Perspectives on the Initial Adoption of Multitiered Systems of Support for Behavior

Blair P. Lloyd, PhD, BCBA-D[1] (iD), Erik W. Carter, PhD[1] (iD),
Brooke C. Shuster, MEd, BCBA[1], Tara L. Axelroth, MEd, BCBA[1],
A. Dia Davis, MA[1], Melissa C. Hine, MEd, NCC[1],
Marilynn M. Porritt, MS, NCSP[1], Rebecca L. Haynes, MEd, BCBA[1,2],
Sunya A. Fareed, MEd, BCBA[1], and James C. Slaughter, DrPH[2]

Abstract

Although the number of U.S. schools implementing multitiered systems of support for behavior (MTSS-B) continues to grow, most schools have still not adopted these evidence-based frameworks. We examined the views of educators (*N* = 561) at the outset of adopting MTSS-B in their schools or districts. Our survey addressed the (a) reasons schools and districts decided to adopt MTSS-B, (b) challenges they anticipated with respect to implementation, and (c) expected outcomes of MTSS-B. We also compared views across three groups of stakeholders: local school team members, building administrators, and district representatives. Although most participants reported multiple motivations for adopting MTSS-B, concerns about student behavior and the need for staff support in this area were among the primary reasons. Anticipated challenges varied by group, with district representatives affirming those challenges most strongly. Responses also suggest these stakeholders have high expectations regarding the impact of MTSS-B in their school or district. We discuss implications for technical assistance providers related to supporting a more widespread adoption of MTSS-B.

The approaches advocated for addressing student behavior have changed dramatically over the last 30 years (Radley & Dart, 2019). Heavy reliance on reactive responses has given way to more proactive postures in which schools establish, teach, and reinforce a common set of behavioral expectations to all of their students. Likewise, many schools are shifting away from a one-size-fits-all approach to discipline and toward a framework that is more data-driven, individualized, and positive. Indeed, multitiered systems of support for behavior (MTSS-B) are now widely recommended as a best practice for creating effective learning environments for all students (Horner et al., 2019). MTSS-B consists of a collection of schoolwide approaches that incorporate universal screening to identify student risk status, research-based interventions based on increasing intensity and alignment to student needs, and data-based decision-making. Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS; Sugai & Horner, 2009) is among the most prominent and evidence-based frameworks of MTSS-B, with a national technical assistance center that has been funded by the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs for more than 20 years.

The number of schools adopting PBIS has grown substantially in recent years, with more than 27,000 schools implementing nationwide (McIntosh et al., 2020). Yet the majority of the more than 130,000 public and private schools in the United States have not yet adopted these evidence-based frameworks. As a result, many state departments of education have invested in technical assistance projects aimed at inviting, equipping, and supporting schools and districts to adopt these approaches in widespread ways (Horner et al., 2019). As one of those state-funded projects, we have provided training and technical assistance on Tennessee's version of MTSS-B, called Response to Instruction and Intervention for Behavior

[1]Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN, USA
[2]Vanderbilt University Medical Center, Nashville, TN, USA

Corresponding Author:
Blair P. Lloyd, Department of Special Education, Vanderbilt University, 230 Appleton Place, Nashville, TN 37203, USA.
Email: blair.lloyd@vanderbilt.edu

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(RTI^2-B). RTI^2-B is based on the national PBIS model and includes an emphasis on alignment with other initiatives and supports (e.g., academics, social-emotional learning, and mental health) as well as adapting systems to fit individual district needs. As part of this work, we have been particularly interested in understanding the views and experiences of educators who are actively involved in launching MTSS-B in their schools or districts. A core tenet of implementation science involves soliciting the feedback and engagement of critical stakeholders (Fixen et al., 2013). We see at least three areas in which the insights of new MTSS-B adopters might be especially informative.

First, it is important to understand what leads schools and districts to initially pursue the adoption of MTSS-B. A multitude of factors could provide this catalyst. For example, concerns about student misbehavior have long been raised by educators and school or district leaders (Baker, 2005; Griffith & Tyner, 2019). Not surprisingly, MTSS-B is frequently framed as an avenue for addressing these enduring concerns (e.g., Simonsen et al., 2008). But other motivations may also underlie these decisions. Educators may see MTSS-B as a way of further strengthening school climate, increasing student safety, or enhancing staff morale. External influences may also play a role. For example, local adoption of MTSS-B may be driven by state or district priorities—both of which are key factors to initiate and sustain systems-level change (Fixen et al., 2013; Office of Special Education Programs Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2015). Other potential external influences include testimonials from other schools, advocacy by parents and students, or consideration of the research literature. Educators actively involved in the early adoption of MTSS-B are in the best position to address why their school or district may be making this particular investment. Several reasons for pursuing MTSS-B have been identified in prior case studies, including high discipline and dropout rates, high teacher turnover, and low staff and student morale (e.g., Goodman-Scott et al., 2017; Malloy et al., 2018; Netzel & Eber, 2003). However, these reasons were specific to individual districts or schools. Larger-scale studies that span multiple districts are yet to be published and could shed light on how broadly school and district staff motivations are affirmed.

Second, educators can speak to the challenges they anticipate encountering as they undertake this new work. The adoption of any new schoolwide initiative will be replete with complexities; the roll-out of MTSS-B is no exception. Studies examining the ongoing implementation of MTSS-B within schools and districts have highlighted a number of actual challenges schools navigate, including staff support, resource availability, time demands, competing priorities, leadership concerns, and limited parent engagement (e.g., Kincaid et al., 2007; Menzies et al., 2020; Pinkelman et al., 2015; Turri et al., 2016). Several of these factors have also been shown to predict implementation

and sustainability outcomes—particularly those related to leadership teams, staff buy-in, and district-level supports (George et al., 2018; Mercer et al., 2014). Educators involved in school or district implementation teams are likely to have a keen understanding of their students, their colleagues, and the context of their particular school or district. As a result, they will have important insights into the factors they anticipate might slow, hinder, or derail their early implementation efforts. Only one study has addressed the views of educators still in the planning stages of implementation. Tyre et al. (2018) explored staff concerns from schools planning for or implementing schoolwide PBIS. Across the four planning and five implementing schools, concerns commonly relate to managing program logistics. However, relative to implementing schools, schools in the planning stages expressed more concerns categorized as "unrelated" to PBIS and fewer concerns related to student outcomes. Additional studies are needed to explore the potential challenges educators see at the *outset* of their efforts. Knowing these anticipated challenges can inform how technical assistance teams train and support stakeholders early on. Training efforts might focus on educating stakeholders on commonly encountered challenges or working to prevent or minimize implementation barriers stakeholders do foresee. Overall, these efforts are likely to strengthen buy-in by making district and school stakeholders feel heard and supported through the initial roll-out of MTSS-B.

Third, little is known about the difference educators anticipate MTSS-B will make within their schools. Research support for MTSS-B is already quite strong and still deepening. This burgeoning literature addresses the positive impact schoolwide investments in behavior can have on students' social skills, office discipline referrals, suspensions, academic outcomes, school climate, and organizational health (see Horner et al., 2019). Most educators, unfortunately, are not likely to be drawing guidance directly from the research literature (Shuster et al., 2017). Yet they still bring expectations regarding the difference MTSS-B might make in their schools. Understanding this expected impact could provide further insight into what draws them to invest in this framework for their school or district.

Understanding educator perspectives in each of these areas—motivations, anticipated challenges, and expected outcomes—can directly inform the training, resources, and support technical assistance projects provide at the outset of MTSS-B adoption. However, the various educators involved in launching and leading MTSS-B have different vantage points from which they see students and their needs. For example, school teams are usually composed of a cross-section of general educators, special educators, related services providers, school counselors, and other staff who are especially attuned to the students whom they directly serve. School-building administrators (e.g., principals and assistant principals) may be more aware of schoolwide needs and opportunities. And district-level staff (e.g., directors and

behavior specialists) may be considering implementation issues that span multiple school buildings. All of these stakeholders are considered to be critical to strong and sustained implementation (Andreou et al., 2015), yet they may not all view implementation issues similarly. Indeed, studies comparing stakeholder views on other aspects of MTSS-B reveal areas of convergence and divergence. For example, views of different stakeholder groups have been shown to differ with respect to philosophical beliefs related to PBIS, perceptions of administrator support, and the impact of professional development practices (Bambara et al., 2012; Debnam, 2013; Feuerborn et al., 2018).

The current study examined the views of educators at the early stages of adopting MTSS-B in their schools and districts. We addressed the following research questions: Why did stakeholders feel their school or district adopted MTSS-B? What potential challenges to implementing MTSS-B do they anticipate? What outcomes do they expect MTSS-B to have at their school or in their district? In each of these areas, we also asked: Are there differences in the views of school team members, school-level administrators, and district-level representatives?

Method

Participants

Participants included 561 educators from nine school districts—all of whom were currently involved in the launch of MTSS-B. These stakeholders included 414 school team members, 100 school-level administrators, and 47 district-level representatives. The majority of respondents (83.8%) were White; other respondents were Black (13.0%), Hispanic/Latino (0.9%), Asian (0.7%), American Indian/Alaskan Native (0.5%), and multiracial (0.7%). Most respondents were female (82.0%). The highest level of education for most participants was a master's degree (55.4%), followed by bachelor's (25.7%), and doctoral or specialist degrees (17.1%); 1.8% reported other degrees. This profile is similar to educators nationally.

With respect to the three groups, school team members included general education teachers (55.6%), school counselors (16.5%), special education teachers (11.6%), instructional coaches (2.7%), school psychologists (2.2%), and related arts teachers (1.7%). The remaining 9.7% of team members held a variety of professional roles (e.g., social workers, librarians, reading/math interventionists, behavior specialists, instructional coordinators, Title 1 Facilitator). School-level administrators included principals (36.0%), assistant principals (60.0%), and other administrative positions (4.0%; e.g., Dean of Students). District-level representatives held diverse professional roles. The most common roles were district-wide behavior specialists (25.5%), district-wide school psychologists (10.6%), special education directors/consultants (10.6%), Response to Intervention

coordinators (8.5%), and district social workers (8.5%). The remaining 36.2% of district representatives fulfilled a wide variety of roles in their district, with only one or two participants representing each role (e.g., restorative practice specialists, federal programs supervisors, director of instruction, district school counselor, and director of mental health program). Across groups, participants reported having an average of 5.9 ($SD = 6.2$) years of experience in their current role at their school or district; 10.0 ($SD = 8.2$) years of experience in their current role anywhere; and 14.2 ($SD = 8.6$) years of experience in the field of education. The majority of respondents across stakeholder groups indicated having previous MTSS experience: 78.1%, 78.8%, and 94.7% for school team members, administrators, and district representatives, respectively. When asked about their anticipated roles in MTSS-B, most planned to serve as an active member of their school or district team (88.7%, 93.0%, and 61.7%, respectively); 31.1%, 59.0%, and 23.4%, respectively, anticipated serving as school or district team leads.

Schools and Districts

During this study, we provided training and technical assistance in RTI²-B to 11 of 40 districts in Middle Tennessee. RTI²-B—our state's version of MTSS-B—is closely aligned with the national PBIS model. Our project was funded by the state's Department of Education and focused on building district leadership and school capacity to implement and sustain MTSS-B.

Participants represented at least 124 schools in 9 districts in Middle Tennessee. Three of the participating districts required every school in the district to be trained in RTI²-B. Other districts allowed schools to choose when (which year) they would begin training, with an expectation that all schools would be trained over the next few years. All districts served Grades Pre-K through 12 but varied widely with respect to size, staff, and student enrollment. The mean numbers of schools, administrators, and students per district were 37 (range, 3–159), 93 (range, 14–334), and 23,945 (range, 2,173–82,424), respectively. An average of 25.4% (range, 6.4–66.6%) of students was Black, Hispanic, or Native American; 33.1% (range, 2.3%–46.9%) was economically disadvantaged; and 13.1% (range, 9.4%–16.4%) had disabilities. The majority of participants (70.2%) worked in schools that served elementary grade levels; 40.9% worked in schools or districts that served middle school grades, and 19.1% worked in schools or districts that served high school grades. Eighteen (3.2%) participants reported serving other grade levels (i.e., prekindergarten/preschool and alternative learning centers).

Procedures

We recruited participants at each initial Tier 1 training for RTI²-B, which was based on the national PBIS model.

These included 20 trainings between December 2016 and November 2019. Several districts had multiple cohorts of schools who attended Tier 1 training, which is why the total number of trainings exceeds the total number of participating districts. District trainings were attended by an average of 42 participants (range, 13–92), most of whom included school team members. Team members were invited by building administrators, but ultimately volunteered, to serve on the RTI[2]-B team. We advised administrators to invite five to seven team members who (a) were representative of the school staff and (b) included at least one person with behavioral expertise and a school counselor (Algozzine et al., 2019; RTI[2]-B Taskforce, 2016). One administrator was required to be on each school team, and at least one district representative was required to attend each training. The administrators and district representatives who attended these trainings, however, were already meaningfully involved in the decision to adopt RTI[2]-B. Prior to the Tier 1 training, we asked all team members to watch a 13-min video introduction of RTI[2]-B, which addressed the purpose of RTI[2]-B; gave an overview of the framework; described each tier of support; and walked through the training scope and sequence. We invited all school team members, school-level administrators, and district-level representatives to complete the optional survey on the first day of Tier 1 training (*prior* to starting the training event). Thus, all surveys were distributed at the same time in each district's training sequence and adoption. We explained that the survey was designed to help us understand (a) the reasons their schools and districts decided to adopt MTSS-B and (2) their expectations of how these systems would play out in their schools and districts. We communicated that all survey data would be aggregated to inform our technical assistance and would be disseminated more broadly for research purposes. Surveys included a space to identify the school district and/ or school each respondent served; however, we did not request names. Thus, individual responses were anonymous, and some (*n* = 12) chose not to report their school. Each person completing the survey could enter a gift card drawing using a separate entry. For every 10 completed surveys, we randomly drew one name to receive a US$10 gift card. For anyone who planned to attend the training but was absent, we sent an invitation to complete the survey via email. The email included a secure link (REDCap; Harris et al., 2009) to the same survey we distributed at the training events. We invited 847 school stakeholders to complete the survey and received 561 completed surveys (response rate = 66.2%).

Instrument

We developed three closely aligned versions of the survey for school team members, school-level administrators, and district-level representatives. Each differed with respect to (a) demographic options and (b) subtle phrasing of some survey questions (e.g., "our school" for teams and administrators versus "our school district" for district-level representatives).

Demographics. We asked participants to report their sex, race/ethnicity, and the highest level of education. We also asked them to identify their school or district, the school levels it served, their professional role, the total number of years employed in that role in their current school/district, the total number of years in that role anywhere, and the total number of years in the field of education.

Reasons for adopting. We asked participants to rate the extent to which they agreed that each of 15 factors was an important consideration in the decision to adopt MTSS-B at their school or in their district (see Table 1). Each item was rated on a 4-point, Likert-type scale: 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *agree*, 4 = *strongly agree*. Any additional reasons could be listed in an open-ended question.

Expected challenges. We asked participants to rate the extent to which they agreed their school or district was likely to encounter each of the 16 potential challenges during implementation (see Table 2). Each item was rated on a 4-point, Likert-type scale: 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *agree*, and 4 = *strongly agree*. Additional challenges could be listed in an open-ended question.

Potential impact. We asked participants to rate the extent to which they agreed that MTSS-B would lead to each of 19 outcomes at their school or in their district (see Table 3). Each item was rated on a 4-point, Likert-type scale: 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *agree*, 4 = *strongly agree*. Any additional impacts could be listed in an open-ended question.

Because no similar questionnaires existed, we developed a new one for this project. To promote content and face validity, we used three main strategies to generate items. First, our team of five educational consultants and two faculty members independently generated items to include in each survey section based on our knowledge and training experience related to MTSS-B. We combined and consolidated these lists by removing items that were repeated and combining or rephrasing items with overlapping meanings. Second, we reviewed recently published articles and technical assistance materials that identified potential influential factors related to adoption and implementation of MTSS-B as well as those identifying potential positive outcomes (e.g., Andreou et al., 2015; Horner et al., 2014; Kincaid et al., 2007; McIntosh et al., 2016; McIntosh et al., 2011, 2015; Team Implementation Checklist [Sugai et al., 2014]). We incorporated any factors or outcomes we found were not already accounted for on each list. Third, we shared our lists with three district leadership team members with the knowledge of MTSS-B and asked for suggestions of additional reasons, challenges, or outcomes.

Table 1. Ratings of Reasons for Deciding to Adopt MTSS-B Across Participant Groups.

	Percentage responding				
Items	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	M (SD)
Need for teacher and staff supports to handle student behavior	1.62	8.63	54.32	35.43	3.24 (0.67)
Concerns about student behavior	2.50	10.02	50.98	36.49	3.21 (0.72)
District priority to adopt MTSS-B	3.76	15.41	57.71	23.12	3.00 (0.73)
Positive experiences with other tiered system (e.g., PBIS, Ci3T, and RTI)	3.43	17.15	61.01	18.41	2.94 (0.70)
Concerns about the number of office referrals and suspensions	4.30	22.58	48.93	24.19	2.92 (0.80)
District mandate to adopt MTSS-B	6.32	20.76	49.64	23.29	2.90 (0.83)
State priority to adopt MTSS-B	5.10	20.40	56.28	18.21	2.88 (0.76)
Concerns about school climate	5.19	22.00	55.46	17.35	2.85 (0.76)
Research literature on multitiered systems of support	3.43	22.38	60.83	13.35	2.84 (0.67)
Positive recommendations from other schools implementing MTSS-B	5.24	27.48	56.42	10.85	2.73 (0.72)
School staff expressed interest	5.24	29.29	53.35	12.12	2.72 (0.74)
Concerns about student safety	6.83	32.55	45.86	14.75	2.67 (0.81)
Concerns about low staff morale	8.45	39.21	39.02	13.31	2.57 (0.83)
Parents/families expressed interest	13.74	59.49	24.23	2.53	2.16 (0.68)
Students expressed interest	17.09	60.00	18.91	4.00	2.10 (0.72)

Note. Percentages are based on the number of participants who completed each item. MTSS-B = multitiered systems of support for behavior; PBIS = Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports; Ci3T = Comprehensive, Integrated, Three-Tiered Model of Prevention; RTI = Response to Intervention.

Table 2. Ratings of Potential Challenges With Implementing MTSS-B Across Participant Groups.

	Percentage responding				
Items	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	M (SD)
Difficulty maintaining interest or commitment over time	4.18	32.36	54.00	9.45	2.69 (0.70)
Time commitments will be too demanding	3.61	40.25	47.47	8.66	2.61 (0.70)
Limited buy-in from school staff	7.76	35.92	46.03	10.29	2.59 (0.78)
Lack of funds for implementation	6.03	39.85	47.71	6.40	2.54 (0.71)
Intensity of student needs	8.33	46.56	36.05	9.06	2.46 (0.77)
Lack of staff expertise in behavior supports	10.85	41.78	42.31	5.06	2.42 (0.75)
Competing state or district initiatives	6.58	52.47	34.92	6.03	2.40 (0.70)
Insufficient training	6.33	51.90	36.35	5.43	2.41 (0.69)
Limited buy-in from parents/families	7.99	53.17	35.21	3.63	2.35 (0.68)
Limited buy-in from students	9.29	54.28	32.60	3.83	2.31 (0.69)
School staff turnover	12.66	52.80	27.31	7.23	2.29 (0.78)
Insufficient staff power	8.63	57.91	30.04	3.42	2.28 (0.67)
Difficulties communicating (e.g., with coaches, with district teams)	8.17	64.79	23.23	3.81	2.23 (0.64)
Limited buy-in from district personnel	22.32	56.81	17.97	2.90	2.01 (0.72)
Difficulty identifying strong leaders on staff to facilitate implementation	18.30	64.31	15.03	2.36	2.01 (0.65)
Limited buy-in from school administrators	26.40	55.70	14.29	3.62	1.95 (0.74)

Note. Percentages are based on the number of participants who completed each item. MTSS-B = multitiered systems of support for behavior.

Data Analysis

We used a combination of descriptive statistics and logistic regression to address our research questions. To summarize results for reasons to adopt MTSS-B, expected challenges when implementing MTSS-B, and expected impact of MTSS-B, we calculated percentages of total respondents indicating each rating (i.e., *strongly disagree, disagree, agree*, and *strongly agree*) for each item (see Tables 1–3). We also calculated means and standard deviations by survey item. To address whether ratings differed among

Table 3. Ratings of Potential Impact of MTSS-B Across Participant Groups.

Items	Percentage responding				
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	M (SD)
Increased student positive behaviors	0.00	2.55	65.14	32.30	3.30 (0.51)
Increased acknowledgment and reward for appropriate student behavior	0.00	2.37	68.37	29.25	3.27 (0.49)
Improved classroom management	0.00	2.53	67.89	29.58	3.27 (0.49)
Improved relationships between staff and students	0.00	2.00	69.21	28.78	3.27 (0.49)
Improved use of behavioral data	0.37	2.19	67.28	30.16	3.27 (0.51)
Improved quality and consistency of staff responses to problem behavior	0.00	1.82	72.18	26.00	3.24 (0.47)
Improved student morale	0.18	3.08	69.27	27.45	3.24 (0.50)
Decreased office disciplinary referrals	0.00	3.63	69.51	26.86	3.23 (0.50
Increased instructional time	0.00	5.83	65.21	29.96	3.23 (0.54)
Decreased student problem behaviors	0.00	4.54	68.60	26.86	3.22 (0.51)
Decreased in- and out-of-school suspensions	0.18	5.10	68.14	26.59	3.21 (0.53)
Decreased time spent addressing problem behaviors	0.00	6.53	68.12	24.86	3.18 (0.53)
Improved staff morale	0.73	5.67	68.19	25.41	3.18 (0.55)
Reduced number of students who need intensive individualized services, or services in alternative placements	0.18	8.42	70.88	20.51	3.12 (0.53)
Opportunities to serve as a model for other schools	0.18	6.81	73.66	19.34	3.12 (0.51)
Improved district climate	0.37	8.72	69.94	20.96	3.12 (0.55)
Increased family involvement and improved relationships with families	0.55	9.17	76.33	13.94	3.04 (0.50)
Improved student attendance	0.73	13.50	68.61	17.15	3.02 (0.58)
Increased community members' involvement and improved relationships with community members	0.37	17.90	71.03	10.70	2.92 (0.54)

Note. Percentages are based on the number of participants who completed each item. MTSS-B = multi-tiered systems of support for behavior.

stakeholder groups (i.e., school team members, school-level administrators, and district-level representatives), we used the proportional odds ordinal logistic regression model to estimate the probability of survey response by type of respondent while controlling for district (McCullagh, 1980). The proportional odds model generalizes the Wilcoxon rank-sum test to a regression setting that allowed us to estimate the conditional probability of survey responses without relying on assumptions about normality or equal variance. We chose this analysis strategy because it was unlikely responses on a Likert-type scale would be normally distributed, and there was evidence to suggest potential district effects (intraclass correlation coefficients for district ranged from .00–.19). Estimates from this model are presented as means (ranging from 1–4) with corresponding 95% confidence intervals (see Figures 1–3). Separate likelihood ratio tests were used to test for any effect of type of respondent controlling for district (2 *df*). We calculated *p* values and confidence intervals for all survey items and thus made no formal adjustments for multiple comparisons (Rothman, 1990; Saville, 1990). Models were estimated using the "rms" package of the R statistical program (Harrell, 2019; R Core Team, 2019). Missing data were limited (i.e., <3%).

Results

Why Did Schools and Districts Decide to Adopt MTSS-B?

Table 1 displays ratings of factors considered influential in the decision to adopt MTSS-B across all three stakeholder groups (*M* range, 2.10–3.24). The reasons for which the largest percentage of participants *agreed* or *strongly agreed* were influential and were as follows: the need for teacher and staff supports to handle student behavior (89.75%), concerns about student behavior (87.47%), district priority to adopt MTSS-B (80.83%), and positive experiences with other tiered systems of support (79.42%). The reasons least often affirmed as influential were parents/families expressed interest (26.76%) and students expressed interest (22.91%). Few respondents entered additional reasons for the open-ended question. One administrator indicated a need to support the students who *were* meeting expectations. Other responses added context to reasons already included in the survey, rather than revealing other unique motivations.

Figure 1 depicts mean ratings with 95% confidence intervals by stakeholder group. Significant differences in mean ratings by stakeholder group were identified for 10 of the 15
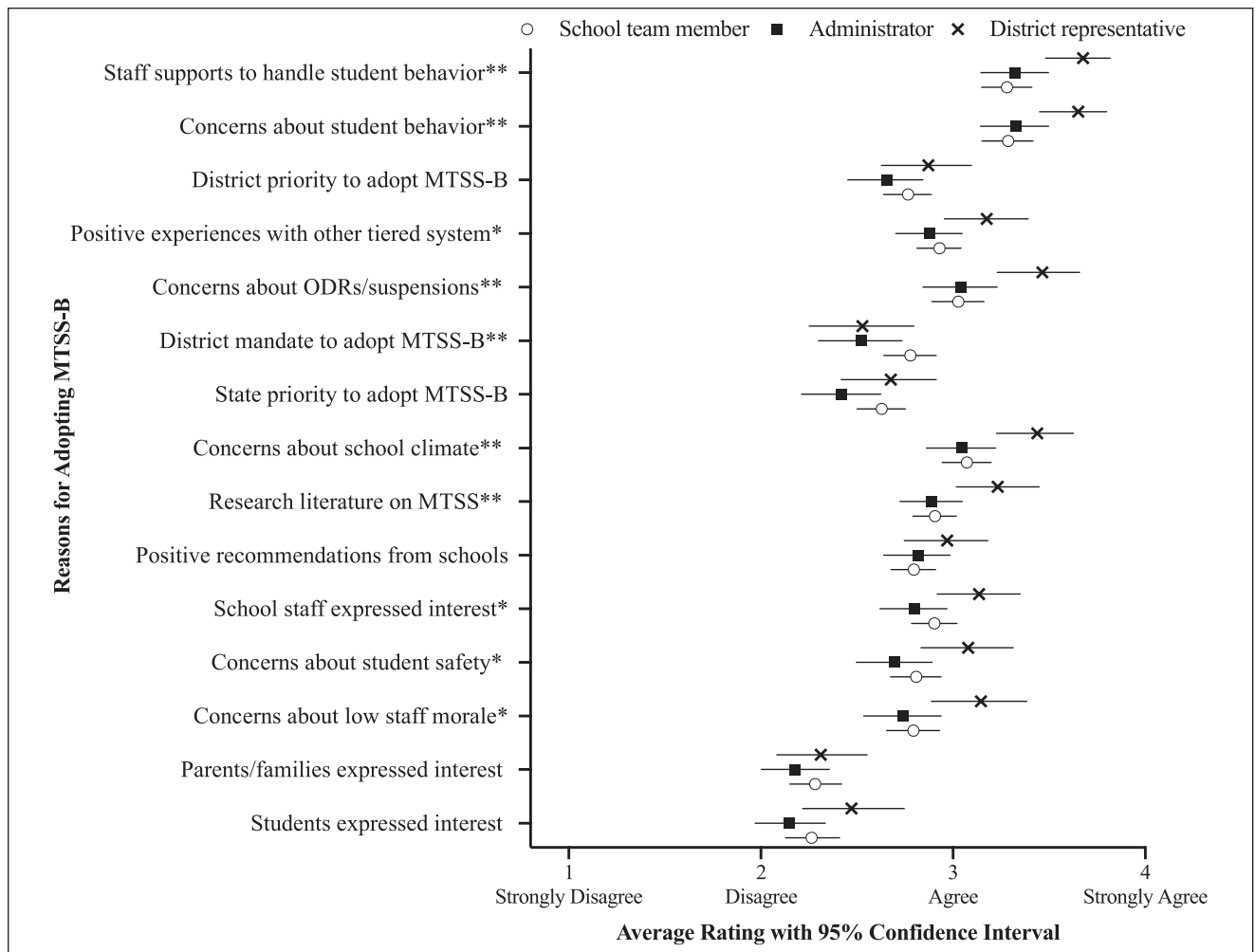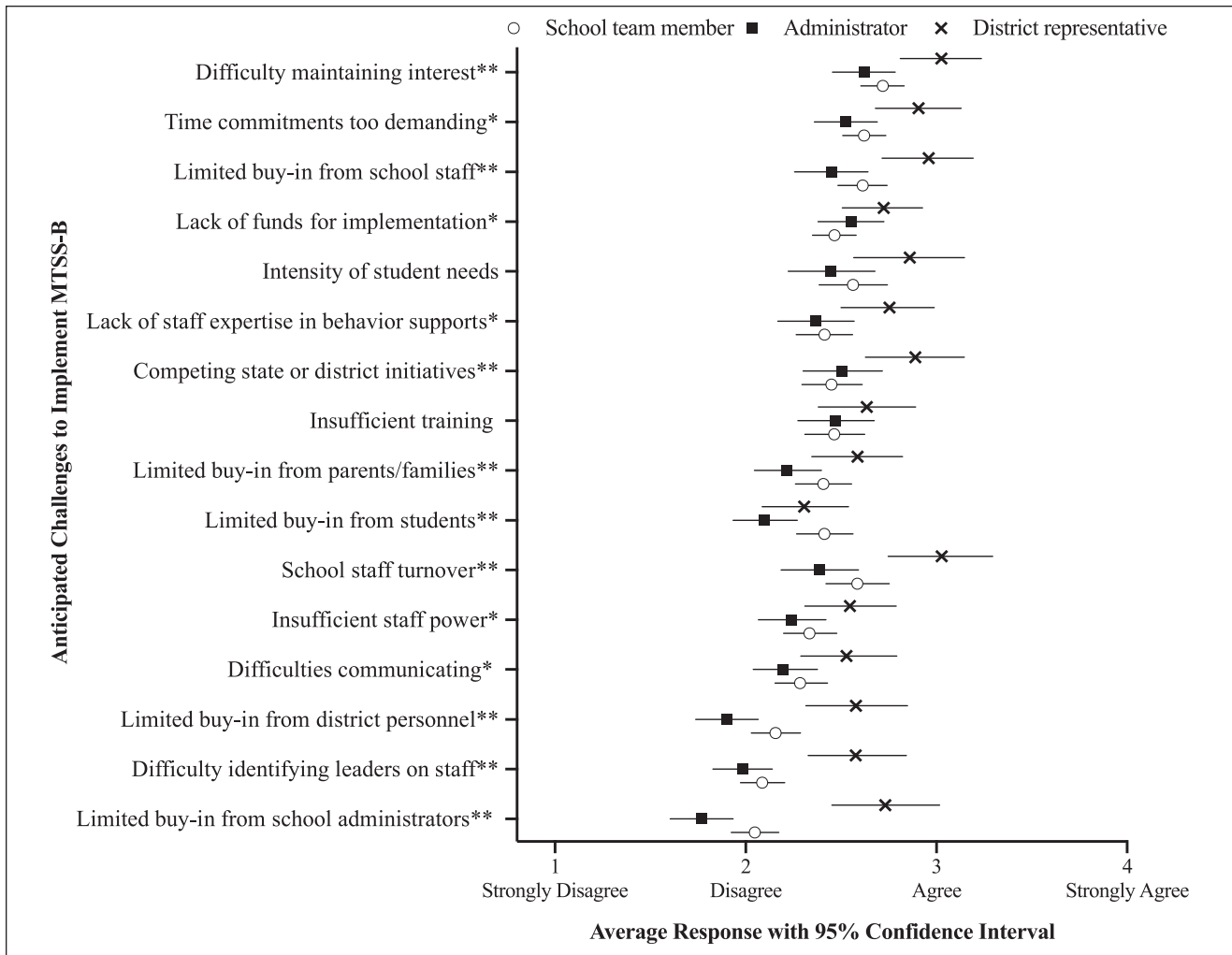
Figure 1. Average ratings of adoption reasons by stakeholder group.
Note. Asterisks indicate statistically significant differences among groups at $p < .05$ (*) and $p < .01$ (**). MTSS-B = multi-tiered systems of support for behavior; ODRs = Office discipline referrals.

listed reasons (see asterisks indicating the level of significance). As shown in Figure 1, these differences appear to be driven primarily by higher ratings of agreement from district representatives relative to school team members and administrators. In fact, district representatives showed higher levels of agreement for all but one of the listed reasons (*District mandate to adopt MTSS-B* was the single exception). Differences were particularly pronounced with respect to participants' concerns about school climate, student behavior, the number of office discipline referrals and suspensions, and the need for supports to handle student behavior.

What Challenges Did They Anticipate Encountering When Implementing MTSS-B?

Table 2 displays ratings of anticipated challenges across stakeholder groups. Ratings of the agreement were lower in this section (*M* range, 1.95–2.69) relative to the preceding

section on reasons to adopt MTSS-B. The challenges for which the largest percentages of participants *agreed* or *strongly agreed* they would be likely to encounter were as follows: difficulty maintaining interest or commitment over time (63.45%), time commitments will be too demanding (56.13%), limited buy-in from school staff (56.32%), and lack of funds for implementation (54.11%). The factors least often considered to be likely challenges were limited buy-in from district personnel (20.87%), limited buy-in from school administrators (17.91%), and difficulty identifying strong leaders on staff to facilitate implementation (17.39%). Few respondents entered additional challenges for the open-ended question. Administrators added context for challenges already listed, such as limited buy-in from staff and students (e.g., getting bus drivers and cafeteria staff on board, finding effective incentives for middle schoolers). One district representative anticipated challenges with the initial roll-out.

Figure 2. Average ratings of anticipated challenges by stakeholder group.
Note. Asterisks indicate statistically significant differences among groups at $p < .05$ (*) and $p < .01$ (**).

Figure 2 depicts mean ratings with 95% confidence intervals by stakeholder group. Significant differences in mean ratings by stakeholder group were identified for 14 of the 16 listed challenges (see asterisks indicating the level of significance). These differences also appear to be driven primarily by district representatives indicating higher levels of agreement relative to school administrators and team members. In fact, district representatives showed higher mean levels of agreement for all but one of the listed challenges (*Limited buy-in from students* was the single exception). These differences were particularly pronounced for the following anticipated challenges: school staff turnover, limited district buy-in, limited administrator buy-in, and difficulty identifying strong leaders on staff to support implementation. In addition, relative to administrators, school team members showed higher levels of agreement with several anticipated challenges, including those related to buy-in across multiple stakeholders and staff turnover.

What Outcomes Did They Expect MTSS-B to Have?

Table 3 displays ratings of the expected impact of implementing MTSS-B across stakeholder groups (*M* range, 2.92–3.30). More than 90% of the participants *agreed* or *strongly agreed* with 17 of the 19 listed outcomes. The two outcomes with the lowest ratings were improved student attendance (85.76%) and increased community members' involvement and improved relationships with community members (81.73%). Few respondents entered additional impacts for the open-ended question. Most responses added context to already listed impacts. One administrator specifically indicated equity as an additional potential impact.

Figure 3 depicts mean ratings with 95% confidence intervals by stakeholder group. Despite the high levels of agreement across items, significant differences in mean ratings by stakeholder group were identified for 18 of the 19
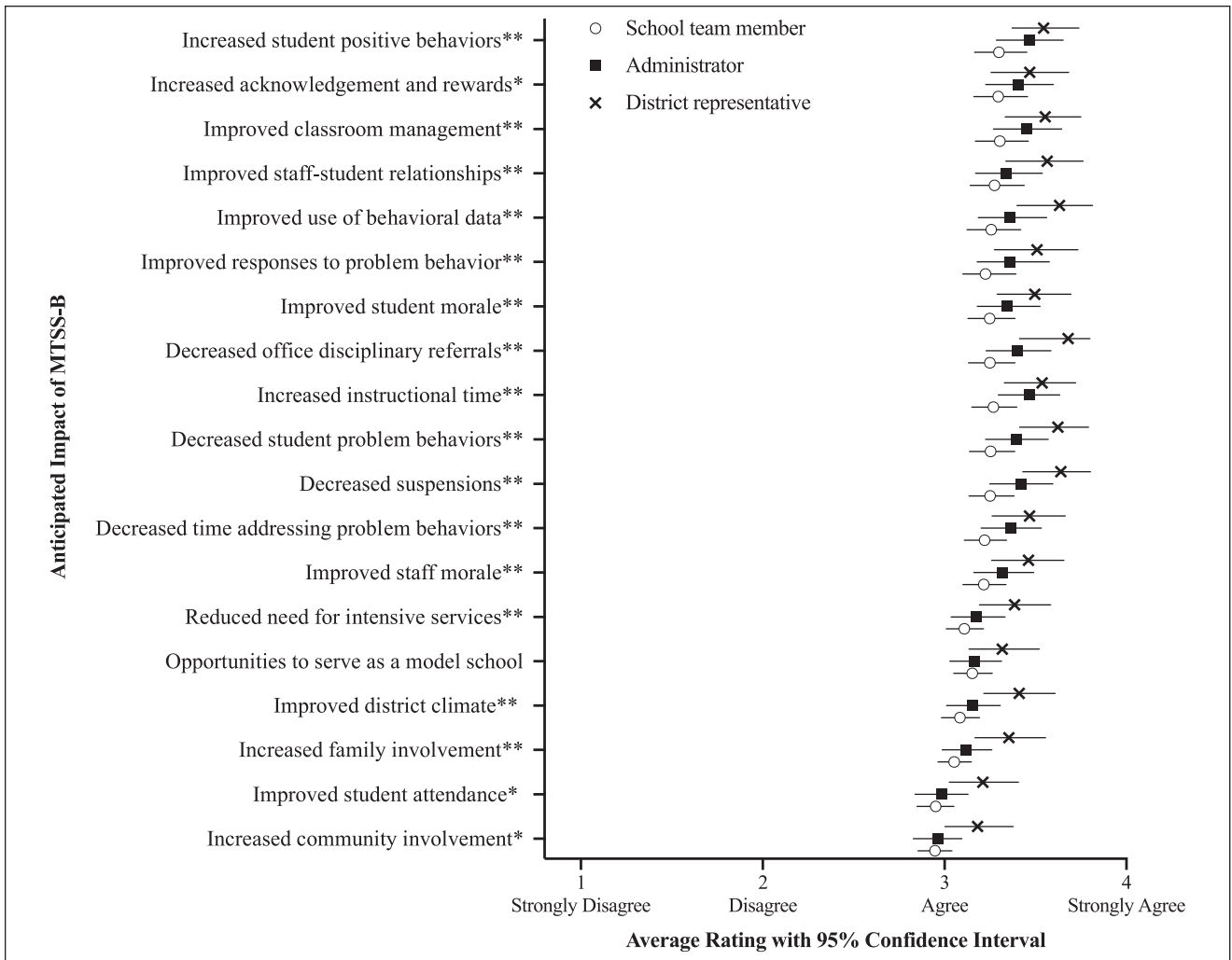
Figure 3. Average ratings of anticipated impact by stakeholder group.
Note. Asterisks indicate statistically significant differences among groups at $p < .05$ (*) and $p < .01$ (**).

listed outcomes. Across items, mean ratings of the agreement were consistently higher for district representatives relative to school administrators and were higher for school administrators relative to school team members.

Discussion

A growing number of schools are adopting schoolwide, multitiered systems of support to address the behavioral needs of students. Yet little is known about the perspectives that educators bring to this important endeavor. This study examined the views of educators as they were initiating MTSS-B in their schools and districts. Our results extend the current literature by informing stakeholder perspectives at the point of initial MTSS-B adoption—a particularly critical window in which technical assistance providers can influence the trajectory of school and district implementation. Our results

also inform differences in views among key stakeholder groups, which had yet to be explored across districts. We highlight three main findings.

First, the reasons district and school stakeholders identified as most compelling in their decision to adopt MTSS-B were concerns about student behaviors and the need for teacher and staff support to address them. This is consistent with a primary goal of MTSS-B, which is to reduce student behavior problems by changing the way school staff interact with students and respond to their problem behavior (Bradshaw et al., 2012; Sugai & Horner, 2009). An additional reason considered to be highly influential was a district priority to adopt MTSS-B. Not surprisingly, district-wide support has been identified as a key predictor of successful implementation and maintenance of MTSS-B (Kincaid et al., 2007; McIntosh et al., 2018). Relative to school administrators and school team members, district

representatives agreed more strongly with these top reasons as well as a variety of other listed reasons to adopt MTSS-B. These differences may reflect district leaders' increased awareness of concerns across schools relative to administrators and school team members who are primarily focused on the needs of a single school. Overall, our results also showed that education stakeholders affirmed multiple reasons for adopting MTSS-B, suggesting a confluence of factors leads districts and schools to adopt these frameworks.

Second, the challenges district and school stakeholders most anticipated when implementing MTSS-B related to securing school staff buy-in, maintaining staff interest over time, and the availability of resources (e.g., time commitments, funding). These data are consistent with previous studies indicating staff buy-in and support as the most commonly experienced barrier to MTSS-B implementation (Kincaid et al., 2007; Lohrmann et al., 2008). However, comparisons among the three stakeholder groups suggest these concerns were held more strongly by district representatives. Relative to administrators and school team members, district representatives expressed stronger agreement with these and other anticipated challenges, which may reflect their previous experiences navigating challenges of other district-wide initiatives. Interestingly, some of the largest differences in mean ratings of the agreement were between school administrators and district representatives and related to factors that have been shown to predict MTSS-B implementation and sustainability. For example, unlike district representatives, administrators largely disagreed that buy-in from school administrators or district personnel would be an issue; nor were they concerned about identifying strong leaders on staff to support MTSS-B implementation.

Third, participants expected MTSS-B to positively impact an array of outcomes for their schools and districts. Indeed, all of the potential outcomes were affirmed by the large majority of educators. These high levels of agreement were not surprising, as they represent views of school and district staff who had already decided to pursue MTSS-B. Although mean agreement by district representatives was consistently higher than administrators and school team members, the vast majority of participants agreed or strongly agreed that all listed areas would be positively impacted by MTSS-B. These patterns suggest a strong degree of buy-in across these stakeholders at the outset of planning for MTSS-B implementation as well as high expectations across a range of outcomes. Whether these outcomes come to pass, of course, remains to be seen, and many depend on the consistency and quality of MTSS-B implementation.

Implications for Technical Assistance

Our findings have several practical implications for technical assistance providers as they support schools and districts in the initial phases of adopting these evidence-based frameworks. First, technical assistance teams should focus on establishing buy-in at the district level when recruiting school partners. A district's priority to adopt MTSS-B ranked highly among reasons that were influential in the initial decision to implement these frameworks, and district leadership has been identified as a critical factor in supporting the early implementation of MTSS-B (George et al., 2018; Horner & Sugai, 2015; Office of Special Education Programs Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2015). Second, rather than trying to apply a one-size-fits-all approach to MTSS-B, technical assistance teams should take steps to identify and understand districts' and schools' unique motivations to adopt these frameworks as well as their most anticipated challenges of implementation. Soliciting this input offers opportunities for technical assistance providers to identify which components of MTSS-B should be prioritized, allocate resources accordingly, and take proactive steps to minimize the impact of anticipated barriers. Third, technical assistance teams should engage in open and direct discussion with leadership teams with respect to setting realistic expectations for MTSS-B outcomes, including what it will take to get there (e.g., time, effort, and resource allocation). The high levels of agreement school stakeholders expressed across a wide range of potential outcomes signaled strong buy-in at the outset of training. However, if such high expectations are encouraged without acknowledging expected timeframes for these outcomes or the potential for achieving positive results in some areas but not others, technical assistance teams might jeopardize their alliance with district and school partners. Rather, technical assistance providers should support leadership teams to align their effort and resource allocation with the primary concerns that motivated the decision to adopt MTSS-B. As our team continues to support districts and schools across Tennessee, we are increasing the amount of time spent with district representatives prior to initial Tier 1 trainings to inform our training approach. For example, district leadership feedback helps us identify schools to prioritize in recruitment, align MTSS-B content with other ongoing district initiatives, and plan coaching supports for school and district leadership teams.

Limitations

Our results should be interpreted with the following limitations in mind. First, these findings reflect the views of stakeholders representing nine districts at a time when the state department of education was strongly encouraging district-wide implementation of MTSS-B and had funded three regional technical assistance projects to support interested districts with implementation. Although many other state departments of education actively endorse and support MTSS-B technical assistance projects, the views of school

and district stakeholders described in this study may differ from those in other states with distinct histories of state endorsement or models of technical assistance. Moreover, the views expressed in this study likely represent school and district stakeholders with greater buy-in to MTSS-B than others in their districts who were not part of leading these efforts. Thus, patterns described in this study may not represent other school and district stakeholders who did not self-select or who were not invited to serve on a school or district leadership team.

Second, we opted to control for the potential effect of the district on stakeholder views rather than explore what factors might explain such district effects. In future studies, district- or school-level factors (e.g., baseline fidelity measures, demographics, academic, or behavioral data) might be included to better understand their influence on stakeholder views at critical stages in MTSS-B adoption and implementation. Third, responses to survey questions may have been influenced by participant-level factors we did not control for, such as knowledge and previous experience with MTSS-B. Although similar percentages of school team members and administrators (78–79%) reported having previous experience with MTSS, nearly all district representatives reported having previous experience, which might have contributed to their higher agreement ratings. Similarly, while most participants were involved in early discussions on the need for MTSS-B in their school or district, there was likely variability within and between stakeholder groups with respect to the types and sources of information they accessed. Thus, stakeholder ratings of factors influencing decisions to adopt MTSS-B should be interpreted as reflecting individual perspectives.

Fourth, due to the nature of the stakeholder groups, the number of participating school team members far exceeded the number of school administrators and district representatives. As reflected by the 95% confidence intervals in Figures 1–3, the mean ratings of agreement for administrators and district representatives were less precise than those for school team members. The large number of items for which statistically significant differences were identified among groups, however, suggests these differences were not merely due to chance. Finally, we designed an original survey instrument to directly address our research questions; the psychometric properties of the survey are unknown. However, our reporting of findings at the item level, coupled with our process for generating items to promote face and content validity, suggests these descriptive data adequately reflect stakeholder views on aspects of adopting MTSS-B.

Conclusion

The momentum behind proactive approaches to discipline and tiered frameworks of behavioral support continues to grow across the country. Still, the majority of schools in the United States have yet to adopt these evidence-based frameworks. Technical assistance providers are uniquely positioned to solicit input from the schools and districts they support on reasons why they decided to adopt these frameworks, initial concerns about implementation, and what they hope to gain. This feedback from early adopters not only has the potential to inform strategies that support implementation for individual schools and districts but also may shed light on tactics to engage and recruit other districts in need of multitiered systems of support.

ORCID iDs

Blair P. Lloyd [iD] https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9444-7230
Erik W. Carter [iD] https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7153-2782

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