

Anthropologist Margaret Mead famously said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." Healthy, productive collaboration is an essential element for all school counselors who are dedicated to meeting the needs of diverse learners in an inclusive environment. Increasingly, school counselors are called upon to help develop an effective multitiered system of supports (MTSS) with their trusted colleagues. As a member of the MTSS team, school counselors can review essential student and schoolwide data, examine and disrupt unfair policies and practices, and build and maintain equitable and culturally sustaining systems to foster all students' academic, career and social/emotional development.

CHANGE

THE  
WORLD

# MTSS TEAM PLAYER

School counselors are uniquely positioned to play an important role on the MTSS team. In their daily work, school counselors interact with educators and stakeholders throughout the school community. They regularly collaborate with their multidisciplinary student support team, teachers, paraeducators, parents, administrators, students and outside agencies. It's important that school counselors are at the table and in the conversation as the MTSS is designed, implemented and refined. Thus, school counselors play a role in both developing systems and providing key aspects of prevention (Tier 1) and intervention (Tiers 2 and 3). This creates an avenue for increased professional growth and the ability to contribute to positive systemic change in schools.

How do you, as a school counselor, find your way on an MTSS team? How can you blend your expertise with that of other educators? What are the benefits and challenges for school counselors who are fully engaged in their MTSS team? Let's look at the process Westside Middle School Academy in Danbury, Conn., went through in building its MTSS program.

**School counselors are a valuable addition to an MTSS team; discover how to best use your expertise and collaborate with other team members.**

**BY PEG DONOHUE, PH.D., AND CURTIS DARRAGH IV**

When Westside Middle School Academy was established eight years ago, staff built the MTSS program from the ground up. The MTSS team consisted of a school psychologist, a school social worker, two school counselors and either the assistant principal or principal. Initially, the team members knew they wanted students to become safe, respectful and responsible (SR2) students. They also wanted

to expand and extend their MTSS implementation to become more effective and improve student outcomes.

During the 2016–2017 school year, Westside Middle School Academy was approved for a three-year grant from the State Education Resource Center (SERC) in Hartford, Conn. The SERC training team would collaborate with Westside’s student services team to remodel and expand their current systems.

During this training, the MTSS team became two separate teams: the Tier 1 team and the advanced tiers team. The teams were also expanded to include general education teachers. The assistant principal worked with the Tier 1 team, and the principal worked with the advanced tiers team. During this professional development, SERC trained both teams in best practices and worked on further defining SR2. By breaking down the language of their SR2 model, teachers, staff members and students had to define what being safe, respectful and responsible meant to them in classrooms, buses, the main office and common areas such as hallways and bathrooms.

During Westside’s second year with SERC, the teams were trained to plan and facilitate an effective tier meeting. They started out by agreeing upon norms and clearly defining their roles, assigning a facilitator, note taker, data reviewer and timekeeper. They began to use a template to document meeting minutes, and they role-played using a set of data to determine what interventions were needed.

Once this system was established, the teams were able to better understand specific documented behaviors at the student, classroom and schoolwide level. As part of the grant, SERC provided Westside Middle School Academy with access to a computer-based schoolwide information system. By training all staff to use this program, everyone could begin documenting key aspects of student behavior, including whether it was teacher-managed or would have to go to administration and become an office discipline referral. Student behavior meeting criteria

for an office discipline referral was then documented in the schoolwide information system. The data set includes the student’s name, grade-level team, time, location in the building, the function of the student’s behavior (e.g., seeking peer or adult attention; escaping an activity or task), and what the consequence was from the teacher or an administrator.

This system also allowed the teams to drill down into the data by student race or ethnicity to look for disproportionality and see how to improve their systems. The teams were able to identify students in need of intervention and look at patterns of behavior throughout the school day by time and location. If a student received three or more referrals within a designated time frame, the advanced tiers team would then discuss interventions in its weekly meetings.

### **Digging Deep**

The school counselor’s role, along with other team members, is to investigate and dig deep within the data and analyze the student behavior. When particular students were discussed in the advanced tiers meeting using the schoolwide information system data, the school counselor could then conduct a one-on-one counseling session with students before inviting them in with the team to discuss possible interventions.

By the third year of the training grant, the teams had established team norms and rules, a vision and mission statement and concrete systems for making the Tier 1 and advanced tiers teams effective and efficient. They were also able to solidify and refine their check-in/check-out behavioral intervention process. As their partnership with SERC was ending, the teams felt confident in their new systems and were able to move forward with new school policies and practices based on their data and continuous avenues for improvement.

The two school counselors on the teams wanted to look beyond check-in/check-out as the only Tier 2 intervention. Drilling down into the academic and behavior data,

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they were able to see that students who were receiving office discipline referrals were also failing multiple classes across all subject areas. They began providing small-group counseling to students who had similar data trends. Sometimes the small-group counseling would include a simple reteaching of SR2 policies. Other groups were run as a restorative justice circle or addressed executive functioning skills. Only students demonstrating need received Tier 2 support.

For those students who were still not successful after the small-group intervention, the advanced tiers team recommended Tier 3 support. For some students, referral to the district alternative middle school was the best avenue for students to receive additional academic and behavioral support in a setting with smaller student-to-teacher ratios.

Having a school counselor on the MTSS team allows the school counselor to:

- » See shifting student data trends throughout the building
- » Discover which individual students were struggling and provide targeted interventions
- » Meet with students 1:1 when necessary to learn their side of the story

### Important Role

School counselors invested in building an effective MTSS team that meets the unique needs of all learners at their school should consider the following:

**Have a seat at the table:** School counselors are uniquely prepared to meet the needs of the whole child and should be involved in designing, implementing and refining the MTSS. Considering academic, career and social/emotional development is essential when addressing the complex needs of students throughout their K-12 experience. School counselors are excellent at fostering professional alliances, building consensus, listening to differing points of view and effectively collaborating on behalf of students and their families.

**Take on team responsibilities:** There are many roles on an MTSS team. School counselors should not be the sole leader,

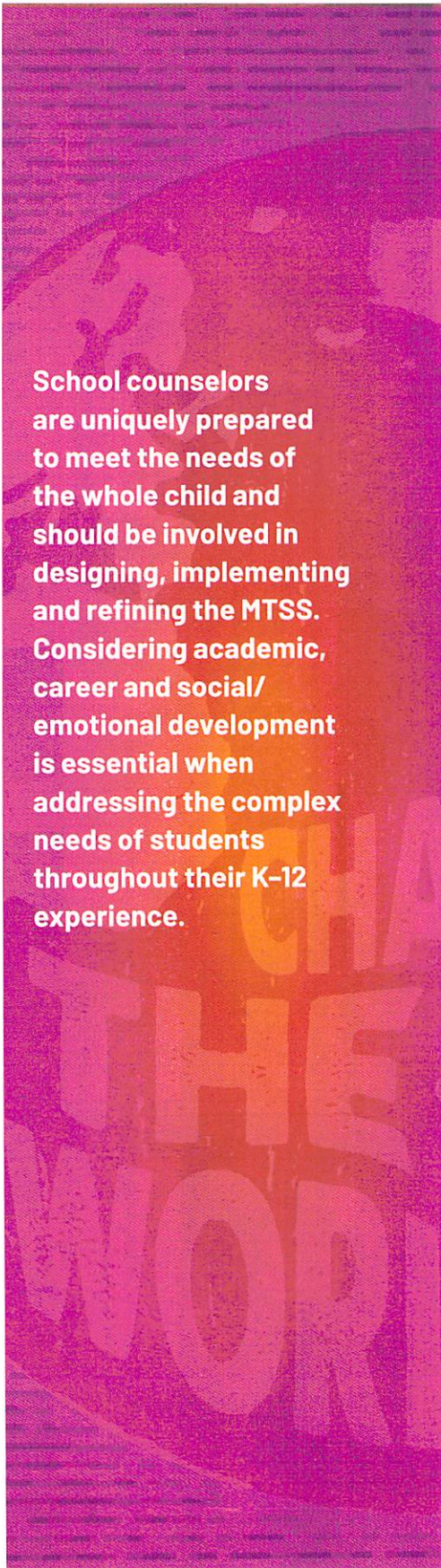
but by taking on a key facilitation role, they can be fully engaged in creating a culturally sustaining MTSS and helping to improve it as needs change.

**Participate in MTSS training:** Investing in professional development in MTSS makes it possible for school counselors to fully engage in aligning their school counseling program with MTSS. Systems and practices addressed in training support school counselors' work on all three tiers. In addition, collecting data to support MTSS also informs school counselors about the effectiveness of their program.

**Advocate for reduced caseloads:** Although school counselors are excellent multitaskers, unreasonably high caseloads prohibit them from having the time to participate in the essential MTSS planning and consultation process necessary for an effective program. Without prevention and intervention systems in place, school counselors are most often responding to crises.

It can become difficult to keep up with the demands and the evolving concerns school counselors must solve each day. Fortunately, they don't have to do it alone. For the school counselors at Westside Middle School Academy, the most important benefit of building an effective MTSS program as a collaborative team is the ability to sustain high-quality prevention and intervention programs even in the event of staff or administration changes. **A**

Peg Donohue, Ph.D., is an associate professor, Central Connecticut State University. She can be reached at [peg.donohue@ccsu.edu](mailto:peg.donohue@ccsu.edu). Curtis Darragh IV is a school counselor at Westside Middle School Academy in Danbury, Conn., and 2021 Connecticut School Counselor of the Year.



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