

## Executive Summary

### Improving Equitable Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Outcomes by Aligning and Integrating Mental Health Systems and Family-School-Community Collaboration in MTSS

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<http://mep.wceruw.org/documents/Garbacz-ExecSummary.pdf>

#### **Implications of Findings for MMSD Policy or Practice:**

- A primary pathway to improve equity in integration across mental health services and family-school collaboration is through strengthening a **schoolwide leadership team**. A schoolwide team that is representative of the school community can identify valued outcomes, set goals, and support sustained implementation of programs or practices that address goals and promote valued outcomes.
- **Universal screening and progress monitoring** systems and practices should be consistently implemented to identify and evaluate progress toward schoolwide goals and identify and follow up with students who would benefit from more intensive support.
- **Family-school-community collaboration** can support implementation of equitable mental health services. To realize a collaborative vision, schools should implement a framework that integrates family-school-community collaboration in school mental health systems. A collaborative framework integrates family culture, community connections, and uses a participatory process for decision making.
- **Teacher integration** in school mental health can help improve implementation across school settings. Teacher integration in school mental health includes finding ways to address student confidentiality and enhancing connections among teachers and parents.
- **Professional development** will be helpful to support teaming, screening, progress monitoring, and family-school-community collaboration, as well as practices to dismantle inequitable systems and build systems that promote equity. For example, professional development for teachers to engage in school mental health would be helpful. In addition, development for school staff in social justice, anti-racism, and the role of explicit and implicit bias will help promote teaming and collaboration with families.

#### **Abstract of the Study:**

This study examined integration of mental health systems and family-school-community collaboration within Multi-Tiered /Level Systems of Support (MTSS). The primary research questions that guided

interviews were, “How do mental health professionals, teachers, and parents<sup>1</sup> describe integration of mental health systems and family-school-community collaboration within MTSS?” and “How should equity be considered within a school-based integrated framework?” These questions were identified from an ongoing collaboration we have with school mental health professionals within MMSD. To answer these questions, we conducted semi-structured group and individual interviews to explore individuals’ experiences. For example, we asked parents and teachers to describe their experiences with school mental health services and family-school collaboration. Study participants included mental health professionals, teachers, and parents. Analyses identified themes from participant responses. Findings then suggested barriers to integrated services, such as a lack of school staff time, and facilitators to integrated services, such as family-school collaboration. Recommendations for optimizing integration were also discussed, such as focusing on equity in school procedures and outcomes and using school teams to promote integration. Based on facilitators, barriers, and recommendations, implications for practice are identified.

### **Major Findings:**

School mental health professionals, teachers, and families pointed to barriers that impede integration of mental health systems and family-school-community collaboration within MTSS, facilitators that promote integration, and ways to improve integration. Although our questions focused on integration of academic, mental health, and family-school systems, participants emphasized equity in addition to mental health, and family-school systems.

School mental health professionals and teachers noted the importance of focusing on student mental health and integrating mental health systems within MTSS but described a lack of time and staff necessary for integration. Mental health professionals, parents, and teachers indicated that mental health services are often delivered in an isolated manner across school and community settings. For example, a therapist may meet with a student individually at the school, but those therapeutic services are not aligned with other social-emotional services a student may be receiving at the school. Teachers said that district concerns about student confidentiality inhibited their involvement in mental health services. Parents described barriers to accessing appropriate services and connecting services. Mental health professionals described a lack of teaming structures to collaborate and integrate mental health initiatives. Mental health professionals, teachers, and parents described a need for systems to identify students who would benefit from additional support, with parents noting a need to connect with students to better understand their wellness.

In addition to barriers, mental health professionals noted that, when present, a schoolwide leadership team (e.g., principal, teacher representatives) helped integrate mental health services, thereby maximizing student mental health and academic outcomes. Similarly, when present, family-school collaboration supported integrating services and promoting student mental health. Mental

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<sup>1</sup> Parent is broadly defined as “a natural, adoptive, or foster parent of a child, a guardian, or an individual acting in the place of a natural or adoptive parent (including a grandparent, stepparent, or other relative) with whom the child lives, or an individual who is legally responsible for the child’s welfare” (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, Sec. 602).

health professionals, teachers, and parents described integrating equity in school procedures and using anti-racist practices as facilitators to improve the effectiveness of school mental health services, while also noting that advancements in equity and anti-racism are needed. Mental health professionals, teachers, and family members described the importance of breaking down the isolated nature of mental health services while building integrated school-community connections.

Discussions with participants about barriers and facilitators to integration often included explicit suggestions for optimizing integration. Mental health professionals, teachers, and parents described the importance student mental health and community building within schools to promote academic achievement. Participants also indicated that focusing on equity in school procedures and outcomes is central to mental health integration, and additional training and support may be helpful to fully realize a vision of equity integration. Mental health professionals specifically noted that schoolwide teaming could identify students who would benefit from more intensive services. Mental health professionals, teachers, and parents spoke to the importance of family-school-community collaboration for optimizing mental health services. Participants suggested including family voice in school decisions, particularly racially or ethnically minoritized families. Mental health professionals and teachers suggested greater teacher involvement in school mental health.