

## Walker Gamble Elementary School, New Zion, South Carolina

Walker Gamble Elementary School is a pre-K through Grade 5 school located just off I-95 in Manning, South Carolina. It is one of four primary and elementary schools in the [Clarendon County School District](#). In 2022-23 the school had a student population of 553<sup>1</sup>, with 61% eligible for free or reduced-price school lunches, 4% multilingual learners and 14% students with a disability.<sup>2</sup>

Interview Date: November 2023

<sup>1</sup> Enrollment data: [SC School Report Cards](#)

<sup>2</sup> Free/reduced-price lunch, ML, and SWD data: [ESEA Network](#) and Walker Gamble Elementary School

### Background and Catalyst

Two catalysts drove the implementation of MTSS at Walker Gamble Elementary School beginning in 2017-18. The first catalyst was the philosophy of collective—rather than top-down—leadership held by the current principal, who has been at the school for eight years. In his second year at the school, the state began a [Collective Leadership Initiative](#) using a [framework](#) designed to support school improvement, which the Clarendon County School District encouraged across its schools. This collective leadership approach undergirds Walker Gamble’s implementation of MTSS. The second catalyst was that South Carolina’s school report cards—which were first issued in the 2017-18 school year—gave the school a “Below Average” rating for student progress, placing it in the bottom 20% of schools in the state. These results created a sense of urgency for improvement and led to changes that ultimately earned the school an award as a [National ESEA Distinguished School](#) in 2023.

### The Present: What Does MTSS Look Like Now?

#### *Leadership: Vision, Teams, Structures, and Processes*

Upon beginning MTSS implementation, the principal recognized that some aspects of the school’s operation had been the same for many years and needed to be reconsidered. He started by working with teachers to increase the use of small group pull-out instruction to address all students’ academic needs. To facilitate this, the staff developed a new school schedule that included blocks for ELA and math intervention. When the school first implemented the new schedule, teachers used their regular professional learning community (PLC) meetings to develop a collective understanding of what Tier 2 targeted intervention looks like. Interviewees pointed out that in some schools there might also need to be a focus on developing a collective understanding of what Tier 1 core instruction should look like. They noted, “You can’t intervene your way out of bad Tier 1 instruction.”

A few staff in the school had begun the 2-year Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling ([LETRS](#)) science of reading training program at the time of the interviews, and interviewees were hopeful that this training would have a positive impact on instruction in the future. These staff are among many [across the state](#) who are learning how to implement the science of reading in their schools.

Shared leadership is important to Walker Gamble’s overall culture and permeates the school’s implementation of MTSS. The assistant principal originally led MTSS, but it has grown into a more team-oriented approach that includes all staff. The core leadership team for the school includes the principal, assistant principal, instructional coach, and literacy coach. When making important decisions about how MTSS functions in the school, the interventionist, school psychologist, and guidance counselor are included in the discussions.

Teachers are also asked for input and are supported in taking ownership of MTSS and how instruction in the school is structured to meet the needs of students. For this reason, third through fifth grades at the school are departmentalized, with teachers leading instruction in the subjects they feel most comfortable teaching. Teachers also group students flexibly within each grade level, dividing all students in the grade between teachers and providing instruction according to each group of students' needs.

Decisions about various aspects of MTSS, such as progress monitoring goals and the criteria for students who need Tier 3 intervention, are made collaboratively. Teachers are empowered to determine what will be taught in small group instruction and how, and they are supported in doing this by the school's reading coach and instructional coach. The school has recently experienced several district consolidations, meaning that some of the district guidance and requirements related to MTSS also changed. Despite this, the school leaders at Walker Gamble have continued to depend on teachers for significant input on how to best meet the needs of their students.

"You've got to find where your need is. If your Tier 1 instruction is good, focus on Tier 2 and what that looks like.... [Y]ou can't intervene your way out of bad Tier 1 instruction. So, you've got to make sure [Tier 1 is] where it needs to be prior to doing anything else."

### **Student Supports**

**Academic supports.** A 50-minute ELA intervention block and a 30- to 40-minute math intervention block are built into the master schedule for academic support. During those intervention blocks, students are grouped according to their needs and all students receive some type of specialized support. For example, students who are identified as gifted and talented and those who are multilingual learners or have IEPs are pulled out of the classroom to receive the services they need. Students receiving Tier 3 intervention are also pulled out of classrooms and work in small groups with interventionists. The remaining students receive small group support from the classroom teacher as they work toward specific reading, writing, comprehension, or math goals.

The school's culture of collective leadership gives teachers some leeway to be innovative in how they teach and support students. At the time of the interview, the school's four 5<sup>th</sup> grade teachers were planning to try an approach where all fifth graders are grouped according to their intervention needs during the ELA and math intervention blocks. One 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher would provide Tier 3 intervention, another would focus on students needing Tier 2 supports, and the other two 5<sup>th</sup> grade teachers would lead enrichment activities with the remaining students.

**Behavior and Well-being supports.** Academic support was the school's primary focus for MTSS because the school has not experienced significant behavioral issues, according to interviewees. They have recently been working to incorporate a greater focus on behavior and well-being. Currently, a guidance counselor, social worker, and school psychologist provide supports to students. The school leadership team collaborated with the school psychologist to determine criteria that would automatically refer a student for one-to-one counseling sessions with the school counselor or social worker. They report that everybody is "on the same page" in getting students the help they need.

### **Impacts of MTSS on the School**

Interviewees reported that strengthening Walker Gamble's focus on core and small group instruction has led the school to double the percentage of students meeting state growth goals. It is currently rated "Excellent" by the state for both academic achievement and student progress. In fall 2023, the school also received a [National ESEA Distinguished School Award](#) for its exceptional student performance and academic growth. The lowest-performing 20% of students and economically disadvantaged student groups in the school outperformed their district and the state in 2022-23.

## What Challenges Did the School Encounter with MTSS Implementation?

### *Sufficient Staffing for Student Needs*

Walker Gamble once had five interventionists, but district consolidations and changes in funding have reduced that to one, which the school feels is not sufficient to meet the needs of all students who could benefit from Tier 3 intervention. School leaders feel that if MTSS is valued by a state there needs to be funding to help support the schools in hiring the personnel needed to provide student supports. They said, “Our teachers are doing a fabulous job with the time that they have within the daily schedule to do as much as they possibly can... [but] we really need more personnel to make sure that we’re meeting our students where they need to be met.”

### *Balancing District and School Initiatives*

Changes at the district level resulted in shifting guidance and expectations for Walker Gamble. For example, a new districtwide progress monitoring program was difficult to align with the school’s instructional pacing. This meant that the program produced student goals that did not reflect the skills students actually needed to strengthen, which frustrated teachers. School leaders overcame this challenge by giving teachers more ownership over identifying the skills they would teach in small groups and setting the goals for students who needed extra support. “We gave [teachers] much more of a voice than we did at the very beginning of the year before we realized that there was that much frustration,” they said.

## Advice for Other Schools

### *Build Time for Intervention Into the Schedule*

School leaders believe that embedding time for small group intervention into the master schedule was key to Walker Gamble’s remarkable improvement. The principal noted, “I think if you’re doing what’s best for kids, then this is the way to go because not only do you see their academic growth, but [the small group approach] also builds relationships... it helps not only academics, [but also] behavior, achievement, everything, just having that system in place.”

“When you incorporate teachers in building that schedule, then you have the buy-in that you need to keep it going every year. And then once you see the results that we did, you can’t argue with that... growth has been constant since we changed the schedule.”

### *Decide Where to Start and Continue Refining MTSS Each Year*

Interviewees recommended that a school beginning or reimagining MTSS first examine the procedures it has in place, its schedule, and its personnel “to see what can work” and decide where to start with strengthening Tier 1, 2, or 3 instruction. They also recommended making time for teachers to focus on providing effective Tier 2 instruction in their classrooms. Walker Gamble’s starting point was to make sure there was dedicated time for all students to receive small group support or enrichment. School leaders recognize that implementing and constantly refining MTSS is a process that will not happen overnight. “We’re still... seven years into it and we change things every year,” they said.

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