

**School Practitioner Community of Practice**  
(A network for sharing & exchange)

**November 22, 2017**

**Topic: Exchange about MTSS (Multi Tiered System of Support)**  
>Center Concerns  
>Comments about MTSS from the field

**Invitation to Listserv Participants to Share Perspectives**

**Featured Center Resources**

**>for turning MTSS into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching**

**Scholastic, Inc. on the move to transform student/learning supports**

**Note: Go to <http://smhp.psych.ucla> for links to other resources including**  
>Upcoming initiatives, conferences & workshops  
>Calls for grant proposals, presentations, and papers  
>Training and job opportunities  
>Upcoming webcasts & other professional development opportunities

This resource is from the  
Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports, UCLA

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Given shrinking education budgets, we have been asked to increase our outreach to make our free resources more available (e.g., for planning, professional development, etc.).

So please feel free to share with anyone you think might benefit (e.g., forward our resources to individuals and share on listservs and websites).

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For those who have been forwarded this and want to receive resources directly, send an email to [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:Ltaylor@ucla.edu)

For previous postings of community of practice discussions, see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/practitioner.htm>

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Note: In keeping with the National Initiative for Transforming Student & Learning Supports, this is being sent to and forwarded by over 100,000 school and community stakeholders concerned about (1) daily matters confronting schools, (2) promoting whole child development and positive school climate, and (3) the transformation of student and learning supports.

## **T**opic for this week: **Exchange about MTSS (Multi Tiered System of Support)**

As you know, we have sent out inquiries about how school districts, state departments of education, and leadership organizations are pursuing the opportunity to transform the way schools address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students. In that context, we also have been raising concerns about the limitations of MTSS (Multi Tiered System of Support) and have been seeking and receiving responses about that framework.

We soon will be preparing a report on all this. In the interim, below is a summary of the concerns we have raised and some comments from the field. And as always we invite your comments.

**C**enter concerns: As emphasized in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), a schoolwide tiered model (also referred to as a multitier system of supports) is referenced for preventing and addressing behavior problems. The tiered model is defined as “a comprehensive continuum of evidence-based, systemic practices to support a rapid response to students’ needs, with regular observation to facilitate data-based instructional decision-making.” The tiered model (including use of early intervening services) and specific approaches such as positive behavioral intervention and supports are presented as strategies for enabling children with disabilities and English learners to meet challenging state academic standards and are to be coordinated with similar activities and services carried out under the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*.

It is important to understand that current discussions of MTSS do not account for its severe limitations as a framework for student and learning supports. Among our concerns are:

- >MTSS is an inadequate depiction of a continuum of student/learning supports (e.g., it simply delineates *levels of school* interventions, rather than *subsystems of school-community student/learning* supports)
- >it does not clarify the contribution each level can make to *reducing* the number of students in need of special assistance (and relatedly how the continuum applies the principle of using the least intervention necessary and the practice of using response to intervention)
- >it does not *systematically organize into the continuum of supports the content* of what schools do each day to address learning, behavior, and emotional problems.

Our analyses indicate that the term MTSS is widely being adopted as a planning convenience without detailing how it will be translated into practice at schools. As the term becomes yet one more set of initials, the risk is that it simply will become another school improvement buzzword. As such, it will do little to enhance a school’s effectiveness in addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students. Enhancing equity of opportunity for success at school and beyond requires going beyond how MTSS generally is conceived and implemented. Those who value a multi-tiered continuum need to evolve it into a much more innovative and transformative framework for increasing the effectiveness of student/learning supports.

**C**omments about MTSS from the field: A November report from the Brookings Institution reviews a sample of state ESSA plans. It states:

*A number of plans mention "multi-tier systems of support." The logic of these systems is that students, schools, or districts can be arrayed into tiers. The lowest tier applies to just about everybody. Those in higher tiers need more support. Arraying individuals into tiers can be cost-effective to the extent that lower-cost forms of assistance can be broadly applied and higher-cost forms of assistance can be narrowly applied to those showing they really need the assistance. It is like triage in hospital emergency rooms. However, what happens in the highest tier still needs to be identified. The notion of using tiers is simply structural - the tiers need to be filled with something.* (“State Plans Under the Every Student Succeeds Act: Where is the Research?” by Mark Dynarski

<https://www.brookings.edu/research/state-plans-under-the-every-student-succeeds-act-where-is-the-research/>

Here are a few of the many responses sent to the Center by a variety of colleagues:

(1) “I agree that MTSS has become a buzz word and is typically used in a top down manner that is less rather than more helpful. In theory, MTSS is sensible: it is supporting school leaders thinking about an ecologically informed manner about systemic and instructional efforts on the one hand and supporting school leaders working to coordinate these efforts. In practice, I rarely see coordination being practiced. And, it is very rare that fostering engagement ( and what I more and more describe as inter generational school improvement efforts) is a focus....”

(2) “I find MTSS to be a structure that provides schools with the framework to develop ‘toolboxes’ of available resources, whether they be grounded in curriculum resources or as part of community support networks. Ideally, MTSS would be broad enough to encompass ‘wrap around’ services available in the community. We have worked to develop tiered intervention that isn’t restricted to school programming and includes community services. We’re not there yet, but I do believe MTSS provides a structure where it is possible to include broader interventions. And in my experience, educators crave structure. So if MTSS provides that base need, let’s make it encompass community resources!”

(3) “Concepts in education seem to become rigid and mechanical when they are translated into policies, practices and action plans. MTSS is one example. I believe the MTSS was developed as a framework that enabled schools to integrate prevention and intervention science into practice, a continuum that has its basis in school/community wide promotion and prevention practices as well as support for those needing support. It has some roots in public health. This is the foundation. In practice it should be seamless and based upon the sound **conditions for learning** (CFL) that enable educators to better ensure a focus on universal promotion and prevention. PBIS is not a great example of a universal skill developing practice and the goal of meeting state standards has not been primary to MTSS in my mind. A ‘system of support’ is dependent upon the effective use of measurement and of individualized connection and caring as well as effective academic instruction. MTSS can be compatible with addressing barriers to learning. Sadly MTSS, like many constructs has gotten distorted in its application and some schools, systems and states see it as a sorting tool. It is like the application of RTI. RTI was a term for schools to look at the effectiveness of their intervention's, their design and implementation. RTI for too many focuses on the child's response rather than the effective design and implementation of the interventions. Student Support Teams were staffed and designed to provide systemic information to enhance school-wide conditions for learning as well as to design and monitor student interventions but few seem to implement this systemic function. Barriers to learning and teaching should be part of the foundational design and implementation of community schools.”

(4) “My experience is as you described. Looks good on paper. Hard to get sufficient buy-in from school staff. People tended to simplify the process to meet their own ability to deal with complexity, maintain their own little spheres of influence, and protect themselves from negative evaluations in the case the student fails to show progress. Knew a few teachers who sabotaged lower level implementation of interventions because they already ‘knew’ via their experience & expert opinion which placement the student really needed. They wanted to move students along to more restrictive environments as quickly as possible and a successful intervention would slow down or eliminate further placement. Knew a few teachers who never referred students for assistance because they feared the principal would use that to lower their performance rating.”

(5) “MTSS framework, while a great vehicle for Learning Supports efforts, doesn’t go far enough to stress prevention and resiliency. There are some translational problems with the application of MTSS concepts. Generally speaking, school folks tend to be problem focused. If there are behavior problems or reading problems, interventions are designed to help. That’s great. But I have to wonder, what are schools doing to PREVENT behavior or reading problems. Behavior problems and learning issues are well-documented. An intervention is put into place and it either works or doesn’t and school folks move on to another intervention — or another

student in need of an intervention. The data are there to show that there was a problem and something was done.

But are data being collected and used to identify the larger issues (barriers) that are at the root of student problems? To use your example, are schools trying to save individuals drowning in the stream, or are they using what they know to repair the bridge that's causing people to fall into the water? Prevention and building student resiliency is much more complex than addressing problems.

Staff need to understand the research, effective practices, indicators of success and have the support to put things into place that will help to prevent problems in the first place. That includes working with community subsystems, being focused on reducing numbers of students with learning issues, and changing day-to-day practice to build resiliency in students. And these things can't be accomplished within the confines of the school building. Teaching a child to read can be done inside a school building and is the job of a teacher. Teaching a child to learn should happen everywhere and is the job of the community. My question for schools using the framework would be, 'Is the time spent on problem-focused efforts to help students equal to the time spent on prevention of problems?'"

(6) "In our district, we have been discussing this issue and agree with your assessment. Below I will share my opinion on this issue based on my experience over the years. Over the past twenty-five plus years this has become a common theme in how school sites and districts explain their work in support services. I was able to see how other districts viewed support services because of my twenty-two years at the university as part-time faculty. MTSS is now the 'buzz word', and I saw the same thing with 'RTI'. We could list a number of 'programs' that serve the same purpose for education: to 'simplify' working on 'Barriers to Learning'. It becomes a 'checkbox' in order to meet mandates and/or funding requirements.

In a short list, I'll try to explain some issues that I have found difficult to overcome:

- I think your preliminary analyses is is very insightful and is correct. In the development of our district's MTSS framework, it was clear that there was general direction as we looked at other state-wide plans, but not a comprehensive approach of how to address the structure. The district took the MTSS as a framework, but used Learning Support Teams as a way to design the work to address the five key components of the MTSS Framework. If you look at those components Learning Support Teams embraced the structure of the work. What has been interesting is how that continuum is perceived by the school sites and also some of the leadership. It has been a challenge to have sites and individuals see that connection. I believe our district could have only used the Learning Support Teams work with their schools, but because of funding and accountable issues, MTSS language needed to be used. Truth be told, MTSS forced the district into this work. It wasn't until after the trainings started that it was realized how important Learning Support Teams work was for the organization of the MTSS Framework.
- It seems to be able to understand and organize round addressing learning, behavior, and emotional supports you need to have leadership that think systematically. Because I have worked with 'system thinking' individuals, I assumed that most people think that way. I was incorrect. The challenge in developing a intervention continuum is to have leadership that guides that work in a systematic way. Unfortunately, I have run into many educational leaders who believe they are system thinkers, and they are not.
- Individuals that support classrooms, teachers, students and families also play an important part in development of this systematic approach to support. Unfortunately, my experience has been that support staff wants to work with individuals and can be very resistant to systematic organization to supports, as well as, partnering with other disciplines and outside agencies.

In the end, there needs to be a cultural change in education in how it views student supports. I don't believe we truly train educators in how to manage those supports. Because of this, developing a comprehensive systematic approach to developing prevention and intervention

supports for students and families become difficult because you have to change thinking. My guess is that district and sites that have developed a comprehensive approach have changed their culture, but the true test is if the supports are sustainable over time. This work has been driven by individuals, it needs to be driven by the system itself. I have struggled with getting people to understand the importance of this work. The joy comes when someone ‘gets it’ and you see the change in how supports are organized for student, families and staffs. You see the change.”

(7) “Here in our state we are doing a lot of work with MTSS (which is also the way we are moving under our ESSA plan). However we are taking a comprehensive look at how the MTSS structure can address ALL needs of students not ‘just learning’. We are looking at services and supports for all 3 tiers for learners. We also know that those tiers can be fluid and variable for youth. We have just officially approved our states Social and Emotional Learning Competencies (SEL) for Birth through Grade 12 which are part of our Tier 1 approach. We've connected the SEL Competencies to the School Improvement planning process for schools to encourage their inclusion in all academic subjects and schoolwide to help address culture and climate. We are in the process of helping schools see the connection between SEL & school mental health and trauma efforts. (as well as PBIS and Rti etc). We have a district in our state who is a SHINING star in this arena. I guess our philosophy is if the movement is towards MTSS how can we take our student support efforts and align them so they don't get lost in the sauce. (essentially if you can't beat em join em...??)”

(8) “First of all MTSS is only mentioned in the ESSA in lower case letter about 7 times, with no definitions or explanations. However, mental health and trauma-informed are mentioned over 30 times. When I asked a representative from ESSA who came to our state, what MTSS is, he did not have any clarity at all. A MULTI tiered model THAT supports IDEA studentS??? I am hoping that the ESSA did not intend for this to be a component of Special Ed or ELL, but something for all children in the public schools.

There are more severe limitations with the ESSA, and MTSS is a start. It is the only framework that is noted and what we need to do is to flesh it out, define it and rebrand it. There is no clarity and so many people across the country are running to define this and some are doing a good job especially when they focus on building a multi-tiered response to students that includes academics and behavior and minimizes all the bulk of non-essentials that are loading our schools down. It is critical that every adult on campus become aware of their responsibility to student behavior and emotional well-being. At the end of the day, a custodian may be a better mentor for a young boy than a school counselor or a MH therapist. Our shift in our system is that building relationships and monitoring student behavior is everyone's responsibility and to view behavior through a trauma informed lens that has compassion for students and their families at its core. The problem is the lack of substance and guidance that has been offered for this from the USDOE. I hope we will not see this relegated to IDEA and ELL, but that MTSS is the way we do business at schools. Re-branding our ideas is critical as our culture is always looking for the next initiative. This could be a "refresh"! If people are gravitating to MTSS, better we are first to the gate to define it before it defines us. Here are my guidelines for MTSS

- >Must be school and zip code centric (not one size fits all, but 1 system that is customizable based on culture and resources both in a school and the community)
- >Must focus on both academics and behavior (this addresses the idea of the whole child) and translates to if you teach the whole class reading writing and math... then also teach behavior. if you need to create a small group to reteach reading writing and math, then also use a small group to teach behavior to those who need targeted support. and lastly, if you meet with students individually for a few minutes to ensure they are getting it in reading writing and math... also do that for behavior. The problem is that there is a belief that those with behaviors don't belong in our classrooms. When behavior management founded in relationships with students is grounded in the teacher's classroom, then there is room for all manner of social, emotional learning as well as depth of knowledge because, the students feel safe and heard and are part of the learning day. (please look at the deeper meaning here... academics would include electives, career opportunities, science, arts, etc and behavior would be the social, emotional, behavioral and well-being

- part and both are inextricably intertwined).
- >MTSS is for all students
  - >MTSS must have admin leadership and buy in with a team that can support a multi-tiered approach including those who can build relationships with family and community.
  - >MTSS can be the framework that ties all initiatives together with definition and support for customization and allow for a way to build processes that meet student needs.
  - >MTSS must use data to identify needs and those needs must be integrated into the professional development of all staff.”

(9) “Thank you for taking on this very important question. Like so many terms in education and psychology, MTSS began with a very specific meaning and then has been generalized to many different uses. It is used to describe the levels of interventions that ought to be used to promote reading competence in schools — a comprehensive and well developed reading curriculum for all students, a small group intervention for students who continue to struggle in reading, and an intensive and individualized intervention for those students who do not benefit sufficiently from the comprehensive and small group instruction. It’s also been used to describe behavioral interventions — much in the vein of Positive Behavior Supports. And it’s been used more broadly to describe mental health interventions. I think that the framework is fine conceptually, but I’m suspicious because almost every author uses three levels, and every reference seems to attribute the same percentages to each level (5% need intensive supports, 15% need additional supports, and 80% of students are said to need only the population wide services.) My suspicion is that those proportions are assigned because of the funding that is going to be made available for the services and not necessarily the size of the need. I think that critical information, that needs to be more evidence-based and practice-verified, includes: how do we know which students need more intensive services and supports? what schoolwide practices are comprehensive and well-developed supports for the general enrollment of the school? what additional practices or supports are needed for the smaller (maybe smaller) groups of students who need more intensive services? and, of course, we have no good evidence that all students needing more intensive supports need the same KIND of intensive supports? So I do think that this has become a shorthand that short circuits much of the most interesting questions about how we promote the success of young people in schools.”

(10) “This is a complicated issue. The root of it, I feel, is in the US DOE's infatuation with PBIS. That articulated the 3-tiers. PBIS focused on Tier 1; RTI was brought in as a bridge between Tier 1 and Tier 2, but the evidence base behind RTI was never broad. Tier 3 was barely considered. MTSS is a way of solidifying commitment to PBIS but, as you and Howard point out, it has many shortcomings. First, it does not emphasize coordination around Tier 1. To me, that is the coordination that brings synergy. That's where the real innovation resides. MTSS also does not really differentiate between school-based and community-based services. In fact, it has been a vehicle for getting more community resources into schools but this is not an unambiguous good, as it de-emphasizes school-based service providers.”

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**Invitation to Listserv Participants to Share Perspectives**

***What can you share about MTSS?***

Send your responses to [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:Ltaylor@ucla.edu)

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## Featured Center Resources

>>for turning MTSS into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching

For our Center's latest books on all this, see:

- > *Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide* -  
Download at this time as a free resource  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/barriersbook.pdf>
- > *Transforming Student and Learning Supports: Developing a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System.*  
Published by Cognella -  
<https://titles.cognella.com/transforming-student-and-learning-supports-9781516512782.html>

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### **Scholastic, Inc. on the move to transform student/learning supports**

For a look at how Scholastic Inc. has adopted the Center's work on transforming student/learning supports into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students, see:

- >a recent webinar on "Ensuring All Students Succeed: The Imperative for a Learning Supports Framework" – on YOUTUBE at  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dYDg4alT1Dk>
- >"Learning Supports Pathway: An Integrated Model of School Improvement"  
[http://dropoutprevention.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Learning\\_Supports\\_Pathway\\_Overview\\_11-17-Solutions-Resource.pdf](http://dropoutprevention.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Learning_Supports_Pathway_Overview_11-17-Solutions-Resource.pdf)
- >"The Alabama State Department of Education's Learning Supports Initiative A Compendium of Practice & Findings"  
[http://dropoutprevention.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Alabama\\_DOE\\_LS\\_Compendum\\_11-17-Solutions-Resource.pdf](http://dropoutprevention.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Alabama_DOE_LS_Compendum_11-17-Solutions-Resource.pdf)
- >"Using a Unified System of Learning Supports to Boost High School Completion" (a National Dropout Prevention Specialist Certification Project) --  
[http://dropoutprevention.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Merriane.Dyer\\_.NDPS\\_.pdf](http://dropoutprevention.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Merriane.Dyer_.NDPS_.pdf)

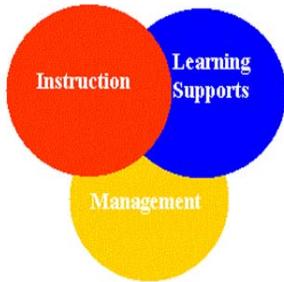
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Did you miss the quarterly ejournal for fall 2017? It had articles on:

- E**XPANDING SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT UNDER ESSA
- > *Revitalizing Local Control: Transforming Student/Learning Supports and Enhancing Equity of Opportunity*
  - > *Escaping Old Ideas to More Effectively Address Barriers to Learning and Teaching*
  - > *Saving Starfish Is Not Enough!*

Did you miss the monthly ENEWS?

You can access both these resources and more from the Center's homepage  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/>



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Information is online about the  
**National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports**  
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html>

**THE MORE FOLKS SHARE, THE MORE USEFUL AND INTERESTING THIS RESOURCE BECOMES!**

**For new sign-ups – email [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:Ltaylor@ucla.edu)**

**Also send resources ideas, requests, comments, and experiences for sharing.**

**We post a broad range of issues and responses to the *Net Exchange***

**on our website at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newnetexchange.htm>**

**and on *Facebook* (access from the Center’s home page <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/> )**