


# Tiered Supports for the Class of 2021 in Unprecedented Times: A High School Counseling Department's Journey

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## Abstract

The impact of COVID-19 and the racial awakening of the United States intensified the inequities already present in many K–12 schools. Authors report a practitioner-focused case study of a high school counseling department integrating multitiered systems of support (MTSS) into their comprehensive school counseling program during the 2020–2021 school year, in response to both a global pandemic and the racial justice movement. Authors describe school counselors' passionate commitment to supporting the school and department goal of increased graduation rate for the graduating class of 2021 in the midst of navigating virtual learning, racial and ethnic disparities, and lack of resources.

## Keywords

multitiered systems of supports, COVID-19, antiracism, graduation, college and career readiness

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a society-level crisis that will have lasting impacts throughout, including in K–12 education (Van Dyke, 2020). Simultaneously, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) racial justice movement gained momentum after the murder of George Floyd in 2020, highlighting persistent racial and ethnic inequities in the United States (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2020). Scholars have described the occurrences of both COVID-19 and racial inequities as a double pandemic (Bryan et al., 2020). Others find the inequities as a pre-existing condition to COVID-19 (Bryan et al., 2020). In short, COVID-19 did not create new issues unique to the experiences of Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC), but rather amplified existing inequities.

## Multitiered Systems of Support

School counselors serve students' academic, career, and social/emotional needs through a comprehensive school counseling program (ASCA, 2019), and align their programs with multitiered systems of supports (MTSS). This helps ensure that all students receive prevention and intervention based on their continuum of needs (Goodman-Scott et al., 2020). The recent impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the U.S. racial justice movement have highlighted long-standing inequities existing throughout K–12 education. Here, the authors describe a practitioner-focused case study of a high school counseling department that integrated MTSS into their comprehensive program during the 2020–2021 school year, in response to both a global pandemic and racial justice movement.

MTSS (encompassing positive behavioral interventions and supports [PBIS] and response to intervention) are culturally sustaining, data-driven frameworks aimed at supporting the whole child (e.g., academic, career, social/emotional) through an integration of data, systems, and a continuum of prevention and intervention practices across tiers (Goodman-Scott et al., 2020; McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). Tier 1 supports are preventative and offered to every student. Examples include teaching grade-level academics to a class, practicing school-wide behavioral expectations and procedures, incorporating acknowledgment systems, using grade-level advising, and implementing school-wide initiatives and community partnerships. Students who need additional support receive targeted Tier 2 supports, often at the group-level. Examples include group counseling, a reading group using targeted strategies, and group advising. Students whose needs have not been met by Tier 1 or 2 supports receive Tier 3 supports, which are the most intensive and individualized. Examples include long-term intensive counseling and wraparound services.

In recent years, MTSS has been called to place a greater emphasis on being culturally responsive (Bal, 2018) and culturally sustaining (Goodman-Scott et al., 2020). MTSS

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frameworks must be based on the unique school and community cultures, and include stakeholder voices (students, families, community members), and home/community cultures. Thus, school counselors are one staff member in K–12 schools equipped to provide direct services (e.g., counseling, classroom lessons) and indirect services (e.g., family and teacher consultation and collaboration) through implementing comprehensive school counseling programs aligned with MTSS. School counselors provide supports across tiers, which has been especially necessary, given the pandemic and racial inequities highlighted during 2020 and 2021.

## Rationale

Through the current context and aftermath of the COVID-19 global pandemic, school counselors implementing comprehensive school counseling programs and MTSS can use a tiered approach to support students; school faculty, staff, and administrators; and families (Pincus et al., 2020). School counselors are uniquely positioned to assess the pandemic's impact on students' social and emotional well-being, and to intervene when needed (Pincus et al., 2020). Furthermore, the school counseling field is beginning to highlight the need for antiracist practices to combat society-level racism and inequities (Mayes, 2021). Simultaneously, school counselors advocate for systemic change and social justice in their schools and surrounding communities (ASCA, 2019).

Although authors have proposed the use of a comprehensive school counseling program/MTSS lens in the wake of COVID-19, the only known literature is a conceptual article (Pincus et al., 2020). In addition, antiracist school counseling is in its infancy (e.g., Mayes, 2021). Thus, the purpose of this paper is to outline a practitioner-focused case study of a high school counseling department aligning their comprehensive program and MTSS during the pandemic and the racial justice movement. Hence, the following research question guided this study: How does a high school counseling department align their comprehensive school counseling program and MTSS during the pandemic and racial justice movement?

## Method

According to Kaffenberger (2012), school counseling-specific practitioner-focused research is “research conducted by school counselors to inform the practice of school counseling” (p. 60). Mainly, practicing school counselors use data from their comprehensive program to measure the effectiveness of an intervention, or to better understand an issue, and then make recommendations for future practice. Relatedly, case-study research provides a detailed examination in its actual environment (e.g., a school), using multiple data points (e.g., outcome data, observations, surveys; Yin, 2014). For the present investigation, a school counselor at Virginia High School (VHS) presents a practitioner-focused case study that is driven by their school counseling practice, uses data from their comprehensive program,

and describes a specific case in its real-world environment. Specifically, data was collected through the first author's work as a practicing school counselor: meeting with students and fellow school counselors; analyzing and tracking student outcome data (e.g., grades and testing); participating in MTSS meetings and school events; and collaborating with school administrators and staff, families, and external organizations. Last, the present case is defined as VHS during the approximately 18 months—March 2020 to August 2021—surrounding the height of the global COVID-19 pandemic and the rise of the BLM movement.

## *The Context of COVID-19 and the Racial Justice Movement: A Double Pandemic*

In January 2020, the United States had its first confirmed case of COVID-19. As the pandemic progressed, every demographic was impacted. Citizens around the world watched as businesses closed, curfews were imposed, gathering size was restricted, and people were required to wear masks. Some of the first major institutions to come to a standstill were the K–12 schools. In late February, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) announced that school districts needed to prepare for the impact of COVID-19, and schools began closing en masse early in March 2020. In mid-March, Virginia's governor, Ralph Northam (2020a, 2020b), announced a temporary emergency closure of all Virginia schools that lasted for the duration of the academic school year. Schools scrambled to determine protocols for finishing the school year remotely, focusing on enrichment and remediation rather than new content.

The pandemic also served as the backdrop to an amplified racial justice movement. With the murder of George Floyd, the nation erupted with protests against police brutality and institutionalized racism; these protests continued in countless cities in the following months. A driving force behind much of the activism was the BLM movement and organization. Much of the institutionalized racism being protested around the world has been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this 18-month period (March 2020 to August 2021), COVID-19 crossed national borders, state lines, and district boundaries. Its consequences, however, have not been equal. The world's vulnerable populations have faced greater challenges, which this pandemic exacerbated. According to the CDC, Black communities make up 30% of COVID-19 cases, despite only accounting for 13% of the U.S. population (Schleicher, 2020). In addition, COVID-19-related hospitalization rates are disproportionately affecting Black communities (Schleicher, 2020). BIPOC are at increased risk for serious illness related to COVID-19 due to already existing inequities including less access to treatment and care because many are uninsured; work that is not amenable to social distancing; and dense housing situations that lack social distancing options (Schleicher, 2020).

Education has been no exception to the disproportionalities. Across the United States, some K–12 school districts are reporting a 50–80% increase in failure rates. The graduating high school class of 2021 is an example of how exacerbated

opportunity gaps can further increase achievement gaps (Van Dyke, 2020). As is traditionally the result, students and families from privileged populations have been able to minimize the impact of the pandemic as a result of more stable infrastructures already in place, and greater access to resources. Thus, families with more privileges and resources often have more flexible opportunities for their children, furthering a gap between them and students who are traditionally minoritized and have less access to resources and opportunities. During the pandemic, K–12 school staff faced decisions of how to continue with learning in light of school closures. The shift to virtual learning illustrated the “homework gap” in American schools: the space between students who have the resources to be successful with remote learning and the students who do not. For instance, 25% of Black teens reported that they often or sometimes could not complete schoolwork because of the lack of reliable internet access, compared to 13% of White students and 17% of Latinx students (Anderson & Perrin, 2018). Because of centuries of discriminatory practices in schools and education policies against BIPOC, these students are more likely to attend schools with fewer economic resources to help circumvent internet issues or provide supplies such as laptops (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2020), concerns which VHS similarly faced.

### Site: Virginia High School

VHS, located in the greater Richmond area of Virginia, serves approximately 1,900 students with 112 classroom teaching staff. VHS is described as a large suburban high school and has been identified as one of the oldest high schools in the greater Richmond area, founded in 1907. According to Fall 2020 enrollment data, 80.4% of students identified as Black or African American, 8.9% as White, 6.2% as Hispanic, and the remaining 4.5% as Asian or multiple races. Of the student body, 16.0% currently receive special education services, 66.8% are listed as economically disadvantaged; and 2.6% are listed as English language learners. VHS accreditation for the 2020–2021 school year was waived, as it was for all Virginia public schools due to the cancellation of 2020 state assessments.

VHS’s vision statement is as follows: “To build strong, positive relationships and connections with students to help prepare all students to be life-ready (Enrolled, Enlisted, or Employed). We will work collaboratively with all stakeholders to be champions for students.” VHS makes a bold promise, with the school-wide goal that 100% of students entering 9th grade will graduate in 4 years and be life-ready by enrolling in a post-secondary educational option, enlisting in a military branch, or entering the workforce.

*VHS and Challenges During COVID-19.* Similar to many K–12 schools across the United States, VHS had an emergency school closure in March 2020. Then, by November 2020, families had the option of sending their students to school 4 days per week for in-person learning. After nearly a year, in February 2021, VHS opened in-person learning for all students. Initially, in

early spring 2021, 10% of the student population opted to participate in in-person instruction. But by June 2021, only 96 students (approximately 5%) were actually present for in-person instruction. The majority of the VHS student population identified as Black or African American, and some families acknowledged the health inequities related to COVID-19 that put minoritized racial and ethnic groups at increased risk of contracting the virus. Thus, even with the county’s thorough COVID-19 protocols, many families chose virtual learning for their students because of perceived risks.

Although the majority of students attended VHS virtually, another related challenge was lack of internet access. Beginning in March 2020, the school’s administration and technology team worked diligently to provide hot spots to as many homes as possible. VHS distributed more than 150 hotspots to families so that students would have consistent internet access to participate in virtual learning.

In addition to challenges with health and access, many VHS families struggled financially during the pandemic as a result of increased unemployment. Approximately 20% of students started a part-time or full-time job to assist with family finances, pay for graduation fees, or because of the flexibility of virtual learning. Some students described other added challenges, including balancing new roles, such as caregiver, or navigating traumatic events (e.g., house fires and familial deaths).

Before the onset of COVID-19, VHS worked diligently on the school goals of increasing the graduation rate, engaging students in the school community, improving the school climate, and exposing students to postsecondary education and options. To facilitate this emphasis, school administrators asked faculty and staff to focus on the school’s core values (i.e., intentional relationship development, shared accountability, risk-taking education and innovation, and passionate commitment), as well as structures already guiding their school. The widely used, evidence-based framework of MTSS elucidates core values to support the school’s goals.

*Multitiered Systems of Support at Virginia High School.* During the 2018–2019 school year, VHS began planning to implement MTSS, with guidance from the state-specific MTSS framework, Virginia Tiered Systems of Support. The newly developed MTSS team consisted of a school counselor, school psychologist, school social workers, community partner representatives, teaching staff, and school administrators. In the summer of 2019, the VHS MTSS team attended a 3-day conference aimed at increasing the teams’ MTSS efficacy. Over the next 2 years, the MTSS team collected data from students, families, staff, and community members on the current school climate and their hopes for VHS (e.g., completing a resource map to track the current services and supports available to students, and identifying the gaps in academics, behavior, and attendance supports). To track and determine patterns, the MTSS team collected monthly data on discipline referrals and positive behavior referrals. Also, the MTSS team gathered data from students and staff to determine their valued behaviors/

characteristics, and these results were used to create VHS's school-wide expectations, namely, encouraging students and staff to Go FARR (Focused, Accepting, Respectful, and Responsible). A range of school-wide stakeholders included the school counseling department, which collaborated with the MTSS team and school administrators to reinforce aspects of MTSS (e.g., examining school data, practicing school-wide expectations, using the acknowledgment system).

*Virginia High School Counseling.* During the 2020–2021 school year, the VHS school counseling department consisted of six school counselors who divided their caseloads by each student's last name, with two counselors assigned to the specialty center students. A registrar and an office assistant enrolled new students and completed other clerical work. Three counselors had 6 or more years in the school counseling field while the remaining counselors had 4 or fewer years' experience in the field. The VHS school counseling department did not have a director, which required the six counselors to divide numerous directorial tasks among themselves. Nonetheless, the VHS school counseling department continued to be dedicated to providing a data-driven comprehensive school counseling program centered around students, school, and community.

The school counseling department aligned its work with the MTSS team by having one member of the school counseling department, who was on the MTSS team, act as a liaison between the two groups, and by collaborating with the school administrators on tiered supports. While preparing for the 2020–2021 school year, and due to the experience of emergency virtual learning, the department acknowledged the essentialness of MTSS to support students, especially the senior class (i.e. the class of 2021). As such, the school counseling department's goal for the 2020–2021 school year built upon the school goal: to increase the graduation rate to 90% for the class of 2021, up from 83.8% the year before for the class of 2020. In addition, VHS serves many BIPOC students, particularly Black students. In the midst of the burgeoning BLM racial justice movement, school counselors prioritized bringing related efforts into their student services.

Utilizing the foundation of the FARR MTSS expectations and the school's core values, the VHS school counseling department implemented MTSS to assist students through their senior year in the midst of the pandemic and the racial justice movement. Lessons learned from the emergency closure served as guidance for senior students' foreseeable obstacles, such as access to technology, consistent engagement with virtual learning, and clear communication. The school counseling department was determined to counteract these issues with intentional tiered supports.

## **Results: The VHS School Counseling Tiered Supports in Action**

### *Tier 1: Prevention for All Senior Students*

The VHS MTSS team had previously developed school-wide expectations, Go FARR, commonly found in MTSS Tier 1

supports (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). They continued to teach those expectations throughout the 2020–2021 school year, modified for virtual learning (see Figure 1), and developed a video featuring students describing their personal definitions of FARR, and “shout-outs” or positive affirmations submitted through a Google form highlighting staff and students who showcased the FARR expectations. A week in January 2021 was deemed VHS Go FARR week. The MTSS team provided a number of events specific for virtual learning (e.g., drive-through student parade, online games, shout-out affirmations gathered online, prizes) to remind students of the school-wide expectations. As a member of the MTSS team and the school counseling department, the first author participated in planning and implementing the listed school-wide Tier 1 supports. Similarly, the school counseling department facilitated a kindness initiative that utilized the MTSS school-wide expectations. Thus, the VHS school counseling department attempted to align and integrate their comprehensive school counseling program and MTSS activities, and create new Tier 1 supports necessitated by the pandemic.

Another Tier 1 support for every student was the creation of the Re-Engagement Team: Acting as a liaison among stakeholders, it aimed to increase transparency with and communication between students and families. This team was especially important, given the isolation and communication gaps that result from virtual learning from separate locations. Members of the Re-Engagement Team were school support staff (e.g., instructional assistants, office assistants, librarians, school social workers, dean of students) and external organizations (i.e., community partners that provide families with resources and services). The school counseling department worked closely with the Re-Engagement Team to respond to questions from students and parents/families related to topics such as emergency virtual learning, technical support, and graduation plans.

The school counseling department also led several Tier 1 supports intended to assist all seniors and meet the department's goal of increasing the graduation rate. First, as part of their comprehensive program, school counselors conducted classroom lessons through video conferencing in all senior English classes in September 2020. The lessons included a refresher on graduation requirements, the college application process, the National Collegiate Athletic Association registration, financial aid, trade schools, workforce development resources, and critical deadlines for seniors. To reinforce the content and provide increased access, school counselors created a web page specifically for seniors that included the information shared in the lesson, related resources, and a recording of the PowerPoint presentations.

Next, in October 2020, the school counseling department met with each senior via video conferencing to confirm the student's diploma type, review credits and courses, and discuss postsecondary plans; overall the department conducted 328 meetings. Thus, the October senior meetings served as a preventive Tier 1 support with the following goals: first, to help the

Virginia High School Virtual Learning Matrix				
EXPECTATION				
	FOCUSED	ACCEPTING	RESPECTFUL	RESPONSIBLE
<b>Virtual Learning</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure your learning environment allows for you to engage in a manner that would also be appropriate in the school setting               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Use a Teams Background</li> <li>◦ Minimize Distractions (if able)</li> <li>◦ Cameras on when prompted</li> <li>◦ Keep your screen on task</li> <li>◦ Participate actively and remain attentive</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Follow classroom expectations as defined by your class</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accept virtual learning expectations</li> <li>• Accept other opinions and value diversity</li> <li>• Be able to work with all students</li> <li>• Be open to change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mute your microphone and wait to be acknowledged to speak</li> <li>• Show respect for everyone's time, privacy, and space</li> <li>• Keep verbal and written communication respectful</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attend classes and be on time</li> <li>• Keep up with all assignments and check your Schoology pages and email daily</li> <li>• Ensure that all technology is working properly and is charged</li> <li>• Act as a self-advocate and ask for help or support as needed</li> </ul>
<b>Faculty</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure your learning environment allows for you to engage in a manner that would also be appropriate in the school setting               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Use a Teams Background</li> <li>◦ Minimize Distractions (if able)</li> <li>◦ Cameras on when prompted</li> <li>◦ Keep your screen on task</li> <li>◦ Participate actively and remain attentive</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Keep schoology organized and easy to use</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be flexible with student needs/concerns</li> <li>• Value diversity</li> <li>• Be open to change</li> <li>• Listen to student voices</li> <li>• Seek a growth mindset</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be available during school hours (8:30-4:30)</li> <li>• Respond to emails/schoology/phone messages within 24 hours (M-F)</li> <li>• Be respectful of other people's circumstances</li> <li>• Model Expectations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Update grades at least weekly</b></li> <li>• Update Schoology calendar and check school email daily</li> <li>• Be available and present daily and give notice if unavailable.</li> <li>• Ask for help or support as needed</li> </ul>

Know someone going FARR? [Fill out this form to recognize them!](#)

**Figure 1.** Virginia high school learning matrix.

seniors identify their graduation goals and make a plan to meet the needed requirements; and second, to reintroduce the counselors to the students and build stronger relationships. Although student–school counselor connection was a priority during typical years and circumstances, it was especially important in light of the consequences of the pandemic, namely, virtual learning, altered caseloads, and increased student and family barriers.

In November 2020, the school counselors invited all seniors to participate in the annual Virginia College Application Week (VCAW). VCAW includes sessions and events related to employment and military enlistment and is an initiative intended to increase the number of students who enroll in postsecondary education. It gives seniors the opportunity to apply to numerous Virginia colleges for free (State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, 2020). Host high schools must serve a population of students of whom 49.5% or more are eligible for free or reduced lunch.

Despite being long-time VCAW participants, the VHS school counseling department knew that VCAW was increasingly important for the 2020–2021 school year because of the nationwide decrease in college and Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) applications. Thus, the VHS school counseling department hosted two virtual sessions daily for students to meet with school counselors and receive assistance with their FAFSA applications and a code to waive application fees. The department also partnered with state colleges and

universities to host virtual college visits and on-site admission sessions. Seniors could hear from admission counselors from nearly 10 higher education institutions and receive further individualized FAFSA assistance from an external organization, Great Aspirations Scholarship Program (GRASP).

Thus, the school counselors facilitated VCAW as an essential Tier 1 support, especially for student populations underrepresented in higher education, ensuring that the students received uninterrupted and individualized assistance in applying for financial aid, and removing barriers to the college application process. To help VHS's many first-generation college students navigate the barriers inherent in higher education financial aid and application processes—also exacerbated by virtual learning—school counselors purposefully partnered with a range of external organizations to provide more virtual access options for supporting students. As with other opportunities to emphasize key information (e.g., graduation requirements, the college process), the VHS school counseling department used quarterly senior class meetings and principal listening sessions (i.e., monthly meetings for administrators to share current information and solicit student, family, and staff feedback). In addition to the school counselors' sharing content, they invited community partners to attend and share resources (e.g., a local community college representative shared a new tuition assistance program).

While focusing on graduation and the postsecondary transition, the school counseling department also incorporated the

racial justice movement into their Tier 1 supports. In February 2021, the department integrated National School Counseling Week with BLM at School. BLM at School, established in 2016, is a national coalition organized to promote racial justice in education. Because most VHS students identify as Black, and because of the racial awakening of the country after the murder of George Floyd, the school counseling department wanted to implement an annual event that would affirm and uplift BIPOC students. The BLM at School events consisted of a virtual advisory lesson on the Black Panther Party (ahead of the international release of the new movie, *Judas and the Black Messiah*) and a virtual open mic event for students. Approximately 75 students attended the events. Student feedback included enthusiasm for more events and activities on Black culture.

### ***Tier 2 and 3: Advanced Tiers for Senior Students With Elevated Needs***

As is common with the MTSS structure (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016), most VHS seniors were on track to graduate after receiving only Tier 1 supports, but some students needed more assistance to be successful, including small group and individual supports. Thus, the school counselors collaborated with the school administrators, the MTSS team, and the Re-Engagement Team to create and monitor Tier 2 and 3 supports for students with elevated needs.

Beginning in October 2020, the Re-Engagement Team's Tier 2/3 supports included contacting students who had missed three consecutive days of virtual learning and students who had more than one F (i.e., a failing grade) for the grading period, and communicating with the case managers of students with disabilities. Then, the Re-Engagement Team connected with all teachers of these students to suggest additional supports and strategies for success. This team continued to act as an added liaison among students, families, and the school.

Throughout the year, and in collaboration with the school administrators and social workers, the school counseling department hosted monthly meetings with students who were at risk for not graduating. These meetings, led by an administrator/counselor pair, were held to create and track students' progress toward graduation, and consisted of goal setting, expressing care and concern, relationship building, and solution-focused counseling. Based on student need, meetings increased in frequency to at least biweekly as graduation approached. Another Tier 2/3 support included school counselors identifying students for the Individual Student Alternative Education Plan (ISAEP) program. The ISAEP program prepares qualifying secondary students to earn a high school equivalency (HSE)/general educational development (GED) credential while developing career and technical skills. Ideal candidates for the ISAEP program were as follows: seniors who wanted to complete high school prior to June 2021 but were severely behind in credits, those at least 16 years of age, those who had completed ninth-grade English and Algebra I, and those who

possessed a state identification. During their monthly meetings, the VHS school counselors identified students who would be ideal candidates for the ISAEP program, ways to combat the related obstacles to the program such as the stigma of obtaining a GED, and the prerequisite course requirements recently required. The VHS counseling department consulted with the ISAEP program staff, school social workers, students, and families to assist 11 seniors to earn their GED through the ISAEP program.

Another Tier 2/3 support was enacted at the conclusion of the first semester, when it was determined that 122 seniors (31%) had failed 289 classes, including mandatory classes required for graduation. The VHS school counseling department sent letters of concern to these seniors' families if their students had received one or more Fs at the end of the first semester. Although emails were the primary method of communication with families, the school database still contained incorrect and missing information. Thus, VHS sent a printed letter home to ensure that the families received the information. These letters contained information on state graduation requirements, the student's failing class, and assurance that the school counselor/administrator pair would contact the families to schedule a meeting. During these meetings with the students and parents/guardians, the school counselors learned that many seniors had acquired part-time or full-time jobs to supplement the home income, pay for senior fees, or utilize the flexibility of virtual learning. The school counselor/administrator meetings assisted in building relationships with many seniors, providing a better understanding of barriers and offering individualized solutions and supports.

Next, in March 2021, still concerned about the first-semester students' failure data, the VHS school administrators implemented a new initiative called Summer School Now (SSN). SSN allows students who earned a 64% (F) in the first semester to recover their grades by asynchronously completing modules for a specific course. As of June 13, 2021, 763 grade-change forms were filed for students who had completed their respective modules. Approximately 25% of those grade-change forms were for senior students. School counselors worked with students and parents/guardians to enroll in SSN by speaking individually with families to explain the objective and purpose of the initiative. Furthermore, once students enrolled, school counselors monitored their progress and encouraged students to complete the modules while also passing the second semester.

### **Lessons Learned and Outcomes**

A hallmark of the case-study approach is providing a thick, rich account of the case under investigation through the use of multiple types of data and varied perspectives (Yin, 2014). Thus, the next section will describe the VHS tiered supports by highlighting reflections from members of the VHS case—a student and a school counseling department—and discussing outcomes for the school counseling department's goal.

### *A Student's Reflection*

A graduating senior, DJ began the school year with optimism and passing grade-level academics. She received the Tier 1 supports offered by the school counselors and other staff (described above). As the school year continued, DJ reported increased isolation due to virtual learning, and misunderstandings and disagreements with teachers over the completion of assignments, which led to a steady decrease in her class participation and grades. By the second semester, DJ had contracted COVID-19, which caused a depressive episode that was exacerbated by the death of her grandmother. At that time, the student reported substantial illness, loss, isolation, friction with teachers, and decreasing grades. The student confided these challenges to the VHS school counselor, including feelings of helplessness, disappointment, and frustration.

As a result, the school counselor planned increased Tier 2/3 supports for DJ. They conducted regular school counselor/student check-ins via email, virtual meetings, and texts until graduation. During these check-ins, the school counselor and DJ discussed organizational skills, incomplete class assignments, and postsecondary goals. The student completed Tier 2 academic supports including modules for retaking courses for credit and to boost her final grades, taking elective credits through her job, and meeting with her school counselor to explore postsecondary options. As a result, DJ began applying to a local community college that provided tuition assistance for her field of interest. When working with the school counselor, DJ shared what she perceived had most influenced her turnaround that year: "I feel more support now. Maybe I just needed to open up, but most importantly I'm doing this for my grandma."

### *School Counselor's Reflection*

When reflecting on what had been learned from the year, during a department meeting, the VHS school counselors shared stories of dedication, flexibility and resiliency, and relationship. First, while no one could anticipate a global pandemic, a racial justice movement awakening, or going through the year's events without a department chair, the VHS school counselors understood that their passionate commitment to the students and school community were assets to support their desired outcome and annual goal of increased on-time graduation.

Administering school counseling services during a virtual and hybrid setting challenged the department to be innovative and resilient: providing school counseling program supports including virtual counseling and advising; programming; communication and collaboration with stakeholders, the MTSS team, and school administrators; and building and reinforcing relationships. Thus, the school year demonstrated that developing intentional relations through a screen was possible, although it required constant and consistent connection with students and parents/families through weekly emails, virtual meetings, text messages, phone calls, or home visits.

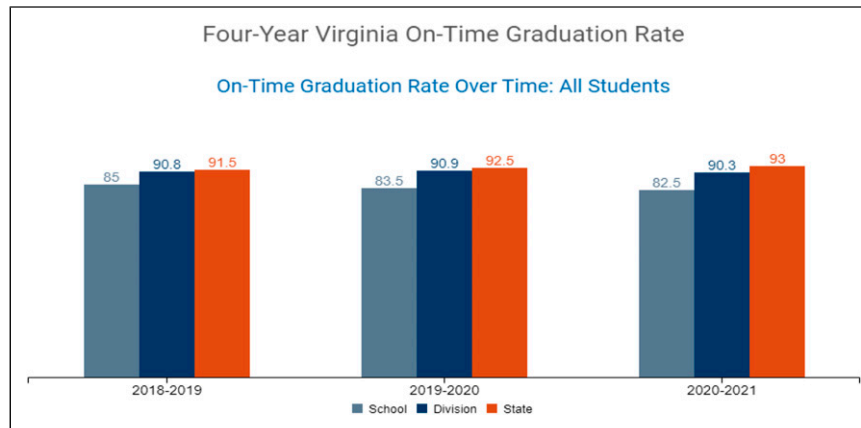
The VHS school counseling department acknowledged the relevance of MTSS and its usefulness in improving school culture and procedures during virtual learning in the midst of multiple crises. Another VHS counselor shared thoughts on the school year and MTSS: "We have a strong foundation and the [MTSS] team has done great work despite a virtual school year. It is time for us to fully integrate MTSS into our program . . . [to] ensure we have an equitable school counseling program." In sum, the 2020–2021 school year was a testament to the relentlessness and resilience of teachers, school counselors, administrators, and, most important, the students as they worked to graduate under unprecedented circumstances.

### *School Counseling Department Goal*

Based on the available data on Virginia's school quality profile, the 2020–2021 VHS on-time graduation rate was 82.5% (see [Figure 2](#)). Although the overall on-time graduation rate did not reach the school/school counseling goal of 90%, when disaggregating the on-time graduation data, we found graduation improvements in some subgroups: female students (from 85.9% to 88.8%); Hispanic students (65.2–66.7); and English language learners, the most substantial increase (53.8–56.5%). Given VHS's priority and efforts serving BIPOC students, particularly Black students, we found it hopeful that while the overall on-time graduation rates slightly decreased (83.5–82.5%), Black students' on-time graduation rates slightly increased (83.5–83.6%). Thus, their rate was higher than the school average and this rate moved in the opposite direction of the school rates as a whole. In the future, we encourage the school and school counseling department to continue analyzing trends in graduation by not only the overall rates, but also by subgroups to look for both successes and areas for improvement.

### **Discussion and Implications**

The results of this practitioner-focused case study provide insight into the process and experience of a high school serving predominately BIPOC students through the lens of the school counseling department as they used an MTSS framework. The framework was designed to address their school-wide goal of increased graduation rates. All of this was in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the racial justice movement. BIPOC students are more likely to face greater challenges in school due to centuries of institutionalized racism. While none of these inequities were new, all were exacerbated by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and were brought to the forefront of the discussion against the backdrop of the Black Lives Matter movement. For example, 25% of Black teens reported that they often or sometimes cannot complete schoolwork because of the lack of reliable internet access, compared to 13% of White students and 17% of Latinx students ([Anderson & Perrin, 2018](#)); 70% of Black and Latinx parents were concerned that they do not have the resources to help their child remain on track during school-building closures, but only 29% of Black families



**Figure 2.** Four-year Virginia on-time graduation rate.

received technical support to set up for virtual learning compared to 40% of White families (The Education Trust, 2020). This was illustrated at VHS by distribution of approximately 150 hotspots to their students compared with the 6000 distributed district-wide.

Presenting further challenges for BIPOC students, they are more likely to live in homes and communities with fewer financial resources due to centuries of underfunding in these communities (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2020). With an increase in unemployment and the shift to remote learning, students were pressed to contribute monetarily to their households. BIPOC students may feel this obligation more acutely than White students because their families often value collectivism more than White families, who value individualism. This can be illustrated by VHS's reports of increased unemployment, and approximately 20% of students starting a part-time or full-time job.

With this contextual information and disruption to routine, it is not surprising that BIPOC students reported feeling additional stress and worry than in previous years (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2020). In fact, they reported feeling disconnected from vital mental health resources including relatives, peers, and adult role models (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2020). However, when considering the antiracist and social justice lens through which VHS framed its MTSS and which the school counseling department actively incorporated throughout the year, it may be less surprising that approximately 385 students graduated on-time for the 2020–2021 school year. The level of involvement of the VHS school counseling department in the MTSS process shows the importance of the school counseling field in decreasing opportunity gaps and keeping schools on track in times of crisis. School counselors need to be equipped and committed to looking at opportunity gaps and to be advocates for students at micro and macro levels.

As connection builders, school counselors are uniquely poised to develop relationships with students, which may help circumvent the feeling of disconnectedness experienced by many students during virtual learning, but particularly BIPOC students (Bryan et al., 2020). Through the pandemic, the need

for the core values of the VHS School Counseling Department was reinforced. Relationships and rapport were needed more than ever to support students and families. As a VHS school counselor stated, “Our students thrive when they feel supported.” Relationship building and social development are key tenets of school counseling and comprehensive school counseling programs (Bryan et al., 2020). Relationship building at VHS from the start was likely more challenging because of the school's population comprised mostly families of color, who may traditionally have less trust in schools due to accustomed discrimination and refusal of services, which continues today (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2020). This may be especially true when compared to White, resourced schools where trust is easy or assumed. Thus, building school counselor and student/family relationships may be especially important for students and families of color, and members of other minoritized populations, including those at VHS (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2020). This illustrates that school counselors need to receive education centered around building relationships with students and families from marginalized populations, including helping to foster educational resilience as a vital part of the school counselor's role (Bryan et al., 2020). Bryan et al. (2020) found that school–family–community partnerships are an effective strategy to regain trust from BIPOC community members and to collaborate on growing educational resilience. Again, the success of initiatives like this can be seen at VHS, where school counselors were an integral part of initiatives such as consistent communication efforts.

This case study also shows: that the MTSS framework was a foundation for responding to and organizing supports pertaining to challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic and to the racial justice movement; the importance of school counselors' role in collaborating with school administrators and staff, especially the MTSS team; and that MTSS can be used as a vehicle for collaboration among school counselors, administrators, and school staff during a crisis—and all with a particular focus on college and career readiness. Similarly, in the present case study, school counselors as school-wide leaders aligned their



comprehensive school counseling program with MTSS, collaborated and consulted with school administration and staff, and were responsible for assisting the school with crisis response, because crises often involve trauma-informed practices (ASCA, 2019; Goodman-Scott et al., 2020). As stated in the ASCA (2016) position statement, school counselors should:

understand the impact adverse childhood experiences have on students' academic achievement and social/emotional development strive to identify, support, and promote the success of students who have experienced trauma through the implementation of a data-informed school counseling program (para. 1).

Although scholars have proposed that comprehensive school counseling program/MTSS alignment can be used in response to COVID-19 (Pincus et al., 2020), this is the first known study to show this alignment in practice, and also to include college and career readiness supports. Not only was this alignment demonstrated, but the alignment strengthened the collaboration between school counselors and other stakeholders.

Thus, MTSS was a helpful framework that assisted VHS to organize their COVID-19 and racial justice supports. As such, schools should preventatively consider having MTSS in place as an organizing framework to assist with a range of crises that could arise in K–12 schools and communities. Furthermore, this comprehensive school counseling program/MTSS alignment can be used to help ground the school counselor's role during a crisis and the school's actions during emergencies. At the same time, although MTSS can assist schools in times of crises, recent research questioned whether all schools have equitable access to this helpful framework. Goodman-Scott et al. (2021) found that schools with larger White student populations were more likely to have access to and to implement PBIS (e.g., MTSS). This is consistent with other findings showing that schools with predominantly marginalized populations traditionally have less access to educational resources (Bryan et al., 2020). Thus, school counselors must advocate for MTSS to be implemented in schools regardless of resources and race/ethnicity of students.

## Conclusion

Overall, 2020 and 2021 have been unprecedented times of societal-level crisis and soaring mental health needs compounded by the racial inequities and racism in the United States. School counselors are uniquely positioned to assess and support all students through crises such as COVID-19 (ASCA, 2016; Pincus et al., 2020), and to advocate for racial justice and antiracism (Mayes, 2021). The present practitioner-focused case study highlights VHS, a racially and ethnically diverse high school in Virginia, and how the school overcame significant challenges caused by the pandemic through aligning their comprehensive school counseling program with MTSS. The VHS community is a prime example of resiliency, passionate commitment, and the use of a tiered approach in unprecedented times to support students toward graduating.

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