

Repurposing the Structure and Language of MTSS at a Systems Level to Proactively Support Schools

Innovations from Green Dot Public Schools California



As they thought about how to improve outcomes for students coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders in Green Dot Public Schools California faced a familiar challenge:

“While I believe we have a lot of resources, there are places where there always feels like there’s scarcity. We seem to keep running into challenges with time, personnel, facilities, etc.”

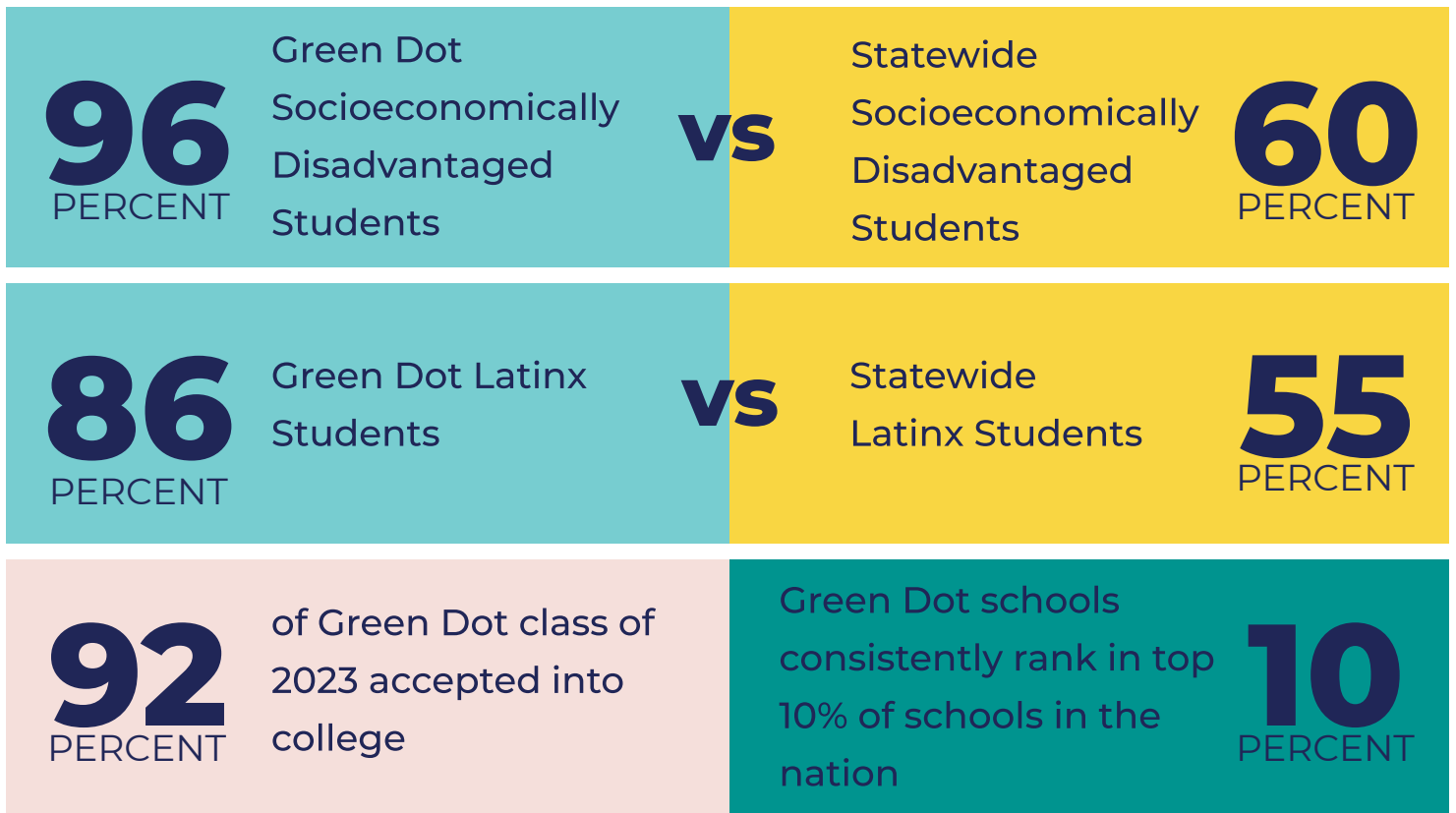
-Leilani Abulon, Chief Programs Officer

Like school systems across the country, Green Dot Public Schools California must make strategic decisions about how to best use their resources to support students enrolled in their schools. At the same time, they must make this process of resource allocation transparent and coherent to schools so that school leaders have a clear understanding of the relationship between their school and the support provided by the Home Office.

This brief describes an innovation that Green Dot Public Schools California co-created with SWIFT Education Center to use the structure and language of Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) to rethink how support is provided from the Home Office to schools in their Charter Management Organization (CMO). Inspired by the Tiered Instruction Matrix designed by SWIFT that focuses on student support, Green Dot developed a parallel tool that focuses on the support provided to schools by teams at the Home Office. By using data and explicitly defining levels of support through a Tiered Support Matrix for each department, leaders at Green Dot Public Schools California’s Home Office are moving toward an intentionally designed and proactively communicated approach to supporting schools’ needs.

Green Dot Public Schools California

Green Dot Public Schools is a nonprofit network of public charter schools with locations across the nation. The first Green Dot California school opened in 2000 with a mission to prepare all students for college, leadership, and life by transforming public education for students in Los Angeles neighborhoods that had been historically underserved. The vision was to create high quality choices for parents via small, successful public schools that provided students with outstanding educational opportunities. The leaders' belief then was the same as now: that public schools can do better and must provide students of color and students from low-income families with rigorous and equitable learning experiences. Today, Green Dot California serves approximately 10,000 students at 18 middle and high schools across Los Angeles. Their student body reflects their commitment to serving the under-served, and their schools are recognized, both within California and nationally, for their academic excellence (Green Dot, n.d.).



Sources: Green Dot, n.d.; Green Dot, 2021; Green Dot 2023a, 2023b

SWIFT Education Center Partnership

As part of its commitment to be innovative and agile in support of their students, leaders of Green Dot participated in 2019-2023 Networked Improvement Community (NIC) of CMO school leaders, supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The aim of this project was to improve outcomes for students with disabilities in schools with a high proportion of Black, LatinX, and low-income students. SWIFT Education Center was a partner in this initiative and provided learning sessions, job-embedded coaching, and organizational assessments to 10 CMOs, including Green Dot Public Schools California. Coming into the project, leaders at Green Dot California knew that they wanted to focus on strengthening MTSS, so they participated in a Professional Learning Community facilitated by SWIFT through the larger project and consulted with SWIFT about how to implement MTSS in their CMO. Both concurrent with and following the project, Green Dot California extended their partnership with SWIFT for two additional years to continue their work to implement MTSS and make overall improvements to their school system.

Green Dot Strategic Plan

At the same time that Green Dot California leaders participated in this project to improve MTSS implementation, they developed a strategic plan to guide the CMO's work for the coming years. The 2020-2021 school year presented many immediate needs, from getting Chromebooks to students to supporting educators who were teaching virtually for the first time. Yet leaders at Green Dot knew that they needed to start planning for what their school system would look like as life returned to the "new normal." In 2021, Green Dot California released [Reimagine 2030](#), their strategic plan to rethink schools and organize the priorities of the CMO. Organized around four pillars, the strategic

plan identifies ten key levers that will help Green Dot work toward their strategic objectives. Building off of the work with the Gates Foundation and SWIFT, lever 1A, Support the Needs of Every Scholar, calls for Green Dot to invest in a robust equity-based MTSS.

Developing the Tiered Support Matrix

With a solid foundation from the earlier partnership and clear strategic alignment, Green Dot was well positioned to move their work with MTSS forward. As defined by McCart and Miller (2020, p. 6),

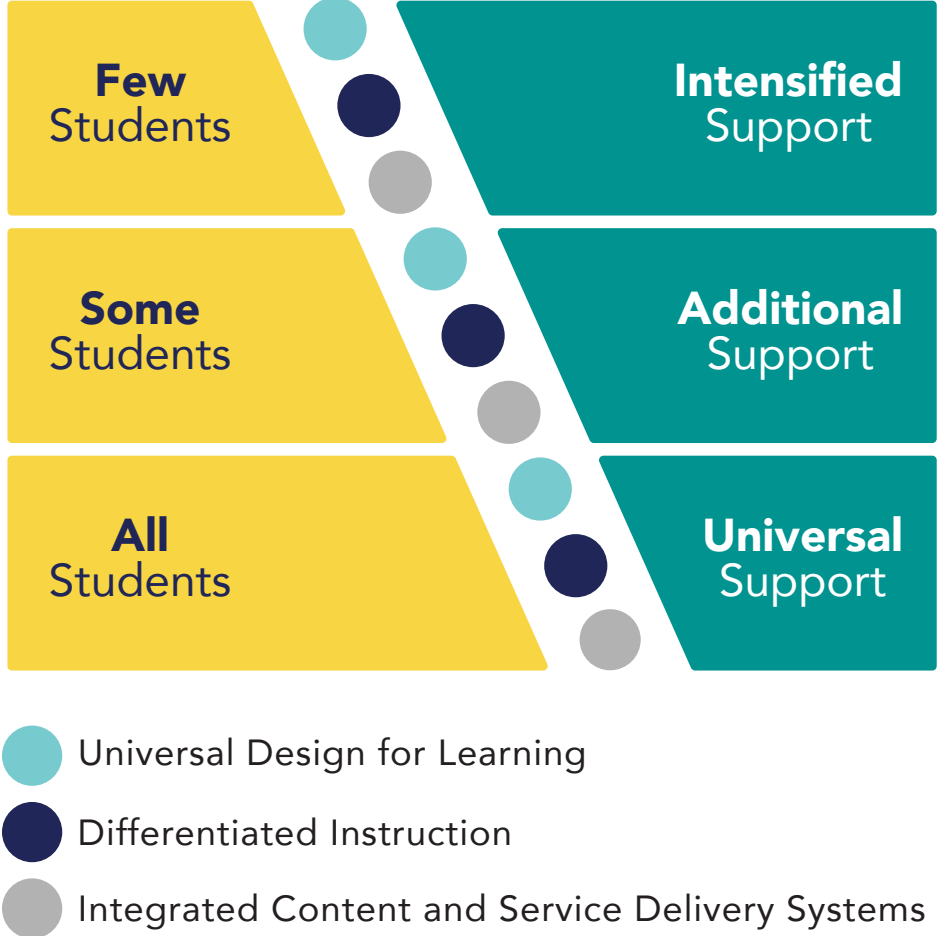
Equity-based MTSS is a complex schooling structure that brings together educator knowledge of context, science, and systems, resulting in positive benefits for all students. It is an organizing framework that uses specific data sources to inform decisions coordinating diverse academic, behavioral, and social resources to meet the needs of each and every student in a dynamic and timely fashion.

A well-implemented MTSS provides a framework through which educators can use the best available data to help them match available resources with different levels of student need in a flexible way.

A defining characteristic of Equity-based MTSS is that levels of student support are differentiated across tiers. As represented in Figure 1, the left side in yellow describes the number of students each level is expected to support, while the right side in teal describes the intensity of support those students receive. Not all students need the same intensity or duration of support for various academic, behavioral, social, or emotional learning needs, and a well-defined MTSS defines when and how resources are deployed to

provide that support. The circles running diagonally across the center of the image represent key instructional practices and ways of working that educators use at every level of support. As a system, Equity-based MTSS is continually evaluated and adjusted to make sure all students are getting what they need in a way that is manageable for educators.

Figure 1: Equity-based MTSS at the School/Classroom Level



Through their work with SWIFT, the structure and language of universal, additional, and intensified support is becoming common across the Green Dot California system as it applies to students and school buildings. Susana Campo, Senior Director of Special Education and Psychological Services at Green Dot Public Schools California, commented that “the emphasis on MTSS has helped us enhance our ability to share a common language around strengthening universal

supports in our classrooms and school communities.” While recognizing that there is still more work to be done, the MTSS lens opened up opportunities for collaboration and rethinking how student support is provided.

Responding to the Need for Coherence at CMO level

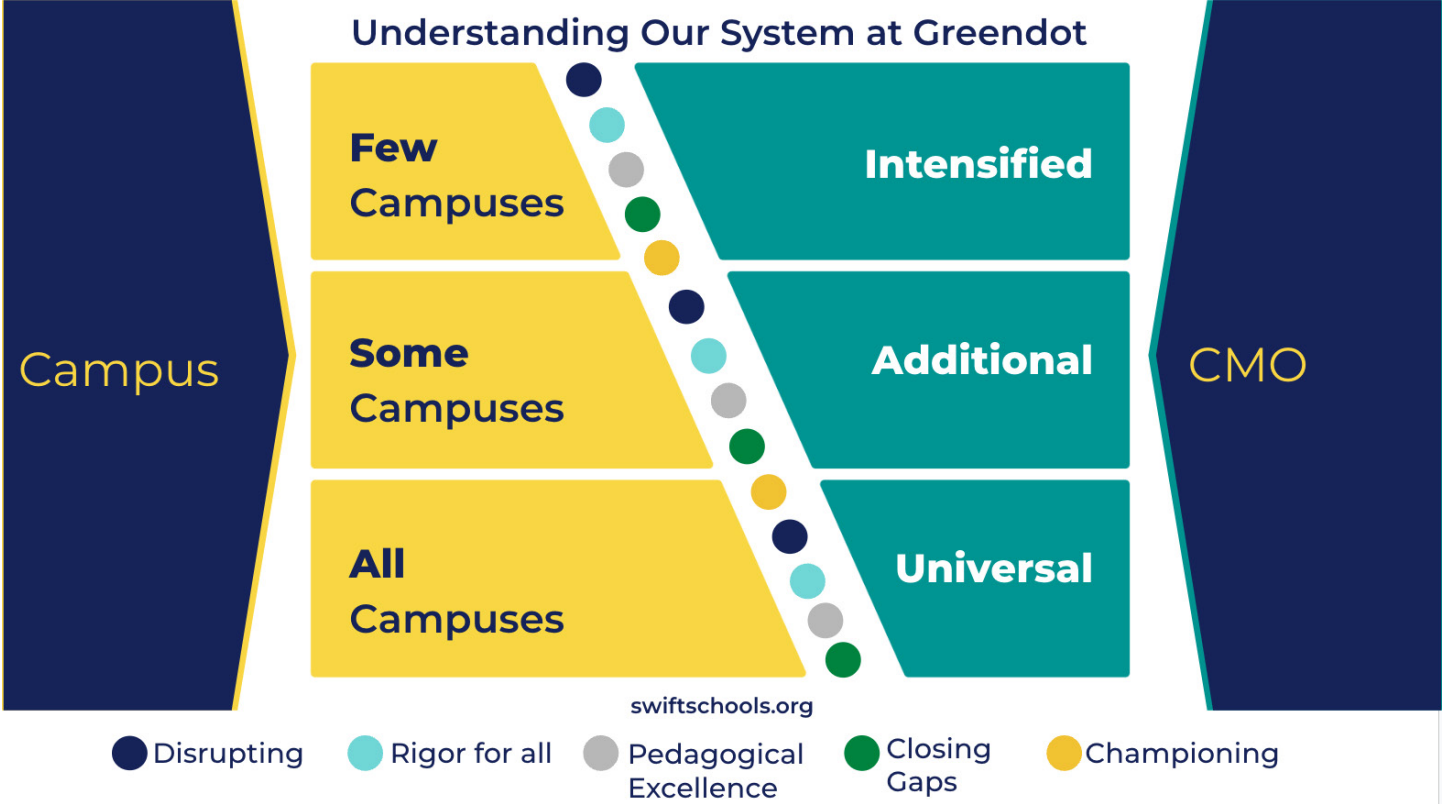
As leaders in the Home Office began to collaboratively plan with SWIFT about how to continue the work toward their strategic goals, they took the time to listen to school leaders about their hopes and concerns and realized that this structure and language could also be used to rethink how support is thought about at the CMO level. A retreat with principals and assistant principals revealed a desire for more clarity about roles and responsibilities of Home Office staff, as well as about what services the Home Office provides to schools. As one principal stated:

The core feedback I have is that now more than ever I feel like I am being asked to do more than I have the time in the day to. Every meeting with every member of the Home Office should be about what that person is doing to support my school. [...] It would be helpful to have a resource to go to & to revisit some of the expectations around roles & responsibilities.

Given this feedback, Leilani Abulon, Chief Programs Officer with Green Dot Public Schools California, began thinking about how the structure and language of MTSS could be applied at the organizational level to clarify how support was provided between the Home Office and individual school campuses. She wanted a shared language that would work across different types of teams out of the Home Office, from the academic team to the operations team, to clarify how decisions were made about levels of support provided to individual campuses. Abulon reached out to her SWIFT partners, Karmen Clark and Dawn Miller, with

her idea. Together, they developed a new variation of the Equity-based MTSS image presented in Figure 1 that reflected levels of support at the Home Office level (see Figure 2). Notice that on the left in yellow, the number of campuses, instead of students, are represented, and the dots running diagonally across represent Green Dot’s equity commitments that are threaded through everything that they do.

Figure 2: Equity-based MTSS at the CMO Level



Professional Learning and Coaching

Using this new systems-level framework for thinking about MTSS at Green Dot, SWIFT led two professional learning sessions with members of the Organizational Leadership Team in the winter/spring of 2023. First, the group did a resource mapping exercise where they mapped out which resources were available for each team. In the next learning session, teams focused on thinking about how their specific team or department supports school campuses and began using the

structures and language of MTSS to think about resource allocation. Abulon noted that she wanted to add transparency around which supports schools were offered from the Home Office, clarifying what universal support looks like for all schools, which data points are used to intensify support, etc.

In order to help each team within the Home Office articulate this, Abulon and Clark created a variation of the [Tiered Instruction Matrix](#), a tool developed by SWIFT for use at the school level, to a Tiered Support Matrix that explicitly focused on proactive resource allocation and data use at the CMO-school level. Consistent with SWIFT's overall theory of action, which is informed by work out of the National Implementation Research Network, this approach with Green Dot focused on the CMO/district level as the point of intervention in order to effect transformation at the school level. In the learning session, facilitators asked members of the Organizational Leadership Team to begin filling out this new [Tiered Support Matrix](#) for each team to specify what all schools get as part of universal support and how data is used to determine the need for additional and intensified support. SWIFT staff then set up individual meetings with each team within the Home Office to review drafts of their Tiered Support Matrices and provide feedback to department leaders.

Continued Learning through Tiered Support Matrices

Use of the Tiered Support Matrix is ongoing at Green Dot and in its early stages, but they are already seeing the benefits of articulating levels of support at the CMO-school level. SWIFT's Dawn Miller noted that, drawing on her experiences working to implement MTSS in schools across the country, it is usually fairly straightforward for teams to articulate what they provide at the universal level. Teams tend to struggle identifying what data can be used to elevate a student (or, in

this case, a school campus) to the additional and intensified levels of support. By having to think through and articulate what to put in each department's Tiered Support Matrix, teams at Green Dot Public Schools California articulated what data they would use to offer additional or intensified support to a school. Rather than simply waiting for a principal to call and ask for help, teams worked on identifying which data they would use to proactively offer support for schools' needs and get ahead of potential problems.

One key to the usefulness of this exercise was the disposition of the team members at Green Dot Public Schools California. Miller was impressed with the willingness of Home Office leaders to ask the hard questions:

They question deeply. They question each other, they question the system they've created and that they support. [...] They're open to looking at their system very critically without it being critical. They're open to making their system be what it needs to be.

With this willingness to deeply assess whether resource allocation was truly supporting the goals outlined in the strategic plan, leaders at Green Dot were open to finding new ways of doing business that could better support school campuses.

Another aspect of the project that was important to its usefulness was the co-planning that occurred between SWIFT and Green Dot leadership. Rather than coming in with a pre-canned presentation about MTSS that is used with all schools, SWIFT learned about the priorities and struggles at Green Dot Public Schools California to design professional learning that had immediate relevance to their strategic plan and issues they were facing in their system. Abulon stated: "I really credit the partnership with SWIFT, and helping me and us to think

differently about an integrated system that is less siloed,” stated Abulon. “Like many school systems, [...] we didn’t have the right mechanisms or structures to make it all feel like we were all working towards the same ends.” Clark agreed that the process of completing the Tiered Support Matrices was beneficial to the CMO, saying that it helped “schools leaders and educators understand what each department does and how they use data to improve outcomes.”

Now in the first school year since starting with the Tiered Support Matrices, Green Dot is using these tools to help keep them on track with their strategic plan. Abulon noted that the process of articulating when campuses would receive additional and intensified support from the Home Office helped to match data to the key levers outlined in the strategic plan. Monthly meetings are held about each of the key levers, including a discussion of leading and lagging indicators and how that data should inform levels of support they offer to school campuses. Because the teams are reevaluating data on a monthly basis, they are able to adjust levels of support to schools in a dynamic way that was not a common practice before, allowing the CMO to be much more responsive to emerging school needs.

Another advantage has been to have a clear pathway through which they can articulate to schools which supports are available and how those might change over time. For example, when the Home Office Culture Team had a vacancy in a key role, they adjusted the Culture Tiered Support Matrix to clearly share with schools how that vacancy would affect universal, additional, and intensified support.

As stated at the beginning of this brief, CMOs and districts across the country face the perpetual challenge of providing support to schools and students with resources that often feel insufficient while

trying to bring coherence to multiple initiatives. This brief outlined the way that one CMO, Green Dot California, is bringing intentionality and coherence to their relationships with school campuses. They are continuing to refine how they use the Tiered Support Matrices to provide support to school campuses, with SWIFT as their partner in the 2023-24 school year.

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