

Coker-Wimberly Elementary School, Battleboro, NC

Coker-Wimberly Elementary School is a rural Pre-K through grade 5 school located between Raleigh and the coast of North Carolina, one of five elementary schools in Edgecombe County Schools. In 2021-22 the school had a student population of 234, 60% of whom were economically disadvantaged.¹ In 2022-23 21% of Coker-Wimberly students were English learners.²

Interview Date: February 2023

¹ Enrollment and free/reduced-price lunch data: <https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/schoolsearch/index.asp>

² EL data: Coker-Wimberly Elementary School

Background and Catalyst

Until recently, Coker-Wimberly Elementary was a school designated for Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI), meaning that its performance placed it in the bottom 5% of Title I schools in North Carolina. In June of 2020 Coker-Wimberly was awarded a three-year, \$1.5 million North Carolina Innovative Partnership Grant (IPG) via a competitive process for low-performing schools in the state. The grant allowed the school to undertake various efforts to raise student achievement. Part of the award was used to hire a full-time MTSS coach in the 2020-21 school year and pay for additional MTSS coaching support in 2021-22. In addition, the grant funding helped the school provide teachers with professional development in critical areas for improving instruction. An external partner and an IPG coach were also funded to support the school. The external partner worked with the school counselor to create a comprehensive counseling plan that includes MTSS protocols. Coker-Wimberly attributes much of its impressive improvement to its focus on MTSS implementation.

The Present: What Does MTSS Look Like Now?

Leadership: Vision, Teams, Structures, and Processes

The principal interviewed had approximately 12 years of experience implementing MTSS—first as a teacher and then as an assistant principal at another school—before leading the MTSS efforts at Coker-Wimberly. The principal believes that everybody in the school needs to buy into MTSS, not just core instruction teachers. “[MTSS] should be the language of the building,” she said. New hires are asked about their knowledge of MTSS as part of the interview process. MTSS is foundational to the Coker-Wimberly School Improvement Plan, which focuses on strong core instruction and identifying students who need additional support in the areas of attendance, academic achievement, or behavior. The school involves parents and community partners in the School Improvement Planning Team to provide external input and feedback and to build awareness of the school’s approach to providing all students with what they need to improve and succeed in school.

Early in MTSS implementation, staff at the school took the [North Carolina MTSS Beliefs Survey](#), which revealed a need for change in some beliefs about teaching and learning. The principal noted that her first step was to help teachers understand that the foundation of MTSS is core instruction. Her second step was to help build teachers’ capacities to implement small group and individualized interventions with fidelity in classroom settings. The school culture has changed over time such that instead of a focus just on identifying which students were in need of support because they were not passing state tests, teachers began examining how instruction could be

“It is imperative that [students] hear the [teacher’s] voice. Why am I getting this question wrong? What can I do to be better?”

delivered more effectively for each student. Teachers also learned how to “become the coach for their students” by helping students set goals and providing “real, authentic, explicit feedback.”

“We first had to try to get the mindset around, ‘Hey, maybe I’m not reaching everybody, and what can I do to change that?’”

In the first two years of the IPG grant, teachers carefully reviewed the learning needs of every student, which helped them learn to differentiate between students who needed extra support and students who simply needed better core instruction. Teachers also learned how to document student progress data to address those needs. The school now uses a decision-making chart to identify students who need Tier II support. All

staff use a shared digital data notebook to document student data and help them fully understand a given student’s strengths, needs, and preferences.

Parent engagement is a key feature of MTSS implementation at Coker-Wimberly. The school leads Parent Education Academies to help parents understand their student’s achievement data, as well as what kinds of supports are being provided to their student and why. The school takes a holistic approach and ensures that both parents and students hear about students’ strengths, not just areas that need attention and support.

Student Supports

Edgecombe County Schools is currently training all K-3 teachers in Language Essentials for Teacher of Reading and Spelling (LETRS). This training has helped strengthen core literacy instruction at Coker-Wimberly. In addition, Coker-Wimberly invested in [HillRAP](#), a structured literacy program for students who have significant gaps in foundational reading skills. Three HillRAP-trained staff provide direct support to students by pushing into classrooms. They also support teachers and share ideas during Professional Learning Community meetings.

“It’s okay to use a tier two intervention for...80% of the students, since they all need the intervention.”

To enhance math instruction and intervention, teachers from the school received professional development from the Long-View Number Lab in Austin, TX which focuses on teaching number sense and conceptual math. Because Coker-Wimberly is working toward a more holistic, child-centered approach to teaching and learning, teachers have also received professional development in cultural responsiveness. The goal of this training is to help address potential biases and improve relationships between teachers and students, as well as among students.

“Enhancement teachers” push into classrooms to provide support to small groups of students during a dedicated intervention and enrichment time at Coker-Wimberly. Students also have access to out-of-school-time learning opportunities to get additional tutoring during the spring and fall semesters, and they benefit from subject-specific remediation at the end of the school year.

Impacts of MTSS on the School

Implementing MTSS with a focus on strengthening core instruction and targeting students for additional support helped Coker-Wimberly elevate its performance enough to exit from the state’s CSI and TSI school list by 2022-23. The principal reported that the percentages of students performing at or above proficient on state assessments increased from the teens to the thirties and forties. She also noted that teachers are building better relationships with students and have a better understanding of students’ individual needs. They are increasingly skilled at identifying the specific type of small group instruction that is needed for specific groups of students, recognizing when students make progress, and reflecting on what supports students will need next. As a result, she observed that students enjoy their small group instruction and generally like coming to school, because they recognize that they are getting the support they need. Some students who were on Tier II behavior plans are now seeing academic successes because their behaviors are improving.

What Challenges Did the School Encounter with MTSS Implementation?

Mindset: Making MTSS the Culture and Language of the School

Understanding MTSS and how to better meet the needs of all students required a schoolwide change in mindset. The principal reflected that this shift involved “hard conversations” with staff and a significant amount of professional development. The professional development was intentionally incremental to help teachers recognize that they were not reaching all students with their instruction and begin to learn how to change that. Initially, teachers had difficulty looking at their teaching styles and instructional delivery, sometimes struggling to identify which students needed intervention. In addition to analyzing the results of the MTSS Beliefs Survey, school leadership created a walk-through tool based on the [Get Better Faster](#) model to help identify teachers’ capacity to implement small group interventions. This tool helped school leaders initiate conversations about professional development and identify action steps to help teachers understand how to plan for and implement different levels of supports for students. The principal aimed to build a school culture in which staff felt coached and supported in the same way that they were trying to coach and support students toward improved academic success.

Advice for Other Schools

Plan for MTSS Implementation With School Context in Mind

It takes time to implement MTSS successfully in any setting, but implementation can be an even slower process in a low performing school because of the large number of students who are in need of supports. Teachers need support in interpreting and using data to help them make decisions about what is not working for students, as well as understanding how to adapt instruction to make it more effective for students. The principal noted that in low performing schools where many students are not succeeding with core instruction, there should not be a rush to implement Tier II or other interventions outside of the classroom. Rather, the focus should first be on providing stronger Tier I instruction to meet the academic needs of all students.

Have Authentic Conversations with Teachers

Some conversations with staff may be difficult because they address topics like beliefs, teaching styles, accountability for low student performance, or teacher knowledge and skills. Helping teachers reflect on why their teaching (and/or school-wide instruction) has not resulted in success for students is difficult and requires honest reflection and authentic inquiry, which in turn require a school culture built on transparency, supports, and trust. Making changes to instructional practices is not easy, particularly for those who considered themselves seasoned teachers. Just as conversations with students about how to improve should be timely and specific, so should conversations with school staff be specific to their use of particular instructional practices and how data are used to make decisions regarding supports for their students.

“We cannot do this with dishonesty. It has to be done with transparency, with trust, and we have to have authentic conversation around how we can make this change happen. ...That’s absolutely not

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