning MTSS with PBIS was evident in many pilot schools. However, the design of CA MTSS inherently integrates Response to Intervention (RtI) and PBIS. While the integration of PBIS is inherent in the design, administrators developing a hands-on understanding of this integration served as an "ah-ha" moment for many school leaders. This understanding of alignment seemingly enabled some administrators to confidently seek additional streams for braided funding to support their schools. Additionally, an understanding of alignment seemed to enable administrators to reduce the burden on teachers when implementing multiple initiatives by being less duplicative of their teams and minimizing their duties outside of the classroom.



6. Allow time to build meaningful relationships in and across schools and communities.

MTSS was evident across all years of implementation research. However, the significance of this relationship-building extends beyond implementing CA MTSS. Administrators were able to identify how all types of relationships in the school community mattered for fostering a positive school climate. Ensuring that all students had a supportive relationship with a teacher was often cited as a strategy for behavioral support. These relationships were frequently seen as the antecedents to identifying the root causes of student support across all domains. Building relationships between teachers and using professional learning communities and communities of practice was also deemed important for professional development. Establishing strong relationships with parents and family members was seen as a necessary step for bridging the home and school systems for students. These relationships enabled administrators to feel confident when implementing alternative disciplinary practices by ensuring transparency and buy-in from families. However, the administrators often cited their relationships with their MTSS coach as a significant source of support. Many administrators felt isolated in their positions and believed they had limited district support. Developing professional and supportive relationships across the district could be a strategy for amplifying the impact of CA MTSS.

CONCLUSION

CA MTSS Phase II implementation offers a window into the complexities of executing large-scale efforts intended to organize schools around the needs and interests of students.

It is easy to overlook key elements of implementation, including staffing, time, and resources, or the need to recognize why systems of support are necessary in school settings when educational institutions haven't always served young people well, or the role of schools in dismantling—not perpetuating—racial inequality. These enduring lessons can hopefully shape the way the state supports any type of educational transformation at scale. The California Community Schools Partnership Program represents a much larger investment from the state ($4.1 billion) than CA MTSS (over $200 million), but it will be critical not to lose sight of the purpose of both efforts: to move California toward becoming a model for equitable teaching and learning conditions.

REFERENCES

Bishop, J. P. & Howard, T. C. (2024). *When the lights are turned on: Documenting the impact of COVID-19 on California's education landscape*. Center for the Transformation of Schools, School of Education & Information Studies, University of California, Los Angeles.

Bishop, J. P. (2023). *Our children can't wait: The urgency of reinventing education policy in America*. New York, New York: Teachers College Press.

California Department of Education. (2023). *Statewide System of Support (SSOS) summary*. https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/sw/t1/documents/supptsummary.pdf

California Department of Education. (n.d.). *California MTSS*. https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/ri/

California Department of Finance. (2022). *2022–23 California state budget summary: K–12 education*. https://ebudget.ca.gov/2022-23/pdf/BudgetSummary/K-12Education.pdf

California Department of Finance. (2021). *2021–22 California state budget summary: K–12 education*. https://ebudget.ca.gov/2021-22/pdf/Enacted/BudgetSummary/K-12Education.pdf

Carver-Thomas, D., Burns, D., Leung, M., & Ondrasek, N. (2022). *Teacher shortages during the pandemic: How California districts are responding*. Learning Policy Institute. https://doi.org/10.54300/899.809.

Choi, J. H., McCart, A. B., Miller, D. H., & Sailor, W. (2022). Issues in statewide scale up of a multi-tiered system of support. *Journal of School Leadership, 32*(5), 514-536.

Darling-Hammond, L., Schachner, A., & Edgerton, A. K. (2020). *Restarting and reinventing school: learning in the time of COVID and beyond*. Learning Policy Institute.

Davis, D. J., Chaney, C., & BeLue, R. (2020). Why "we can't breathe" during COVID-19. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies, 51*(3-4), 417-428.

Dee, T. S. (2024). Higher chronic absenteeism threatens academic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 121*(3), e2312249121.

Fahle, E., Kane, T., Patterson, T., Reardon, S., Staiger, D., & Stuart, E. (2023). *School district and community factors associated with learning loss during the COVID-19 pandemic*. https://cepr.harvard.edu/sites/hwpi.harvard.edu/files/cepr/files/explaining_covid_losses_5.23.pdf

Fensterwald, J. (2024). *California agrees to target the most struggling students to settle learning-loss lawsuit*. EdSource. Retrieved from https://edsource.org/2024/california-agrees-to-target-most-struggling-students-to-settle-learning-loss-lawsuit/705088

Flories, R. T. & Losen, D. J. (2023). Lost instruction time in California schools: The disparate harm from post-pandemic punitive suspensions. The Civil Rights Project / Proyecto Derechos Civiles, School of Education & Information Studies, University of California, Los Angeles. https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7td9r8gq

Freeman, R., Miller, D., & Newcomer, L. (2015). Integration of academic and behavioral MTSS at the district level using implementation science. *Learning Disabilities: A Contemporary Journal, 13*(1), 59-72.

Goldhaber, D., Kane, T., Mceachin, A., Morton, E., Patterson, T., & Staiger, D. (2022). *The consequences of remote and hybrid instruction during the pandemic*. Center for Education Policy Research, Harvard University. https://cepr.harvard.edu/files/cepr/files/5-4.pdf?m=1651690491

Gross, B., & Opalka, A. (2020, June 10). *Too many schools leave learning to chance during the pandemic*. Center on Reinventing Public Education. https://crpe.org/too-many-schools-leave-learning-to-chance-during-the-pandemic/

Horsford, S. D., Cabral, L., Touloukian, C., Parks, S., Smith, P. A., McGhee, C., & Jacobs, J. (2021). *Black education in the wake of COVID-19 & systemic racism*. Black Education Research Collective: New York, NY, USA, 30.

Howard, T. C. (2020). *Why race and culture matter in schools*. (2nd ed.) New York: Teachers College Press.

Hung, M., Smith, W. A., Voss, M. W., Franklin, J. D., Gu, Y., & Bounsanga, J. (2020). Exploring student achievement gaps in school districts across the United States. *Education and Urban Society, 52*(2), 175-193. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124519833442

Krause, K. H. (2022). Disruptions to school and home life among high school students during the COVID-19 pandemic—Adolescent behaviors and experiences survey, United States, January–June 2021. *MMWR supplements, 71*.

Kuhfeld, M., Soland, J., Tarasawa, B., Johnson, A., Ruzek, E., & Liu, J. (2020). Projecting the potential impact of COVID-19 school closures on academic achievement. *Educational Researcher, 49*(8), 549-565. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X20965918

Legislative Analyst's Office. (2023). *The 2023–24 budget: Proposition 98 overview and K–12 analysis*. https://lao.ca.gov/Publications/Report/4701

Lieberman, M. (2021, October 12). *How bad are school staffing shortages? What we learned by asking administrators*. Education Week. https://www.edweek.org/leadership/how-bad-are-school-staffing-shortages-what-we-learned-by-asking-administrators/2021/10

Onadeko, K., Walker, T. J., Craig, D. W., Pavlovic, A., Szeszulski, J., DeFina, L. F., & Kohl III, H. W. (2024). Comparing the use and effectiveness of in-person and remote physical education delivery during the COVID-19 Pandemic. *American Journal of Health Education, 55*(1), 24-32.

Orange County Department of Education. (n.d.). *California MTSS: A Framework for the Whole Child*. https://ocde.us/MTSS/Pages/default.aspx

Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) collaborative. (n.d.). Wisconsin Child Welfare Professional Development System. https://wcwpds.wisc.edu/organizational-development/organizational-process-improvement/plan-do-study-act-pdsa-collaborative/

Tai, D. B. G., Sia, I. G., Doubeni, C. A., & Wieland, M. L. (2022). Disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on racial and ethnic minority groups in the United States: A 2021 update. *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities,* 1-6.

U.S. Department of Education. Office of Civil Rights (2021, June). *Education in a pandemic: The disparate impacts of COVID-19 on America's students*. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED619629.pdf

Washburn, D. (2019). *Trauma in paradise: A California school system focuses on mental health after devastating fire*. EdSource. https://edsource.org/2019/trauma-in-paradise-how-a-california-school-system-plans-to-cope-with-devastating-loss-after-fire/607216

Wharton-Beck, A., Chou, C. C., Gilbert, C., Johnson, B., & Beck, M. A. (2024). K-12 school leadership perspectives from the COVID-19 pandemic. *Policy Futures in Education, 22*(1), 21-42.