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REVIEW OF WESTONKA PUBLIC SCHOOLS MULTI-TIERED SYSTEM OF SUPPORT FRAMEWORK AND SCHOOL MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

Introduction

Westonka Public Schools (Westonka) have been implementing a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS; previously called Response to Intervention or RtI) framework for a number of years and have similarly committed to supporting student mental health throughout the district in recent years, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. District leaders recently requested a comprehensive review from Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement (CAREI) at the University of Minnesota of its district wide implementation of an MTSS framework, with a focus on the extent to which this framework was being implemented in support of School Mental Health (SMH) services and programming.

Eight evaluation questions guided this review in the categories of Multi-Tiered System of Support Framework, School Mental Health, and Positive School Climate. Information for the review was collected during the months of October 2021 - March 2022 through group interviews, staff surveys, student/family surveys, review of extant student data, review of staffing data, and review of district data and documentation (e.g., discipline policies). Key findings and recommendations identified through this review are summarized below.

Summarized Findings and Recommendations

Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) Framework

MTSS Strengths

Westonka demonstrated strengths in the MTSS domains of multi-level instruction and assessment. Within multi-level instruction, Tier 1, or universal instruction, was a particular highlight, as the district demonstrates a strong commitment to differentiation, alignment to state standards, and Tier 1 supports for social, emotional, and behavioral (SEB) skill development (facilitated by use of the Pyramid Model in early childhood settings and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, or PBIS, in the primary and middle schools).

MTSS Recommendations

- **Coordination of MTSS**

- *Within schools:*

- Building leadership teams should continue to refine their MTSS Resource Maps (which outline instruction and assessments being used at each intervention tier in the building as well as an inventory of teams and their meeting frequency, membership, and purpose). This process will help teams define and standardize the assessment tools and interventions they are delivering and identify and fill gaps in evidence-based curricula/practices as needed.

- We recommend that buildings establish clear schedules and meeting agendas that specify who examines screening data and exactly which additional data are collected/reviewed and by who each school year. CAREI can provide standardized schedules/agendas to use or adapt as needed.
 - *Across schools:*
 - Develop a comprehensive District MTSS Process Guide using [CAREI's Process Guide Template](#) (which Westonka has already purchased) that provides: (a) clear definition of tiers, (b) decision-making rules for movement between tiers, (c) procedures for screening and progress monitoring in academic and social emotional domains, (d) procedures for matching intervention to student need, (e) procedures for evaluating intervention effects (who does this and when?), (f) procedures for assessing fidelity of implementation of programming and assessments, and (g) procedures for documentation of problem solving efforts.
 - Consider gathering student problem solving teams (Student Strategies/Support Teams) to discuss current processes and identify areas for greater alignment (e.g., team name, frequency of meeting, agenda structure, use of data, referral process). This process will not only help create some alignment between these teams, but will also allow for sharing of tools and resources. Additionally, if there is interest in further refining these teams' processes, consider engaging in [CAREI's Problem Solving Teams training](#) (self-paced or in-person sessions available).
- **Professional Development**
 - Provide “MTSS 101” training to all staff that includes definitions of the MTSS core components and articulation of what these look like (or the goal for what they will look like) at each building. Explicitly focus more of this training effort on how to apply an MTSS framework within the areas of SEL and behavior, data literacy, and how to navigate and use Westonka’s data systems (all areas where staff reported lower skills levels).
 - Consider providing targeted professional development sessions and/or coaching for early childhood staff on how to apply an MTSS framework to support academic skills, and to high school staff on supporting SEB through MTSS.
- **Assessment - Screening**
 - *Social, emotional, behavioral (SEB):*
 - CAREI suggests adopting a universal K-12 SEB screening tool. However, this process would benefit from starting by engaging district stakeholders (educators, families, and students) in a dialogue around the purpose and benefits of district use of an SEB screening tool to ensure that all stakeholders are on the same page and can have a voice in determining selection and use of the screening tool.
 - Following initial dialogue with stakeholders, collaborate with CAREI to follow the steps for adopting a universal K-12 SEB screening tool outlined in [Best Practices In Universal Social, Emotional, And Behavioral Screening: An Implementation Guide](#), including identifying goals and objectives of screening, establishing screening processes, and developing procedures for how data will be

used at the building and district level. Notably, this process includes continued engagement with stakeholders as a tool is selected and a process is implemented.

- *Math*: Adopt a specific universal math screening assessment/process that goes through 8th grade (e.g., FAST or NWEA). Relatedly, at the middle school, all students should be completing the same math screening assessment (some currently take FAST and some NWEA MAP) so that data are more easily comparable within and across grades.
- *High school*: Consider adopting or developing an Early Warning System (EWS) that utilizes existing student data histories to flag those at risk in a systematic way. This [EWS Implementation Guide](#) could be used as a resource to guide this effort.
- *Across grades and domains*: Student screening data are generally collected following the district's [Standardized Testing Schedule advertised on Westonka's website](#), but there were a few cases in which more data are being collected than are advertised here (e.g., in middle school, students complete a math screener: FAST aMath or NWEA MAP assessments, which is not listed online). The district should conduct an inventory of all screening tools being used at each school to identify areas for improvement and to ensure accurate assessment information is being communicated to families.
- **Assessment - Progress Monitoring:**
 - Early childhood, primary schools, and the middle school should align progress monitoring frequency with best practices (i.e., every other week to monthly for Tier 2; weekly for Tier 3), which includes adopting tools designed for more frequent monitoring of progress in interventions. The high school should be supported in identifying and adopting progress monitoring tools and practices to monitor students receiving interventions, according to best practices.
- **Instruction - Tier 3:**
 - Work to align Tier 3 instruction with best practices across all grade levels and in reading, math, and SEB. Tier 3 interventions need to be more intensive than Tier 2 interventions and adapted to address individual student needs through an iterative manner based on student data. Distinguish the difference between Tier 2 and 3 in terms of the data required for decision making, groups size and dosage, instructional delivery methods, and interventionist expertise. As much as possible, re-evaluate staffing decisions to ensure sufficient allocations are made to support the implementation of Tier 3 interventions.
- **Infrastructure and Support Mechanisms**
 - **Schedules:** Primary schools should implement school-wide or grade-level common intervention time to ensure that interventions supplement rather than replace core instruction. Support high school staff in clarifying, coordinating, and streamlining their WIN (What-I-Need) intervention time processes as well as bolstering supports to ensure that students who need direct skill instruction (academic or behavioral) can receive that at this time.
 - **Cultural and linguistic responsiveness:** The district should continue down its path to engage in intentional work to address cultural competency as a district, as outlined in their [Cultural Competency Plan](#).

- **Communication with families:** As the district defines its MTSS framework (through development of a process guide and/or other tools), share this information with families. Each building should also develop procedures for communicating about student progress to parents for students participating in interventions.
- **MTSS Teams:** Examine current practices (meeting schedules, agendas, and routines) for building and district leadership teams. Ensure that these linked teams have methods of communicating with each other and that MTSS is the central framework used by these teams to talk and think about instruction and student supports throughout each building and at the district office.
- **Data systems:** Consider evaluating and streamlining data systems. Considerations should be made for either reexamining use of current data systems (use of [Skyward's intervention tracking tools](#)) or exploring use of a data warehouse that functions similar to Educlimber (which has features that facilitate documenting and monitoring progress for interventions).
- **Fidelity of Implementation and Evaluation**
 - Develop district and building implementation plans to monitor short- and long-term district and building goals that are explicitly tied to or positioned within an MTSS framework. The district should use data annually to evaluate the effectiveness of tiered support at each level.
 - On a cycle that aligns with data availability and decision-making pragmatics, the district and individual schools should evaluate system outcomes to discover who is and who is not adequately benefiting from the current system of support. Data should be regularly collected and disaggregated in the areas of academic achievement, attendance, disciplinary incidents, and SEL.
 - Building leadership teams should work to develop a system and measures to monitor the fidelity of implementation of core, supplemental, and intensive interventions, as well as screening and progress monitoring processes.

School Mental Health Services

School Mental Health Strengths

Westonka demonstrates many strengths as a district regarding implementation of school mental health and SEB support for students. As noted above, there are strong Tier 1, preventative SEB support systems and curricula in place at primary and middle schools as well as a variety of Tier 2 SEB interventions available. Tier 3 mental health and SEB supports are primarily offered through contracted mental health service providers (Relate Counseling Center, or Relate; and Park Nicollet's Growing Through Grief program, or GTG), who provide intensive, evidence-based therapy and counseling to students as well as consultation to staff. A particular highlight is that staff report that the addition of Relate interns this school year has resulted in increased capacity and reduced waitlists for mental health supports.

Survey data collected also indicate that Westonka parents reported that they are aware of, know how to access, and are satisfied with available school/district resources that can support their students' social, emotional, and mental health needs. Similarly, students generally reported that they know how to and have been able to get help at school when they have felt "sad, mad, worried, or stressed." Staff reported that Westonka staff value and feel positively about building relationships with students, collaboration and consistency for SEB practices, and using proactive/preventative strategies to address students' SEB needs. Additionally, school-employed staff and contracted mental health providers agreed that contracted providers are visible and accessible in their outreach to staff and students, that interpersonal relationships and processes are supportive of ongoing collaboration between school and contracted staff, that the district values and welcomes collaboration with families and community agencies, and that collaboration with contracted mental health agencies has improved Westonka students' and families' access to mental health services.

School Mental Health Recommendations

- **Contracted Mental Health Services**

- In general, the current contracts guiding the partnerships between contracted mental health service providers and Westonka lack detail on topics such as expectations for use of service providers' time, access to student data, expectations for communication with staff/students/families, and guidelines for scheduling sessions in ways that best align to student schedules. Westonka leaders are currently in the process of co-creating an updated contract with Relate Counseling and are encouraged to do the same with Park Nicollet's Growing Through Grief program. These updated contracts should include additional details that outline how contracted staff are expected to spend their time and best practices for working within the district and each building. The following tool, developed by Dr. Kim Gibbons and the St. Croix River Education District (SCRED), may be a useful template to use or adapt for this purpose: [SCRED Community Partner Services in the Schools Communication Guide](#).

- **Addressing Beliefs About Behavior**

- Survey results across all buildings indicate that approximately 40% of Westonka staff hold concerning beliefs about the extent to which there is a sense of shared ownership/responsibility related to students demonstrating challenging behaviors (e.g., many staff agreed with the statement, "*Students who misbehave in the classroom or non-classroom settings (cafeteria, recess) should be handled by counselors, behavior specialists, and/or administrators*"). Consider training staff at all buildings on the role they can and are expected to play in supporting students' social, emotional, and behavioral wellbeing at the Tier 1 level (e.g., relationship building, positive reinforcement) to increase shared ownership and support for each student as a "whole child." Alongside this effort, provide training/documentation that clarifies how and when to refer students to counselors and other support staff (i.e., vs. calling the family first or attempting a simple intervention).

- **Mound Westonka High School:** Support for the high school around SEB should be coordinated and multi-pronged:
 - **Tier 1 SEB systems and curricula:** Mound Westonka High School should participate in state-provided PBIS training. In the meantime, support the school in developing and enforcing schoolwide behavior expectations, selecting an evidence-based SEB curriculum, and determining a schedule for when that curriculum will be delivered on a regular basis to all students throughout the year. CAREI can provide example Tier 1 SEB schedules for secondary schools and support selection of curricula.
 - **Screening:** Adopt a universal SEB screening tool (see above).
 - **Staffing:** Start by developing definitions of roles and duties for counselors and other student support staff at the high school. Within these definitions, identify top priorities as well as any duties that can come off their plates and be reassigned to new or existing staff. Additionally, consider hiring a school social worker dedicated to supporting general education at the high school (someone who can focus on supporting students experiencing significant mental health needs, trauma, suicidal ideation, and homelessness) and/or hiring a staff member to take on duties related to testing coordination and master scheduling.
 - **Professional Development:** In addition to providing training for all buildings, consider providing additional targeted professional development sessions and/or coaching for high school staff focused on supporting SEB and student mental health through MTSS.

Positive School Climate

Strengths

Student School Climate Survey data indicate that Westonka students generally hold positive opinions about their school, other students, and teachers. They indicated that staff treat each other fairly and generally treat students with respect. A very high proportion of students also reported that they have at least one good friend at their school. Parent School Climate data indicate that Westonka parents generally provided very positive ratings of school climate as a district and within each building. Parents expressed the highest ratings on items related to pride in having their family be a part of the Westonka Public School community and experiencing positive relationships with and impressions of school staff.

Recommendations

- Student School Climate Survey data indicated that students held relatively low opinions of how students in Westonka treat each other. Consider identifying lessons within Tier 1 SEB curricula already being used (i.e., Second Step) that target the skill of demonstrating respect and kindness toward peers and dedicate extra time teaching or reteaching these lessons. Supplement this effort in grades K-7 and target this skill area at the high school, through use of the [Random Acts of Kindness curriculum](#) (a free, evidence-based SEB curriculum for grades K-12) or a similar curriculum.

- A few items on the student school climate survey had high levels of positive responses, but may indicate a need for targeted supports for some students (e.g., students who reported that they have zero “good connections” with staff or were not sure what to do in response to bullying of themselves or others). Westonka has access to these student data, which include student respondents’ email addresses. If this has not already been acted upon, each school should examine responses to questions like these and plan a systematic follow-up response for students who did not provide positive answers.
- While most questions received high ratings on the Parent School Climate Survey, relatively lower ratings were provided related to feeling informed about what is happening in their child’s school, feeling that the school’s programs and curricula supported their child’s success as a student, and bus safety. We recommend that school administrators and staff such as family liaisons attend to and respond to these data, by collecting more information from families (e.g., through surveys, focus groups, or listening sessions) and/or by developing strategies to provide information or address concerns in a systematic fashion throughout each school year.