

Decatur High School, Decatur, Georgia

Decatur High School is the only high school in the suburban district of City Schools of Decatur in Atlanta, Georgia. In 2021-22 the school had a student population of 1,732, with 7% economically disadvantaged,¹ 1% English learners, and 8.5% students with a disability.² The school's graduation rate was 97%.³

Interview Date: January 2023

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

² EL and SWD data: Enrollment by Subgroup Programs: <https://gosa.georgia.gov/dashboards-data-report-card/downloadable-data>

³ Graduation rate: <https://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/communications/Documents/4-Year Cohort Graduation Rate State District School by Subgroup 10 06 22.pdf>

Background and Catalyst

The school's efforts to implement MTSS started more than 10 years ago with what they described as a state mandate. Initially, a teacher coordinated the school's MTSS efforts in addition to her teaching duties. A full-time MTSS Coordinator was hired in 2018 because the district was not seeing the student gains it hoped for at the high school. A full-time literacy interventionist was hired in 2021 to work primarily with 9th grade students who needed Tier 3 support, and a full-time math interventionist was hired in 2022 to fill a similar role for mathematics support.

The Present: What Does MTSS Look Like Now?

Leadership: Vision, Teams, Structures, and Processes

Currently (in 2022-23), Decatur High School employs three full-time staff to support MTSS: an MTSS Coordinator, a Literacy Intervention Specialist, and a Math Intervention Specialist. The school's MTSS team consists of these staff members and the school's administrators. The district also has an MTSS team that includes an MTSS Coordinator and a District MTSS Coach. In 2021, the literacy interventionist was given "carte blanche" by the district to build the school's intervention program. She developed systems to document processes, including for behavior support, attendance monitoring and communication, and communication with families and community supports.

Student Supports

The literacy and math interventionists have caseloads of Tier 2 and 3 students they monitor and provide with direct academic support through tutoring before school, small group intervention classes, and push-in support in core classes. The interventionists play a key role in tracking student data and sharing it across the school and with the district, as well as managing the movement of students between tiers of support. They also communicate with parents, community resources, social workers, the attendance officer, and other support staff, and develop supportive relationships with students on their caseloads.

Tier 2 and 3 Literacy and Math Support. The school is focused on providing intensive literacy support to 9th grade students with gaps in basic reading skills. These students are identified using the state's [Remedial Education Program](#) criteria, which include students who perform below the 25th percentile on the most recent state ELA exam. The literacy interventionist is embedded in core English classes to support specific Tier 3 students. She also teaches these same students in a 90-minute reading enrichment elective class after their core English class. Thus, these Tier 3 students have a 3-hour block of English and reading enrichment. The reading

enrichment classes are kept very small—around six or fewer Tier 3 students, and they use the Read 180 program, which has small group, individualized and computer-based components. For 10th through 12th graders, literacy support is provided through the [Remedial Education Program](#) (REP), following guidelines for student eligibility, class size and setting, instructional format, and progress monitoring. REP English classes cover the same standards and content as a typical English class, but with embedded supports.

The math interventionist also provides small group support to students with basic skill gaps, focusing on modeling, reteaching, and fact fluency. The math interventionist position is new as of the 2022-23 school year.

Other Support. The literacy and math interventionists help teachers with behavior supports, tracking attendance and communicating with the attendance clerk, and in general, serve as case managers for the academic and behavioral needs of students on their caseloads. They have small caseloads because the students they serve often need significant support. As one put it, “I may spend two to three days a week when I’m not teaching communicating with administrators and chasing down four to five kids to see why they’re not in class.” She reflected that students on her caseload need more hands-on time than the average high school student, as do their families. Her focus is not just on providing academic support, but also on supporting students and families with being connected to the school.

The interventionist role also includes supporting classroom teachers as they work with struggling students. The literacy interventionist maintains a Google Classroom resource for all English teachers with blocked and chunked assignments, graphic organizers, vocabulary aids, and behavior interventions and helps teachers with cross-curricular literacy supports. The interventionists also plan with teachers whose classrooms they push into and assist with individualizing Tier 2 supports.

Impacts of MTSS on the School

One outcome of the school’s recent work to strengthen literacy and math intervention was described as minimizing the number of students graduating without the necessary skills to be successful after high school. Both the literacy and math interventionists report seeing students make significant gains through the small group support they provide. They have also seen students’ confidence and self-efficacy grow as they master basic reading and math skills they have likely struggled with for years.

What Challenges Did the School Encounter with MTSS Implementation?

The Complicated Needs of Some Tier 2 and 3 Students

Interviewees observed that academic skill gaps are often intertwined with other challenges, like disengagement, attendance, or behavior. Attendance has been a particular challenge post-COVID and impacts the ability of students to get the support they need if they are not in school. In this relatively affluent and high-performing school district, students who struggle can report feeling disconnected from the school and may either try to fly under the radar or “make a very big show of making sure that people notice them.”

Simplifying the Use of Data to Identify Struggling Students and Communicate Their Progress

The school uses a variety of data points to identify students in need of support but finds that some do not align and there are too many. It is working on simplifying assessment and data analysis by reducing the number of assessments students must take and ensuring that they can be completed quickly. In the 2022-23 school year, [Renaissance Learning’s Star reading and math assessments](#) served as a universal screening tool, with

“I think it's important that the administrators look at the big picture of everything they're asking their teachers to do, and then look at what are the requirements, and how many of these other things can we let go of so that we can focus on what matters. And what matters is good teaching for kids who aren't figuring it out by themselves.”

other data points also factored into decisions about which students needed intervention. The literacy interventionist reported that a current challenge is to review universal screening data and compare it with other criteria to make sure they are not missing students who need support and are accurately identifying students' needs. Another challenge is effectively communicating data with families using language they can easily understand (for example, telling them their child is reading at the 4th grade level rather than at the 5th percentile).

Advice for Other Schools

Discuss your School's Vision for MTSS

The interviewees recommended that schools take the time to discuss their vision for student supports and how they can be continuously improved. That is, is the vision just to provide specific interventions? Or is it to develop an MTSS program that involves the whole school in addressing the needs of each child, which requires greater teacher buy-in and collaboration?

Adapt MTSS to Your School Context

Schools should identify their non-negotiables and areas of flexibility as they continuously improve their MTSS implementation. If a full-scale school-wide effort to provide students supports is the vision, those involved need to communicate regularly, because MTSS is an iterative process that is "really hard work" and can look different in different school contexts. In addition to committing staff to MTSS (such as literacy and math interventionists), it is also important to consider the classroom teachers' skill sets in providing student supports in the classroom and help train them, listen to them, and respond to their needs.

"There's no easy way and no single way to do it. It happens best when staff know what to do and how to do it and are given support."

Put Your MTSS Approach on Paper

Developing the infrastructure for a successful MTSS implementation includes a need for clear, written guidance on various key aspects of implementation, including entry and exit criteria for interventions, staffing and available resources for providing interventions, identification of non-instructional supports and how they will be coordinated (e.g., counselors, social workers, community supports), and logistics (e.g., space for and scheduling of intervention). This school's district has published [a summary of its process](#) on the district website, though school-specific documents are not publicly available. There are many different approaches and no single way to do MTSS "right," but however a school chooses to implement MTSS, staff will need to the details of how it works.

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