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# Understanding Minnesota School Districts' Use of Minnesota Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MnMTSS) Resources: Evidence from Case Studies in Three Districts

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# ABOUT US

## REGION 10 CCNETWORK WISCONSIN MINNESOTA

With deep roots in the region, R10CC is made up of three organizations: the University of Wisconsin–Madison’s Wisconsin Evaluation Collaborative (WEC), the University of Minnesota’s Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement (CAREI), and Education Analytics (EA). Our team has extensive experience working with the Wisconsin Department of Instruction (DPI), Minnesota Department of Education (MDE), regional education support organizations, professional associations, and school districts to translate research into practical applications.

## THE COMPREHENSIVE NETWORK

The U.S. Department of Education’s Comprehensive Centers Program is designed to provide high quality and intensive capacity-building services to help state education agencies and their clients identify, implement and sustain evidence-based practices to support education outcomes pursuant to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015.

# Introduction

The Collaborative Minnesota Partnerships to Advance Student Success (COMPASS), a statewide education system designed to support schools’ and districts’ efforts to accelerate student learning, offers professional development opportunities with various levels of support. Through COMPASS school districts and charter schools are provided a variety of resources, evidence-based practices, and facilitated guidance to support schools in areas of Literacy, Math, and School Climate and Mental Health using the Minnesota Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MnMTSS) continuous improvement framework. As part of the federally-funded Region 10 Comprehensive Center (R10CC), the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement (CAREI) at the University of Minnesota has collaborated with MDE to develop a wealth of written resources to support implementation of MnMTSS across Minnesota schools and districts.

As part of the R10CC’s commitment to building capacity towards successful MnMTSS implementation in Minnesota, CAREI conducted a series of case studies in the summer of 2023 to understand how school districts were using the resources shared during the six- and nine-week MnMTSS COMPASS cohort courses. The aim was to identify and build on the strengths of existing MnMTSS resources, to understand how districts use the resources, and to identify what may contribute to or inhibit their use.

This brief summarizes what we learned from three Minnesota school districts who participated in COMPASS cohort learning experiences. We’ll introduce each district and describe how their teams engaged in the cohort courses, how their participation impacted local MnMTSS development and implementation, and what lessons they learned along the way. We hope these stories can inspire other school districts and charter schools to take advantage of COMPASS and MnMTSS resources in ways that support local planning and implementation.

## APPROACH AND PARTICIPANTS

The case studies were designed using a mixed-methods approach that included interviews and polling with school districts, a review of the previously mentioned MnMTSS resources, and analysis of existing data. Three districts selected for their deep engagement in cohort courses as well as their geographic diversity were invited to participate: (1) Madelia, a district in Greater MN with a racially/ethnically diverse student population (2); Burnsville-Eagan-Savage, a district in the Greater Twin Cities Metropolitan Area with a racially/ethnically diverse student population (3); and Delano, a district in Greater MN with a primarily White student population. District 2 received a [state grant](#) to fund their local MnMTSS capacity building work, including funding staff time to engage in professional learning such as the cohort courses.

District	Location	Grant Funded?	Cohort Participation	% Students of Color	% Free & Reduced Lunch
(1) Madelia	Greater Minnesota	No	6 & 9 Month Cohorts	48.2%	61.5%
(2) Burnsville-Eagan-Savage	Greater Twin Cities	Yes	6 & 9 Month Cohorts	70.1%	65.1%
(3) Delano	Greater Minnesota	No	6 & 9 Month Cohorts	8.7%	13.7%

The following summarizes the three districts’ experiences with the written materials, including the approaches they took, the barriers they encountered, and recommendations for districts considering participating in the COMPASS learning opportunities.

# Madelia

## ABOUT THE DISTRICT

- Small K-12 district
- 600 students
- Located in southern MN

Prior to starting the full 15-month COMPASS cohort, the district was in a position to align strategic planning and MnMTSS efforts. In essence, they had the opportunity to start from scratch and leverage MnMTSS resources to develop a local continuous improvement framework aligned with MTSS. Being a small district, their cohort leadership team of nine members was a blend of district and school leadership with representation from both elementary and secondary levels, as well as major district departments.

The team took full advantage of the MnMTSS resources by first completing the Self-Evaluation of MnMTSS for District Leadership Teams (SEMI-DLT). This tool—now in its second iteration—was designed to support districts and charter schools in identifying MnMTSS components and subcomponents to prioritize in their MTSS planning and implementation. With a clearer sense of priorities, the district could proceed with MnMTSS planning bit by bit, relying on the MnMTSS Framework to guide its internal process and to customize other templates—such as the District Handbook template and Team Guidebook template—to fit their context. For example, the district created their own quick reference guide to accompany the Team Guidebook, which was rolled out in time for staff professional development this fall.

“I have never felt in my entire career—and this is year 32—that we have ever had this much support on anything from MDE... This has been a pretty transformational program that, I think, is going to show some really positive results.”

When asked what made the resources useful, the team shared that they are comprehensive and customizable, making them usable for a district of any size. All of the resources align so that districts can integrate the components month-over-month towards successful MTSS implementation. Despite it being a significant time commitment, the resources ultimately save time by being aligned with MDE requirements, thoughtfully organized, and supported through the MnMTSS professional learning courses. The only downside we heard was that the resources are so comprehensive that the scope of the planning process can feel like a lot to take on.

Despite its size, the district is already seeing results. The process is driving the Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) process and curriculum choices. Staff attitudes are shifting towards one of urgency to implement MnMTSS with fidelity to support more students. Support and respect for people's time through efficient, action-oriented meetings are becoming the norm. Committees work with purpose, and there are now dedicated days for meetings. Paraprofessionals are included in professional development and are compensated for their time. Ultimately, this has fostered trust throughout the district in the process, with consistency and support for continuous improvement. There are

improved connections between district policy and its infrastructure, with continuity across departments. With an equity lens embedded throughout the MnMTSS framework, the district has been able to make thoughtful, equity-minded decisions resulting in a shared confidence that there will be significant progress towards more equitable outcomes for students.

“MDE guidance was pivotal... [It] gave us an organized way to tackle a very heavy lift.”

# Burnsville-Eagan-Savage School District

## ABOUT THE DISTRICT

- Large PreK–12 district
- 18 schools, 8000 students
- Located in Twin Cities metro

For the Burnsville–Eagan–Savage district, a state MTSS grant opportunity was what initially led the district to collaborate across multiple departments toward a more unified approach to MTSS. Previously, MTSS was done without a consistent framework, and the MnMTSS professional learning cohort was a chance to do the work with structured support. Once awarded, and with an MnMTSS Coordinator position already in place, momentum began to build as the grant created a sense of accountability.

The original intent of the district’s MTSS planning team was to focus on priority areas identified from the SEMI-DLT. While the work began over the summer, it became clear that Collaborative Linked Teams (MnMTSS Subcomponent 1.6) was a critical component to their success. With two dedicated positions to shepherd the process, the MTSS Coordinator and MTSS TOSA attended the MnMTSS professional learning cohort sessions. They collected and customized resources and shared pertinent information with the District MTSS Team to make efficient use of people’s time. In year two, the team will shift its focus to the other three priority areas identified in the SEMI-DLT: Systems Evaluation, School Climate, and Educational Decision Making. They were able to make significant strides by using the MnMTSS Framework criteria as a checklist with action steps. This included identifying

“One of the biggest changes is that we’ve heard a lot from teachers and staff that the work used to be done in silos and they weren’t able to see the connections between the work that we’re doing and thinking that everything is something new and different. People are starting to finally see some of the connections that can be made, and understand that everything isn’t necessarily different.”

the timeline for implementing each item, necessary resources, and measures of completion. They also separated each subcomponent into its own document and organized it to fit their context. They further customized the Framework by creating corresponding documents grounded in their own approach.

In the interview with the CAREI team, they shared how useful the MnMTSS resources were. The resources supported transparency in the work by being explicit and detailed. They also shared that while there’s room for greater alignment with external compliance such as QComp, overall the process and resources are synced with other external requirements. Once the Instructional Leadership Team started to see the value and engage in the work, the momentum took off. The result is increased connection between buildings and the district. The culture of continuous improvement is supported and reinforced throughout the district by leaders including the Director of Curriculum and Instruction, Assistant Superintendent, and Superintendent.



# Delano

## ABOUT THE DISTRICT

- Small PreK-12 district
- 2300 students
- Located in south central MN
- High-performing district

As instruction returned to in-person following the height of pandemic fears, teachers voiced concerns about how COVID had changed their students. The district knew it needed to act, and formed a three-person team charged with responding to students' needs through robust implementation of MTSS:

- Elementary Principal
- The Curriculum & Assessment Coordinator, who was new to MTSS and the district
- Dedicated MTSS Coordinator, who had extensive experience in the district as a special education teacher

A secondary team was formed to support these leaders' work, composed of building principals, assistant principals, a social worker, and representations from curricular areas. Focusing on K-10, the two teams approached the work by having the primary team attend the COMPASS sessions and then bring back what they learned to the secondary team. From there, pertinent information was shared as needed with relevant departments.

The work was possible due in no small part to the support the team had from district leadership. Teachers were provided release time to engage in

“This [MTSS] model allows us to be proactive instead of waiting until kids are 2, 3 years behind before they can qualify for extensive services... The [MnMTSS] resources were a great opportunity to move in that direction.”

the work, and the support of a dedicated staff person ensured there was accountability, momentum, and organization within the process. Going further, the team approached roadblocks and resistance from the perspective of a training opportunity rather than a barrier. All of this made for effective use of the materials.

Completed early in their process, the SEMI-DLT suggested numerous areas of focus. The tool served as a neutral voice and integrated an equity lens into the work. From there, the team leveraged the Framework to guide planning at building and district levels, proving essential for developing tiered interventions and integrating K-10 screeners. Additionally, the team used the District Handbook as the template for their own, starting with little customization but plenty of room for continuous improvement and adaptation.

When asked what made the resources useful, district representatives highlighted the thoroughness of the MnMTSS components and subcomponents; noting that they give a clear definition with tangible assets and visuals. The resources and the process were so effective that they helped familiarize new staff to the district's context. As a high-performing district, there had previously been a culture whereby some staff would want low-performing students “sent somewhere else”,

but the MnMTSS framework and its equity emphasis served as powerful and clear reminders that staff should—and could—meet students’ diverse needs. “It’s all of our jobs to meet that student where they are on a daily basis,” one representative said of an emerging culture of responsibility brought about in part by the MnMTSS development and implementation process.

“The layout and the process we went through was very systematic and intentional on MDE’s part. Clearly, whoever’s doing the research behind that knows that this is a sequential process, and it helped us to develop our handbook and our guiding principles and teaming practices.”



# Interested in Joining the COMPASS Pathways?

If your district could benefit from guided support and resources in your MTSS efforts, the MnMTSS Professional Learning opportunities offered as part of [COMPASS](#) can help. You can also sign up to learn more by subscribing to the [COMPASS Updates bulletin](#). Whether you're considering joining the MnMTSS Professional Learning Courses or are already in the process, here are some of the key recommendations that emerged from our interviews with previous participants to make the most of the professional learning and related resources:

- Leadership should be involved. From the superintendent to principals, their involvement demonstrates support and alignment, and helps with identifying priorities. At the minimum, having them involved in the SEMI-DLT is truly a value add.
- The team structure is important. While there's no one-size-fits-all approach, finding a way to have a dedicated person and at least one additional person on the primary team can help ensure momentum. If possible, consider someone with a strong history within the district.
- Be strategic with information sharing. There are a lot of resources made available in this process and it can be overwhelming. The most effective way for these districts to engage and make progress was to have a core team attend the sessions, present insights and recommendations to a larger team of representatives from affected departments, customize the materials to meet the needs of their specific context, and then share pertinent information with affected divisions or individuals.
- Create opportunities for others to engage in the work. Whether it's by securing teacher release time, restructuring committees, or even paying for paraprofessional development, seek to integrate MnMTSS planning into teachers' and staffs' current workloads instead of adding to them.

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