CADRE

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Findings from Interviews with Colorado Multitiered Systems of Support (COMTSS) Coordinators

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About CADRE

The Center for Assessment, Design, Research and Evaluation (CADRE) is housed in the School of Education at the University of Colorado Boulder. The mission of CADRE is to produce generalizable knowledge that improves the ability to assess student learning and to evaluate programs and methods that may have an effect on this learning. Projects undertaken by CADRE staff represent a collaboration with the ongoing activities in the School of Education, the University, and the broader national and international community of scholars and stakeholders involved in educational assessment and evaluation.

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Introduction

This report presents findings from a series of interviews conducted to gather insights about the implementation of the Colorado Multi-tiered System of Supports (COMTSS) in participating districts. The interview focused on three key areas: 1) understanding the extent to which participating in this grant resulted in introducing new or improved structures and process to existing COMTSS work; 2) the perceived utility of COMTSS progress-monitoring tools provided by the Office of Learning Supports (OLS) at the Colorado Department of Education to participating districts; and 3) identifying key learnings that resulted from engaging in this work for a few years. Since the interviews required participants to take a retrospective look at their district's COMTSS implementation work, we limited the pool of participants to Cohort 1 and 2 sites.

We begin by describing the interviewee selection process. Details about the interview transcript analysis process can be found in Appendix A. In the results section that follows, we highlight common findings that emerged across participants' responses, along with selected unique insights that added depth and nuance. We conclude with a set of recommendations for CDE staff to consider when adjusting the tools and supports to better meet the needs of district and school partners.

Sampling Methods

Selecting Interview Participants

The interview participants were drawn from a convenience sample from the pool of Cohort 1 and 2 COMTSS coordinators at the district or Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) level. The OLS COMTSS staff sent an email invitation soliciting the voluntary participation of coordinators to share their perspectives and experiences with the COMTSS grant work. Those who agreed to participate scheduled their interviews directly through a scheduling link. A total of 12 districts and BOCES—out of 28 sites participating in the grant—were interviewed via Zoom by two CADRE members between November 15, 2024, and January 24, 2025.

The interviews followed a semi-structured format, using an interview protocol that was collaboratively developed by OLS and CADRE. A copy of the protocol is located in Appendix B. To facilitate the discussion, participants received the interview protocol in advance, along with the School Fidelity Tool (SFT), Look-For-Tool, and District Capacity Assessment. Eleven out of 12 participants shared with CADRE staff that they reviewed the protocol and the tools before the interview.

Table 1 and 2 summarizes the characteristics of the participants, and the sites represented. On average, the interviews lasted 40 minutes and ranged from 27 to 61 minutes. As shown in Table 1, small and rural districts comprised a significant portion of the sample (66.6% and 83.3%, respectively) and this proportion is reflective of the larger population of participating districts. That is, out of the 28 Cohort 1 and 2 sites, there are only three large districts participating in the grant.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Baseline characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Time in COMMTS role		
Since start	8	66.6
Joined later	4	33.3
Coordinator Level		
Regional	2	16.6
Districts	10	83.3

Table 2. Site Characteristics

Baseline characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Size		
Large	2	16.6
Medium	2	16.6
Small	8	66.6
School context		
Rural	10	83.3
Suburban	1	8.3
Urban	1	8.3
Cohort		
One	8	66.6
Two	4	33.3

Results

We organized the interview data collected according to the main topics outlined in the interview protocol. Within each topic, we differentiate between insights that were mentioned across multiple sites and those that represent unique but meaningful insights. For sections related to specific tools, results are further categorized into positive aspects, challenges, and suggestions for improvement.

Major Shifts in MTSS Practices

The first interview question focused on identifying major shifts or changes in COMTSS practices those districts experienced as a result of participating in the COMTSS grant. A central observation reported by all interviewees was the adoption of a systemic framework that brought greater coherence to COMTSS efforts across schools. The COMTSS framework offered a common structure that helped align previously disconnected initiatives into a more integrated and strategic system. As one coordinator from a large district explained:

"As a result of this grant, we have elevated COMTSS to be more about how all of the various systems within our school work together in an interconnected manner, where decisions made in one arena influence decisions made in another."

For the two Regional coordinators interviewed, the grant also supported greater regional integration, helping foster more cohesive collaboration across districts. In addition, six sites reported that the grant facilitated the development of district-based structures that supported shared understanding and a common language around COMTSS. One small, rural district described this shift:

"We have done a huge push, especially in our secondary schools, our middle school and high school, towards kind of across our district. So defining out what best first instruction is, and we just created a framework and a definition for what COMTSS versus Response to Intervention (RTI) are and what those look like within our district."

Several districts also implemented locally tailored solutions to support coherence and accessibility. For example, one large district developed an internal resource site where staff could access key materials, such as the SFT and flowcharts illustrating the COMTSS process. In some cases, these structural shifts contributed to the formation of learning communities that fostered cross-team collaboration and knowledge sharing.

Another significant shift, reported by coordinators at nine sites, was the deepening of problem-solving and decision-making processes related to COMTSS. Rather than relying on quick, reactive solutions to address emerging issues, teams began adopting more sustainable, long-term approaches. One medium-sized rural district shared:

"One of the big issues that we took on is attendance. What is our policy? What is our practice and how do we address attendance? And that was through the lens of COMTSS."

This shift moved teams beyond academic performance and compliance-based approaches and toward intentional, data-driven decision-making. That is, teams were being composed based

on areas of expertise, rather than familiarity or availability, and decisions were informed by meaningful data analysis and reflection rather than intuition. A BOCES coordinator from a small rural district described the change in team dynamics:

"There's always this introduction of why are we even giving this? Why are you collecting the data behind it? And then after they do, they immediately see the results, they immediately start doing a pre-analysis of what the results mean and then they go back to their district teams and they dig in, then they go back to their school teams, and they dig in even further."

That said, the transition was not easy for all sites. At two districts, the shift toward a "go slow to go fast" philosophy—which encourages thoughtful, phased implementation—presented challenges. In these cases, schools felt pressure to implement solutions quickly, which at times conflicted with the more deliberate pace encouraged by the grant.

Clarifying Misconceptions and Recognizing Variation in Impact

For seven sites, participation in COMTSS helped correct longstanding misconceptions about the COMTSS framework. Many coordinators shared that they initially equated COMTSS with RTI. Through their involvement in the grant, however, they developed a more accurate understanding of COMTSS as a broader, systems-level approach to supporting all students.

While the majority of districts saw growth in their COMTSS implementation, some came to the work with limited prior experience. For three sites, this was the first exposure to COMTSS as a distinct framework, as their earlier efforts had focused solely on RTI. In some cases, the two terms had even been used interchangeably. COMTSS provided these districts with foundational tools and structures to begin shifting toward a more comprehensive model.

Despite these promising developments, not all districts experienced meaningful change. One large district, in particular, struggled to implement COMTSS with consistency and purpose. Although it had been part of the grant for several years, the coordinator shared that the district was still "all over the place" - a reflection of ongoing challenges in building a unified structure for COMTSS implementation. As they reflected:

"I don't think we have benefitted from participating in the COMTSS work."

This variation underscores the importance of strong leadership, clear vision, and context-sensitive support in ensuring the success of systems-level initiatives like COMTSS.

Feedback on Progress Monitoring Tools

In the next segment of the interviews, coordinators were asked to reflect on the utility of tools developed as part of the COMTSS grant to support progress monitoring. This section focuses on responses related to the SFT, summarizing both frequently occurring ideas and site-specific perspectives. Participant feedback is organized into three categories: positive aspects, challenges and suggestions for improvement, and unique reflections that offer additional insight into how the tool is experienced in different contexts.

School Fidelity Tool

The SFT emerged as one of the more widely used and discussed resources across participating sites. Coordinators shared a range of insights about its purpose, perceived benefits, and implementation challenges. This section summarizes common experiences related to the

tool's strengths and limitations, as well as site-specific experiences that illustrate how the tool supported or complicated COMTSS efforts on the ground.

Positive Aspects of the School Fidelity Tool

A key benefit cited by coordinators at five sites was the SFT's ability to facilitate deep reflection and meaningful discussion. One participant from a small district described how the tool prompted unexpectedly rich conversations:

"I think just looking through the tool, it creates a shared understanding [...] And to me it's the conversation that's the power, not the rating. That's the power."

Another participant highlighted how the SFT promotes intentional communication, especially in small districts where informal exchanges are common. However, one site cautioned that while the tool effectively initiates reflective dialogue, this does not always translate into concrete goal setting or action planning.

The tool's role as a diagnostic measure of progress was affirmed by coordinators from seven sites. These participants reported that the SFT helps identify both strengths and areas in need of improvement, supporting data-driven planning and resource allocation. A coordinator from a large district shared:

"We've asked not only the schools in the grant to complete the SFT, but all of our schools. And so we get that data from them and that gives us the opportunity to understand both where—which of those specific practice profiles are schools implementing in a really robust way and which are more challenging for them. So that's helpful for us in terms of planning any trainings that we might need."

In addition, the tool supports long-term growth tracking. One coordinator noted that while progress in schools is often incremental, the SFT helps capture these small yet meaningful changes:

"Sometimes it's hard to see the progress because at the end of the day, progress that we get in schools are minuscule and people want to see big closing of the achievement gaps and all this stuff. And I think that the tool helps measure some of those minuscule things that have to do with systems and structure." (Medium-sized district)

Two sites also noted that the SFT contributes to continuity of work across staff transitions, serving as a reference point when new administrators join. In contexts with high leadership turnover, this continuity helps schools maintain alignment with COMTSS goals and prevents the loss of institutional knowledge.

Challenges and Suggestions for Improvement

Despite these benefits, five sites expressed concern that the SFT is often perceived as a compliance exercise rather than a tool for meaningful reflection. For three coordinators, completing the SFT felt more like checking a grant-required box than engaging in an improvement process. In two of those sites, teams found the task repetitive. In another, the school team struggled to see the tool's value at first—but perceptions shifted once tangible results emerged, leading to greater appreciation of its usefulness.

Five participants also cited the time-consuming nature and length of the SFT as a challenge. Completing the tool took longer than anticipated, and in some cases, schools viewed the process as burdensome. One participant shared that their schools preferred a more streamlined, data-focused approach—such as an automatically scored form—over the current discussion-based format.

Concerns about the accuracy and relevance of the SFT's content were also raised by four participants. Some items were seen as misaligned with local COMTSS work. A coordinator from a large district explained:

"There are some questions or some of the practice profiles that schools find more applicable than others... and so it's all of these pieces where some of the questions are not really connected to the work that the COMTSS team is doing."

Two participants noted that misunderstandings of SFT items sometimes led to inaccurate scoring. One coordinator described schools giving a zero score out of confusion:

"So what I've heard is that some folks, they just take a guess or they put zero. They [tell me], 'I don't even know, not yet. Sure, whatever.' And then they email me and [they tell me]…'we hate this question…it's really stupid.' And I [respond], 'I hear you...'" (Large district).

Others reported that inflated scoring was a concern, often driven by a desire to "get credit" rather than engage in honest reflection. One high school, for example, rated itself highly across all areas due to misunderstandings about the tool's intent.

Three participants raised issues with the language and phrasing of items in the SFT. A coordinator explained:

"Some of the language on this tool—the acronyms, the wording, the phrasing—is not information that... they're not words that the schools use. So I was talking to a colleague and she was like, 'I don't even know what half of these questions are asking me because it's a little jargony.'"

This disconnect between the tool's language and the everyday vocabulary used in schools added to inconsistencies in response accuracy. Participants emphasized that a strong foundational understanding of COMTSS and the tool's purpose is critical for teams to engage in thoughtful and accurate self-assessment.

Concerns about redundancy across tools were raised by three participants. Overlap between the SFT, District Capacity Assessment (DCA), and local tools was especially challenging for small districts, where the same individuals often complete multiple assessments. Suggested solutions included allowing districts to alternate tool use each year or select items based on their stage of implementation.

Five coordinators also expressed confusion around who should complete or inform specific items. Some SFT items seemed more appropriate for district leaders than school-based teams, making it difficult to assign responsibility—particularly in large districts. In small districts with shared buildings, questions about which school level responses applied created further complications:

"So we struggled a little bit with answering the questions in terms of, well, is this the work that we've done…[as a] district, or would this be specifically only something happening in middle school even though we're all together?"

To address this issue, one large district is developing guidelines for completing the SFT to be included in their district handbook.

Unique Site-Specific Reflections

In addition to the common benefits and challenges surfaced from the interviews, a few coordinators offered distinct insights that highlight specific conditions or use cases of the SFT:

- One small district emphasized the need for a shared understanding of COMTSS concepts to complete the SFT accurately. Within their school, team members interpreted terms like "communication" differently, which impacted the quality of discussion. This site recommended offering training sessions on COMTSS language and concepts to ensure consistency during tool completion.

- Another participant from a small district raised the challenge of facilitating SFT discussions while also serving as an active team member. They suggested using an external facilitator to lead the process and take notes, allowing internal team members to fully engage in reflection:

  "Then when I'm trying to be a team member and facilitate it, I think that it gets difficult to separate out those roles and it just doesn't go as well."

- One site noted that while the SFT produces valuable insights, there is limited guidance on how to translate those insights into action. Without clear next steps, the potential of the tool is diminished. The participant recommended more support or resources to bridge reflection with concrete planning.

Look-for-Tool

Although use of the Look-For-Tool was limited across most sites, as mentioned by nine sites, several participants provided valuable feedback on its perceived utility and potential applications. This section summarizes reported benefits and concerns with the tool, and unique site-level reflections that highlight variation in how the tool has been interpreted and applied.

Positive Aspects of the Look-For Tool

While adoption of the Look-For-Tool remains in the early stages for many sites, some coordinators expressed enthusiasm about its potential value. Three participants described the tool as a helpful resource for supporting fidelity checks and guiding team reflections. In these cases, the structure provided by the tool helped teams focus their implementation efforts. A participant from a medium size district shared:

"It caused a lot of deep reflection and thinking too. It was not easy. It took us probably four hours total to come to a place of agreement on that tool for something that's so easy. We were all shocked, but just the conversation was really good around it."

Four participants highlighted the tool's utility in collecting feedback and tracking implementation. As one Regional Coordinator noted:

"I will personally say the purpose behind it, my team absolutely loves it because it's necessary that we're not just throwing out initiatives. There's too many times where we throw something

out for professional development or learning with the expectation.[...] And then there's never that follow-up check to make sure is it really making the difference that we're intending it to make". For these districts, the tool contributed to systematizing the collection of implementation data in a manageable and actionable format.

Three district coordinators appreciated the tool's flexibility and adaptability. One described the Look-For Tool as easy to modify, allowing their team to isolate components most relevant to their local context. Another site reported repurposing the tool as a self-assessment for teachers, which they found particularly useful for fidelity monitoring and ongoing reflection. One site emphasized that, although simple in design, the tool helped prompt valuable dialogue and collaborative learning among staff.

Challenges and Suggestions for Improvement

Despite these positive experiences, limited and inconsistent use of the Look-For Tool was a recurring point raised across interviews. Many sites reported that they were still in the early stages of implementation or did not find its use meaningful. A coordinator from a large site explained, "I haven't used the Look-For Tool beyond what's been required by the grant."

Similarly, a small district coordinator commented, "We'll use the one for the term of the grant and then it's going to go bye-bye."

Six sites chose not to use the tool due to the availability of existing tools that served similar purposes. As one large district coordinator explained, "There are already a lot of observational tools available in our district that administrators and coaches use. And so it doesn't really make sense for us to introduce another tool."

One site noted that schools were reluctant to complete the tool if it meant submitting a "baseline of zero" for compliance purposes. Several participants shared that the Look-For Tool often gathered information already collected through observation protocols or existing monitoring processes. One coordinator recommended allowing schools to cross-reference the Look-For Tool with their current instruments, rather than requiring its use in its original format. Without this flexibility, the tool felt duplicative and burdensome, particularly in schools already managing multiple requirements.

There was also a strong call for greater contextual adaptation and clearer guidance. One district described the tool as functioning more like a checklist, not requiring expert administration—though in practice, their site was using it as if it did. Three other sites emphasized the importance of calibrating administration, especially since both teachers and team members were using the tool. These varying perspectives suggest a broader need for clarity on the tool's purpose and intended use.

Two sites expressed concerns that some items did not align with their school's work. As one small district noted, "We did struggle a little bit with the grant-required item and that it was very specific... felt kind of counterintuitive to what we were doing."

Some participants viewed the Look-For Tool more as a compliance requirement than a meaningful resource, which impacted engagement. Six coordinators indicated they were unlikely to continue using it beyond the grant period, citing limited added value and an unclear purpose. One participant shared frustration with being required to use the tool in its original form, despite preferring to integrate its elements into existing systems.

Unique Site-Specific Reflections

In addition to the common challenges and strengths noted above, several sites shared unique experiences and challenges related to the Look-For Tool:

- One district found the tool less effective for teacher feedback, as the items were too broad and lengthy to be useful in that context.
- Another district noted that the tool's late introduction and limited guidance from OLS made integration into existing systems difficult.
- One site expressed concern that required items on student engagement strategies did not align with their implementation goals.
- In one district, the tool facilitated peer-to-peer classroom observations, giving teachers opportunities to observe one another using the tool in practice.
- In very small districts, the tool was perceived as unnecessary, as staff already had close knowledge of classroom practices. In these cases, formal observation tools were seen as redundant.

District Capacity Assessment

The District Capacity Assessment (DCA) was generally viewed as a valuable diagnostic tool, particularly during the early phases of COMTSS implementation. Coordinators highlighted both its strengths and its evolving limitations over time. This section summarizes recurring benefits and challenges with the tool, as well as unique site-level reflections that illustrate variation in how the DCA has been interpreted and applied across different district contexts.

Positive Aspects of the District Capacity Assessment

The DCA was widely recognized for supporting goal-setting and structured planning. Multiple participants described how the tool helped them examine current practices, identify capacity gaps, and clarify expectations for COMTSS work. A coordinator from a large district shared, "Having a tool has been really helpful for us to think about how we're structuring things at the district level and to really analyze our own practice and to elevate MTSS and elevate the work that's happening in schools. The DCA has been really helpful in that sense."

The DCA's rubric-style format allowed teams to track incremental progress and visualize areas for growth. One coordinator noted that the tool sparked important conversations early in the grant, especially around how district-level support could strengthen implementation across grade levels.

Participants also appreciated that the DCA encouraged reflection rather than feeling like a compliance requirement. Three sites remarked that, unlike more rigid reporting tools, the DCA created opportunities to celebrate progress and foster productive dialogue. One district emphasized that the tool helped identify capacity gaps, which in turn bolstered their case for requesting additional resources.

In several districts, the DCA served as a strategic planning tool. One site described it as an "educational resource" that helped staff deepen their understanding of COMTSS. Another found

that completing the DCA prompted documentation of systems and communication processes—particularly valuable in small districts where informal practices were common. In these cases, the tool contributed to continuity across leadership transitions.

Challenges and Areas for Improvement

Despite its strengths, participants identified several challenges that limited the DCA's long-term utility. A key concern shared by four sites was the disconnect between DCA findings and district strategic planning. While the tool surfaced useful insights, those insights were not always reflected in Unified Improvement Plans (UIPs) or other planning processes. As one small site noted, "We have some internal goals that take precedence over anything that that tool would generate." As a result, COMTSS-related goals were sometimes siloed, limiting alignment and sustained momentum.

Four sites also noted that the DCA felt more relevant to senior administrators than to COMTSS coordinators. One Regional Coordinator explained that while the tool supported regional planning, it felt less actionable at the school or COMTSS coordinator level. Although regional coordinators use the Regional Capacity Assessment (RCA), the coordinator was referencing the DCA specifically as "less actionable" for school personnel and for COMTSS coordinators.

Another issue—raised by two sites—was the tool's limited ability to capture annual progress, particularly in large districts where change occurs slowly or across multiple systems. In these cases, results often underrepresented the full scope of implementation. One coordinator shared that returning results to teams could feel discouraging when the data didn't reflect the work underway or captured factors outside of their control.

Redundancy with other tools was also a concern. Three participants—mostly from small districts—shared that staff were responsible for completing both the DCA and SFT, creating burden and fatigue. Some suggested alternating tool use by year or breaking the DCA into phases aligned to stages of implementation.

For two large districts, coordination challenges limited the DCA's effectiveness. Organizational restructuring and distributed responsibilities made it difficult to collect accurate information, particularly on items requiring input from leaders or departments outside of the COMTSS team. These issues were compounded by limited communication across departments.

Four sites also expressed confusion about who should complete the DCA. As one small district asked, "Do we have the right people at the right table, or do we have the right voices in the conversation?... I think that when we go through some of the admin changes that we're going to go through, we're going to need to relook and say who needs to be at the table."

One district found it difficult to engage executive leadership, while another emphasized the importance of involving someone with decision-making authority to ensure follow-through. These differing perspectives point to a lack of shared understanding about the ideal composition of DCA teams.

Finally, a recurring concern—mentioned by four sites—was the tool's use of ambiguous or technical language. Terms like "Effective Innovations" were interpreted inconsistently, sometimes even as synonyms for MTSS. Other abstract phrases, such as "support" or "highly competent," led to extended debates among teams. One coordinator explained, "Usually the

conversations center around, well, what do you think it means by this particular word? And then the whole debate revolves around the word— I don't know, highly competent. What are we going to use to measure that?"

Several coordinators recommended simplifying the language to reduce confusion and cognitive load.

Unique Response: Clarification on Tool Alignment

Although this point emerged during interviews about the Look-For Tool, one insight is relevant to the DCA as well. Two district coordinators expressed that the DCA did not feel aligned with or supportive of the specific work happening in their schools. To clarify, this point surfaced in small districts where there was considerable personnel overlap between district and school teams. As one coordinator from a small district noted, "We had school personnel sitting with us completing the DCA…if I was confused about some of those questions [in the DCA], the [school personnel would share]…what are you even talking about!" The other coordinator mentioned that the team at her district had to complete the DCA and the SFT and that several team members indicated that the DCA felt less useful or actionable than the SFT. This feedback illuminates some of the challenges of using these tools specifically with team members that operate at both district and school levels, and need to prioritize work that has a more direct impact on their school/s.

Data Dashboard

The Data Dashboard was the least utilized tool among those discussed, with minimal awareness or usage reported across participating sites. While some coordinators acknowledged its potential value, most noted barriers to engagement ranging from limited access and outdated data to unclear communication about the tool's purpose. This section outlines the primary reasons for low adoption, perceptions of potential value, and broader system-level challenges.

Limited Use and Contributing Factors

Across all interviews, participants consistently noted little to no use of the Data Dashboard. In many cases, coordinators reported they had forgotten about the tool, had only recently received access, or were entirely unaware of its existence. Some districts shared that they had never heard of the dashboard, while others were unsure how to access it or what it was intended to support. One district recalled that the dashboard was initially helpful during the early years of the grant, but had been unavailable for the past two years—and its absence went largely unnoticed.

A key reason for limited use was that most districts already access the data they need through alternative means. Many rely on internal spreadsheets, district-developed tools, or direct communication with CDE. As one site shared, "So we have a folder where she takes graphs that look just like those that you just showed me [...] And that's where I go when I want to look at the DCA." One district even developed a custom internal data system, which they described as more effective and better aligned with local needs.

Another commonly cited issue was that the dashboard data were not updated in real time, reducing the tool's value for decision-making. Two participants noted they would consider using it more frequently if the data were updated consistently and reliably.

Some districts also expressed frustration with how the dashboard was rolled out. One site described a premature launch, “They pushed it at us pretty hard and it wasn’t ready. And I feel that a lot of people in my position probably just lost confidence in it based on that.”

This sentiment reflected broader concerns about introducing tools before they are fully functional, which can lead to early disengagement and persistent disuse. Another district noted that the tool was introduced without sufficient guidance or follow-up, leaving users unsure how to navigate it or apply the data meaningfully.

Mixed Perceptions and System Challenges

While many coordinators did not find the dashboard useful, others appreciated its concept and believed it could support future planning—particularly if better maintained and integrated. One small district noted that dashboard monitoring felt unnecessary given their size, but added that, if kept up to date, the tool could be helpful for onboarding and communicating progress or “It could help tell the story of what we’ve done.”

Access issues further limited use. One site reported they didn’t know where to find the dashboard; another said their access had been non-functional for two years. Some districts encountered technical challenges related to Tableau—the platform on which the dashboard is built—which complicated user account setup and team access.

Lastly, several participants described a sense of “tool fatigue.” With multiple resources already in circulation, the dashboard felt like “one more on top of all the other things that we do.” As a result, teams often prioritized tools they perceived as more relevant, better supported, or directly tied to implementation goals, leaving the dashboard underutilized.

Training for the Colorado Multi-Tiered System of Supports Coordinator Role

Training and support for the COMTSS Regional and District Coordinator role received a mix of praise and constructive critique across participating sites. While nearly all coordinators valued personalized support and accessible materials, challenges related to onboarding, content overload, and alignment with local needs were common. This section summarizes positive aspects of the training experience, areas for improvement, and site-specific adaptations that highlight diverse implementation contexts.

Positive Aspects

One of the most consistently valued components of the training experience—mentioned by 11 of the 12 sites—was the personalized one-on-one support provided by OLS COMTSS specialists. This individualized guidance helped coordinators navigate resources, adapt content to their contexts, and organize professional development for school leaders and teachers. Coordinators described this ongoing partnership as a form of “continuous training,” often more impactful than formal sessions. Local proximity of OLS COMTSS partners further strengthened this support. As one small district coordinator shared, “So really the work we’ve been doing hand in hand with [OLS partners] has given me the knowledge base to follow through and carry out the work we’re doing.”

Six sites highlighted the value of the initial training, which helped orient coordinators to the MTSS framework and expectations. One large district coordinator described these sessions as “a basic kind of entry,” while another from a small district noted, “It was good in that it was almost like, for me... the preset for me to be aware of what was coming.”

Five coordinators appreciated the clarity and accessibility of written resources—particularly Padlet and other centralized documents—which were seen as valuable reference tools. One coordinator explained, "The Padlet has been helpful... I remember that OLS already made that thing, and I just need to go find it in the Padlet. So I'll go back to the Padlet and I'll look for it there. That's been super helpful."

In rural districts, where professional isolation is more common, training sessions were valued for creating community and shared learning spaces. Two sites emphasized the importance of connection and camaraderie through these sessions.

Finally, certain formats and structures were seen as more effective. Coordinators generally preferred shorter, quarterly sessions over long Zoom meetings, and found interactive formats more engaging and manageable within their busy schedules.

Challenges and suggestions for improvement

Despite these strengths, participants identified a number of challenges. The most commonly reported issue, cited by nine sites, was misalignment between training content and district or grant priorities. Coordinators noted that training sessions often didn't match their current stage of implementation or the size and scope of their district. One coordinator shared, "I've gone to their OLS conferences [...] it either doesn't match where we're at or what we're doing or the size of our district." This feedback highlights the need for a more differentiated or tiered training model that reflects varying levels of COMTSS experience and implementation.

Eight sites raised concerns about a lack of structured onboarding for coordinators who joined mid-grant. As one small district explained, "I did not have that training. I think that was a significant oversight... the system didn't necessarily accommodate the reality that you would have some people coming and going." Additionally, the discontinuation of the Coordinator Series further complicated onboarding, leaving new coordinators reliant on past recordings and fragmented modules. While some found those resources helpful, others called for more structured, scaffolded support.

Seven sites expressed a desire for a clear implementation guide or "playbook" outlining stages of COMTSS development (beginner, intermediate, advanced), along with guidance on what to prioritize at each stage. Participants also noted that the OLS website was overly dense and disorganized, making it difficult, especially for new participants, to locate and navigate essential resources.

Four coordinators preferred shorter and more digestible training formats, citing long Zoom sessions as cognitively and logistically challenging. Quarterly meetings were viewed as more manageable. One large district coordinator shared, "I think a quarterly type of training is more appropriate. They're long Zoom meetings... basically the majority of the day, which is just a long time to be on Zoom... I appreciate a format that's a little bit more condensed." Others noted that long asynchronous recordings were also overwhelming. As one district noted, "To log onto the module, see right away that it's a six to seven hour recording [...] that's mentally daunting."

Four sites noted a lack of training focused on engaging staff within school teams. Coordinators felt underprepared to navigate resistance from school leaders or to foster collaboration across teams. One coordinator shared, "There's not a lot of training about how to bring people on board... especially when you have to deal with people who are very hostile to the work." Another reflected on the complexity of moving ideas through school systems, "I can have these great ideas, but

how to move those ideas into schools, into school leadership and then to school teams and then subsequently on to school staff is incredibly complex."

Three sites reported that early training was too content-heavy, with dense, front-loaded webinars that were hard to absorb. This initial overload made it difficult to translate training into actionable steps at the district level.

Three other sites highlighted scheduling and planning issues. Rigid calendars, limited advance notice, and misaligned timing made it hard for coordinators to integrate training into their professional schedules. One large district coordinator explained, "Having a training that lasts for four hours in the middle of your workday is very cumbersome and very disruptive." Another small district added, "Last year... our Friday professional development (PD) workday was set aside for our COMTSS meetings... This year we didn't. And we're really struggling with finding that time."

Finally, two districts pointed to a lack of concrete, evidence-based examples in training sessions. One coordinator noted frustration with being expected to "create from scratch," while another remarked: "The impression that's left with me is there's this huge toolbox out there that's very difficult to [implement]."

Unique Site-Specific Reflections

In addition to the recurring issued raised, a few sites shared unique adaptations and insights:

One region implemented a cascading training model to support district coordinators. This approach was seen as both effective and scalable, fostering support across system levels.

A small district emphasized the central role their BOCES played in providing hands-on training and capacity-building.

Another small site underscored the importance of collaborative learning environments, where staff felt ownership over the development process. As one coordinator shared. "They don't want to come in and be told to sit down and listen to anyone. They want to create the learning for themselves."

Key Takeaways and Challenges

Key Takeaways

Several key ideas emerged across coordinator interviews that provide insight into both the strengths of COMTSS implementation and the conditions that supported it. These findings highlight what worked well and offer lessons for future efforts.

Leadership engagement and cross-team collaboration were key enablers (10 sites).

Support from both school and district leadership played a critical role in successful COMTSS implementation. When leaders were actively involved, their engagement helped drive alignment, allocate resources, and maintain momentum. Coordinators also described how strong collaboration between school and district teams fostered shared decision-making and a culture of continuous improvement. The grant was seen as instrumental in deepening relationships and expanding networks across districts and regions, contributing to a sense of shared responsibility and reducing professional isolation.

Understanding Colorado Multi-Tiered System of Supports as a systemic framework is essential (7 sites).

One of the most frequently shared takeaways was the importance of shifting from a narrow view of COMTSS—as a collection of isolated interventions—to a broader, systemic understanding. Coordinators emphasized that COMTSS should serve as an integrated framework that brings coherence across multiple systems within schools and districts. This systemic perspective enabled more strategic planning, stronger Tier 1 practices, and a shift from reactive problem-solving to long-term, structural thinking. Many noted that the grant helped redefine local understandings of COMTSS—expanding it beyond a focus on RTI—and supported the development of a shared vision and purpose across schools.

Locally tailored professional development proved most effective (5 sites).

Coordinators consistently reported that professional development was most impactful when it was customized to the needs of their local context and embedded in the day-to-day work of schools and districts. Ongoing, site-specific support—especially when paired with opportunities for reflection and application—was seen as more meaningful than one-size-fits-all training. In larger districts, where structures and roles often differed from the assumptions underlying generic training, generalized sessions were particularly ineffective. Several participants highlighted the importance of combining a big-picture lens with support for evaluating partnerships among schools, families, and communities.

Additional Insights from Local Contexts

While the issues above were broadly shared, several coordinators provided additional insights that offer nuance and highlight the importance of local context in implementation:

- Structured reflection supported focus and decision-making. The two Regional coordinators emphasized the value of regular check-ins and structured reflection. These routines helped maintain focus, align goals, and shift from passive feedback collection to more systematic evaluation. The reflective process also supported data-informed decision-making and improved efficiency when managing overlapping initiatives.

- COMTSS provided stability during transitions. Two district-based coordinators noted that the structured framework of COMTSS helped maintain consistency during periods of staff turnover or leadership change. This was particularly important in smaller districts, where disruptions could have a greater impact on systems-level work.

- Site-specific strategies contributed to momentum. One district reported improved internal communication after consolidating overlapping teams and establishing a centralized decision-making group. Another shared that focusing early on a high-priority issue, such as attendance, led to visible success and built momentum—especially after initial skepticism. These early wins were critical for building credibility and setting the stage for addressing more complex challenges over time.

Main Challenges

A number of shared challenges emerged across interviews with coordinators, reflecting the complexity of COMTSS implementation in varied local contexts.

Lack of a clear vision during early implementation (11 sites).

Across several sites, coordinators noted that schools were brought into COMTSS work before a shared understanding of key concepts and system-level goals had been fully established. This early ambiguity created confusion about the purpose and scope of the work. Some districts initially interpreted COMTSS as focusing only on student-level interventions, missing the broader, systemic intent. Similarly, BOCES staff were unsure how regional implementation should look in practice. Without a clear, articulated vision, it was difficult to convey the value of the initiative or show how existing work aligned with it.

Inconsistent district-wide coordination and alignment (10 sites).

In some districts, a lack of shared vision among central office leaders led to fragmented implementation. Coordinators struggled to gain buy-in from superintendents and other senior leaders, some of whom perceived COMTSS as a separate initiative rather than an integrated support for district goals. When COMTSS was siloed from strategic planning or operated independently from other initiatives, the work lost coherence and long-term viability.

Limited onboarding and support for new coordinators (5 sites).

New coordinators—especially those who joined mid-grant—often felt unprepared due to insufficient onboarding. A lack of structured orientation and limited access to foundational training left many feeling uncertain in their roles. Staff turnover or changes in the OLS specialist assigned further disrupted continuity and made it hard to sustain momentum. Several coordinators described having to revisit old materials independently or operate

without consistent guidance, often feeling isolated due to limited face-to-face contact with OLS COMTSS Specialists.

Additional challenges were also raised across interviews:

- **Staff resistance to change**—particularly among experienced educators who viewed COMTSS as another short-term initiative—posed a barrier to early buy-in. Districts found that careful pacing and focusing on visible early wins, such as improving attendance, helped establish credibility and build momentum.

- **Sustaining engagement outside the core implementation team** proved difficult without dedicated time in team structures or administrative meetings. In small districts, overlapping roles and limited staffing further strained capacity.

- **Concerns about long-term sustainability** were common. Coordinators questioned how they would maintain implementation once grant funding and supports ended in 2026. Specific concerns included the future of stipends, coordinator positions, and participation incentives.

- **Mixed experiences with implementation tools**. While tools like the SFT, DCA, and Look-For Tool were useful for some, others found them overly complex, duplicative, or misaligned with local priorities. Several coordinators noted that the tools sometimes emphasized documentation over meaningful action, adding burden to already stretched systems.

Discussion

Findings from this qualitative inquiry offer valuable insight into how the COMTSS grant influenced COMTSS implementation across a sample of Colorado districts. While local experiences varied, coordinators consistently emphasized that the grant strengthened their educational systems and supported more intentional, system-wide COMTSS practices.

In addition to the recurring patterns presented earlier, two cross-cutting observations emerged during the content analysis that merit further attention.

District Size and Local Context as Influential Factors

First, district size and local context appeared to shape how the COMTSS grant was experienced and implemented. While all coordinators described efforts to engage in systemic COMTSS work, the scope and nature of that work varied widely.

In small, rural districts, the grant often served as a starting point for building foundational COMTSS structures—sometimes introducing the framework for the first time. In these contexts, close integration between district and school teams meant that some tools (e.g., the School Fidelity Tool and District Capacity Assessment) were perceived as redundant, and limited staffing frequently constrained the capacity to engage in documentation and implementation.

In contrast, large, suburban or urban districts generally used the grant to deepen or refine existing COMTSS systems. These districts grappled with more complex hierarchies and faced challenges such as cross-department coordination, tool access, and the alignment of training content to specialized roles. Medium-sized districts often straddled both ends of the spectrum—working to build foundational systems while also scaling and sustaining efforts.

While these distinctions offer insight into how district characteristics shape implementation, they should be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size and the overrepresentation of small, rural districts in the interviews.

Inconsistent Understanding of Coordinator Training

Second, there was no consistent interpretation of what constituted coordinator training. Early in the data collection, it became clear that participants referenced different materials, formats, and learning experiences when discussing their training. This prompted the addition of a clarifying question in subsequent interviews; however, responses remained inconsistent. Coordinators described varied pathways depending on when they joined the grant and which resources they accessed.

This lack of a shared definition or structure for coordinator training may limit the consistency and quality of COMTSS implementation—particularly given the relatively high turnover among coordinators. Establishing a clearer and more structured training pathway, including foundational content, suggested timelines, and role-specific expectations, could support smoother onboarding, clarify responsibilities, and promote coherence across districts.

The Importance of Flexibility and Local Adaptation

Nearly all coordinators emphasized the importance of flexibility in how the grant was implemented. Given the diversity of district contexts—ranging in size, capacity, and prior COMTSS experience—a one-size-fits-all approach was rarely appropriate. Allowing districts to adapt tools, pacing, and training formats—while staying aligned to core COMTSS principles—emerged as a critical factor in enabling meaningful, sustainable work.

The findings also reinforce that implementing COMTSS at scale is not solely a technical task—it requires both organizational capacity-building and cultural shifts. Coordinators noted that COMTSS should be seen not as a static framework, but as a long-term strategy for advancing equity, coherence, and student success. Sustaining that vision will depend on cultivating leadership commitment, deepening understanding, and embedding the work into existing systems.

Sustainability Strategies and Concerns

Many districts are actively working to sustain the capacity built during the grant period. Coordinators described strategies focused on developing internal leadership, integrating COMTSS into existing structures, and reducing reliance on external funding. One common approach involved investing in leadership development to ensure that principals, teachers, and district or regional staff are prepared to continue the work even if coordinators or key

leaders transition out of their roles. In at least two sites, early success stories helped establish COMTSS as a core, valued part of district practice.

To promote sustainability, several districts opted not to use grant funds for staffing, choosing instead to embed COMTSS into district operations. Funds were often expended on items such as professional development or purchasing materials and supplies. This approach was intended to prevent overreliance on temporary funding and to reinforce COMTSS as a long-term priority.

In terms of infrastructure, coordinators noted plans to maintain effective tools and streamline implementation materials. Examples included developing user-friendly guides for onboarding and continuing rollout efforts. Regional Coordinators reported initiating a three-year cycle of needs assessment, strategy refinement, and leadership rotation to build distributed capacity across the region. District-based coordinators described efforts to institutionalize COMTSS-focused professional development days and maintain implementation teams—while simultaneously exploring alternatives to stipends previously covered by the grant.

Despite these proactive strategies, concerns about sustainability remain. Some coordinators expressed uncertainty about how to maintain structured processes and compensate staff without ongoing funding. Leadership turnover was cited as a key risk, even in cases where resources had been set aside for continued COMTSS work. Coordinators feared that changes in leadership could deprioritize COMTSS or lead to a loss of momentum.

While this concern is common across reform initiatives, it underscores the importance of cultivating distributed leadership, embedding practices in district routines, and ensuring that COMTSS work is not overly dependent on individual champions.

Appendix A

Analytical Approach

This study employed a hybrid content analysis approach to examine interview transcripts collected from COMTSS coordinators. The goal was to systematically identify common topics, points of emphasis, and site-specific insights related to COMTSS implementation under the COMTSS grant.

Prior to engaging with AI tools, members of the research team independently reviewed interview transcripts and generated analytic memos. These memos were used to document frequently occurring topics, highlight emerging patterns, and capture unique but meaningful perspectives across sites. The memos provided a foundation for developing prompts that guided the AI in generating descriptive summaries of interview content.

Using these prompts, the research team entered de-identified excerpts from the transcripts into an AI tool (Notebook LM) to produce draft summaries organized by tool or support component. All personally or district-identifiable data were removed prior to uploading. The output was then reviewed, cross-checked against the original transcripts and memos, and refined collaboratively by the team to ensure accuracy, contextual alignment, and relevance to the study's guiding questions.

This hybrid approach enabled both systematic content identification and efficiency in synthesizing large amounts of qualitative data. By combining team-based memoing with AI-assisted synthesis, the process supported consistency across summaries while preserving the diversity of local experiences represented in the interviews.

Appendix B

Interview protocol with COMTSS Coordinators

Introduction: Thank you for joining this interview. You have been selected as a district representative who can share perspectives on the COMTSS grant program from the vantage of a Cohort 1 district. First, please tell us how long you've served as the COMTSS district liaison, and how long you have been working with the school district? We'll begin by asking you questions about the context for COMTSS in your district, ask you some questions about supports, and then ask you to share some learnings from this work.

Note to interviewer before starting recording: Ask about name of the district, how many years they have been in the role, size of District and ask the person to classify the district (e.g., large/medium/small size and urban/metro/rural)

I. COMTSS Context

1. To what extent did the COMTSS structure and process change in the schools you're supporting once your district joined the COMTSS grant?

II. Utility of Tools, Trainings, and Supports
Note to interviewer: tools that will be addressed in the interview will be sent to COMTSS coordinators. Start with the school fidelity tool, and then ask for reactions and feedback to the other tools (look-for tool, and the district capacity assessment). If there are certain features or if a tool is flagged as not being useful, ask the interviewee to clarify and see if the person has any suggestions for improvement.

2. There are several tools used by all COMTSS sites, and we would appreciate knowing how each tool has been useful (or not) for your COMTSS work.

School Fidelity Tool:

a) What items on this tool are most useful to support your COMTSS work?

b) Are any of the items on this tool confusing? In what way?

c) If you were improving this tool, how might you change it? (specific items, structure, etc.)? Why?

Look-for tool:

a) Has this tool been useful in supporting your COMTSS work? In what way(s)?

b) Are any aspects of this tool confusing? In what way?

c) If you were improving this tool, how would you change it?

District Capacity Assessment:

a) Has this tool been useful in supporting your COMTSS work? In what way(s)?

b) Would you recommend its use to other districts beginning their COMTSS work? Why or why not?

3. Let's also discuss the data dashboard. Can you tell me how often you refer to the dashboard to progress monitor the COMTSS work taking place at each of your schools and across the district? Do you have any suggestions for improving the visualizations, the data, or information you get from this?

4. Regarding the Coordinator training, can you describe the format this training has taken? Have you ever participated in training events with other districts? (If it doesn't come up naturally, clarify whether the training is more one-on-one, delivered in modules, or follows another format). How did the Coordinator trainings equip you in your role to engage in the COMTSS work with your schools?

What suggestions do you have around the time and frequency (e.g., number of trainings provided as well as length of time for each training) of the coordinator trainings that would still lead to foundational understanding of COMTSS? For example, should there be fewer or more trainings to establish the requisite knowledge and skills for a person to take on the role of a COMTSS Coordinator and support person in your district? Are there aspects of this training or support that you think could be improved? If yes, please share any suggestions or recommendations you have about this.

III. Learnings

1. Since your district has been involved with this grant for over three years now, what are some key takeaways and learnings from the COMTSS work? What has been particularly challenging about this work and what are some powerful practices, goals or successes that have been achieved thus far?

2. If you can go back in time, how would you have approached the COMTSS work differently with your schools or has this been implemented in a way that you think works best for your schools?

3. This grant will end in the fall 2026. What will your district do to sustain the MTSS work over time?