

Examples of MTSS in Practice

MTSS has become a set of buzzwords among educators. Our Center has explored the framework's strengths and weaknesses and proposed ways to build on current practices to develop a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of learning supports (<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/mtss.pdf>).

In this document, we provide examples of how a state department and two school districts present their approach to MTSS and again emphasize that the MTSS framework is only a starting point for efforts to transform how schools address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage disconnected students.

California Department of Education

The California Department of Education (CDE) promotes a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) as "an integrated, comprehensive framework for local educational agencies (LEA) that aligns academic, behavioral, and social-emotional learning in a fully integrated system of support for the benefit of all students" - pre k-12 (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/ri/index.asp>). The CDE has invested over \$30 million in efforts to promote and expand use of the MTSS framework. As a result, over the last few years schools in California have increasingly framed student and learning supports in terms of tiers or levels.

The core components of the approach are (a) high-quality, differentiated classroom instruction, (b) systemic and sustainable change, (c) integrated data system, and (d) positive behavioral support. The framework brings together both RtI² and PBIS. "It relies on data gathering through universal screening, data-driven decision making, and problem solving teams, and focuses on content standards." The department stresses a basic three tier framework and guidelines and encourages schools to customize the approach based on their needs. An "MTSS Resource Inventory" worksheet is provided to help schools identify and organize existing school, community, and state resources for every tier (https://oconline.ocde.us/implement/camtss/cms_page/view/38283455).

Within each tier, data are to be collected based primarily on a school's Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) and the California School Dashboard, as well as other local indicators. The accountability program tracks three types of data: student outcome, implementation, and capacity with respect to such indicators as suspension rates, graduation rates, math and English performance. To aid schools in capturing and analyzing data, the State created several resources (<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/ri/index.asp>).

Madison Metropolitan School District (WI)

As described on their website, the district's MTSS was formerly referred to as Response to Intervention. The framework stresses a process to support the needs of all learners with "high quality standards-based core instruction and ... data to identify students for appropriate acceleration and intervention" (<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1SNQQLtuoy6xJxvEciAqwtQhSdEuS1EG1qhXvotUgBJY/edit>).

The district emphasizes that decisions regarding instruction and intervention at each tier are driven by data and a four-step problem solving structure. The work is team-based (e.g., school based leadership teams, teacher teams) and organized in steps.

The first step involves identifying the desired goal – *What is it that educators want students to achieve?* Academic goals are driven by Common Core State Standards, while behavioral goals are

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guided by social-emotional learning standards. In this step, the team identifies if the goal is school-wide, grade-wide, class-wide, focused on a small group of students, or pertaining to only one student. The second step analyzes the gap between current and expected achievement for the goal on hand. Teams clarify why the gap is occurring, what barriers are in the way, and create hypotheses and identify possible root causes based on data. The third step implements key intervention aspects, such as data collection, student monitoring, and the fidelity of the instruction and intervention. Lastly, the teams evaluate student progress and whether plans need to be adjusted.

The district has a Data Dashboard for teams to get quick access to multiple types of data online (<https://assessment.madison.k12.wi.us/files/assessment/uploads/WorkKeys/data-dashboar d-quick-start.pdf>). By using different filters to focus on the data of interest, educators can look at current data or historical data, and data on one student or on a whole school. The Data Dashboard is updated every evening and contains data on attendance, achievement, early warning systems /early indicator systems, enrollment, trancies, tardies, GPA, assessment results and participation, suspensions, behavior, and restraints/seclusion. The Dashboard enables teams to identify where schools, grades, or students need to improve. A *Root Cause Worksheet* helps teams determine why certain groups or students are not doing well and a *Data Analysis/Reflect & Adjust Protocol* guides planning and implementation (<https://assessment.madison.k12.wi.us/files/assessment/uploads/Other/rootcauseanalysisworkshee ttemplate.pdf>).

Dothan City Schools (AL)

Dothan's 3 tier MTSS framework for preschool through 12th grade "grew out of the integration of ... Response to Intervention (RtI) and Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support (PBIS)" (<https://www.dothan.k12.al.us/site/handlers/filedownload.ashx?moduleinstanceid=3596&dataid=5655&FileName=DCS%20PST-RTI%20FRAMEWORK%202019-2020revised.pdf>).

The key implementation mechanism at a school is a Problem Solving Team (PST). The number of PSTs per school is determined by the number of students that need intervention. In addition to the classroom teacher, each team consists of at least four of the following: intervention teachers, instructional coaches, special education teachers, school counselors and/or administrators. Within each team there is a chairperson, a secretary, a timekeeper and a data person. The chairperson's role is to identify the students that need to be discussed, organize meetings, and notify the other members of the meetings. The secretary takes note of the decisions made at the meetings and generates letters to update parents on interventions regarding their children. The timekeeper ensures that discussions at the meetings are on track and timely, while the data person presents and explains graphs and charts of data pertaining to each student.

During the first three weeks of school, classroom teachers participate in a meeting to review data for their students and compile a list of those who are not performing up to expected state standards. Data are collected on reading performance, oral expression, writing performance, math, attention span, organizational skills, attendance, and behavior. The teachers create Tier 2 folders, begin tracking students, and inform the PSTs of their findings. PST members use a four step approach, called PAIR, to review identified students. (PAIR stands for problem identification, analyzing the problem, intervention design and implementation, and response to intervention and monitoring of progress.)

PSTs identify what data need to be collected for each student and use templates to inform parents explaining intervention initiation and to document intervention activity plans (e.g., accommodations/interventions implemented, work sample analyses, parent conferences, classroom teacher input, behavior management plans progress, adverse effects, dyslexia screening assessment, referrals). Parents are notified if their child has entered Tier 2 or Tier 3, and they are given copies of what is discussed regarding their child at PST meetings. Parents are also updated on progress, or lack thereof, every two to three weeks. Once a student meets standards and progress is as expected they return to Tier 1 status.

About the Examples

The examples underscore commonalities and deficits in how MTSS is adapted. (And at this juncture, sufficient data on effectiveness has yet to be published.)

The examples indicate that all have adopted a three-tiered framework that incorporates their previous response to intervention and positive behavior support initiatives and are data-based; they all provide guidance and resource aids. Importantly, in adopting MTSS, they commit to proactively preventing problems rather than just reacting to students experiencing problems. They also commit to tailoring supports to individual needs (although they do not demonstrate an appreciation of the difference between individualization and personalization or how to counter trends to use the same strategy for all students). While not necessarily stated as such, each is making a commitment to enhance equity of opportunity for students to succeed at school.

Among the important deficits are the way students' parents are and are not involved in the processes and the degree to which and how community resources will be integrated. While communication practices are noted, it is unclear what mechanisms will lead to community resources and families being involved in an ongoing way with students' academic and behavioral life). The success of any system of student/learning supports requires extensive and proactive family and community involvement.

In general, the operational infrastructure for a MTSS at state, district, and school levels (e.g., administrative leadership, teams/workgroups) is not well delineated with respect to mechanisms for weaving together, implementing, and sustaining a comprehensive and equitable system of student/learning supports. There is little evidence that any of the examples will significantly transform student/learning supports.

The COVID-19 pandemic, of course, has hampered MTSS activity.

Building on MTSS

The COVID-19 pandemic and growing concerns about social justice mark a turning point for how schools, families, and communities address student and learning supports. Those adopting the prevailing MTSS framework have made a start, as have the initiatives for community schools, integrated student supports, and school-based health centers. Given the growing challenges, however, SEAs and LEAs need to develop and implement a more transformative approach to addressing barriers to learning and teaching and reengaging disconnected students. The multi-tier model can readily be expanded to guide development of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports.

Strategically, given limited resources, developing a comprehensive system involves deploying, redeploying, and weaving together all available school and community resources used for student and learning supports to equitably strengthen interventions and fill critical gaps. Our prototype for unifying and developing a comprehensive and equitable system to address barriers and reengage students not only stresses a full continuum of integrated intervention subsystems that interweaves school-community/ home resources, it organizes classroom and schoolwide efforts into a circumscribed set of student/learning supports domains (see Adelman & Taylor, 2020).

A system of student and learning supports requires more than conceiving a continuum of intervention: it is necessary in addition to organize interventions cohesively into a circumscribed set of well-designed and delimited domains that reflect a school's daily efforts to provide student and learning supports in the classroom and schoolwide.

A Few Related Resources from the Center

- Adelman, H., & Taylor, L. (2016). *Rethinking MTSS to better address barriers to learning*. Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA.
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/essamtss.pdf>
- Adelman, H. & Taylor, L. (2017). *MTSS: Strengths and weaknesses*. Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA. <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/mtss.pdf>
- Adelman, H.S. & Taylor, L. (2017). *Addressing barriers to learning: In the classroom and schoolwide*. Los Angeles: Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA.
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html
- Adelman, H.S. & Taylor, L. (2020). *Restructuring California schools to address barriers to learning and teaching in the COVID 19 context and beyond*. Palo Alto: PACE.
<https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/restructuring-california-schools-address-barriers-learning-and-teaching-covid-19>