



Minnesota Transitions Charter School MDHR Semi-Annual Report-CI #1386543

We at Minnesota Transitions Charter School have continued our journey in better understanding how we serve our students and which areas we need to improve on, in order to genuinely reach each child. In August, I transitioned from my role as School Social Worker, which is the role I served our youth in for the last 3 years, to my current position as the Director of Equity and Diversity. Elevating our equity work to an administrative level speaks to our deep dedication to serve our students and community authentically and I am honored to share our progress in this work, thus far.

Progress on Final Plan

As mentioned above, MTCS has hired a full-time Director of Equity and Diversity. In this role, I supervise our social work team, as well as, our Family Engagement Coordinators. This allows us to consult regularly and align our practices to best support our students and families. I am on the School Board and I facilitate our Board Equity Committee which meets quarterly with ongoing work in between meetings. We surveyed our learning community to receive feedback on what equity means to our staff and I will survey our students and families, as well. The committee will then create our MTCS definition of Equity that will ground our work moving forward. Until we have crafted our personal definition with our community, we will continue to utilize the definition of equity as defined by the Minnesota Department of Education, as well as, their Equity Magnifier, to inform our lens.

Updated Information: Our Equity committee crafted our MTCS Definition of Equity which was presented to our MTCS Board of Directors and approved as our working framework for this work. Below is the MTCS Definition of Equity:

MTCS believes equity provides historically disenfranchised students the opportunity for an education whereby they have access to the resources and opportunities that will elevate them holistically and empower them to advocate for meaningful and intentional work. We recognize that eliminating barriers requires daily reflection, engagement and practice. We commit to actively dismantling internal systems of oppression, leveling professional power and valuing the assets of difference.



MTCS utilizes this definition to guide our work, particularly the parts that reference intentional action, not simply the belief. We are genuinely prioritizing what does it mean to walk the walk? Too often in equity work you receive the best of intentions and the seemingly meaningful responses to reflection questions that fall fairly disconnected from daily actions. Our work currently is about doing a deep dive into the inside-out work that is necessary for pushing ourselves beyond our comfort zones and actually into cycles of transformation. We are at a critical precipice in pushing forth for equity and social justice. Our community, in particular, is learning what it means to “hit close to home” with our Secondary and District offices being demolished in the Uprising. Due to the impact of seeing the devastating results of continued brutality and dehumanizing of Black, Indigenous and People of Color, our White educators can no longer deny the existence of systemic racism, even if they still don’t understand it. Our community was given an opportunity to rise up and own that our students, largely BIPOC, matter, and that it is up to us to make sure they know it, feel it and experience the value they bring.

Academic Coaching

We have three academic coaches in our district that are supporting our MTS Elementary school, Banaadir North/South and MTS Secondary. Our coaches meet with our teachers regularly to engage with our scope and sequence, develop lesson planning skills and build capacity in utilizing data to inform instruction. These coaches can continue conversations based on our embedded professional development around standard-based teaching practices, data and cultural lenses when assessing curriculum and building deeper connections with their students.

Updated Information: We have welcomed our academic coaches into further layers of our administrative time together. They participate in our Superintendent’s Cabinet once a month to discuss progress, assessments and how we can center equity in their creation and critique of lesson plans. They also participate in our Superintendent’s Cabinet Book Club, which I facilitate. We are currently working through Dr. Bettina Love’s brilliant book, “We Want To Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom. We meet monthly for 1.5 hours where I challenge my colleagues to dig deep, offer counter narratives, engage in deep personal and professional reflection and to dialogue with colleagues in small breakout groups. There is a fine line to balance creating space for curiosity and growth while minimizing harm. It has been a learning experience to understand where each Director is along the continuum of Cultural Proficiency and how to make each minute



count. Every time we gather I have the opportunity to create the conditions for transformation and insight. I utilize restorative circles and educator platforms like google slides and padlet to engage my colleagues in a true journey. I require disruption, reorganization of mental models and a collective understanding that it is our job to dismantle any policies and practices that are rooted in White Supremacy. It is vital that we include those who coach our educators, alongside our leaders who inspire them, in this dialogue.

Professional Development

For the school year of 2019-2020, we have adopted ½ day Fridays to embed professional development for our staff. We rotate between Trauma-Informed Practices (for which, I am the trainer), Restorative Practice, Standards-Based Teaching Practices, Teach Like a Champion and conduct data dives to improve our instruction. For Trauma-Informed Practices PD, I also apply the lens of Cultural Proficiency to the work we do. Often work around trauma misses vital cultural considerations and sometimes does not address the internal workings of individuals that can impact judgement and behavior. As a learning community, we are exploring how our own core values, beliefs and mental models inform the data we select, the assumptions we make, which drive our judgements and ultimately extend outward in our behavior. If we hope to genuinely address equity as a community, it is imperative that we begin with ourselves. As adults, we must recognize that we are all affected by systemic racism and oppression. The only way to make progress towards not perpetuating those same systems inside of our classrooms, is to reflect and dialogue about how our thinking is impacted as a result of White Supremacy and acknowledging our roles in intentionally dismantling those practices.

Updated Information: This school year (2020-2021) we have maintained our embedded PD but tried to individualize our responses to PD based on the needs of our programs. As of this past week, every single program in our organization has received training in Culturally Proficient School Systems. I facilitate these training sessions which allows me to build my relationships across the district and support the understanding of creating enough space for difference. I feel deeply that it is my responsibility to disrupt our staff regularly, meaningfully and then wrap around them to support the mess that comes from that process. I have facilitated many restorative processing circles to provide space for folx to share their truth, learn and process the impact of their lack of understanding and create opportunities to repair harm that occurs. I am learning that the work is in intentionally creating conditions packed with potential for transformation and



then responding with compassion, in real time, honoring the dignity and worth of all people, grounding us in some collective truths. In many ways, inequities are perpetuated by the lack of agreement on some collective understanding of human worth, rights and value. If we have MTCS values that drive our mission, then we also need some collective truths that will guide our work in antiracism and equity.

Last spring, I facilitated an online training on An Inside-Out Approach to Navigating Youth Trauma for YIPA (Youth Intervention Programs Association). In exchange, I negotiated a free one-year membership for MTCS. Educators have utilized these additional resources and training in PLCs and further professional development. I would like to continue our membership as having multiple places that educators can access opportunities for growth the more potential there is for change.

Lastly, there are two teachers at Banaadir Academy who approached me in the beginning of the school year about leading a professional development on antiracism for their staff. They wanted to do a book study and chose “This Book is Antiracist” by Tiffany Jewell. They journal, they reflect and dialogue and I have coached the facilitators in how to lead restorative conversations as difficult situations arise. More and more teachers and paraprofessionals are expressing interest in deeping their own work and leading more groups around the district. People are starting to own the work, which is yet another layer in how we move forward.

Restorative Practice

We are making progress in our implementation of Restorative Practices, however, turnover rates can also make gaining momentum difficult. It is challenging to move onto stage 2, 3 and 4 if we are perpetually needing to begin again at square one, every year. MTS Elementary school and P.E.A.S.E. Academy are the most successful sites, thus far, in integrating circles into daily scheduling and responding to discipline issues with a fully restorative process. MTS Secondary struggles with shifting the mindset of our educators from punitive to restorative, not from an administrative level but a teacher one. Understanding a new way of holding students accountable has been very challenging, as their mental models are rooted in traditional ways of approaching classroom management. Dismantling belief systems that are rooted in power and control is something that takes much time, patience and persistence. I am confident that we will continue to make forward strides in this area and we are beginning to hire new staff that are more aligned with this vision already, which is helpful.



Furthermore, there is a team of us who are trying to create a restorative framework for responding to discipline. This plan will be finished by the end of the year but we are implementing processes of engaging in restorative conversations, circles and conferencing presently. When an incident occurs, attempts are made to involve all student parties; teachers, if the issues stems from a ruptured teacher-student relationship; and parents, especially if it involves a re-entry from a suspension. Restorative practice is highly individualized and the repair of harm is decided upon by students and staff to best match the rupture. We are continuing our efforts in creating clearer systems and communication lines that include all necessary parties, as well as, re-examining how we genuinely make room for processes that require ample time and attention.

Updated Information: Our approach to further developing our skills and use of restorative practice has been to be as responsive to the needs of the community as we can. We have successfully hired social workers for each of our programs which has been a long time goal. We added two full-time social workers this year to support our Banaadir programs which highlights the value MTCS places on what our social work lens and expertise bring to the table. Due to having a full social work team that I lead, we are able to have each social worker be an extension of our restorative practice coordinators. We have two in our district, one to support MTS K-12 and one to support Banaadir K-12 both of whom are also teachers. This allows them to speak directly to other teachers about how to integrate restorative ways of being into how they facilitate learning. I also supervise the restorative coordinators and I partner with them and our social workers to provide community building circles and processing circles that center reflection and dialogue. These circles have occurred in response to helping educators process shifting to distance learning, the Uprising, learning new online platforms, community crisis, grief, and our work with the cultural proficiency framework.

My hope for the remainder of this year is to help organize groups of folx who need different things; e.g. a BIPOC affinity group, a beginner group for those new to understanding whiteness and systems of oppression and a group for White folx who are ready for a deep dive into intentionally unconditioning from whiteness. We will utilize the circle process for all of these groups.

Culturally Proficient School Systems

Additionally, last school year (2018-2019), I trained our administrative team in Culturally Proficient School Systems (CPSS). The hope was that then leaders would be ready to continue the work in their own buildings. While the training was largely



MTCS | K-12 Academic Community

successful in shifting mindsets, building capacity and creating space for creating deeper levels of understanding of the self, no leader felt equipped to train their staff. Which in full-disclosure, they were trained in the framework, not trained as trainers of the framework. As mentioned above, I continue this work with staff during our embedded professional development, but I have begun conversations with district administrators about how we honor this work more fully, rather than solely sharing space with trauma-informed practices. We will continue these conversations and by the end of the year, we will have a plan for me to connect with all staff regularly about this work. I truly believe that by utilizing the Culturally Proficient School Systems framework, we will begin to see the actual shifts we desire.

Updated Information: Great news! I now train weekly across the district in Culturally Proficient School Systems so a fuller picture of this work is listed in the aforementioned section on *Professional Development*.

In addition to training all staff in the CPSS framework, I have added many thought partners that are helping ground my reflection and impact how I move forward with what I plan for each training. I partner with a coach at the Minnesota Department of Education and the Regional Centers for Excellence, as well as, our family liaisons to ensure my perspective is always being widened. I also engage in my own personal and professional reflection and dialogue to ensure my own continual growth in hopes of minimizing any harm I might cause in any given situation. I utilize my clinical social work skills, my leadership skills and everything I learn, primarily from activists of color to help guide my work. I listen, I create, I respond, I listen more and hopefully inspire insight whenever I am gifted a platform to share time and hold space for our community.

Learner and Community Voice

In the beginning of the year, we hosted our annual meeting, in which we shared our vision, mission, our strengths, areas of growth and philosophies on approaching learning and discipline with students. Our Superintendent emphasized our dedication to Trauma-Informed and Restorative responses, all with the lens of Cultural Proficiency and Equity. We communicated our plan to engage in our own professional learning to better serve our learners. We provided survey feedback opportunities and unfortunately, had limited response. This is an area of focus for me as well, in which I hope to develop trusting relationships with our families that will result in opening our lines of communication and developing feedback loops.

At the heart of equity work is elevating and prioritizing space for youth to engage in self study. On a recent site visit to California I heard the quote, “Schools violate our



humanity when they deny our identities and cultural connections.” My focus is to challenge our organization to put students at the center of all learning. More equitable outcomes will require us to involve students, families and community members in helping us understand what students want/need to learn in order to be successful, outside of state standards. Our key stakeholders will also be vital in better understanding how to create an environment that elevates all voices, honors and celebrates difference and attends to the development of our learners as whole and complete people.

One way I hope to address involving stakeholders is by creating teams of people to consult with. We have created a Student Advisory Council for MTS Secondary to meet with me and our Principal monthly to engage in dialogue on improving learning experiences, creating a more connected and compassionate learning community and planning for next year. I am meeting with each Family Engagement Coordinator to construct cultural considerations handouts for teachers and paraprofessionals to reference in regards to our Somali/East African, African American, Latinx/Hispanic and Indigenous learners. My hope is that with specific attention paid to our differences, we can elevate the vibrant assets that our differences are, lead with empathy and understanding and bridge deeper connections within our community.

Finally, we have a committee that is chaired by our Director of Food Service, who has also been a parent in our community and is a woman of color. We are a very diverse group and our task is to design a school year calendar that celebrates the cultural traditions and histories of our students throughout the year. Historically, we have only been good about honoring cultural traditions when we had a staff member who was dedicated to planning and leading an event. Our calendar will honor traditions regularly, offering ideas for embedding cultural conversations into the classroom, having information/imagery displayed in hallways, classrooms, bathrooms, on projectors and hosting events. The calendar will serve to provide structure that can be followed regardless of which impassioned staff we have.

Updated Information: I am a part of our MTS Secondary’s Leadership Team and in partnership with the Regional Centers for Excellence, we are diving into student voice. We explore different platforms, Pear Deck, Nearpod, Padlet, etc. that allow for some anonymous sharing. Teachers have begun to pilot check-in questions: What is on your heart or mind today; to mid-class assessment questions: How is this lesson going? Is there anything I can do to shift what I am doing to make the lesson clearer? And end-of-class questions: How did the lesson go for you today? Is there anything I can



shift for next time? Is there something that would help you understand the lesson better?

We are also working on normalizing feedback. We are noticing that adults really struggle with feedback, from each other, from students and then ultimately, from our families. If we hope to build relationships where our stakeholders can speak their truth and offer ideas to be considered and incorporated then we need to help our educators to embrace feedback. We are beginning to name how whiteness impacts our thinking and how it shows up in places. I believe that this resistance to feedback is rooted in ideas perpetuated by White Supremacy. My hope is to help our community be able to recognize when whiteness is dominating, how to name it and how to create space for finding value and assets in things we are less practiced at. We can normalize questioning, critical thinking, curiosity, expanding perspective and separate individual gifts from positional power. Our teachers have a lot to learn from folx who aren't teachers, if only they open themselves to listening for understanding, learning through curious partnership and freeing themselves from this notion that they must be the keeper of all knowledge. We all have a place and a purpose within our community and no one can nor should be the who knows all things. Ubuntu: I am because we are.

Next Steps

Our work will continue on course and will remain open to what surfaces now that our students and staff have a specific person to come to. As I continue to build positive relationships with all members of our learning community, I am entrusted with the experiences, thoughts, curiosities and concerns that swirl among us. As I consult with our staff of color, I gain more insight as to the many layers of work we have to do. I also must continue to do my own work in walking through the journey of self study, just as I ask of our staff.

Now that I have had an opportunity to settle into this role and understand our contract with MDHR, my goal for the rest of the year is to focus on a tracking system that is more streamlined across the district. Currently, each site tracks their own data in a spreadsheet that categorizes all the necessary points of data. I am the designated reviewer of this data and as I get more familiar with how we are tracking, we can begin to be more intentional about analyzing this information with as much attention as we do academic and attendance data. I want us all to be consistent about what, how and when we track, so that I can ensure that we have accurate data to review regularly. Once I can establish a review pattern for this data, I will facilitate dialogue with leaders about what we see and how we can be proactive around themes in behavior. Once we have



MTCS | K-12 Academic Community

completed our restorative rubric for responding to ruptures in relationships, we can be more intentional in our tracking. I hope to examine the finer nuances of discipline and how we can affect positive change rather than stick with broad data that tells little of the people behind the numbers.

Updated Information: Well, Covid-19 shifted all things, everywhere. Full disclosure, I made no progress on a tracking system. All of my energy went towards keeping a community together during some of the most challenging times our community has experienced. Having said that, when I reviewed the Outcome/Evaluation portion of our plan for reducing disparities, I can proudly say we have accomplished far more of those goals than we have not, amidst a pandemic and the largest movement towards social justice that I have experienced in my lifetime. Our community continues to center our equity work around honoring relationships, humanity, mattering and intentional antiracist action.

I am currently creating a Google Slides Bitmoji Classroom version of our MTCS Equity Library. It is packed with books, articles, Ted Talks, podcasts and series recommendations. My hope was to create something that would feel organic and mimic what it might feel like to be in my office with me and my resources. It is designed to promote curiosity and for people to click around and see what they find. I have debated on whether to add some additional labels for guidance like you might find in a real library but I hesitate. My fear is that if I define each space, people will either intentionally or unintentionally (driven by bias) avoid learning in certain areas. It is in phase two of asking for feedback and will be launched officially out to all staff my March. I would love to show this to Dr. Lanise Block when we connect in February. So far, feedback indicates it is a valuable tool and one more opportunity for exposure to multiple cultures and perspectives.

Finally, our Equity Committee is focused on what Equity in Action looks like at MTCS. We are exploring how we can infuse this work in all programs so that it becomes the plate in which we carry all things. Ultimately, our commitment to helping all of our students *thrive* is profound and we have the sense of urgency as wind in our sails. I am pushing hard while supporting and tending to the bruising that is inevitable when we get real and engage in dialogue we are deeply unpracticed at. The most effective way of changing behavior is to change the norm. Once our norm at MTCS is rooted in antiracism, equity, restorative practice and cultural proficiency, we will retain those who are aligned with our vision and we will gain those awaiting to join a community as beautiful and vibrant as ours.

Summary Data



MTS Secondary (seat-based program)

Total Number of Students: **159**

Demographics: **96% Students of Color; 32% EL; 31% SpEd; >90% F/R; & 12% Homeless**

Total Number of Office Referrals: **0**

Total Number of Suspensions/Expulsions: **42 Suspensions Issued**

Reasons for Suspensions: **Physical Fight, Instigating Violence, Marijuana Use, Weapon Threat, Spraying Fire Extinguisher, Possessing Alcohol, Assault on staff**

Number of Suspensions involving Gen Ed. Student: **25**

Number of Suspensions involving Special Ed. Student: **17**

Ethnicity of Students issued Suspensions: **Somali, African American, Native American, & Hispanic.**

Note: 18 of these incidents occurred on one day and were the result of a large in school fight during lunch that involved over 30 students and an incredible number of staff to diffuse. Many people were injured, police were involved and the trauma to our school was significant. The choice was made for the safety of the rest of the school to suspend those students who instigated and continued to engage in fighting despite staff attempts to diffuse the fight. This break was a necessity for all parties. In the days following this incident, we spent much needed time to process with both staff and then with students. It was a vital space to provide in order for our community to heal and move forward.

Additionally, we have also shifted away from office referrals to student support spaces. Our hope is to be proactive in responding to difficulties students are having and to be restorative in our approach by not referring a student out of class but by asking for support in wrapping around the student. The more we normalize that we can recognize when we are not in a good space for learning and to advocate for what we might need in order to regulate and rejoin the learning community, the more space we create for students to be agents of their own experience.

MTS Elementary (seat-based program) Transitioned to distance, some hybrid.

Total Number of Students: **80**

Demographics: **88% Students of Color; 12% EL; 15% SpEd; >90% F/R; & 12% Homeless**



Total Number of Office Referrals: **0**
Total Number of Suspensions/Expulsions: **0**
Reasons for Suspensions: **N/A**
Number of Suspensions involving Gen Ed. Student: **0**
Number of Suspensions involving Special Ed. Student: **0**
Ethnicity of Students issued Suspensions: **N/A**

Banaadir Elementary (seat-based program) Transitioned to distance learning.

Total Number of Students: **176**
Demographics: **100% Students of Color**
Total Number of Office Referrals: **0**
Total Number of Suspensions/Expulsions: **0**
Number of Suspensions involving Gen Ed. Student: **0**
Number of Suspensions involving Special Ed. Student: **0**
Ethnicity of Students issued Suspensions:

Banaadir Academy (seat-based program)-Transitioned to distance learning in March

Total Number of Students: **147**
Demographics: **100% Students of Color**
Total Number of Office Referrals: **0**
Total Number of Suspensions/Expulsions: **0**
Reasons for Suspensions: **N/A**
Number of Suspensions involving Gen Ed. Student: **0**
Number of Suspensions involving Special Ed. Student: **0**
Ethnicity of Students issued Suspensions: **N/A**

P.E.A.S.E. (seat-based program)-Transition to some Hybrid and full-time distance learning

Total Number of Students: **22**
Demographics: **18% Students of Color; 4% EL; 25% SpEd; 39% F/R; & 0% Homeless**
Total Number of Office Referrals: **0**
Total Number of Suspensions/Expulsions: **½ day suspension issued**
Reasons for Suspension: **Cussed out his teacher in front of the whole class.**
Number of Suspensions involving Gen Ed. Student: **0**



MTCS | K-12 Academic Community

Number of Suspensions involving Special Ed. Student: **1**
Ethnicity of Students issued Suspensions: **White**

P.E.A.S.E. has a true restorative process which does not include an “office referral” process. The view is that students need access to different supports to be more present in class. Supports include the Director, Chemical Dependency Counselor and a School Social Worker. When an incident arises, attention is paid to which support is needed, which the student helps to identify. This learning community regularly engages in restorative circles, mindful movement and addresses difficulty from a community approach.

Virtual High School (online program)

Total Number of Students: **383**
Demographics: **35% Students of Color; 2% EL; 22% SpEd; 40% F/R; & 5 % Homeless**
Total Number of Office Referrals: **0**
Total Number of Suspensions/Expulsions: **0**
Number of Suspensions involving Gen Ed. Student: **0**
Number of Suspensions involving Special Ed. Student: **0**
Ethnicity of Students issued Suspensions: **N/A**

Connections Academy (online program)

Total Number of Students: **4,475**
Demographics: **25% Students of Color; 1% EL; 16% SpEd; 48% F/R; 1% Homeless**
Total Number of Office Referrals: **0**
Total Number of Suspensions/Expulsions: **0**
Number of Suspensions involving Gen Ed. Student: **0**
Number of Suspensions involving Special Ed. Student: **0**
Ethnicity of Students issued Suspensions: **N/A**

Conclusion

We acknowledge that we are only beginning to get to all the things that live “under the iceberg” of equitable discipline and educational practices. However, this work has my full attention and unwavering dedication to help lead our district in doing this work daily. There is never a moment when the lens of equity isn’t a part of the



MTCS | K-12 Academic Community

conversation, examination and decision-making process. I consult with our Superintendent, Brian Erlandson, regularly, to ensure that we are always being intentional in aligning our actions with our values and beliefs. We are in constant reflection and dialogue about how we better attend to the needs of our students. By elevating the voices of those most marginalized we will have different conversations, share different perspectives and together, we will find ways to deepen our connection, understanding, and compassion. With meaningful engagement, over time, we will live closer to the equitable learning environment we hope to be.

Wendy Lorenz-Walraven, MSW, LGSW, LSSW
Director of Equity and Diversity
Minnesota Transitions Charter School