

Okapilco Elementary School, Moultrie, GA

Okapilco Elementary is one of 10 elementary schools in the Colquitt County Schools System, located in southwest Georgia. In 2022-23, the school had a student population of 341, with 100% economically disadvantaged, 25% English learners, and 20% students with a disability.¹

Interview Date: November 2023

¹ Enrollment, ED, EL, and SWD data: <https://ccrpi.gadoe.org/>

Background and Catalyst

Okapilco Elementary serves an economically disadvantaged student population (100%), 25% of whom are English learners (many from migrant families). As recently as 2022, Okapilco was on the state's list of Promise Schools—those schools whose performance places them in the lowest 5 to 10% of all schools in the state. Notably, the school improved student performance enough to exit the list as of 2022-23. The principal attributes Okapilco's improved student performance in large part to the school's approach to MTSS.

Okapilco began implementing MTSS in 2015-16. The school faced challenges in its first phase of implementation. For example, in 2020, the principal noted that about a quarter of the school's population was identified to receive Tier 2 or 3 supports and recognized that providing this level of supports was unsustainable. She sought out MTSS training for herself and other staff to help identify ways to implement MTSS more efficiently and effectively for the school's high-needs student population. A focus on improving Tier 1 instruction and more intentionally selecting interventions based on students' individual needs has helped the school reduce the number of students needing academic Tier 2 and 3 interventions by approximately 50% over the past few years.

"We had to make sure Tier 1 instruction was going the way that it should be going.... If we had [strong] Tier 1 instruction in place, then students had a better chance of not falling behind academically."

The Present: What Does MTSS Look Like Now?

Leadership: Vision, Teams, Structures, and Processes

The school principal has been a part of the school's MTSS implementation efforts since 2016—first as an academic coach, then as an assistant principal, and finally as the principal. The school's culture and vision for MTSS implementation has evolved significantly since she came into her principal role in 2020-21. The current school culture sets high expectations and provides high levels of support to both students and teachers. The principal leads the school's MTSS leadership team, which also includes the assistant principal, two interventionists, and an RTI interventionist.

Responsibilities for reviewing student data are split between three academic teams of teachers. That is, a reading team, a math team, and a science/social studies data team each meet monthly to examine relevant schoolwide data and the progress of students receiving Tier 2 and Tier 3 support for their given content area. A fourth behavior team composed of the school counselor, social worker, and PBIS leads also meets to discuss and monitor well-being supports for students. In addition to these team meetings, there are four meetings per year with the parents of students receiving Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions.

Student Supports

Academic supports. According to the principal, a significant factor in their improved implementation of MTSS was the school’s use of a standards-aligned universal screening tool (i.e., NWEA MAP). This tool enabled staff to closely examine student growth in reading, math, and science and better understand student support needs. The school also invested in a number of nationally recognized academic intervention programs, including Corrective Reading, Reading Mastery, and Language for Learning, and began focusing on better matching intervention programs to students’ particular needs. With better identification of student needs and more individualized intervention, Okapilco was able to monitor progress and set student growth goals more accurately. In 2021, Okapilco moved a veteran interventionist into an RTI specialist role. She trained and coached paraprofessionals and special education teachers on the interventions used in the school so they could better coordinate their support for students with the school’s two interventionists.

“We realized that students can make progress if they get the right intervention, and that the same intervention does not work for every student.”

Currently, Okapilco provides students with academic supports in reading and math for all grades, as well as for science in fifth grade. However, the greatest focus has been on reading supports. Classroom teachers provide Tier 2 intervention, while interventionists, special education teachers, and trained paraprofessionals provide Tier 3 intervention. The school initially had different intervention times for each grade level but moved to a 30-minute schoolwide intervention block in 2021 to allow for more flexible grouping of students by needs across grade levels. This intervention block is also used to provide enrichment so that all students are receiving something they need during the half-hour period at the beginning of the day.

Behavior supports. Okapilco has been a PBIS school since 2015-16 and provides student supports for behavior, using behavioral interventions matched to student needs. The principal also hired a behavior interventionist to help reduce behavior referrals and suspensions by building better relationships with students. There is a schoolwide focus on Tier 1 behavior supports, including teachers greeting students at the door and awarding attendance incentives for both students and staff. PBIS expectations are embedded in a daily morning show, and all classes are expected to watch. “There’s not a kid in our school...[who] cannot tell you our expectations and what they mean,” said the principal. The principal ensures that the staff participates in morning greetings and the morning show by making herself visible throughout the school each morning in “Focus Walks.”

Well-being supports. Okapilco has a school counselor and a social worker to provide mental health and family support. In addition, licensed counselors come to the school four days per week through the [Georgia Apex Program](#). Funded by the Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities, the Apex Program builds capacity within schools to increase access to mental health services for school-aged youth. As needed, students are referred to the school counselor by teachers and staff. The school counselor can, in turn, refer students to the licensed Apex counselors if needed. Okapilco’s principal reports that having this mental health service in the school has been popular with parents and impactful for the school, noting improvements in student behaviors as they are able to receive mental health support when they need it.

Impacts of MTSS on the School

Okapilco has experienced significant growth in reading, math, and science since 2020, despite the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Those COVID impacts were mitigated through a 1-to-1 device initiative, access to web-based intervention programs, and the provision of hotspots during school closures to ensure that students could access instructional and intervention resources. Not only have students’ content mastery rates improved, but the school has exceeded projected growth. Students who were previously performing at the lowest level on the state Milestones exams are moving into higher levels of performance. The principal attributes this growth to the school’s efforts to improve core instruction and ensure that students receive interventions that more directly target their needs.

The principal also reports reduced rates of student suspensions and behavior referrals due to their increased focus on building better relationships with students. The school’s behavior interventionist plays a key role for students who need Tier 2 and 3 behavior support. She leads the school’s [Check-In/Check-Out](#) intervention and is very intentional about checking in with identified students and being available to them on a daily basis. Attendance incentives have helped to reduce chronic absenteeism.

What Challenges Did the School Encounter with MTSS Implementation?

Getting Teachers to Buy In to MTSS

The principal noted that change is hard, and teachers need support in order to buy into MTSS. Her approach has been to look at the data with them and together examine what the data say about whether the past approach was working. The fact that the school’s data put them on a state school improvement list helped motivate staff to make changes. The principal also noted the challenge of coordinating schoolwide interventions such that all teachers are involved. She believed that everybody needs to be involved in the MTSS process, whether it’s for enrichment, supporting students at grade level, or providing intervention to those who need extra support.

Allocating Funding for Interventions

One challenge when the school first implemented MTSS was the need to allocate more resources for intervention programs. The principal was able to obtain extra funds for these programs because the school was on the school improvement list, but she made sure to make strategic purchases that could be used even after that funding was no longer available.

Advice for Other Schools

Spend the Time Needed to Get Students the Right Interventions

In the early days of MTSS implementation, Okapilco used one-size-fits-all interventions and left students in interventions for extended periods of time in the hope that growth would eventually come. But now, staff carefully examine student data to select enrichment, remediation, or intervention for students and meet multiple times per year to determine if particular interventions are working for particular students. They also started giving students “growth cards” so the students can be accountable for their own progress. Staff explain to students why they are receiving a particular intervention to help them feel more empowered as they develop the needed skills. The school’s advice to others is to look intentionally at student data to identify student needs and find the interventions best aligned with those needs.

MTSS is a Marathon, Not a Sprint

The principal reflected that fully implementing MTSS well and making it sustainable is a process that takes time, and “you’ve got to be willing to bend and change” in order to get to where you want to be as a school. MTSS implementation is better characterized as a marathon than a sprint. It requires continuously examining what could be done better and focusing on a few things at a time. Thus, the continuous improvement of MTSS implementation can take years.

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