Pursuing Educational Equity in Minnesota
Through a Statewide Multi-Tiered System of Support
# Introduction

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Current State of Education

Over the past several years in Minnesota, numerous sources have published data that reveal a very troubling trend in our state’s educational outcomes. Prior to the onset of the global COVID-19 crisis, Minnesota’s students were already experiencing arguably the largest opportunity gaps in the nation. Moreover, our alarming education trends are intensified by the continuation of antiquated policies that are used to determine how students qualify for special education service and support, thereby condemning countless students to unjust failure. There is now a reason to believe that those gaps will only be further exacerbated by the upheaval of COVID-19. The moment we are in right now is absolutely critical in determining the future of education in our state. Without action, these disparities will only increase, exacerbated by the onset of this recent pandemic.

A. Worst education gaps in the country

The achievement gap, more aptly referred to as the “opportunity gap,” has been observed across the U.S. for decades. In recent years, Minnesota has been highlighted as having one of, if not the worst gap in achievement test scores between White students and students of color. Furthermore, we face staggering disproportionality in the use of exclusionary discipline, which limits educational access and puts students at risk for very troubling outcomes throughout their lives.
Current State of Education

Exclusionary discipline

In the state of Minnesota, Black students are 6.2 times as likely as White students to be suspended. According to 2017-2018 data, approximately 40% of all K-12 disciplinary actions across the state were for Black students, despite the fact that Black students only account for approximately 11.2% of the student population in Minnesota (N = 99,604). Previous research has demonstrated that discipline gaps are largely influenced by classroom decisions about referrals based on subjective categories of behavior, suggesting that the differences in suspension are not adequately explained by absolute rates of behavior.

Graduation Rates

In examining graduation rates for the 2016-2017 school year, we can see how Minnesota compares to two of our neighboring states, Iowa and Wisconsin, both of which have embraced MTSS and supported it through policy and resources. Overall, Minnesota’s graduation rate ranked 34th in the nation. Iowa and Wisconsin ranked 1st and 11th, respectively. For students with disabilities, Minnesota is ranked an underwhelming 36th in the country with 38.8% of students with disabilities not graduating in four years. For graduation rates of low income students, the data is even more alarming, with Minnesota ranking 45th. Most disturbing, our state is dead last in graduation rates for both Black and Hispanic students. These troubling statistics extend to achievement scores, suspension/expulsion rates, and other meaningful variables that we use to determine the health of our education system.

Although there was an increase in graduation rates in 2018 in Minnesota, this increase was greatest for White students (88.4% graduation rate). Graduation rates for students of color experienced minimal (if any) improvement (72% of students who identify with two or more races; 66.8% of Hispanic students; 67.4% of Black students). In addition, English learners, students with disabilities, and students eligible for free and reduced price lunch all graduated at rates well below their peers.

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Looking specifically at high school graduates, we see White students averaging much higher ACT scores and enrolling and staying in college far more often than their peers of color. Furthermore, White students are less likely to be required to take developmental education courses in college, and those who do take such courses are required to take fewer credits. This is an important detail to highlight because developmental education courses do not result in credits toward college degrees, diplomas, or certificates in Minnesota. That means that, once in college, students of color are required to spend time, energy, and financial resources toward the completion of courses that do not formally count toward their graduation. These students are too often exiting our K-12 school districts ill-equipped to take on the demands of higher education.

Test scores
Another area in which educational disparities are evident in the state of Minnesota is student performance on state and national standardized tests.

The Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments Series III (MCA- III) are reading, mathematics, and science tests that are designed to measure student achievement of the state’s academic standards as part of the federal school accountability legislation, Every Student Succeeds Act. Student performance falls into one of four categories: Exceeds, Meets, Partially Meets, and Does Not Meet state standards. In looking at the distribution of performance levels for various student populations, we see White students
consistently performing more frequently within the Meets and Exceeds categories than their peers of color across both reading and mathematics at all grade levels (including grades 3 to 8, 10, and 11). These trends continue when comparing reading and math scores by other needs, including English learner status, special education status, free or reduced price lunch eligibility and homeless/highly mobile designation.

NATIONAL ASSESSMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRESS (NAEP)

Minnesota’s disparities in academic achievement are demonstrated beyond statewide assessments. According to the 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), administered by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) within the U.S. Department of Education, a greater proportion of White students performed higher across reading and mathematics in both 4th and 8th grade when compared to students of color. Gaps between the average performance of Black and White students have remained consistent for 20+ years, further revealing that despite many stated intentions to address our achievement gaps, Minnesota’s disparities remain virtually unchanged. Significant gaps are also revealed between students who are eligible for free and reduced price lunch (FRPL) and those who are not (Non-FRPL). These gaps have also remained consistent with the exception of performance on the 8th grade mathematics assessment which have actually grown significantly wider. Gaps between these populations further illustrate the lack of opportunities available to children without access to meaningful resources. The chart below displays students’ performance on the 2019 administration of the NAEP in relation to the state average. Scores for 4th grade reading and 8th grade mathematics were used due to their predictability of literacy development and college and career readiness respectively.

*Results are displayed in terms of standardized mean differences from the state average. Zero indicates groups are at the state average. Differences indicate the number of standard deviations from the state average (e.g., 0.2 = two-tenths of a standard deviation difference, either positive for above or negative for below the state mean).
Results of our Minnesota Student Survey (MSS) tell a similar story, and even more concerning, shed light on the fact that Minnesota’s students are experiencing declines in social and emotional skills. Dr. Michael Rodriguez of the University of Minnesota along with his Minnesota Youth Development Research Group have extensively explored students’ responses on the MSS over the course of three consecutive administrations (2013, 2016, and 2019). Results of their analyses demonstrate that, despite the aforementioned gaps, Minnesota’s students from every background want to be successful in school and beyond. Race and ethnic differences in measures of assets and social and emotional skills are substantially smaller than those observed in academic achievement; there are no differences in commitment to learning for White and Black students.

**CONCLUSIONS -** It is beyond time for Minnesotans to confront the fact that the opportunities we presently celebrate are overwhelmingly reserved for our White, typically-abled families with economic means. Why are we doing so miserably in relation to so much of the U.S.? We argue that these differences largely point to a failure to embrace current best practices and house our educational efforts within a meaningful, organized framework such as MTSS.

**B. Outdated criteria for access to special education services**

Another contributing factor towards the state of education in Minnesota is those processes currently employed to qualify students for special education services. The use of the ability-achievement discrepancy model in determining eligibility for special education support has been found ineffective by scientific communities for decades. This method for determining specific learning disability (SLD) eligibility is based on the following: a student completes both a standardized cognitive assessment (a measure of intellectual *ability*) and an achievement assessment (a measure of general academic *achievement*). If the scores on these assessments are significantly discrepant, the student qualifies for special education services under the SLD eligibility category (with other converging evidence).

In 2004, research overwhelmingly pointed to the demise of the outdated *ability-achievement discrepancy model*. As stated above, this model has been identified as ineffective in accurately identifying students in need of special education services. Put simply, the discrepancy between scores that is required to qualify for services is quite large; students must obtain a score that is incredibly low on the achievement assessment, leading some to coin this method the “wait to fail” approach.
Too many of our struggling students are failing to meet basic academic proficiency standards but are unable to access the intensive interventions and services within special education that they so desperately need due to antiquated criteria. Limited access to necessary supports contributes to a myriad of consequences: low grades, low motivation, behavioral issues, self-harm, and drug use.

The discrepancy model communicates to these students and their families that their low ability, which is typically derived from a single, biased assessment (with origins in Eugenics and ethnic cleansing), justifies their failure in school. These students are thus barred from accessing a free and appropriate education (FAPE), which is a right of all children under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. The students that suffer from these unjust conditions are overwhelmingly students of color and students of other traditionally marginalized statuses (e.g., students from families with low income). There presently exists a substantial body of research that details the IQ gap across ethnicities and cultures. One notable highlight from this body of research is that African American students typically perform lower on such measures than their White peers. Research related to the opportunity gap indicates that differences in these scores do not reflect a true gap in ability but rather a bias of the tests and their sensitivity to the effects of negative societal variables that disproportionately affect African Americans and other marginalized populations. Due to environmental conditions that systematically impact marginalized communities, many of these students struggle in school but are often barred from appropriate programming due to current Minnesota law.

The 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Sec. 300.307 dictates that each state “must adopt criteria for determining whether a child has a specific learning disability.” Specifically, the statute indicates that states’ criteria “must not require the use of a severe discrepancy between intellectual ability and achievement” and that they “must permit the use of a process based on the child’s response to scientific, research-based intervention [SRBI].” Despite the fact that federal law enacted fifteen years ago clearly states that the outdated discrepancy model must not be required and that determination based upon students’ response to intervention must be permitted, Minnesota has yet to adhere to this legislation. Rather than explicitly barring schools from leveraging MTSS as a framework for determining eligibility, current Minnesota requirements are prohibitive of implementation. Minnesota Administrative Rule 3525.1341, subp. 4 requires that, in order to determine that a student is eligible for services under the category of SLD based upon their response to intervention, each district must identify within their respective total special education system (TSES) plans an outline for introducing a tiered system of SRBI.

Specifically, it states that the plan “should detail the specific SRBI approach, including timelines for progression through the model; any SRBI that is used, by content area; the parent notification and consent policies for participation in SRBI; procedures for ensuring fidelity of implementation; and a district staff training plan.” If such a plan is not included in a district’s TSES, they are not permitted to determine eligibility based upon students’ response to intervention and are instead required to determine eligibility based upon the aforementioned outdated model of calculating the discrepancy between ability (IQ) and achievement - a method that Minnesota used in 1907 to identify students as “backward and feeble-minded.”

By a backward child, I mean one who is simply slow to learn, but whose whole intellectual nature is well balanced; who in proportion to his mental grasp, possesses good judgment; who, while he learns slowly, reasons correctly, and whose judgment, so far as his limited experience goes, is good; who possesses that indefinable something that we call common sense, and the power of application, so that his progress, even though it be slow, is continuous.

- The Relation of the Institutions for Defectives to the Public School System, published in 1907

This rule essentially states that families cannot access current best practices to properly identify a SLD until their districts have developed a complex system of tiered interventions (MTSS), as well as a detailed plan for its implementation. As a result, Minnesota districts are indefinitely bound to use outmoded practices that fall short of meeting students’ needs. It is an unfortunate reality that the majority of districts within Minnesota do not have such a plan detailed within their TSES and are consequently denied the opportunity to identify students with disabilities properly. We support districts developing and implementing an MTSS framework, yet our state’s failure to support this model and the requirement of outdated practices is illogical and unjust. Minnesota’s law not only violates Sec. 300.307 of IDEA; it is morally wrong.

Minnesota is burdened by obsolete policy. We have found ourselves left behind while the majority of our neighbors have invested in a better future for their students. The question that we raise is: how much longer will we ignore the needs of our most vulnerable students?
Students are each unique, vary in many ways, and arrive at school with a range of experiences and needs. Those needs may go unsupported unless there is a well-organized approach to addressing those needs. Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) is a school reform model that involves new ways of thinking and doing business with the aim of organizing how schools support every student in a systematic and equitable manner. It is a whole-school, data-driven, prevention-based framework designed to improve learning outcomes for every student through a layered continuum of evidence-based practices and supports. MTSS supports the whole-child by addressing academics, social-emotional/behavioral functioning, and beyond and ensures that supports are not denied or delayed while the team waits for a child’s failure. Rather, schools respond based on every student’s need. As opposed to a manualized intervention, MTSS is a non-prescriptive framework for efficiently organizing and distributing educational and district resources to meet the wide range of student needs within the school or district. This framework has been overwhelmingly supported by research for decades, and many states have embraced it with notable success. Although specifics of what MTSS looks like in any given context is best determined at the local level, there are broad characteristics found in effective MTSS models:
While the specific details of an MTSS framework will look different based upon the unique circumstances of a given district, an effective system will include the components identified above. However, it is not merely the presence of these structures that allows a district to achieve desired outcomes. *How* a district goes about putting practices in place is just as important as *what* that district decides to put in place. A well-implemented MTSS model must embed a process throughout the system to ensure that evidence-based practices are followed with fidelity while also allowing for reasonable adjustments to best meet the particular needs of their students. An effective MTSS model is implemented with both flexibility and fidelity in mind.

### B. Case examples of Minnesota schools that have embraced MTSS

**TWIN CITIES GERMAN IMMERSION SCHOOL**

Over the last several years, staff at Twin Cities German Immersion School (TCGIS) in St. Paul have focused efforts towards strengthening components of their MTSS framework. These efforts began (and are sustained) with a sense of shared leadership across the executive director, administrative team, support services, grade-level teacher teams, interventionists, and special education team members. In addition to planned professional development opportunities surrounding data literacy and data management, the administrative team leads efforts for family, school, and community partnering. Opportunities for partnership and collaboration include public presentations to the District Assessment Committee (DAC) members and parents/guardians of students, as well as the TCGIS School Board on topics specific to MTSS implementation (i.e., Universal Screening measures, Tier II service delivery, development of local Curriculum-Based Measurement [CBM] in Reading probes in the German language, etc.). These efforts not only provide opportunities to inform the TCGIS community about how TCGIS educators are supporting all students, but also provide an opportunity for community member feedback to inform TCGIS practices.

TCGIS currently implements school-wide universal screening across grades K-8, including assessments to measure development in academics and social-emotional/behavioral skills. These assessments are administered in fall, winter, and spring to inform instructional decisions across levels of need, from differentiated instruction at Tier I to a special education referral at Tier III.

Following screening periods, TCGIS staff engage in regularly scheduled grade-wide data review meetings (a minimum of 4 times per year) to allow for data-based problem-solving and decision-making. Data review meetings include the Tier II interventionist team members, grade level teachers,
administrative staff, and the school psychologist and provide an opportunity for team members to review available student data (i.e., classroom data, universal screening data, state achievement data, progress monitoring intervention data, etc.). Reviewing all student data allows the team to make decisions related to supporting individual student needs. To streamline data management at the district level, TCGIS is in the process of rolling out school-wide use of a cloud-based data system that enables quick and efficient data analysis, beginning with the intervention team members and administrative staff.

For the past four years, the school psychologist at TCGIS has led efforts to successfully apply for Alternative Delivery of Specialized Instructional Support (ADSIS), a form of state special education aid. Since its initial implementation at TCGIS in 2015, ADSIS support services have grown to include six full-time service providers that implement services across math, reading (English and German literacy), and social-emotional and behavioral domains at the Tier II level, creating a layered continuum of support. These 6-8 week intervention cycles include the delivery of evidence-based interventions during which providers monitor student progress. The chart below summarizes the growth of Tier II intervention support (ADSIS) over the past three years of implementation.

In addition, TCGIS maintains data related to whether those students who receive ADSIS support are later referred for special education services, or meet their instructional goals after receiving Tier II support. The graphs below display data for two years of ADSIS support implementation. Overall, a greater proportion of those students exiting from Tier II support exit as a result of meeting their instructional goals.
Finally, the chart below summarizes performance across students on various spring universal screening measures (FastBridge Learning CBMreading [1st-5th grade], aReading [6th-8th], and aMath [2nd-8th]), as well as the MCA in reading and math during the 2018-2019 school year. Across all students, by spring of 5th grade, 67% of students were at or above benchmark on CBMreading, and by spring of 8th grade, 90% and 97% of students were at or above benchmark on aMath and aReading, respectively.
Jefferson Community School is another example of a school that has embraced the MTSS framework and worked toward implementation over the past several years. Serving students from prekindergarten through 8th grade in Minneapolis, Jefferson’s population is predominantly comprised of students of color, and most students are eligible for free and reduced lunch. Through their commitment to providing an education within this tiered framework, they have moved decisively toward more equitable outcomes for their students.

Implementing an MTSS framework benefits students beyond their performances on academic assessments. Operating within a tiered system of support also allows schools to meaningfully implement practices that have a profound effect on students behavioral and social-emotional functioning. Jefferson Community School has used the MTSS framework to provide behavioral support, resulting in sharp decreases in the number of office discipline referrals (ODRs) and suspensions they have received over time. Looking at data prior to the onset of distance learning during the current 2019-2020, the rates of ODRs were down by 75.8% and suspensions decreased by 36.3% from the 2013-2014 school year. Those decreases represent remarkable increases in student engagement and access to instruction. As a result, Jefferson Community School’s growth percentages (the proportion of students demonstrating typical growth) have recently increased in both reading and math, whereas growth rates for Minneapolis Public Schools overall have either stayed the same or decreased. These declines in ODRs and suspensions also result in less punitive discipline which, in turn, means that fewer students are at risk for involvement in what we often refer to as the “school-to-prison pipeline.”

In addition to the behavioral and academic benefits identified above, Jefferson Community School has also seen a notable drop in the number of students that are initially found eligible for special education services. The MTSS framework has allowed the school to take a more preventative approach and meet the needs of these students through less intensive resources. As a result, these students are spending more time with their typical peers and avoiding the unnecessary failure that typically occurs in the current “wait-to-fail” model. Additionally, less students needing special education services results in less of a strain on resources, therefore allowing them to be allocated more effectively.
*119 of the scheduled 171 in-school instructional days occurred during the 2019-2020 school year prior to the transition to distance learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Based upon the data up to that point, the school was on pace to experience a total of ~129 office discipline referrals and ~100 suspensions respectively. These numbers maintain a trajectory of improvement from the 2018-2019 school year when 172 office discipline referrals and 127 suspensions occurred.
Alternatives for Statewide Policy

C. Other states implementing MTSS

As a state that has not yet implemented an MTSS framework across schools and districts statewide, we can learn from those states that have established what this work looks like, and the resulting outcomes. Wisconsin and Florida are two states (of many in the U.S.) working towards full implementation of equitable MTSS frameworks.

Wisconsin’s emphasis on using Response to Intervention (RtI) as a systemic framework for educators to more effectively address the diverse needs of all students occurred concurrently with changes in federal and state rules for identifying students with specific learning disabilities (SLD). Essentially, Wisconsin was able to “sunset” the discrepancy approach between 2010 and 2013, replacing this criterion with the documentation of insufficient progress, a process-oriented approach consistent with the implementation of RtI. In November 2010, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction partnered with education stakeholders from around the state to publish Wisconsin Response to Intervention: A Guiding Document. This guidance was developed to support education leaders’ understanding of Wisconsin’s vision for Response to Intervention (RtI) as a multilevel system of behavioral and academic supports designed to increase success for every learner.

Similarly, in 2008, the Florida Department of Education (FLDOE) released a state-wide plan for scaling up RtI, now referred to as Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS). The plan highlighted the FLDOE’s commitment to continued funding of seven key projects including the Problem Solving/Response to Intervention (PS/RtI) Project at the University of South Florida (USF), the Positive Behavior Support Project at USF, the Florida Center for Reading Research at Florida State University (FSU), and the Florida Center for Research - Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math also at FSU.

Positive student outcomes in Wisconsin and Florida through efforts towards MTSS implementation

Implementing and sustaining MTSS can ultimately improve outcomes for all students. For many schools, this first means establishing strong universal support (Tier I) for all students, including social-emotional, behavioral, and academic support. Continuously examining school and even district-level data allows school teams to allocate resources appropriately. Ultimately, strengthening Tier I supports can decrease the number of students needing additional, more intensive support at Tiers II and III, whether academic, social-emotional, or behavioral. In some cases, this may result in reduced suspensions and office discipline referrals (ODRs), increased academic achievement, and improved accuracy in the identification of students with disabilities.
Alternatives for Statewide Policy

Special education identification

According to the National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD), between 2006 (prior to adopting the RtI, process-based criterion for identification of SLD in Wisconsin and Florida) and 2011 (after the adoption of the RtI rule), Wisconsin and Florida both experienced a decrease in students identified as eligible for special education services under the SLD category. In fact, both achieved a decrease greater than the average national decline (19% and 20%, respectively, compared to 12.9%, nationally).

Graduation rate

Similarly, since the implementation of MTSS, both states have experienced gradual increases in graduation rates. In Wisconsin, in 2019, 90% percent of students completed high school within four years, a 1.6 point increase over the past five years. Not only has the graduation rate increased overall, there have been increases across subgroups of students, including a 7.3 point increase over the past five years in the graduation rate for Black students. A similar trend can be seen across Florida schools, where there has been a 9 point increase over the past five years in the graduation rate. There have also been increases across subgroups of students, including a 13.5 point increase over the past five years in the graduation rate for Black students.

Disciplinary data

A 2015 Civil Rights Project Report showed Florida as having the highest overall suspension rates of students in elementary (5.1%) and secondary (19%) schools in a comparison of 48 states. In addition, Florida housed the district with the greatest disparity in suspension rates when comparing Black and White female students, with a difference of 39 percentage points. Wisconsin did not fare much better: prior to allocating sufficient resources and efforts towards implementing an equitable multi-level system of support, Wisconsin had the second-largest gap in suspension rates between Black and White students in elementary school. Across secondary students, Wisconsin had the largest gap in suspension rates between Black and White students.

Since the implementation of MTSS, Wisconsin has lessened this suspension rate gap. Across those Wisconsin schools implementing MTSS, for those schools with existing PBIS and reading Tier I supports, there was a 44% decrease in the gap between the suspension rate for Black students and White students. For those schools with reading Tier I supports established, there was a 41% decrease in the suspension rate gap.

A similar trend can be seen for the suspension rate difference of American Indian students and White students. Specifically, for those schools with PBIS Tier I supports, there was a 53% decrease in the suspension rate gap between American Indian students and White students. Finally, for those schools with reading Tier I supports, there was an 18% decrease in the suspension rate gap between students with and without an IEP.

In its annual report, the Wisconsin RtI Center has highlighted schools around the state that have integrated mental health supports and universal social-emotional and behavioral screening into their MTSS efforts. Through their screening efforts, schools are better able to identify those students in need of additional support, while also strengthening Tier I. While Wisconsin does not have available overall data regarding their office discipline referrals, the Wisconsin RtI center highlights schools that have shown significant improvements. In some cases, these schools have witnessed dramatic decreases in office discipline referrals (ODRs). For example, Stanley-Boyd Middle School documented 1,103 ODRs during the 2015-2016 school year. After reaching full MTSS implementation, the school most recently documented only 306 ODRs during the 2018-2019 school year.

According to the 2018-2019 Florida PBIS annual report, those schools in Florida implementing PBIS Tier I supports with high fidelity have a 36% lower average ODR rate, and a 44% lower average out of school suspension rate. Although Black students continue to receive office discipline referrals and out of school suspensions at a disproportionately higher rate than White students, the FLPBIS Project is dedicated to continuing to collect accurate data, and implement positive behavioral interventions and supports within an MTSS framework.

**Student achievement**

Both Wisconsin and Florida are experiencing gains in student achievement. According to an evaluation brief from the Wisconsin RtI Center, schools implementing both behavior and reading-focused equitable MTSS with fidelity had increased academic achievement over time. Specifically, there was an overall increase of 1,058 students (7.28%) meeting or exceeding expectations on Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) in Reading between 2011-12 and 2014-2015. Black students had the largest gains (11.78% increase in students meeting or exceeding benchmarks; N = 742), and Hispanic students also showed a statistically significant increase (N = 394).

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According to NAEP data, in 2005 and 2007 the average score of Florida’s fourth graders ranked nationally 25th and 21st in math, and 29th and 22nd in reading, respectively, (prior to statewide implementation of MTSS in 2008). Currently (2019), Florida’s fourth graders’ average NAEP scores place them 5th in the nation in math and 7th in reading. Eighth grade scores for the same years did not reflect growth in math, however, reading showed improvement increasing in the state rankings from 42nd (mean = 256) in 2005 to 23rd (mean = 263) in 2019.

Florida is also achieving positive results for children who are Black, Hispanic, have a disability, are English Language Learners, and those from low socio-economic families. These groups of students often perform higher than peers from the same demographic groups in other states on the NAEP assessments. For example, in 2005 the average Math NAEP score for Black fourth grade students attending public schools was 222 and has only increased to 224 in 2019. Florida’s Black 4th grade students’ average Math NAEP score has improved from 224 to 233 in that same time period. The growth for Hispanic students is even more dramatic, increasing from 233 in 2005 to 242 in 2019, which is eleven points higher than the national average score.

According to Florida’s 2018-2019 RTI Annual Report, 71% of those schools implementing MTSS have shown an increase in “student outcomes.” Since implementing MTSS Florida has had three different state assessments, making pre- and post-comparisons difficult. The Florida Standards Assessment was implemented in 2015. Roughly between fifty to fifty-eight percent of the students are scoring at a Level 3: Satisfactory on the state reading assessment. Since 2015, the percentage of students performing at a “satisfactory” level has increased by at least three points in grades three through six, with third grade experiencing the largest gains of five percent.

**SUMMARY** - Although highlighted here, Wisconsin and Florida are not the only two states working towards implementation of MTSS in order to ensure equitable resource allocation. Other notable states include: Iowa, Colorado, New Hampshire, Kansas, North Carolina, and many more. These states have created systems through MTSS to ensure the needs of all students are met, helping to create many of the positive outcomes outlined above. Based on the data discussed in Wisconsin and Florida, MTSS implementation has supported positive outcomes for all students, with even more significant positive results for students that have historically scored disproportionately lower on achievement tests, had more ODRs, and had lower graduation rates compared to White students.


D. Fiscal implications

Our need to pursue MTSS is not just morally imperative, it is fiscally responsible. Functioning within a systemic framework allows schools to effectively and efficiently make decisions, implement practices, and ensure that those practices are supported so that they are successful. When schools allocate resources within an MTSS framework, there are long-term effects on student outcomes. Further, schools are able to effectively reinvest their funds creating long-term financial impacts on our broader social systems.

A study from 2017 found that for every dollar invested in MTSS (specifically SW-PBIS, a segment of MTSS focused on behavior supports), schools experienced fiscal savings of approximately $105.17 According to New Hampshire Department of Education and Antioch University’s Summary of Evaluation Outcomes on New Hampshire’s MTSS for Behavioral Health & Wellness (referred to as MTSS-B), outcomes contributing to reduced costs included decreased office discipline referrals, increased instructional time, increased access to school-based behavioral and mental health supports, and increases in families accessing and engaging with high-fidelity wraparound services. The authors concluded that while New Hampshire’s MTSS-B framework requires considerable resources and effort to implement, downstream problems (e.g., substance misuse, mental illness, attendance problems) and ultimately school failure are prevented.18 Striving to prevent school failure is not only fiscally responsible but more importantly, socially and morally imperative.

Another study from 2019 that looked at outcomes for 65 schools in Wisconsin similarly found that, in addition to significant academic growth and reductions in behavioral issues, the implementation of an integrated MTSS framework resulted in gains in administrative and instructional time. These outcomes also suggested that the time saved for staff represented financial values that can be re-invested in educational efforts and allocated more equitably.19

The fiscal benefits of implementing MTSS extend beyond the figures illustrated in the aforementioned studies. By enacting evidence-based programs and resources within a supportive framework, schools are no longer jumping between costly innovations. Instead, they are able to effectively engage in best practices with less of a fiscal burden, not to mention an increase in satisfaction from both the staff and the communities that they serve. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge the long-term fiscal benefits to society at large as preventatively contributing to student achievement will predictably result in less of a need for social resources (housing, transportation, etc.) later in life.

For years, we have heard state leaders vow to close our achievement gap in Minnesota with no real success. Their approaches have ranged from well-intentioned isolated programs to the misguided embrace of baseless trends. Minnesota has a history of being a national leader in education, previously scoring among the top states in overall student achievement. Unfortunately, this claim has been diminished by our current state of affairs, particularly our abysmal performance in the area of documented opportunity gaps. We can reclaim our position as a frontrunner in providing high-quality, equitable education to all Minnesota students by adopting practices supported by the best available evidence.

Clear historical trends and now a global pandemic have made this matter abundantly clear - we need to support an MTSS framework in Minnesota. We cannot navigate this transition and our uncertain future without the infrastructure that this framework provides. Minnesota has the experts and research available to us, but our hands are tied until our policies allow us to do what is right. With that in mind, we advocate for ending/fading out the outdated discrepancy model and embedding MTSS within our current educational policies. As educators, we refuse to passively operate within a system that denies students fair opportunity. By allowing this system to operate as it presently exists, we are actively supporting the expansion of social and economic disparity throughout the state. Our failure to adequately address our opportunity gaps will result in our schools perpetuating the inequities that have become all too common in the state of Minnesota. It is time for Minnesota’s response to be proportionate to the size of the problem. We can do better.
Appendix
Appendix

PERCENT OF HS GRADUATES ENROLLING IN COLLEGE

PERCENT ENROLLED IN COLLEGE THAT PERSIST TO 2ND YEAR

PERCENT ENROLLED IN DEVELOPMENTAL ED. IN MN COLLEGE DURING FIRST 2 YEARS
Appendix

Results of the 2019 Minnesota Student Survey

Results are displayed in terms of standardized mean differences from the state average. Zero indicates groups are at the state average. Differences indicate the number of standard deviations from the state average (e.g., 0.2 = two-tenths of a standard deviation difference, either positive for above or negative for below the state mean).

*According to the Minnesota Youth Development Research Group, we generally interpret these differences as being 0.2 or less = very small; 0.2 to 0.4 = small; 0.4 to 0.6 = moderate; > 0.6 = large
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About MnCEE

The Minnesota Collective for Educational Equity (MnCEE) is a grassroots group of passionate educators and researchers who have organized to promote educational policy and practice that will address the alarming opportunity gaps in the state of Minnesota.

We believe in a future where students from all backgrounds, identities, and intersections are provided an education that gives them access to meaningful opportunities and respects their unique experiences.

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