
Collaboration to Promote Social-Emotional Learning: Promoting Resilience During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: A long-standing, traditional teacher professional development relationship was expanded to involve school mental health professionals in supporting the implementation of a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) and fostering social-emotional learning district-wide. The ultimate goal of the collaboration was to foster a balanced focus on social-emotional, behavioral, and academic student success throughout the district. The goal for the first year of the collaboration was to develop and support MTSS within the context of the American School Counseling Association's National Model for Comprehensive School Counseling and the National Association of School Psychologists Practice Model. This paper describes the partnership and how the infusion of SEL informed the school district's responses to the pandemic.

KEYWORDS: social-emotional learning, Multi-Tiered System of Support, professional development schools, pandemic

NAPDS NINE ESSENTIALS ADDRESSED:

Essential 1: A Comprehensive Mission: A professional development school (PDS) is a learning community guided by a comprehensive, articulated mission that is broader than the goals of any single partner, and that aims to advance equity, antiracism, and social justice within and among schools, colleges/universities, and their respective community and professional partners.

Ball State University (BSU) has a unique relationship with Muncie Community Schools (MCS). One of the benefits of this partnership is access to collaboration, resources, and expertise to mutually support the mission of the local school district and of the university. An opportunity to infuse social-emotional learning for pre-K-12 education came about through the innovative partnership. The SEL implementation plan informed the MCS response to the pandemic.

Comprehensive mission

BSU is located in east central Indiana, grew out of teacher preparation roots and achieved university status in 1965 with the addition of non-teacher education programs. Recent enrollment at the university was reported as just below 16,000 undergraduate and 6,000 graduate students (76% White, 9% Black or African American; 6.5% Hispanic/Latinx; 3.8% multiracial; 55% female; 61% eligible for need-based financial aid) (BSU, 2020). The university established the Office of Teacher Education Services and Clinical Practice (OTES-CP) to achieve goals consistent with the National Association of Professional Development Schools (NAPDS) first essential: the development of “a learning community guided by a comprehensive, articulated mission that is broader than the goals of any single partner, and that aims to advance equity, antiracism, and social justice within and among schools, colleges/universities, and their respective community and professional partners” (NAPDS, 2021).

Teachers College at BSU also created a clinical practice network to support the aforementioned broader mission, and the network consists of approximately 20 regional schools, including the local schools in MCS. These schools “work with a dedicated faculty liaison who collaborates on field experiences within the school, provides site-specific professional development, and leads school-based research tied to school improvement documents” (BSU, n.d.). Within the network, MCS represents an urban school district with total Kindergarten-Twelfth Grade (K-12) enrollment of just under 5,000 students (57% White; 21.5% Black/African American; 15% multi-racial; 5.3% Hispanic/Latinx; 58.4% of students identified as economically disadvantaged; 22.8% have an identified disability, 2% English learners) (IDOE, 2022).

Innovation and reflective practices

In July 2018, as a result of state legislative actions, BSU and MCS began a unique partnership with the goal of transforming the district into a national model for innovative and holistic educational practices. This partnership was built on established professional development school (PDS) relationships between the university and the school district. Following this legislative action, an Academic Innovation Council comprised of leaders within the university and school district was formed and charged with guiding the attainment of the following innovative goals: to engage and embrace the ideas of all the stakeholders in development of an academic innovation and financial viability plan; to develop strategies and wrap-around services to strengthen academic performance; to embolden educators and staff to pursue innovative teaching practices and partnerships; to develop a streamlined process for university and district educators to use when conducting research projects; to celebrate and share the transformative work happening as a result of the partnership; and to build community support for the school district. These goals are reflected in the MCS district’s current strategic plan. The two foundational principles of the strategic plan include: culturally responsive practices and continuous, aligned, strategic professional learning. These foundational principles are expressed across five operational pillars: 1) high-quality pre-kindergarten education; 2) recruitment, development, and retention of educational leaders; 3)

student-centered teaching and active learning; 4) social and emotional learning; and 5) family and community engagement.

As reflected in the OTES-CP mission, the university has historically focused on elementary and secondary education programs, with the goal of supporting “the professional development of teachers and the training of future educators” (BSU, n.d.). As such, each school in the district has worked with a teacher educator PDS liaison for many years. This model was recently expanded to include school mental health professionals, specifically school psychologists and counselors, after the advent of the BSU–MCS Partnership. Mental health professionals were included in the new model to support the social-emotional learning (SEL) operational pillar of the district’s strategic plan. Toward this end, in addition to the already established education PDS liaison relationships and initiatives, two SEL liaisons were assigned to the district: a school psychology educator and a school counselor educator. The existing PDS structures formed a foundation upon which to develop SEL strategies and support, and a solid base to inform the university and school district’s responses to the pandemic.

Structure of the partnership

Within the aforementioned expanded PDS structure, the BSU–MCS partnership emphasized advancing SEL by providing a cohesive framework to enhance the ongoing collaboration, implementation of evidence-based strategies, and reflection of SEL in practice through the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) process in conjunction with comprehensive school counseling, as outlined by the American School Counselor Association’s (ASCA) National Model (ASCA, 2019) and the National Association of School Psychologists Practice Model (NASP, 2020). The MCS-BSU partnership adopted an improvement-by-design approach, which outlines specific steps for infusing cultural values, developing procedures, conducting decision making at the local school level, and fostering professional collaboration to inform the MTSS process (Bohanon et al., 2016). The MCS staff and BSU liaisons collaborated with each other to support and facilitate changes to attain the goals of the MCS strategic plan’s SEL operational pillar.

Prior to the BSU–MCS partnership, the district’s implementation of the MTSS framework proved ineffective at the district level and was inconsistent across buildings. The district’s percentage of students struggling with chronic absenteeism was three percent higher than the stage average. Further, in and out of school suspension rates for the district exceeded state averages by 5.8% and 6.1%, respectively (IDOE, 2022). The gaps in the process led to missed opportunities to provide effective tiered support and early intervention for students. Given the high percentage (23%) of students eligible for special education services, it was clear to leadership that a strategic, district-wide plan would be essential in order to address the breadth of student needs within and across buildings.

In order to support the district in addressing these concerns using an MTSS framework, BSU SEL liaisons attended weekly building-level MTSS meetings and monthly SEL leadership team meetings. The MCS SEL leadership team included the two SEL liaisons, the special education director, three school psychologists, one school counselor, and one board-certified behavior analyst (BCBA). The MTSS building-level teams included the school psychologist, school counselor, a building-level administrator, a behavior consultant (behavior coach or BCBA), the student assistance coordinator, the family navigator, and the academic interventionists. While attending the weekly MTSS meetings, the BSU SEL liaisons offered ideas for effective tiered support, provided access to resources, and modeled a problem-solving approach to support MTSS

team members (Elksnin & Elksnin, 2003). During the monthly SEL district leadership meetings, the BSU SEL liaisons worked with the district leadership team to identify barriers to effective MTSS implementation (e.g., misalignment between academic elements in the strategic plan) and best practices for SEL. For example, the liaisons worked with the district leadership team to identify a universal screening instrument that could be used to systematically identify students at low, moderate, high risk for social-emotional challenges in the classroom (e.g. Student Risk Screening Scale-Internalizing Externalizing; Drummond 1994; Lane & Menzies, 2009). The BSU liaisons also helped the team identify systemic barriers (e.g. lack of adequate resources, incomplete or inconsistent use of restorative practices), and provided professional development about the role of SEL in fostering the student mindsets and behaviors as the cornerstones for academic success (ASCA, 2020). Finally, the BSU liaisons reinforced strengths and identified areas of growth for both the district and school level leadership teams. In an annual comprehensive, district-wide assessment, liaisons provided school-specific and district wide data and recommendations to support development and ongoing successful implementation of MTSS, infusing social-emotional considerations in addition to academic learning. Individual schools were evaluated using the Multi-tiered Systems of Supports Needs Assessment (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016) and the district leadership team conducted a Strengths-Weaknesses-Opportunities-Growth (SWOT) analysis. These data were summarized in an internal report to the district leadership team with the goal of using the data to inform ongoing implementation of the district’s strategic plan.

District priorities in light of the pandemic

Shortly after these structures had been established the pandemic began and created a situation that no educator or student was prepared for. The district schools, like others in the country, had to quickly pivot to virtual instruction and various forms of hybrid learning. Many teachers were not prepared for the dramatic shift and had a steep learning curve. Teachers learned to work on virtual platforms and harnessed the power of online apps and extensions that they might have never used before. An additional challenging aspect of hybrid instruction was assisting families in accessing the instruction and using the technology that MCS was able to provide for home use. Many of these families had not previously had access to Wi-Fi at home or had never used a learning management system before. The technology challenges our teachers encountered were similar to those reported by Francon and colleagues (2021). Many students essentially disappeared during the pandemic, and teachers were stressed about those students’ well-being and safety. Teachers reached out to families, trying to establish contact with them and to encourage their participation in the virtual learning process, but many families were facing dire circumstances as a result of the pandemic and were not able to fully participate in their children’s virtual learning activities.

Then in the second year of the SEL partnership and pandemic, new challenges arose for teachers as students returned to in-person learning. Some students had spent up to 18 months in virtual learning, with limited or no access to social interactions with their peers, except through a virtual platform. Students thus returned to school with anxiety and dysregulation related to the mass trauma event they were experiencing (Brooks et al., 2020). Many students returned to school with delayed or diminished self-management skills (Patrick et al., 2020). Classroom teachers attempted to create safe, caring learning environments, but what they had done in the past did not always work in the 2021–2022 school year. Burnout of teachers became an urgent concern.

Pressley (2021) identified four factors contributing to teacher burnout, including: COVID-19 anxiety, current teaching anxiety, anxiety communicating with parents, and perceived lack of administrative support. These factors were evident in our district and contributed to challenges in establishing our schools and classrooms as a safe environment. Teachers shared that they were experiencing burnout symptoms, including high levels of stress and anxious feelings, which in turn fostered learning environments characterized by similar affective states in many students. Next, while the need for teacher self-care was evident to school leaders, self-care initiatives implemented by school leaders frequently were experienced by teachers as patronizing in the face of “initiative fatigue.” “Self-care” was seen as an unrealistic expectation in the face of ongoing administrative demands such as advanced lesson planning and conducting additional assessments for academic progress monitoring. Student achievement and degree of progress were high-stakes outcomes for MCS and the MCS-BSU partnership. Finally, even when schools were invested in providing Tier 2 and 3 interventions, staffing challenges made it difficult to offer interventions with fidelity. For example, prior to the pandemic the district had a substitute fill rate of 88% but during the pandemic that number fell to 71%. This discrepancy was due to the combination of a higher need for substitute teachers (due to teacher absences) and fewer substitute teachers available to cover absences.

As a result, the SEL leadership team made it a priority to focus on supporting trauma informed, Tier 1 SEL during the second year of the partnership instead of the originally planned goal of developing or refining Tier II and III interventions. Therefore, the SEL and MTSS teams focused on supporting implementation of high-leverage, trauma-informed Tier 1 supports in the general education classroom that initially focused on helping teachers implement self-regulation and co-regulation strategies. Then MTSS teams identified and supported teachers in utilizing other trauma informed, Tier 1 SEL classroom strategies. These strategies included having support personnel and school mental health professionals “push into” the classroom versus pulling students out of the classroom for interventions.

Professional development efforts addressed trauma-informed MTSS concepts and implementation in several ways. First, the concept and key principles of trauma-informed MTSS was the focus of a whole-day training at the beginning of the 2021-22 academic year for all school staff. Throughout the year, professional learning communities (PLCs) discussed implementation strategies. In addition, trauma-informed MTSS was included in professional development activities on monthly early release days, and came up for discussion during MTSS team meetings. For example, in one elementary school the BCBA reviewed the impact of trauma on self-regulation and co-regulation during PLC meetings. Following this training, the BCBA and school counselor supported teachers as they applied the concepts within classrooms. The BCBA and school counselor encouraged and supported in modeling co-regulation in the classroom. The school counselor and practicum students provided visuals for all teachers to use in their classrooms. Staff collaborated on the development of regulation stations within classrooms and throughout the building, and school counselors delivered classroom guidance lessons (using material from the evidence based library on BSU’s campus that is described below) on any topic individual teachers weren’t comfortable teaching. The school counseling and psychology practicum students were concurrently enrolled in a graduate level course on youth trauma and crisis counseling. These BSU students were able to work with teachers and their own supervisors to apply the knowledge and skills they were learning in their coursework to their “real world” practicum settings.

Partnership as a “shared resource”

There are shared values within the school–university partnership that inform the SEL programming, which we have been working collaboratively to identify and enhance. The university has a clear commitment to community engagement. Based on that value, the university actively encourages students, faculty, and staff to be involved in the local schools as partners and resources. The university highlights community-based learning experiences for students and formally recognizes and rewards faculty efforts fostering community engagement within our professional education preparation programs. From the university’s perspective the community is a resource because it provides post-secondary students with an opportunity to gain the real world experiences needed to be career ready. From the school district’s perspective the university provides knowledge, skill and time as resources to support their employees and enhance their K-12 student’s learning outcomes.

There are two academic programs that have been instrumental in supporting SEL implementation within the context of trauma-informed MTSS: school psychology and school counseling. Student psychologists and counselors are placed in schools as part of their routine practicum training. In these roles, students are involved in MTSS meetings and in implementing Tier 2 and 3 interventions. The students have knowledge about SEL curriculum and student support services from their graduate coursework, and in the MTSS teams, they are able to apply their knowledge and offer additional resources to support teachers, school counselors, school psychologists, and the MTSS team as a whole. Students are able to listen to the needs and concerns expressed in MTSS meetings and then meet with their university supervisors to develop potential solutions, seek resources, and then bring those tools and strategies to the MTSS team and to classroom teachers.

In this way, the practicum placements in school counseling and school psychology not only afford BSU students with an opportunity to develop their professional skills under the supervision of licensed school mental health professionals, but also provides many MCS students with an opportunity to receive SEL interventions and support that the district might otherwise not be able to provide. The BSU students have been able to fill gaps and provide direct mental health support and social-emotional skills development across Tiers 1, 2, and 3 during the pandemic. This supervised service delivery benefits the MTSS team members, pre-K-12 students, and graduate students alike.

Further, a large collection of evidence-based SEL curriculum and interventions is housed in a university-run clinic staffed by the school counseling and psychology faculty. All the resources are available for use by the teachers, school counselors, or school psychologists within our clinical practice network. The students who attend the MCS MTSS meetings routinely check out these resources and make them available to the schools. The students have learned how to implement the interventions through their course work. They then can gain skill with implementation in their practicum sites. In doing so they are modeling these evidence-based practices (when there is a need for such), and after developing proficiency they can provide professional development for teachers seeking to learn how to implement the SEL curriculum and interventions in their classrooms. Additionally, the partnership provided an opportunity for students to engage in resource development for their placement schools and the district. The advanced school psychology students recognized a need for developing a warehouse of user-friendly resources to support implementation of MTSS using best practices. So they worked with their site supervisors to develop a “how to” manual that provides guidance and strategies for implementing MTSS across

the Tiers. The students continue to update the manual as needed with input from the MTSS teams about what additional resources their schools might need, and they provide professional development with teachers on implementation of the supports across levels.

Conclusion

The initial goal for this partnership was to establish comprehensive MTSS that fostered both social-emotional and academic learning. The pandemic altered our focus by establishing a need to implement trauma-informed SEL within the context of MTSS. By adding the mental health liaisons, we were able to enhance a culture of caring for our teachers and students, and we unintentionally (or maybe intentionally) created a collaboration across academic and SEL staff, so that teachers are more familiar with and have more trust in support staff and school mental health professionals as colleagues. We hope to be able to continue this work which highlights how partnerships, teamwork and collaboration are the keys to embedding SEL competencies into evidence-based educational practices. We also hope the partnership described herein can provide a model for other PDS partnerships who want to expand their liaison relationships to include school mental health professionals in order to promote both academic success and SEL skills that enhance all students' college and career readiness.

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