

Calvert County Public Schools Blueprint Exploration Study

Spotlight Practices Brief

Exploring how to use the Blueprint for Maryland's Future to accelerate improvement and systemic change

Four Stories from Calvert County Public Schools

November 2025

This Spotlight Practices Brief provides case narratives describing how four schools are organized to improve teaching and learning, focusing on collaborative teaming structures, leadership and teacher roles, and multi-tiered systems of support. The Brief intends to inform district-level planning and implementation of Blueprint policies.

Authors:

Brett Lane, INSTLL

Review and factual check provided by:

Principal Eric Ruffo, Huntingtown Elementary School

Principal Joe Sampson III, Mill Creek Middle School

Principal Rebecca Bowen, Calvert Middle School

Principal Ryan Crowley, Southern Middle School

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Table of Contents

The Practice Brief is divided into several sections that can be used together or separately.

Introduction to the Blueprint Exploration Study	1
By the Numbers: School demographics and academic data	2
Executive Summary: Exemplars and Examples of Teacher Collaboration, Teacher and Leadership Practices, and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support	3
Huntingtown Elementary School Case Narrative	9
Calvert Middle School Case Narrative	17
Mill Creek Middle School Case Narrative	23
Southern Middle School Case Narrative	29

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Huntingtown Elementary School	Eric Ruffo, Principal Alkeisha Williams, Assistant Principal Grade Level Teachers and Special Educators; Grades 1, 2, 4, 5
Calvert Middle School	Rebecca Bowen, Principal Chandra Fleet, Assistant Principal Grade Level Teachers and Special Educators; Grades 6, 7, 8
Mill Creek Middle School	Dr. Joe Sampson, III, Principal Matthew Deegan, Assistant Principal Madeleine Tucker, Dean of Students Grade Level Teachers and Special Educators; Grades 6, 7, 8
Southern Middle School	Ryan Crowley, Principal Willanette Lohr, Assistant Principal Cassidy Miller, Teacher William Patton, Teacher – Special Education Lisa Yankanich, Literacy Coach

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Introduction to the Blueprint Exploration Study

Rationale. In the Spring of 2024, Calvert County Public School leadership was considering how to implement and leverage the Blueprint for Maryland’s Future. Key policy levers, such as expanding collaborative time for teachers, creating professional learning to support teachers and teacher leaders, and ramping up multi-tiered systems of support, were being explored by district leaders and school principals. Conceptually, these policy levers were seen as important and valuable. Pragmatically, leadership had questions and concerns about how to align—and leverage—Blueprint implementation with the district’s strategic plan and best practices already in use in schools and classrooms.

Together, we considered ways to document and learn about existing best practices in schools, among leaders and teachers. We endeavored to access the expertise and knowledge of school-based practitioners, to learn about and then explore how to deliberately expand practices that demonstrated promise. District leaders were also eager to identify potential challenges, areas for improvement, or strengths that might limit or reinforce the impact of Blueprint policies. We invited four schools—one elementary school and three middle schools—to participate in this study to learn how they were organized and using learning opportunities to improve teaching and learning.

The Goals of the Blueprint Exploration Study were to: (1) document models and exemplars of teaming structures, leadership and teacher roles, professional learning, and tiered systems of support that leverage the career ladder and that meets adult and students’ needs—to inform district-level planning and implementation of Blueprint policies and (2) inform, support, and enhance school-based implementation of teaming structures, leadership, and processes that support instructional improvement and tiered/individualized support for students.

Support and Documentation. In addition to participating in planned district professional development, each school partnered with Brett Lane, Calvert County’s Blueprint Strategic Facilitator, to document how their schools were structured and organized to provide high-quality instruction. A collaborative research approach was used, to articulate the theory of action each school was employing and to carefully document how key strategies were being implemented and adapted. Our approach incorporated improvement science protocols (Bryk et al., 2017)¹ and a case narrative research design. An organizing frameworkⁱ, focused on collaborative teaming, leadership, and improving instruction, was used to guide technical assistance and documentation.

Over the 2024-25 school year, the Strategic Facilitator met with each school four times, conducting interviews with leadership and focus groups with multiple grade-level teams.

What did we learn?

The findings and learnings from this study are shared in this document, through an Executive Summary that highlights emerging best practices, and detailed case narratives for each school. The case narratives provide significant details on how each school is organized to support professional learning and improve teaching and learning.

¹ Bryk, A. S., Gomez, L.M., Grunow, A.G., & LeMahieu, P. G. (2017). Learning to Improve: How America’s Schools Can Get Better at Getting Better.

By the Numbers: School demographics and academic data

Table 1. Selected School Demographics and State Assessment Data

	Enrollment by race/ethnicity ²						Selected Populations - Percentage	
	All	Black	White	Hispanic	Asian	Multi-Race	Low Income	SWD
District	15179	2093	9916	1303	240	1586	31.1%	10.2%
Huntingtown ES	478	31	343	54	*	47	27.0%	15.4%
Calvert MS	617	116	356	56	*	81	37.1%	9.4%
Mill Creek MS	429	65	267	32	*	59	50.2%	11.4%
Southern MS	430	94	269	41	*	52	46.9%	13.1%

The following tables display the percentage of all students scoring proficient on the Maryland Comprehensive Assessment Program (MCAP) assessments, 2024 to 2025.

HES	ELA All Grades (3-5)				Math All Grades		
	Proficient (Level 3 or 4)	Level 2 Pct	Level 1 Pct		Proficient (Level 3 or 4)	Level 2 Pct	Level 1 Pct
2024	75.5	20.2	*		55.4	38.6	6.0
2025	70.4	27.8	*		53.0	40.4	6.5

CMS	ELA All Grades (6-8)				Math All Grades		
	Proficient (Level 3 or 4)	Level 2 Pct	Level 1 Pct		Proficient (Level 3 or 4)	Level 2 Pct	Level 1 Pct
2024	58.2	36.6	5.2		20.9	59.8	19.4
2025	65.5	30.6	*		21.9	56.8	21.3

MCM	ELA All Grades (6-8)				Math All Grades		
	Proficient (Level 3 or 4)	Level 2 Pct	Level 1 Pct		Proficient (Level 3 or 4)	Level 2 Pct	Level 1 Pct
2024	45.1	48.1	6.8		15.4	53.3	31.3
2025	49.3	42.8	7.9		21.0	50.9	28.0

SMS	ELA All Grades (6-8)				Math All Grades		
	Proficient (Level 3 or 4)	Level 2 Pct	Level 1 Pct		Proficient (Level 3 or 4)	Level 2 Pct	Level 1 Pct
2024	37.6	54.9	7.6		9.1	51.1	39.8
2025	41.9	50.2	7.9		12.4	55.0	32.6

² Data on American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, and Native Hawaiian are not included as none of the schools had over 10 students in the student group. In 2025, the district reported 24 American Indian or Alaska Native students, 240 Asian students, and 17 Native Hawaiian students. None of the schools have a multi-lingual population of 5 percent or more.

Executive Summary

The **Blueprint for Maryland's Future** provides districts with the opportunity to use specific policy instruments and additional resources to significantly improve our system of public education. Calvert County leadership asked: how can we leverage this opportunity in our district and for our entire community of students, parents and caregivers, and educators?

Overview. In Spring of 2024, four schools were invited to participate in the Blueprint Exploration Study and share existing best practices regarding collaborative teaming, professional learning, and tiered systems of support. We also asked schools to share challenges and strengths related to specific Blueprint policies.

With this as context, the goals of the *Blueprint Exploration Study* were to: (1) document models and exemplars of teaming structures, leadership and teacher roles, professional learning, and tiered systems of support; and (2) use this information to consider how to meaningfully implement and scale up practices that support instructional improvement and professional learning.

We asked schools to share:

- How are teacher teams organized and structured (e.g., schedules and staffing)?
- What is the content, focus, and purpose of teaming and related collaborative planning time?
- How do administrators and teacher leaders contribute to improvement efforts?
- How do you plan for and provide academic and non-academic support to all students?

Learnings and Best Practices

- **Collaborative Teaming.** Each school is deliberately organizing and supporting teacher collaboration in ways that mirror the intent of the Blueprint and are worthy of continued study and scaling to other schools.
- **Content of Teaming.** Many teacher teams described using semi-structured meeting processes that they find useful, and that are primarily focused on developing effective Tier I instruction and using conversations about students' needs/assets to immediately inform instructional support.
- **Distributed Leadership.** Administrators have a deep understanding of the importance of distributed leadership, illustrated in their actions and teaming structures. Teachers are playing a crucial role in facilitating collaborative time and informing schoolwide decisions; however, teacher leadership often emerges "organically" and appears to be fluid rather than based on formal positions.
- **Core Instruction.** Each school is actively working to support teachers in planning highly effective Tier 1 instruction in inclusion classrooms, that provides differentiated and scaffolded support to all learners. However, there are differences in how teachers understand this expectation and use their planning time, including support from special educators, to develop lessons and instruction.
- **Tiered systems of support via Flex Time.** Schools have ~20 to 30 minutes dedicated to Flex Time, which provides time for students to receive targeted interventions and additional academic support or enrichment. Teachers described a variety of ways that they are using this time, many which are potentially innovative and worthy of additional documentation and study.

Learnings and Best Practices

The emerging best practices are interrelated and best understood as a system of practices, actions, and ways of working that work together in tandem. Each case narrative provides substantial detail regarding school-specific implementation of teaming practices.

Collaborative Teaming and the Content of Teaming

Collaborative teaming. Administrators and teachers described having well-established and generally high-functioning teacher and leadership teams. All teachers articulated the value and importance of teamwork, and nearly all described using their collaboration time³ and their individual preparation time to work together, share resources, work on lessons (often with special educators), and to strategize support for students. **The extent to which teacher collaboration is valued by teachers and supported by administrators cannot be overstated. Nationally and statewide, it is unusual for this level of teacher collaboration to exist.**

In two middle schools, cross-content grade-level teachers have common individual prep and a shared collaboration period, described by one principal as “true teaming.” Southern Middle School has organized content-specific teams in English and Math that have daily collaboration time, in addition to overlapping prep periods. Huntingtown Elementary School provides teachers with daily common prep and provides grade-level teams with additional and consecutive collaborative planning periods, once a month. Huntingtown has also worked to improve how PLC time (~25 minutes, each day) might be used for teacher collaboration on schoolwide and teacher-directed interests.

Content and focus of teaming. Nearly all teacher teams described a relatively established schedule for how they used their collaborative time. Specific teaming practices, such as Kid Talk, Parent Conferences, and two days of instructional lesson planning (one supported by a special educator, and one used to apply strategies and refine lessons) have been established⁴ and are reinforced by leadership. However, there are differences in how structured these practices are across teacher teams. For instance, middle school teachers tend to describe certain practices as part of schoolwide expectations, that they have modified to meet the needs of their team or grade. Elementary school teachers describe consistent practices during their 3-day collaborative planning, including an expectation that a special educator participate to support planning.

Considerations

Implement master schedules in all schools that provides content teachers with two “common” collaboration periods, one individual prep and one collaboration. Current middle school models provide a template, and a similar model could be implemented in elementary schools by expanding the PLC time from 25 minutes to 50 minutes.

Codify collaboration “expectations” using the exemplars described here, with the caveats that: (a) teachers should be granted the autonomy to determine how they meet these expectations and (b) collaboration time must be held sacred and proactively supported by leadership, including providing staffing and resources.

³ Collaboration time is a period when teachers are required to work together. Individual prep is time that teachers may use independently and at their discretion. Often, teachers choose to use individual prep to work together collaboratively.

⁴ Teaming practices and expectations appear to stem from principals’ expectations that have been codified and are now routine practices, known by all teachers. It is unclear if there are explicit district expectations for teaming.

Distributed Leadership

Across schools, principals and leaders are enacting a clear and intentional shift toward **distributed leadership**, emphasizing collaboration, relational trust, and teacher empowerment. Principals and leadership teams have established structures that balance defined autonomy with accountability, ensuring that teachers have ownership of instructional planning and decision-making while maintaining alignment with school and district priorities.

Common themes and leadership actions that have contributed to effective teaming and instructional improvement include the following:

1. **Establishing clear expectations for how collaborative and common planning time are used**—anchored in shared protocols, roles, and outcomes—while preserving flexibility for teams to adapt based on student needs. As a first step, leadership prioritizes teaming and collaboration and ensures that the schedule allows for dedicated teaming (e.g., a team that is stable, and includes a special educator and access to administrators and guidance). Then, leadership establishes and reinforces expectations and proactively monitors and supports teacher collaboration time while ensuring that teachers feel that this time is valuable and useful.
2. **Intentionally building teacher leadership and capacity** by identifying, inviting, and developing teacher leaders within grade-level and content teams. Emerging teacher leaders might be identified based on their instructional expertise, skill in facilitation and team building, or a desire to think about schoolwide issues. Multiple teachers have opportunities to lead—formally or informally—based on their interests or strengths, whether by facilitating meetings, contributing to committees, or sharing best practices with colleagues.
3. **Establishing relational trust and maintaining “buy-in” for collaboration**, by actively listening to teachers’ needs and responding with resources, support, or changes. Each principal described modifying teaming practices or shifting the content of professional learning in response to teacher feedback. Often, leadership invites teachers to present and/or lead portions of professional learning, lifting teachers’ expertise and building relational trust among the entire professional staff.
4. **Ensuring clear communication and accountability** by reinforcing norms for collaboration, clarifying roles and lines of communication, and ensuring follow-through on initiatives even during transitions or shifts in staffing.
5. **Supporting and facilitating the use of structured, data-driven collaboration and planning.** Leaders have integrated formal data discussions into collaborative planning to examine assessment results, monitor progress, and inform instructional groupings and Flex Time planning.

Considerations

Leadership Teams: Consider the pros and cons of school-based autonomy to organize leadership teams. Although principals have established Leadership Teams that are used to guide and inform improvement efforts, there are variations in how these teams are organized and whether they align with the district’s MTSS teaming model.

Assistant Principals: Consider ways to expand the role of assistant principals as instructional leaders.

Teacher Leaders: Consider policies that will allow for the flexible rotation of NBC teachers and potential Level 4 Lead Teachers who may have leadership roles in schools.

The growing use of data is evident in both team-level planning and in how leadership teams progress monitoring school improvement actions and goals.

Improving Core Instruction

Leaders and teachers are actively working to improve and refine core instruction. Professional development provided by district specialists and teachers’ collaborative planning are the key structures used to strengthen the coherence and quality of Tier I (core) instruction. Teachers also described positive adherence to district curricula and programming. Nearly all teachers described working with colleagues to refine lessons, develop scaffolds and differentiate instructional strategies, and to address the needs of all students—specifically, there are exemplary models of instructional planning in each school we visited, that represent best practices that can be modeled and expanded. Many teachers noted that special educators play a critical role as instructional partners, contributing expertise in specially designed instruction (SDI) and helping teachers differentiate instruction to meet the needs of all students, not just those identified for special education. Additionally, some leaders noted that shared training through SDI modules has supported teachers’ ability to differentiate instruction for all students, evident in how teachers are planning daily lessons.

Efforts to continuously improve core instruction is linked to the district’s commitment to inclusive education vis-a-vis natural proportions⁵. Recognizing that much progress has been made, leadership noted that they are still working to ensure that all teachers possess the knowledge and confidence to deliver differentiated, high-quality instruction to all students, even when a special educator is not present. In a few instances, teachers may rely on “interventions” to provide academic support to students in ways that echo past routines or beliefs—namely, that access to certain interventions, tutoring, or planning for academic support is contingent on a student being referred to be evaluated or identified for special education services.

Considerations

Continue to support and emphasize collaborative planning for inclusive education by aligning schedules to maximize co-planning and by reinforcing teachers’ ongoing efforts to differentiate instruction for all students.

Review district and school routines for identifying students performing below grade level or needing additional academic support to ensure that tiered interventions/supports (in Tier I, Tier 2, and Tier 3) are implemented and monitored before initiating a referral for a special education evaluation.

Tiered Systems of Support via Flex Time

Calvert County middle and elementary schools use designated Flex time to provide students with additional academic support, enrichment, and targeted interventions. The four schools in this study allocate ~20 to 30 minutes to Flex Time and are using this time in innovative ways that are worthy of additional study. The three middle schools use a combined Advisory/Student support period (60 or 50 minutes) that could be considered part of the 40 percent of non-teaching time required by the Blueprint.

The table on the following page compares how the three middle schools are using the Advisory/Student support period. Across middle schools, there is an opportunity to improve the focus and intensity of

⁵ The principle of Natural Proportions means the inclusion of children with disabilities in proportion to their presence in the general population. In schools, this means that students identified for special education are, when feasible, represented equally across classrooms.

academic support provided to students, as well as integrate student goal setting that could meet the student learning plan/career planning required in the Blueprint.

Table 1. How are Middle Schools operationalizing Advisory and Student Support Flex Time

Feature	Calvert Middle School	Mill Creek Middle School	Southern Middle School
Overall structure and schedule	Daily 60-minute block divided into two 30-minute periods: Advisory and Student Support.		Single 50-minute Advisory period combining SEL and academic/enrichment support.
Advisory focus	Character education, habits of mind, and goal setting; lessons developed by teachers, student-led in some cases.	SEL and Character Strong curriculum, MAP testing, project-based learning, and writing; variable implementation.	SEL and Character Strong curriculum, followed by flexible academic support or enrichment.
Student Support: Structure	Structured rotation: students rotate and meet with each content teacher once weekly. Flexible model that allows movement based on student need or teacher recommendation.	Structured rotation: students rotate and meet with each content teacher once weekly. Less flexible model; students generally rotate to each content teacher as designed.	No structured rotation: Students generally stay with their advisory teacher. Teachers have developed clubs and enrichments.
Student Support: Academic supports and interventions	Used by students to review goals, grades, and work on assignments. Students flex to content teachers to receive additional support. Time for formal interventions	Used as an extension of core instruction; to complete assignments or a project, to make up tests; some individual support. Time for formal interventions.	Some students flex to receive interventions or support in math and literacy; short-term grouping based on data. Coordinated by MTSS leadership team and separated Academic and Behavioral Health teams.
How are teachers planning for student support time? How is data used to inform student support time?	Grade-level teams plan and adjust support based on data and student needs; flexible scheduling allows for quick adjustments.	Grade-level teams vary in how they use data to inform support time; data use is teacher-specific, some use for targeted instruction or to guide general academic catch-up.	MTSS Leadership Team and committees coordinate data use, interventions, and staff development.

The following case narratives provide significant details on how each school is organized to support professional learning and improve teaching and learning.

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Huntingtown Elementary School

Introduction and Context

Huntingtown Elementary School is a small- to mid-sized elementary school (~478 students in grades PreK - 5) with 35 full-time teachers (including 4 special educators), of which twelve (12) have over 20 years of experience and eight (8) have 5 or less years of experience (2025 Staff Data, MSDE). The school has a relatively stable and established staff and is led by a principal with over 35 years of experience. The school serves a diverse student population⁶ that mirrors the district's overall student demographics.

Invitation to participate in the Blueprint Exploration Study. At the suggestion of district leadership, Huntingtown Elementary School was identified as a school that was actively exploring ways to leverage teacher collaboration, including leaders and teaming structures. As a school that might provide lessons and experience to inform district leaders' thinking about Blueprint implementation, Principal Ruffo was invited to be part of the Blueprint Pilot Study and upon accepting the invitation, we began our work together in fall 2024.

Context – What was Huntingtown Elementary School working on?

During our initial conversation, Principal Ruffo articulated interrelated problems of practice and goals that the school was working on to address.

Academically, school leadership and teachers were exploring how to improve students' academic achievement in Math and specifically, how to improve teachers' ability to effectively differentiate instruction, particularly in Math. Key strategies included an emphasis on student engagement, differentiated instruction through targeted small groups, and data-driven progress monitoring practices and interventions.

Organizationally, leadership was exploring how to continue to build teacher and leadership capacity to improve teaming practices and instructional improvement. Based on research, leadership was working to build a cohort of in-school teachers as hybrid "instructional coaches" who could continue to teach while also supporting other teachers and grade-level team on teaming practices, instructional differentiation, and progress monitoring.

Drivers. Leadership hypothesized that if professional learning opportunities were more focused, teachers had the skills to more deliberately use data to identify students' needs, and if teachers became experts in adapting and adjusting their instruction (e.g., not relying solely on the "workbook"), then all students would receive differentiated core instruction and targeted Flex Time instruction.

Key strategies included increased Math Block time, restructured professional learning opportunities, instructional walkthroughs, and proactive coaching and supervisor support to all teachers. Providing teachers with voice and listening to teacher input was an underlying theme that provided a foundation for all leadership actions.

The following pages summarize how leadership moved forward with innovative leadership and teaming structures, within the context of anticipated Blueprint policies and ongoing district initiatives. What did we learn?

⁶ 2024 Data: 72 percent White; 6 percent Black; 11 percent Hispanic; 10 percent two or more. Huntingtown Elementary School serves a slightly higher percentage of White students compared to the district average (65%).

Teacher Teaming Structures

How are teacher teams organized and structured (e.g., schedules and staffing)?

The main team structure is the grade-level team. Grade-level teams are comprised of four classroom teachers per grade (except for kindergarten with 3 teachers). Teachers have three dedicated times for working together: (1) daily common prep/planning (non-directed); (2) collaborative planning; and (3) Professional Learning Community (PLCs).

1. **Grade-level teachers have daily common planning**, as their individual prep time.
 - Daily common prep/planning occurs when students go to Related Arts.
2. **Collaborative Planning:** Each month, grade-level teams have three consecutive days of additional collaborative planning (~55 minutes).
 - To arrange collaborative planning, students in a given grade leave their core teacher and return to their Related Arts teacher at 2:45 pm (that is when normal Related Arts block ends). The Related Arts teachers are the mechanism/staffing used to provide the coverage needed for core teachers' collaborative time.
3. **Professional Learning Community (PLC):** All teachers have from 8:10 to 8:35 am (as part of their contractual day), prior to students arriving at 8:35 am.

The overall time for collaborative, non-instructional time:

- Common Planning = 45 m; PLCs = 25m: **~70m daily + 165m (3 collab days per month)**
- Flex Time = **25m**

How are leadership teams organized?

The school has an active set of leadership teams, comprised of a Core Leadership Team, a School Improvement Team, and multiple standing committees.

Core Leadership Team. The Core Leadership Team includes the Principal, the Assistant Principal, the school counselor, and a teacher representative. The Principal and Assistant principal meet daily. The Assistant Principal is primarily responsible for managing IEP and special education, as well as running SST meetings and testing. Huntingtown does not have a dean (which is different from other elementary schools), which would allow the Assistant Principal more time to serve as an instructional leader. Leaders work with the Counselor (~weekly, if not more) and collaborate with district instructional specialists to plan professional development and address ongoing work.

School Improvement Team. A representative school improvement team, comprised of administrators, the school counselor, and grade-level representatives, meets ~every other month. Standing teams/committees include ILT, HCIE, PBIS, Equity, SST, Behavioral Health, and 504 and IEP. The school improvement team developed a 90-day action plan based on an analysis of multiple data sets and regularly reviews data and progress in relation to their 90-day Action Plan, to make updates and set goals. The 90-day planning structure is new this year and is working well. For instance, grade-level teams make goals based on schoolwide goals, which often filter down to teachers setting classroom goals (with their students). Leadership noted that the Action Plan is “more relevant” than previous planning processes.

Teaming Content and Focus

What is the content, focus, and purpose of teaming and related collaborative planning time?

Daily common planning (Teachers' individual prep). Each grade level has a common, individually directed prep that includes access to a special educator, typically 2 or 3 days a week. School leadership stressed that teachers have autonomy to use this time as needed, as their individual prep. Ideally, each grade-level is encouraged to use one day of common planning to work together as a team, with the special educator, to review and/or plan consistent lessons (e.g., to look at their week in a glance, or a couple of weeks out). Teams have access to voluntary protocols and tools, such as a 15-minute planner (from their work on inclusive practices) to guide this conversation. As described below, teachers are using common planning time effectively and collaboratively, often meeting multiple times per week to think about and formally align and plan lessons.

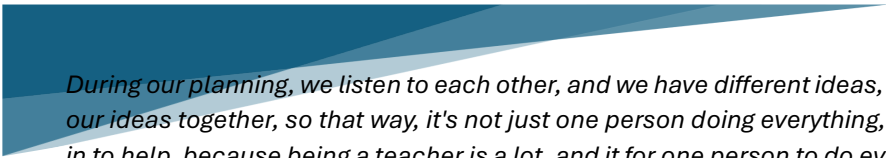
The 5th grade team has a relatively formal schedule for working with their special educator during daily planning. As the grade is partially departmentalized, the ELA and Social Studies teachers meet with the special educator once a week, as do the Math and Science teachers (after school). Scheduling formal time with the special educator is seen as necessary—it's what we need to do—to make sure that lessons include accommodations for students identified for special education and to differentiate instruction for students with different skills. These meetings are structured to start with teachers reviewing the standard that is being taught in upcoming lessons and then determining resources and scaffolds (often using HQIM materials, e.g., i-Ready resources). Instructionally, teachers collaborate to scaffolding lessons by creating "mini anchor charts," adjusting slides and activities, and making sure students have reference materials.

The 4th grade teachers meet during their daily common planning time approximately 4 times a week, to ensure that they "are on the same page" with instruction strategize on how to support student behavior and other needs or concerns. Two of the 4th grade teachers share a large classroom, allowing for flexible grouping of students across the two classrooms and small group tutoring. The team described the importance of having "very cohesive" and similar academic expectations and practices regarding classroom management and student behavior. One 4th grade teacher uses this time to meet with a special educator, focusing on differentiation and scaffolding for students.

The 2nd grade teachers described a flexible and informal use of their shared common planning time rather than holding structured, collaborative meetings. They value this time and primarily use it for individual classroom planning, meeting as a full team only occasionally. However, collaboration occurs organically through brief daily check-ins during planning periods, lunch, or between classes, and through a shared text chat used to coordinate lessons and share resources. The team maintains consistent expectations for pacing and regularly exchanges lessons and activities that they have found to be effective. The special educator, who supports one or two classrooms, does not share the same planning period with the 2nd grade team.

The 1st grade teachers described using their common planning time to collaborate frequently (e.g., daily) and flexibly throughout the week. They meet formally and informally—during planning periods, lunch, or through brief check-ins—to align weekly lesson plans, share instructional resources, coordinate pacing, and support one another in addressing student needs. Their collaboration also includes troubleshooting lessons that didn't go as planned, adjusting groupings based on

observations, and preparing logistics for upcoming events. The team works together without a formal lead teacher, leveraging their collective experience (at this school and at other schools) leading to a strong balance of shared expertise. This collaborative approach reduces individual workload, promotes consistency across classrooms, and strengthens their collective ability to respond to student needs.



During our planning, we listen to each other, and we have different ideas, and we usually just try to combine our ideas together, so that way, it's not just one person doing everything, it's a little bit of everybody putting in to help, because being a teacher is a lot, and it for one person to do everything is not possible.

I think that hearing their [other teachers'] ideas helps me become a better teacher, because I can implement what they're saying. I don't have to do exactly what they're saying; I can make it my own for my own kids, because she doesn't have the same students that I have, and their needs are all different. So when we're talking about what the lesson is, I can say what my students' needs are, and I can already tell you, like, this student's gonna need a sentence starter or whatever they're gonna need, and then she has some students that might also need that.

1st grade teacher

Collaborative Planning. In 2023–24, school leadership implemented a three-day consecutive block for collaborative planning, shifting from one meeting per week to a 3-day cycle. During this time, teachers engage in core instructional planning, differentiation (often in collaboration with special educators), planning for Flex Time, and using data to inform instruction. A collaborative planning agenda is provided, which teachers are responsible for completing and uploading to the shared planning folder. Teachers are generally positive about this structure.

One of the three days is administrator-driven and focused on *Kid Talk*, during which teachers analyze academic (e.g., i-Ready) and non-academic data to identify supports, monitor progress, and plan next steps.

The remaining two days are organized by grade-level teams, who have discretion to determine their agenda within established expectations—a type of *defined autonomy*. Special Education teachers are included in one or more of the planning days to inform Tier I lesson planning and specially designed instruction. While teachers are expected to be working on instructional planning, reviewing data, and organizing the use of Flex Time, they do have some autonomy to determine what they are working on, which teachers describe as important.

The 4th and 5th grade teams described a consistent approach to how they use Collaborative Planning: The first day is *Kid Talk*, which involves reviewing academic and non-academic data with administrators and special educators, to inform conversations about specific students and the use of “watch lists” to identify and monitor students in need of support or referral to SST. Days two and three are focused on long range instructional planning, with special educators working with two teachers each day. A portion of day two or three is also used to plan how to use Flex Time to focus on a schoolwide instructional focus or emerging academic needs for students.

Teachers noted that it is important that: (a) the special educator is a part of these meetings, as a partner and source of expertise in instructional planning and (b) the two days allocated for instructional planning

are reserved for and used to focus on lesson planning; in past years some of this time may have been used to provide teachers with training or professional development.

The 1st and 2nd grade teams similarly value their three-day collaborative planning time as an opportunity to meet with administrators, review student data to inform targeted support for students, and to strengthen team communication.

The 1st grade team described having one day dedicated to “Kid Talk,” where teachers and administrators review assessment data and make decisions about student progress, instructional needs, and modifications to Flex groups. The remaining two days emphasize long-range instructional planning, aligning curriculum, selecting resources, and additional time thinking about how to best organize Flex Time. Teachers assign instructional responsibilities for specific student groups, collaborate with literacy and technology specialists as needed, and plan sequencing of interventions and enrichment. This structure helps ensure first-grade students receive timely and coordinated support and that instruction remains aligned across classrooms. **The 2nd grade team** follows the same approach and appreciated having dedicated time to discuss student support, clarify questions directly with administrators, and share resources. However, teachers noted that some of the collaborative time is often taken up by administrative updates and testing logistics, leaving limited opportunity for deeper instructional planning. Despite these challenges, they recognize the importance of this time and are eager to make it more effective by using a more structured agenda with defined time allocations to balance administrative needs with lesson planning, differentiation, and instructional preparation.

Professional Learning Community (Mornings). Teachers participate in a **district-led virtual PLC** once a week (Wednesday or Thursday). On Monday and Tuesday, school leadership sometimes offers a **school-based PLC** for all teachers – teachers may attend one of the two days. Initially, the school-based PLC focused on a schoolwide priority (e.g., classroom management, UDL, 7 Steps to a Language Rich Classroom, often connected to professional development provided during staff development days.

Leadership shifted how the morning PLCs were used, in response to the following challenges and needs. First, leadership identified a clear need to expand school-based professional learning but acknowledged that the current district calendar offers limited dedicated time to support it. Second, leadership endeavored to ensure that professional learning, during the 3-day collaboration planning cycle and the morning PLCs, was focused on school-based and teacher-driven topics.

Leadership then modified the structure and content of morning PLCs to ensure that this time was valuable to teachers, shifting from a top-down model to a more flexible, teacher-driven format. For instance, rather than focusing solely on schoolwide priorities (which continued as core expectations), leadership invited teachers to nominate topics and agenda items that they would like to work on as immediately relevant—pressing issues that could be immediately addressed. Teacher identified topics, such as clarifying the general educator/special educator relationship, and general classroom management, became the focus of subsequent PLC sessions, and teachers led professional development and conversations. When useful, external experts or district supervisors were invited to share information based on teacher input. And special educators have been encouraged to attend PLC sessions, to broaden ownership and understanding of key topics. By inviting teacher input and ensuring the strategic participation of team members, PLC sessions are now more collaborative and relevant.

Leadership Structures, Actions, and Roles related to Teaming and Learning

The Blueprint calls for districts to reexamine traditional leadership roles and responsibilities, including the use of teacher leaders and how to schedule time for teacher collaboration and academic support for students. With this as context, we discussed how leadership (namely, the principal and his team) endeavors to maintain high quality instruction and support teacher teams. We also explored the leadership “actions” that may contribute to effective collaboration, supporting high-quality teaching and learning.

Overall, Principal Ruffo described a leadership approach that is both collaborative and strategic—designed to empower grade-level teams, foster professional growth, and continually improve the school’s instructional practices. Maintaining and improving teachers’ efficacy is paramount, within the context of implementing district curriculum and initiatives. Leadership is also considering how to expand the role of certain teacher leaders (e.g., those with model facilitation and instructional skills), although staffing and scheduling pose significant challenges in creating formal “lead teachers” who would have a reduced teaching load while supporting teacher teams. Similarly, extant roles assigned to administrators pose challenges to build the instructional capacity of leaders and teachers.

Important **leadership actions** that the Principal and Core Leadership team have taken include the following, depicted as key actions that contribute to effective teaming and instructional improvement.

1. **Strengthening teaming through distributed leadership and teacher autonomy.** Teachers’ daily common planning time and the 3-day collaborative planning sessions are key forums for professional learning. Leadership has shared expectations for how these opportunities should be used, while ensuring that teachers have significant autonomy regarding how this time is used and the focus of collaboration teamwork.

During **the 3-day collaborative planning**, the Principal/Assistant Principal or district supervisor leads one of the three collaborative planning days, and then teachers have defined autonomy to use the remaining two days to work on instructional planning, data use, and Flex Time. Although teacher teams do not have a formal “teacher leader,” informal team leaders emerge organically. Roles for collaborative planning meetings are established (e.g., facilitator, note taker, timekeeper). The principal’s goal is for each team to have a team leader/facilitator with training in *instructional coaching*, who helps to lead, support, and coordinate these meetings.

During teachers’ **common planning**, leadership provided informal expectations for how this time may be used, and teachers noted that leadership is responsive to grade-level requests, needs, and instructional resources.

2. **Implementing district initiatives.** Leadership ensured that all teachers completed the Specially Designed Instruction (SDI) modules. While SDI is primarily focused on developing instruction for students receiving special education, the modules provide a baseline of skills and shared language for instruction and inclusion, which has had a positive impact on teachers’ capacity to develop lessons and instruction that meets the needs of all students. Teachers, collaborating with their special education counterparts, are increasingly engaging in intentional, team-based planning around barriers, solutions, and instructional support for all students.
3. **Promoting data-driven instruction and planning for Flex Time.** Leadership has leveraged collaborative planning—particularly the Kid Talk day—and provides additional support by facilitating formal grade-level data discussions to examine student assessment data and plan for

student grouping and teachers' use of Flex Time. While there is always room for improvement, focusing on assessment data (via the i-Ready assessments) is helping teachers move towards a more routine and strategic use of data.

4. **Responsive and shared leadership.** As noted, leadership refrains from directing how teachers use planning time and instead empowers them to use this time collaboratively and aligned with school and grade-level priorities. Leadership's intentional modification of the morning PLC time to focus on teachers' voiced concerns illustrates how inviting teacher input and feedback can build shared ownership and efficacy so that the content of professional learning is valuable to teachers.
5. **Facilitating teachers' professional learning and targeted training.** In response to teachers' requests and school-wide priorities, leadership invited district specialists and inclusive education staff to support co-teaching and parallel teaching. Leaders also supported special educator participation in planning meetings to maximize their effectiveness while acknowledging their workload. Leaders are actively considering ways to spread instructional expertise (e.g., through walkthroughs, teacher-led professional development, strategic pairing of staff and teachers) within and across grades.

Tiered Supports (MTSS) – Advisory, Flex Periods, and Student Support models

Flex Time, approximately 20 to 25 minutes each day, is the primary source of tiered support, in addition to intentional grouping during core instruction. Flex Time provides dedicated time for identified students to receive targeted interventions (and not miss core instruction) and time for all students to receive additional academic instruction, support, enrichment, and small group tutoring.

For instance, the 5th grade team uses Flex Time to focus on math; teachers have different groups of students based on i-Ready diagnostics and then use a combination of ongoing assessments (formative, quizzes) and suggestions from the Math teacher to monitor progress and inform the instruction provided with their students in Flex Time. The student groups (assigned to teachers) change every ~45 days (estimate) based on data, and to proactively focus on skills that students may need for current or upcoming units.

The 4th grade team described using Flex Time to provide enrichment and support for students, focusing primarily on fluency and reading comprehension. Students generally stay with their teacher during Flex Time (although some may rotate out for targeted interventions); and then students may be grouped within their class depending on needs or enrichment. Teachers described moving to this model to reduce time lost during transitions and that it generally worked better for them, as a grade level.

The 1st and 2nd grade teachers use Flex Time as an intentional and collaborative structure to provide targeted instruction based on student needs. The 2nd grade team described planning lessons together using a modified co-teaching approach, in which teachers deliver similar lessons on consecutive days while students rotate between classrooms. This model allows students to experience varied instructional strategies, reinforce key skills, and benefit from multiple teaching styles. Students are grouped by ability in reading during the first half of the year and in math during the second half, using benchmark data and adjusting groups based on ongoing performance and teacher observations. Similarly, the 1st grade team described using the collaborative planning sessions to analyze data and adjust their "Flex Groups" according to students' skill level and instructional needs. Flex Time includes

teacher-led small-group instruction, collaborative skill-building activities, and one day each week devoted to iPad-based learning. The teachers view Flex Time as a valuable opportunity to differentiate instruction, increase engagement, and ensure all students receive personalized support.

During Flex Time:

- Teachers use flexible grouping, supported by additional aides/teachers; so that students are often in smaller groups, working independently or supported by an educator.
- Most students receive targeted interventions, support, or enrichment based on need. Students may be working on math, literacy, or enrichment activities.
- The focus of support is often determined by the grade-level teachers, student need (e.g., math or literacy), or intentional rotating of Math and Literacy throughout the school year.
- Student groups may be organized by need so that students rotate to other teachers, or students may be organized by need within classrooms.
- Progress monitoring every ~4 weeks, during collaboration time.

Calvert Middle School

Introduction and Context

Calvert Middle School is a mid-sized middle school (~620 students in grades 6 - 8) with 43 full-time teachers (including 6 special educators), of which seventeen (17) have over 20 years of experience and five (5) have 5 or less years of experience (2025 Staff Data, MSDE). The school has a relatively stable and established staff and is led by a principal with over 28 years of experience. The school serves a diverse student population⁷ that mirrors the district's overall student demographics.

Invitation to participate in the Blueprint Exploration Study. At the suggestion of district leadership, Calvert Middle School was identified as a school that utilized sophisticated teaming practices and strategies to support students. As a school that might provide lessons and experience to inform district leaders' thinking about Blueprint implementation, Principal Bowen was invited to be part of the Blueprint Pilot Study. Principal Bowen accepted the invitation, and we began our work together in fall 2024.

Context – What was Calvert Middle School working on?

During our first conversation, Principal Bowen highlighted the strengths of Calvert Middle School and described current improvement efforts. Prior to the 2024-25 school year, Principal Bowen and her leadership team reviewed MCAP state assessment data to identify strengths and areas for improvement. They noted that students' scores on the writing assessment did not correspond with reading assessment data and wondered why there seemed to be a discrepancy between reading and writing scores. Leadership also noted that while students generally performed well on calculation, some seemed to have less success with reasoning and explaining their mathematical thinking.

Leadership and teacher leaders (via the Instructional Leadership Team) used this information to identify potential root causes and identify action steps to improve students' writing, mathematical reasoning, and to build students' ownership of learning. With effective teaming practices already established, the school endeavored to use professional learning, collaborative teaming, and student goal-setting to improve student achievement. Key strategies included:

- Focusing professional development and team meetings on improving writing instruction, including developing common success criteria, vocabulary, and structures across content areas.
- Focusing professional development and support to improve math instruction, particularly around reasoning and explaining thinking, to help close the gaps between calculation and conceptual understanding.
- Streamlining targeted interventions and support during the advisory/student support time to help students improve in areas of weakness, whether that's writing, math reasoning, or other skills.
- Establishing a student goal-setting process, by (1) having students review their own data and set quarterly goals to improve and (2) having teachers meet one-on-one with students to discuss their data and help them set meaningful goals.

⁷ 2024 Data: 58 percent White; 19 percent Black; 10 percent Hispanic; 13 percent two or more.

Teaming Structures

How are teacher teams organized and structured (e.g., schedules and staffing)?

Principal Bowen describes her teaming approach as “True Teaming.” The grade-level team is the primary teaming structure. What makes this “true teaming” is that a grade-level team is comprised of a stable set of core teachers, special educators, and instructional aides that share common planning and prep, ensuring that teachers may consistently work together.

- A grade-level team (in 6th, 7th, and 8th) consists of two English teachers, two social studies teachers, two science teachers, two math teachers, and a dedicated special education teacher. The special education teachers are integrated into the teams and provide support across the content areas. Instructional assistants (IAs) also participate in the team meetings to provide input and support.
- Each grade-level team has two daily and shared non-instructional periods, one for their individual prep and one designated as “Collaborative Planning.”
- Each team has a designated point of contact, usually the special education teacher, who helps facilitate communication and coordinate with related arts teachers.

Teaming Content and Focus

What is the content, focus, and purpose of teaming and related collaborative planning time?

Collaborative Team Planning includes four days of Team Planning and one day allocated for district, supervisor, or administrative conversations. The four days of Team Planning are generally focused on: (1) instructional lesson planning; (2) collaborative planning on a common instructional goal or problem of practice (e.g., improving writing); and (3) student-specific conversations (kid talk) that may inform classroom management, SEL and guidance, and the use of Advisory/Student Support time. One grade level characterized **whole team collaborative time** as the time when teachers collectively discuss the needs of students. Teachers then apply this information (about students’ needs) during their **content-based instructional planning time** to incorporate student-specific instructional strategies into lessons and classroom instruction.

Collaborative Instructional Lesson Planning. The primary purpose of this time (~2 days a week) is for teachers to refine lessons (within their content area) that meet the needs of all students. Teachers spend significant time with special educators planning instruction for all students and for specific students, which may include lesson differentiation, scaffolding, and specially designed instruction in each classroom. Special educators often work with the math and science teachers one day, and with English and history another day. Classrooms use “natural proportions” to ensure that students are equally distributed across all classrooms, ideally scheduling students with similar needs in the same class. Collaborative planning is used to develop and supplement Tier 1 instruction with student-specific scaffolding and differentiation of lessons. The goal of this time is to align instruction and lesson planning, develop common success criteria, ensure consistency of instructional strategies, and to co-develop scaffolds or instructional strategies (including the use of small groups) for specific students.

Example: A grade level Social Studies team described using their Tuesday collaborative time to design a lesson that involved dividing students into three groups, to work on writing an essay. One group was independent, the second group used a graphic organizer with support from a teacher,

and the third group received more hands-on support with organizing ideas, themes, and the writing process. The groups and supports (e.g., the scaffolding provided) were determined based on the needs of all students.

If we didn't have collaborative time we couldn't do this; if you don't know ahead of time where you're doing, and what needs to be modified, then we couldn't plan. When we first started inclusion, we didn't have anything like this (collaboration time). And so this has made a huge difference, and also the support time.

Collaborative Planning on an Instructional Focus. Collaborative planning also provides time for the entire grade-level (cross-content) to work together on a schoolwide instructional priority. For instance, in SY24-25, the school was working on improving writing across the curriculum. Teachers described using this time to discuss best practices in writing, review data, develop or align common approaches to instruction and rubrics (e.g., common language and common expectations), and to develop additional strategies to be incorporated across the grade-level. This time is also used to review student data, which then informs teachers' conversations with individual students during the Advisory/Student Support period.

Collaborative Planning on student solutions (student-focused meetings). During this time (~once a week, also part of the Wednesday conversations with the principal), teachers discuss individual student concerns and strengths and review academic and non-academic student data, to design strategies to support these students. Typically, one Wednesday a month may be used to meet with a district facilitator, one Wednesday is used for administration and/or meetings with the principal, and the other two Wednesdays focus on student-specific concerns, strategies, and progress monitoring. These conversations also involve strategizing for support during the Advisory/Student Support period.

Specific activities include:

- Data Analysis: Teachers review student assessment data, such as MCAP and MAP scores,
- Intervention Planning: Teachers coordinate the targeted interventions and support students will receive during the Advisory/Student Support period.
- Student Support: Teachers discuss individual student needs, share observations, and collaborate on strategies to provide support; and may use this time to meet with individual students.

Leadership Actions and Distributed Leadership

Leadership and teachers articulated key features (e.g., expectations, structures, and ways of working) that they believe are directly related to the overall effectiveness and impact teaming structures. These features are described here as leadership actions that contribute to effective teaming.

1. **Setting expectations and communication to support Collaborative Planning.** The principal and Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) established clear norms and expectations for collaborative planning, including specific outcomes (e.g., developing strong Tier 1 lessons, collaborating with special educators, engaging in productive student-talk). Then, each grade-level team has the autonomy to develop additional norms to guide their work. For instance, norms for student-centered conversations include maintaining focus on students' strengths and challenges and determining solutions rather than linger on "problems."

Structured Meeting Time and Processes: The daily team meetings, with a clear focus on collaborative planning and student support, are a key component of the team structure. Having established norms, agendas, and protocols for these meetings helps ensure they are productive and focused on improving instruction and student outcomes.

Communication. Each team has a point of contact (who may also be part of the instructional leadership team), who is instrumental in facilitating communication among the grade-level, with leadership, and coordinating with related arts teachers.

2. **Maintaining proactive administrative support and oversight:** The principal provides ongoing support to teams, through weekly participation in grade-level team meetings, modeling and facilitating team meetings, and working with the ILT. Proactive support, such as setting and modeling expectations and then providing teachers with autonomy to run their meetings, is crucial in maintaining the integrity of the teaming model. Specifically, the principal meets with each grade-level team once a month to discuss student concerns, provide professional development, and address any curricular or instructional updates. The district supervisors also meet with the teams once a month, focusing on data reviews, curriculum, and other initiatives.
3. **Distributed Leadership and Defined Autonomy.** The grade-level collaborative teams do not have designated “team leads.” The meetings are led, but these teachers have emerged organically in response to the tasks and expectations set by administrators, so that there may be multiple “leads” within a grade who work together to meet teaming expectations; they have “defined autonomy.” The school does have an Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) that includes grade-level and related arts representatives; however, these individuals are not necessarily the “leaders” within their grade-level. Teacher leaders emerge and are encouraged by administrators based on their performance in classrooms, often asked to demonstrate best practices or provide professional development.

“The one thing I learned is you have to give them [Teachers] some professional space. You have to give them some professional courtesy to make judgments, as long as it's in the best interest of a child. Yes, at certain times I may have three different things going on with three different grade levels. But I also know they're getting their job done.”

4. **Establishing and maintaining “buy-in” for collaboration and teaming.** The teaming model requires a strong collaborative culture among the teaching staff. The principal emphasized the importance of getting staff buy-in when first introducing a teaming approach and then taking actions to maintain a shared vision and commitment to the teaming model, to ensure its long-term effectiveness.
5. **Being responsive and flexible to changing conditions.** The ability to adapt the teaming structure to address changing needs, such as adjusting the master schedule or support for related arts teachers, is important. Maintaining a balance between the core teaming structure and the flexibility to meet evolving needs helps to sustain the effectiveness of the model.
6. **Ensuring adequate staffing.** The team structure requires a specific number of teachers per content area to maintain the team configurations. Ensuring the school has the appropriate staffing levels, especially in core content areas, is necessary to sustain the teaming structure utilized by Calvert MS⁸.

⁸ Related arts teachers agreed to teach every period and take their planning during Advisory and Student Support. This ensured that Related Arts teachers received 1 hour of planning daily and an additional 2 hours of planning each week because students only go to their content teachers for Student Support.

Overall, the stability and effectiveness of the "true teaming" structure at Calvert Middle School relies on a combination of adequate resources, a collaborative culture, structured processes, administrative support, and the flexibility to respond to changing circumstances.

Tiered Supports (MTSS), including Advisory and Student Support models

How does the school's teaming structure inform or related to the Advisory/Student support period?

Calvert Middle School's grade-level teaming structure is closely integrated with the school's Advisory and Student Support period. Below is a summary of how they are connected:

Advisory and Student Support. The school has a daily Advisory and Student Support period, which is divided into two 30-minute blocks.

Advisory. During the first 30 minutes, students participate in advisory lessons focused on character education, habits of mind, and career exploration. Teachers have an assigned advisory class roster, and students typically stay with their Advisor the entire year. Advisory lessons were developed by teachers and are delivered in a relatively consistent manner, with teachers having some autonomy to customize the standard lessons. For instance, some teachers noted that Advisory lessons are often "run by students" with direction from the teacher.

[Flexible] Student Support. The second 30 minutes are dedicated to Student Support. Formally, students rotate through each content teacher once per week, on a set schedule so that students meet with each content teacher for one additional period per week. Students use this time to review their academic goals, grades, and to check on assignments for each content class. Students work on assignments and may also receive targeted academic support for their class. This time is also when students may receive specialized interventions.

However, leadership and teachers describe this time as **structured but adaptable**, so that teachers can prioritize individual student learning needs and students may exercise choice in what to work on. For instance, students have the flexibility to go to another content teacher if they need additional support (on certain skills, or to complete missing work). Similarly, teachers can recommend/suggest that students go to another content teacher, based on conversations during teachers' collaborative planning and students immediate learning needs.

As a result, the Student Support period is best characterized as a "**Flexible Support Model**" that allows for personalized and responsive academic support determined by students' needs and choice.

Relationship to Teaming. Overall, the grade-level teaming structure provides the foundation for the school's multi-tiered system of support, with the teams working together to ensure students receive the targeted instruction and interventions they need during the Advisory and Student Support period. The flexible scheduling and collaboration among the team members allows them to be responsive to student needs and adjust the support as necessary.

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Mill Creek Middle School

Introduction and Context

Mill Creek Middle School is a small- to mid-sized middle school (~430 students in grades 6 - 8) with 27 full-time teachers (including 5 special educators), of which ten (10) have over 20 years of experience and five (5) have 5 or less years of experience (2025 Staff Data, MSDE). The school has a relatively stable and established staff and is led by a principal with over 23 years of experience. The school serves a diverse student population⁹ that mirrors the district’s overall student demographics.

Invitation to participate in the Blueprint Exploration Study. At the suggestion of district leadership, Mill Creek Middle School was identified as a school with established teaming practices and a strong cohort of experienced teacher leaders. Principal Joe Sampson III, who had served as the district’s Blueprint Coordinator in 2023-34, became the principal of Mill Creek prior to the start of SY24-25. As a school that might provide lessons and experience to inform district leaders’ thinking about Blueprint implementation, Principal Sampson III was invited to be part of the Blueprint Pilot Study, with the added value being that Principal Sampson III had a deep understanding of Blueprint policies and was eager to apply his experience at the school-level. We began our work together in fall 2024.

Context – What was Mill Creek Middle School working on?

During our first conversation, Principal Sampson III highlighted the strengths of Mill Creek Middle School and described initial thinking regarding areas for improvement and establishing relational trust with school staff. Three related areas for improvement were identified and became the focus of our study; to explore how teacher collaborative time, teacher leadership, and student supports were being used to address these areas for improvement.

1. Academic Focus: How can we improve students’ writing and ability to respond to a writing prompt accurately and effectively?
2. Organizational Focus: How can we improve classroom and hallway management, and student behavior overall?
3. How can we structure collaborative planning in a way that is effective, so that classroom teachers have the skills and resources to provide the academic support that is discussed in planning, and needed by all students?

The underlying premise connecting these strategies is that high-quality and coherent instruction drives student success. As Mill Creek transitions from traditional co-taught inclusion classrooms (e.g., one content teacher and one special educator) to an inclusion model that may not rely on special educators in each class, the challenge is to ensure that all content teachers have the skills to “be that person” who provides instruction (e.g., standards-based, specialized, differentiated) to all students in the classroom without having a special educator present. We explored this challenge by examining how grade-level teams were being used to plan lessons and instruction, building upon special educators’ expertise. We also explored how content teachers were engaging with their content colleagues, to engage in planning specific to their content area.

⁹ 2024 Data: 62 percent White; 15 percent Black; 7 percent Hispanic; 14 percent two or more.

Teaming Structures and Master Schedules

How are teacher teams organized and structured (e.g., schedules and staffing)?

The grade-level team is the primary teaming structure for teachers, organized as 6th, 7th, and 8th grade teams. Each grade-level team consists of ~6 content teachers (English Language Arts, Social Studies, Math, Science), a special education teacher, and Instructional Assistants (IAs). Related Arts teachers are a separate team. Due to staffing and school population, there are four content teachers in each grade, plus one additional content teacher who teaches multiple grades; there are 4 or 5 teachers per content area for the entire school.

- Some content teachers [~5 teachers, in Math, ELA, Science and one Social Studies] teach two grade-levels, which may limit consistent team planning; specifically, not having consistent teams impacts teachers' ability to understand and address students' needs when/if there are common issues.
- Special education teachers work with each grade-level [multiple special education teachers may work with specific grades] and provide support across the content areas. Instructional assistants also participate in team meetings to provide input and support.

All grade-level content teachers have two non-instructional periods per day. Structurally, the schedule provides most of the teachers in a grade-level with a common non-instructional period.

For each grade-level:

- One common period is designated as Team Planning.
- One common period is the teachers Individual Prep.

Each team has a designated point of contact, a "Team Lead" who is responsible for setting the schedule, communicating with leadership and others regarding the agenda and requests for support.

Teaming Content and Focus

What is the content, focus, and purpose of teaming and related collaborative planning time?

Team Planning is a shared period (separate from individual planning) that teachers may decide how to use – they have significant autonomy over how to flexibly use this time, based on their needs and priorities. Team Planning includes daily involvement with special educators.

The general structure of Team Planning is as follows, with the caveat that there are differences between the ideal or intended use and how teams have customized their use of collaborative planning time over time:

- **Instructional Collaborative Planning (two days per week)** involves planning with grade-level content counterparts and/or special educators; the planning is focused on developing standards-based lessons and instructional strategies to ensure that all students can access the content [including but not limited to specially designed instruction], and to develop anchors and common assessments.
- **Student Focused Conversations (two days per week)** provides time for teachers to engage in "student-talk" to collaboratively discuss academic and non-academic issues regarding students. These meetings include guidance and sometimes special educators. Typically, this time: (a) informs how teachers across the grade are supporting shared students; (b) informs conversations

regarding student services; and (c) highlights student strengths/positives, which is a schoolwide practice across all grades.

- **One day per week: Open Flex Time for teachers**, typically used to schedule and hold parent conferences, and to meet with administrators related to school-wide initiatives.

Two examples of grade level Team Planning

8 th grade team schedule:	7 th grade team schedule:
Monday: Full team meeting to review students' IEPs and discuss support that can be provided to those students (Instructional Collaborative Planning). Tuesday: Student-focused conversations with the guidance counselor, to problem-solve around specific student concerns. Wednesday: Parent conference day; or Flex Time, or use this for special education, or proactive conferences with students. Thursday: The team selects students of the week and talks about student concerns to discuss with the guidance counselor the following week. Friday: Instructional common planning with special educators to plan specially designed instruction.	The team typically uses the first portion of each day to review students' needs or concerns and identify actions. Instructional planning occurs throughout the week, typically on Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday Monday: Student-focused conversations, to check-in on actions for the week, to inform instruction and related support. Tuesday: Alternating time for teachers to work with special educators (on instruction) and with Guidance. Wednesday: Parent conference day; or Flex Time, or use this for special education, or proactive conferences with students. Thursdays: Dedicated time to “break out” with our special educators, focusing on scaffolding (for all students); specially designed instruction, and other instructional modifications as needed. Friday: The team selects students of the week, agreeing on two kids to receive recognition for positive work.

Instructional Collaborative Planning

The 8th grade team uses two days of Team Planning to discuss/review students' IEPs, consider instructional strategies that they might use in upcoming lessons, and then meet with special educators to share and receive feedback on their lesson plans. In theory, teachers are using one day of Team Planning to co-develop potential instructional strategies, using their Individual Prep (which may involve some co-planning) to develop lessons, and then use one day (Friday) to work with special educators to refine their lesson plans for the upcoming week. In this manner, lessons are informed by teachers' collective expertise, special educators' insights, and ensure that special educators and instructional assistants have a solid understanding of daily lessons/instruction.

The 7th grade team spends about two days on instructional lesson planning, while also using their individual prep and additional time (after school, during lunch) to meet with content peers from other grade levels. Teachers described using a “student-centered” approach and working closely with special educators to develop scaffolding and instructional strategies for all students, including students identified for special education. Teachers described the student-centered approach as starting first with students'

needs and assets, then examining the content to be delivered and designing instructional strategies so that students can fully access the content. Like the 8th grade team, lessons and instruction are informed by teachers' and special educators' expertise.

The 6th grade team has a similar understanding of the purpose of collaborative Team Planning – to meet with their content counterparts and with special educators on tier one instruction to “really look at how we're presenting and covering our content in a way that is accessible for everyone.” Due to how the 6th grade team is configured, only the math teacher described being able to use these two days as intended (e.g., to meet with a math colleague and then with a special educator). Other 6th grade content teachers are using this time to plan core instruction and stated that they have access to the special educator; however, teachers described their instructional planning as mostly individual, so that the Team Planning period becomes a de facto additional prep that is sometimes used for informal (but still useful) collaboration.



One teacher described the positive impact that collaborative team time has on instruction and teachers as professionals:

Because we've experienced both Collaborative planning and not having planning, it was horrible to lose that collaboration time [For one year]. I felt lost after teaching all these years. It doesn't matter, because I didn't have that time to debrief. I didn't have that time to make sure I understood the new directive that was coming out and I didn't have that time with [teachers] to catch all those things that we catch and support each other as a team. I was a veteran teacher who's been doing this forever and been teaching that long with that much experience and have all this success, and then to lose team for one year and feel that way. Losing team time was a huge difference for me and it made me realize just how much we actually support each other.

7th Grade Teacher

Area for future inquiry: Teachers value Team Planning, however, there may be differences in how content teachers and special educators are fully collaborating and leveraging their expertise. Factors influencing collaboration include: (a) having formalized and routine expectations for collaboration; (b) ensuring that teachers' schedules align to allow for shared team planning; and (c) emphasizing the value added of collaboration among all teachers and for all students, not solely for students identified for special education.

Student Concerns and Guidance

Grade-level teams use this time (two days a week) to discuss issues with students and to meet with guidance counselors.

The 8th grade team noted that this time is very useful, and that it helps them to build relationships with students (even if they aren't in their classroom), to share and use classroom or hallway management strategies that help with one or more students, and to make sure they aware of and attending to issues that may arise during the school year. Teachers use this time to discuss ways to support individual students (e.g., strategies to use when students act a certain way or need support) and monitor progress.

The 7th grade team spends a portion of each Team Planning day reviewing students' needs and concerns, focusing on proactively addressing issues and assessing how actions that they've put into place may be

supporting students. The formal meetings with the guidance counselor, proactive identification of challenges, weekly positive reinforcements (e.g., students of the week) and targeted conferencing with students are collectively geared towards providing all students with the support they may need.

The 6th grade team uses one day (Tuesday) to meet with guidance to discuss student concerns, set up parent conferences, and start the SST process for students who have been absent or are struggling. The second day (Thursday) includes the special educator and used to provide updates on IEPs and other special education matters. Together, the two days are used to collaborate, discuss, and communicate information about students. Team planning is seen as essential, to ensure that students do not “fall through the cracks.”

Leadership Roles and Expectations to support collaborative planning

There is limited in-person involvement of administrators with teachers during Team Planning. The Assistant Principal and Dean noted that they would like to be more involved given that they are working on improving culture and climate.

Tiered Supports (MTSS), including Advisory and Student Support models

Advisory is structured as two 30-minute advisory periods per day for students.

Traditional Advisory (30 minutes): During one of the two 30-minute periods, students stay with an assigned teacher the entire year. Advisory focuses on social-emotional learning, MAP testing, and project-based learning. Some teachers described having a “list” of things for students to do during Advisory, so that there are common activities across the grade. Teachers are also using this time to support student writing (writing prompts, use of a composition book), as part of the school’s focus on improving writing; however, these approaches are not schoolwide and may be teacher dependent. Traditional advisory time is also used to provide some students with specific academic interventions (8th grade teachers noted that Lexia PowerUp was used with some students, during this time).

Student Support: In the second 30-minute advisory period, students rotate through their content teachers each day, so that each class/student has one additional period with their ELA, Math, Science, and Social Studies teacher. Teachers noted that this portion of Advisory provides them with additional time (literally, an extra period each week) with each class. This time is used to continue a project or other classwork, provide acceleration and individual or group support to specific students (e.g., tutoring), and additional support as needed.

How are grade-level teams using this time?

There may be differences in how teachers are using this time and how students are benefiting. One set of grade-level teachers described the student support period as student focused – a modified “what I need” block for students, but with the support determined by teachers’ assessment of what students may need to work on.

“It’s almost another intervention, because it provides us, as the educators, that 30 additional minutes to address the needs of certain students, to get other students caught up, and to do extension activities for our higher-level learners. Again, this is not a formal, scripted intervention to meet the needs of an IEP, but it allows us to address students’ needs.”

Teachers in another grade described using the support period as an extension of their daily class, while also noting that they are thinking about doing some more “targeted instruction” in math with students during this time. For most students (based on teachers’ comments and a small student focus group), the Student Support portion of Advisory is primarily used to complete missing assignments, review grades, and make up tests and quizzes. Some teachers described using the Student Support period to provide individual support (e.g., tutoring) to students or to extend lessons for the entire class or groups of students.

Southern Middle School

Introduction and Context

Southern Middle School is a small- to mid-sized middle school (~440 students in grades 6 - 8) with 31 full-time teachers (including 6 special educators), of which nine (9) have over 20 years of experience and five (5) have 5 or less years of experience (2025 Staff Data, MSDE). The school has a relatively stable and established staff and is led by a new principal with over 20 years of experience. The school serves a diverse student population¹⁰ that mirrors the district's overall student demographics.

Context – What was Southern Middle School working on?

Going into SY24-45, school leadership made significant changes designed to improve students' academic achievement and to improve school culture and climate. These changes involved convening an MTSS school improvement team prior to the 2024-25 school year to develop school priorities, securing needed staffing and re-establishing teaching roles and responsibilities, and taking immediate actions to improve school culture and climate. The work was led by a new principal (Principal Ryan Crowley), new administrators, and prioritized support from the district including additional support from an instructional coach.

School improvement planning was initiated in summer 2024, beginning with an open invitation interest meeting (attended by 23 staff) followed by the formation of an MTSS leadership team that reviewed data, considered questions and ideas for improvement, and determined priorities for the coming school year. Serving as the school's overarching Leadership Team, the MTSS team includes 12 individuals (administrators, specialists, and grade-level representatives) who coordinate, monitor, and implement key improvement initiatives. Coming out of the summer, priorities included: (1) improving student achievement and (2) improving school climate, to ensure a safe a secure learning environment for students and adults. Establishing collaborative teaming structures was also part of the conversation and an outcome of summer MTSS meetings.

Strategies to improve culture and climate were implemented at the beginning of the school year and continued throughout the year. Key strategies included: (1) establishing clear expectations and accountability regarding student behavior in classrooms and throughout the schools; (2) increasing administrators' visibility and presence of staff in hallways to establish and reinforce expectations; (3) focusing on consistent follow-through on behavioral expectations, including a renewed focus on Restorative Practices; (4) redistributing roles and responsibilities to ensure a more balanced distribution of work and responsibility; and (5) improving communication and feedback loops. Additionally, the MTSS team used a school-based action plan to implement and monitor progress towards improving culture and climate, and literacy and math instruction.

The following description of Teaming Structures, the Content of Collaborative Teaming, and MTSS is primarily focused on academic and instructional priorities in literacy and math, as determined by the MTSS team. However, leaderships' work to establish a safe a secure learning environment for adults and teachers is foundational and remains a priority.

¹⁰ 2024 Data: 56 percent White; 22 percent Black; 10 percent Hispanic; 12 percent two or more.

Teaming Structures and Master Schedules

How are teacher teams organized and structured (e.g., schedules and staffing)?

Teachers did not have formal collaborative planning time in SY23-24. Funding for collaborative time was used for additional staff positions (ostensibly to reduce class size or for other reasons). Recognizing that collaborative time was necessary to implement their SY24-25 priorities, leadership restructured schoolwide teaming structures by establishing an umbrella MTSS team (e.g., a school improvement team) and multiple “MTSS Teams” with specific foci and functions, as described below.

Leadership and teaming structures are layered and intersecting, with ongoing progress monitoring, data reviews, and monitoring of students needing academic and non-academic support occurring across teams. Notably, Collaborative Time is organized as a four-week cycle.

Leadership Teams

The MTSS Leadership Team is an “umbrella” team that includes multiple representatives, including administrators, facilitators of focused teams (committees), and additional staff.

The Principal Leadership Team is comprised of the Principal, Assistant Principal, Dean, and Instructional Coach. This team considers overall strategy and focus, meeting ~2x/month to assess progress within committees, prior to meeting with the MTSS Leadership Team each month.

MTSS Teams (sometimes referred to as committees) include:

- **Inclusion Team:** Focused on special education and ensuring that Tier 1 supports are in place and used prior to identifying students for SST; always includes time to consider equity related issues.
- **Student Services Team:** The team has restructured processes and structure, meeting twice a month alternating between: (1) attendance and academics and (2) behavior management and social-emotional learning, including behavioral health (Behavioral Health Team).
- **PBIS Team**

The main collaborative teacher teaming structure is by content area, across grades.

Collaborative Teaming as a four-week cycle

Three weeks of collaborative planning:	One week for Leadership and MTSS Teams:
ELA and Math teachers have dedicated <u>daily</u> collaborative planning. ELA teachers meet 7th period and Math teachers meet 6th period; ELA and Math teachers also have daily individual prep. Science and Social Studies teachers meet 2 to 3 times a month. Related Arts and Spanish Teacher collaborate once a month, including special educators.	Each MTSS Team/Committee meets to review progress and develop actions and professional development for upcoming three weeks of collaborative time. Members of the Principal Leadership Team participate in these meetings, along with the facilitators who may be facilitating the teacher collaborative planning. The MTSS Leadership Team (which includes representatives of each Committee and the Principal Leadership Team) meets on one day, to receive updates on progress and determine next steps.

Teaming Content and Focus

What is the content, focus, and purpose of teaming and related collaborative planning time?

Content-based team meetings in ELA and Math are focused on different topics, guided by school priorities, team needs, and the designated lead for the team. Generally, teams are working on: (1) data analysis/looking at data; (2) reviewing benchmark data; and (3) instructional planning (overall and student-specific). Teams have running agendas, protocols, and outcomes for each meeting.

How are ELA and Math teams using collaborative time?

Based on conversations with school leadership and teachers in winter and spring of 2025, the change back to daily collaborative time appears to be beneficial. ELA and Math teachers are meeting ~4 days a week, inclusive of special educators, to plan Tier 1 instruction. Many classrooms are co-taught with a special educator or instructional assistants, and collaborative time is used to plan instruction. Notably, having the ability to “work with the same special educator” more regularly is seen as useful. And special educators noted that working with multiple teachers (in contrast to co-teaching with a single teacher all year) has increased their ability to observe different approaches to instruction and facilitate sharing of instructional strategies across classrooms and teachers.



I think that because I've worked with more teachers, I get to meet more students. I'm able to not only work with the kids that are on my caseload, but I also get to see different teaching styles. And so with this particular teaching style [working with multiple teachers], I can pull that [information] and talk to my co-teacher and say, “hey, have you thought about this, or have you tried this?” And while we're collaborating, I can ask the other teacher, “can you show us how you do this, or how you're going to teach this, or whatever?” And I find that it works really a lot better.

Special Educator

Collaborative meeting agendas include times for different topics/foci, such as time for co-teachers to plan together and for district specialists [literacy, math, inclusion] to push-in to meetings, depending on need and focus.

In ELA, the weekly schedule for collaborative time includes: (1) Kid Talk, which involves reviewing assessments and data, and developing processes for supporting students, such as student goal setting and conferencing with students; (2) content-based co-planning; and (3) co-planning with special educators and/or inclusion specialists. The other two days are “flex” days, sometimes used to provide coverage to allow for Social Studies and Science teachers to collaborate.

In Math, teachers are using one day to pose/frame questions related to upcoming content (e.g., a month ahead) that will be used by all the teachers in each grade. These “questions” are being used to proactively prepare for academic interventions (e.g., teacher-developed strategies and activities) that will support students prior to being exposed to upcoming content. These academic supports are provided through the Advisory/Student Support period. Teachers use two additional days (Tuesday and Friday) to plan lessons (among grade-level counterparts), to co-plan with special educators, and to review SWA results, also by grade-level.

Social Studies and Science teachers do not have similarly structured daily collaborative time. Leadership is working to provide time (2 to 3 times a month) for these teachers to engage in collaborative planning, by leveraging district specialists and aligning the focus of this time with Action Plan priorities. Coverage for this time is provided by ELA and Math teachers. Social Studies and Science teachers teach five content classes (like Math and ELA) and have an Advisory class (resource teachers also have an Advisory); ELA and Math teachers do not teach Advisory.

Area for Inquiry and context regarding scheduling. In spring 2025, school leadership was actively exploring scheduling options that would increase collaborative time for social studies, science, and related arts teachers. In SY24-25, the leadership had to make strategic tradeoffs to provide ELA and Math teachers with collaborative time. The tradeoffs involved a desire to keep class sizes down in social studies and science and responsibility for teaching the Advisory class. The school has an Advisory class rather than dedicated Advisors for students that stay with them during their experience at Southern MS. Social Studies and Science teachers are responsible for teaching Advisory, which allows ELA and Math teachers to have collaboration time and an individual prep; while social studies and science teachers have somewhat smaller class sizes but do not have two individual preparation periods.

School leadership is prioritizing daily or more frequent collaborative time for all teachers in SY25-26.

Scheduling Possibilities being considered by leadership include:

1. **Providing daily collaborative time for all core content teachers.** This is seen as the ideal situation but would require additional staffing and may be difficult to maintain.
 - Dedicated daily collaborative planning period
 - Rotating weekly focus for science and social studies
 - Utilizing advisory coverage to create monthly collaboration time
 - Exploring an eight-period day with shorter periods to accommodate planning
2. **Retaining collaborative time for ELA and Math while expanding time for SS and Science:**
 - If every science and social studies teacher has an advisory, rotate coverage to allow five days of collaboration per month
 - Embed collaborative time within the existing eight-period schedule
 - Ensure minimal instructional disruption during collaborative planning

Considerations and Ideas:

- Balancing instructional needs with planning time.
- Having flexibility in scheduling.
- Importance of maintaining consistent collaborative opportunities for all teachers.

Leadership Roles related to Teaming and Learning

How are leaders ensuring and supporting teachers to effectively use collaborative time?

First, a variety of research-based protocols (e.g., Data Wise, MCIE protocols, Specially Designed Instruction protocols) are being used and are characterized by leadership as how “we organize for collaborative work.”¹¹ Leadership described how they have “merged” these protocols, to customize them for their school and the specific types of collaborative meetings that they have instituted. As a result, there are clear expectations and protocols for each collaborative meeting aligned with the goals and purpose of the meeting. Second, leadership noted that having collaborative time for three weeks followed by time to “reset” during the fourth week has been useful, as this provides the MTSS Leadership Team an opportunity to review progress, receive feedback from facilitators, and adjust accordingly, for “the next round of collabs.”

Observations regarding Leadership Structures

The newly established leadership structure and use of collaborative time is described by leaders as effective and valuable. Two characteristics of SMS’s leadership and teaming structures are important to highlight, as they may have implications for other schools.

1. The use of a layered leadership structure that includes multiple teams, dedicated time to meet, and a 4-week cycle that allows for progress monitoring and adjustments is innovative and worthy of study.
2. Leadership expertise, provided by the Principal, an Assistant Principal with a deep knowledge of coaching, inclusion, and distributed leadership, and coordinated use of district resources, were described as important factors.

Leadership Actions that appear to be contributing to positive momentum

- **Establishing Collaborative Teams and Teaming Structures.** The district assigned new leadership to the school who [re]established collaborative teaming structures and voiced an urgency to improve. Key teams included an umbrella MTSS Leadership Team, a Principal Leadership Team, and content-level teams.
 - Collaborative teaming built upon previous training and professional development re: Organizing for Collaboration, including establishing norms and teaming protocols.
 - Targeted and meaningful support from district specialists and a school-assigned coach is seen as important and crucial ingredients.
- **Focused Planning and Prioritization.** Leadership developed an Action Planⁱⁱ with specific priorities regarding school culture and climate and instructional improvement.
 - The MTSS Leadership Team regularly reviews the Action Plan, monitors progress, and makes necessary adjustments.
- **Distributed Leadership.** Leadership took explicit and visible actions that demonstrated that they valued teacher expertise/input and wanted teachers to take on leadership roles.
 - Leadership took time to build relationships with staff, to understand their skills and values.

¹¹ Reference to a “three step process” that appears to have been instrumental in organizing teams for collaboration.

- Leadership noted that “we’ve redefined roles” and created distributed leadership, by “building in leadership components across the board.”
- Leadership asked/invited teachers in each content area to take on leadership roles, as “facilitators for collaborative planning.” These teacher leaders, including special educators, have played a crucial role as team leaders and as members of the MTSS leadership team.



I think that the math team has made huge gains just in the sense of, like, being open to new ideas, willingness to work together, talking about specific students, like we, I think we've made big gains in that regard.

I personally have grown through our collaborative I've grown as a leader just being there for the math department and those in the department. But I also think I've grown as a teacher, especially in the sense of like differentiation and SDI through like the trainings we've gone through, having the time to sit and talk to my special educator about specific students in specific classes that we have.

Teacher Leader

Challenge: Only a few of these teachers are Nationally Board Certified. Leadership noted that some of the current teacher leaders are pursuing their NBC. However, leadership roles are flexible and tend to rotate among teachers. Balancing Blueprint requirements regarding Level 3 and Level 4 teachers with the practical reality of how leadership emerges and is distributed remains a key challenge.

- **Communication and Accountability.** In the past, high leadership turnover may have reduced accountability among staff, as staff might “wait out changes” in leadership. Expectations set in prior years may not have been consistently applied and reinforced. Similarly, leadership turnover may have contributed to a lack of follow-through on collaborative planning, progress monitoring, and school wide initiatives.
 - In SY24-25, leadership set expectations and intentionally used the assigned leadership roles to maintain clear and proper lines of communication. For instance, leadership often redirects questions from teachers to appropriate staff and discusses “standard operating procedures” on how to communicate and address questions or issues that may arise.
 - In prior years, teachers may have felt that they received different answers (or directives) from different members of the leadership team; the goal this year was to remove ambiguity regarding expectations and establish greater accountability among teachers.

Challenge: Negotiating and balancing the need to set schoolwide expectations and accountability while building relational trust with staff.

Tiered Supports (MTSS), including Advisory and Student Support models

The school is actively working on improving core/Tier 1 instruction to provide differentiated and specially designed instruction. This work is undertaken by teachers and occurs during ELA and Math collaborative planning. Additionally, the Advisory period provides additional opportunities to provide targeted interventions and student-specific support.

How did the school go about implementing academic and non-academic MTSS for all students?

As noted earlier, the school's overarching leadership team is called the MTSS Leadership Team and committees/teams are referred to as "MTSS teams." Notably, the school modified the Student Study Team (SST) by forming two related teams: (1) a Behavioral Health Team responsible for designing and monitoring behavioral support and (2) having the SST focus solely on academic support and monitoring. This shift was made in response to SST being overwhelmed with referrals.

Short-term results:

Regarding Culture and Climate. As of April 2025, leadership reported improvement based on multiple sources: improved survey data from parents; reduced referrals (96 compared to 250); positive feedback from parents; increased student participation in activities; positive shifts in hallway and classroom behaviors; and more teachers open to sharing, risk-taking, and using feedback.

Regarding the implementation of MTSS. Forming an umbrella MTSS leadership team and creating separate teams focused on behavior and academics is seen as a positive shift. However, our conversation about Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions (behavioral and academic) highlighted a few challenges. In previous years, students were often "referred" to SST as a perceived first step to receive and/or have access to Tier 2 support, which might involve those students being identified for special education. There may have been a perception that a student needed to be "referred" and potentially identified for special education to receive certain Tier 2 academic support. The school is working to change this mindset, which is embedded in past practices and operating procedures.

Three guiding principles should guide this approach:

1. All students should have access to all Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports and interventions. Students should not be restricted from receiving (accessing) or exiting Tier 2 support for any reason (e.g., schedules).
2. Students should never be identified for special education to gain access to or participate in a Tier 2 or Tier 3 intervention.
3. Students are not referred to or placed in tiers. All students may receive some type of Tier 2 support at some point during the school year. Tier 2 is not a program or a specific intervention. Similarly, Tier 2 or Tier 3 are not formally connected to special education. Specially designed instruction (SDI) is provided across **all** Tiers and can be delivered by any educator, **regardless of certification**.

Advisory is structured as a single 50-minute period that includes two related components:

1. All students participate in social-emotional learning (SEL) and Character Strong programming [10 to 15 min].
2. After the SEL and Character Strong work, students work on and/or move to academic support for the remainder of the period, which may include targeted/formal academic interventions based on

data (e.g., literacy or Power Up), flexible interventions (in Math or Science), or enrichment, clubs, other activities. Two items of note:

- Some students are flexibly moving to different teachers/classrooms after the SEL/Character Strong component, based on interest and identified academic needs (e.g., short term math interventions, or literacy interventions).
- Moving to a flexible “Advisory” period has required some teachers to change their thinking; that instead of focusing solely on implementing an intervention with fidelity, it was equally if not more important to allow time for SEL check-ins.

Topics for additional inquiry:

- **Exploring how teachers perceive and understand the purpose of collaborative time**, to learn how teachers feel that this time may be used most effectively and efficiently.
- **Formalizing goal setting with more students.** The 2024-25 advisory schedule included “Thriving Thursday” – time for students to review their grades, organize assignments, email teachers.
 - How can advisory time and Advisory teachers more formally support students in developing and setting academic goals (e.g., through data sheets and formal goal setting)?
- **Formalizing more targeted progress monitoring and assessment of the Advisory time.** Some advisory classes are being used more effectively than others, with respect to the focus of lessons and activities, and in how students may be engaged in activities directly related to content areas.
 - **How could the** MTSS leadership team continue to identify and spread best practices in Advisory?
 - By leveraging staff, formalizing small group tutoring, and supporting student goal setting.
 - Evaluating the effectiveness of flexible interventions in math in reference to preparing students for upcoming units.

Problem of Practice [Southern Middle School]

Academic Achievement and Instruction

- How can we improve students' academic achievement in Math and ELA?
- How can we support teachers' effective use of collaborative teaming, to support Tier 1 Instructional Improvement and Tier 2 interventions and supports.

School Culture and Climate

- How can we develop and cultivate a safe and secure learning environment for students?
- How can we develop and cultivate a safe and secure learning environment for adults?

Drivers

If we ...

- Support teachers in designing and delivering **rigorous instruction** (grade-level, standards based, pacing)
- Improve teachers' use of **engaging and differentiated instructional practices** – to improve student engagement....
- Develop **instructional leaders** within the school...
- Establish new **Schoolwide and Teacher Teaming structures to support instructional improvement...**
- Established collaborative teaming for ELA and Math, partially for SS and Science.
- Each content team is working on **Action Steps** articulated in the 90-day action plan, supported by Lead Facilitator and oversight by Administration.

ORGANIZING FRAMEWORK

Teaming Structures and Master Schedules

How are teacher teams organized and structured (e.g., schedules and staffing)?

- Who is teaming? Who has shared individual and/or common collaboration time?
- How is your school organized to support professional learning and improvement?
 - o How is the master schedule constructed to allow for effective teaming and collaboration?
 - o How frequently do teachers have shared individual prep and common collaboration time?
 - o What are variations of teaming (e.g., co-planning, co-teaching, content, grade-level)?

Teaming Content and Focus

What is the content, focus, and purpose of teaming and related collaborative planning time?

- How do teacher teams work to improve **Core Instruction** (e.g., teachers' unit and lesson planning, differentiated instruction that meets the needs of all students, co-teaching)?
- How do teacher teams work to support identification of **student-specific academic needs**, to accelerate student academic achievement among all students.
- How do teacher teams support **proactive behavioral or classroom management** and/or strategies for individuals and groups of students.

Leadership Roles related to Teaming and Learning

- What are the current and potential roles of administrators and teacher leaders related to teaming and collaborative planning?
- What tools, processes, and approaches do teams use to structure collaborative time?

Tiered Supports (MTSS), including Advisory and Student Support models

- How are students that “need additional help” or “the most challenging” provided with interventions and support?
- What tools, processes, and approaches support student goal setting, engagement, and academic support?
- What are the systems, processes (e.g., data meetings, assessments), and approaches used to support students?

ii How does the 90-day action plan inform leadership and teacher teams work?

The Action Plan is actively used to guide agendas, focus, and progress monitoring.

- (1) Culture and Climate: Improving classroom behaviors via restorative circles, classroom management, and engagement strategies.
- (2) In Math, improving Tier 1 instruction, primarily by grade-level (e.g., developing weekly spirals, setting student math goals, implementing new instructional strategies); proactively identifying interventions to support students ability to access upcoming content, and developing common assessments and analyzing data/MAP to modify instruction.
- (3) In ELA, improving Tier 1 differentiated instruction through co-planning, improved anchor charts, analysis of MAP and reading data, working with students on 90-day cycles that include student goal setting, and modeling close reading processes.