

(3/25/26) **This continuing education resource is from the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA**

Featured

(1) Does a Multi-Tiered System of Supports limit teacher creativity?

(2) About School Improvement and Making Educational Practice “Scientific”

(3) Embedding Trauma-Informed Practices into a System for Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching

And, as always, you will find

(4) Links to more resources

This community of practice Practitioner is designed for a screen bigger than an Iphone.

For discussion and interchange:

A School Board Member asks:

>Does a Multi-Tiered System of Supports limit teacher creativity?

Here’s the request we received:

“Do you have any information as to how Multi-Tiered System of Supports limits the creativity of teachers? I’m researching the pros and cons I think the major concern and con would be the roll out on training. Now that’s on us but we have 497 emergency certified teachers with 4 year degrees and most not in education. ... Multi-Tiered System of Supports credit recovery may do well for the child that is sick or missed too many days or for the teacher with no clue. It ends up as a day to day boring routine and stifles teachers to think outside of any box. I think most are trained to do Multi-Tiered System of Supports in its entirety and many fear being terminated if they do not go by the book. It’s my opinion our training is not up to par and we force teachers to use it and then they don’t have the time to incorporate hands on activities”

Below is our response, and some responses from colleagues around the country.

Center Comments:

Our scan of the literature finds MTSS described as follows: “a flexible framework built on teacher decision making, not a scripted program. Effective MTSS models rely on differentiated instruction, teacher autonomy, and professional judgment, all of which support – not restrict – creative instructional practice (e.g., differentiated instruction research in MTSS contexts emphasizes varied, teacher designed approaches to meet diverse needs).”

Over the last decade, an increasing number of districts and schools have adopted/adapted a multi-tiered support system (MTSS). The investments in some states have been in the millions. For example, California has allocated 95 million to date to establish its version of MTSS statewide.

Over the last five years, a variety of concerns have arisen across the country about how well

MTSS is meeting teachers' needs for student/learning supports. And, of course, there are a multitude of implementation problems.

The following excerpt from a recent article caught our eye:

From: *Multi-Tiered System of Supports in the Classroom: Special Education Teachers' Experiences*

"Five experienced special educators were interviewed to learn about their experiences working in a school district with a fully developed Multi-Tiered System of Supports. The interviews revealed these special educators were highly supportive of tiered supports because they provide strategic and intensive interventions for students who are behind. Nonetheless, these educators also reflected a significant frustration with the amount of additional work they experienced when implementing tiered supports.

All five affirmed a district expectation for special educators to work with students without Individual Educational Plans as part of efforts to prevent the need for special education. The teachers understood tiered supports were a district expectation, but their experience suggested adequate resources to meet students' needs were not provided. Detailed analysis of the interviews suggested how the current Multi-Tiered System of Supports practices did not take into account systems-level data about student needs. Implications for preparing future general and special educators are discussed."

We have written about the limitations related to MTSS and suggested how to move on to transform student and learning supports.

For instance, we have stressed that MTSS is not doing much to end the fragmentation and marginalization that has long characterized the ways that schools address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage disconnected students. We suggest that it is essential to realize that more is involved in building a truly comprehensive system of student/learning supports than the emphasis on a continuum of interventions. That is, while a full continuum is essential, it is just one facet of a comprehensive intervention system. Given this, we view schools using MTSS as their intervention framework continue to limit understanding of why school improvement policy marginalizes student/learning supports. It is way past time to (1) end the marginalization of student/learning supports in school improvement policy and (2) evolve MTSS into an intervention framework that guides development of student/learning supports into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system. See

> *The Multi-Tiered System of Supports Continuum: Essential but Not Comprehensive Enough – How to Make it Better*

> *Building on MTSS to Enhance How Schools Address Barriers to Learning*

> *Student/Learning Supports: A Brief Guide for Moving in New Directions*

Comments from the Field:

Here is a sample of what colleagues shared:

(1) "The intent of Multi-Tiered System of Supports is to standardize the process of identifying appropriate supports for students. However, in practice, as with much of education, it can be a checkbox mentality and can feel stifling for teachers who may see the structure as a burden.

From a district perspective (i.e., going to scale), it is hard to find the sweet spot of fidelity and adaptation to local (even classroom) norms. So I think I understand the concern if Multi-Tiered System of Supports has been applied district-wide and it is not clear how well teachers are using it. My experience with this in Chicago schools is that it seemed to depend on how well teachers are mentored and whether early career teachers are provided appropriate role models of implementing tiered learning models with close attention to students' needs.

The hard part is that without a structure like Multi-Tiered System of Supports kids can (and have) easily get lost in the system. It is terrific that this board member is concerned with how teachers are using the model. My suggestion is to attend to those who are using it well (by whatever standard she selects) and draw on their expertise to mentor other teachers."

(2) "I am a big fan of Multi-Tiered System of Supports and what I am hearing here is clearly a problem of defining and implementation of Multi-Tiered System of Supports.... We have given a serious amount of time and focus to building a strong Tier one for 8 years now and with some COVID setbacks and lack of personnel dedicated to lead Multi-Tiered System of Supports, I feel that this year we are fortunate to have 2 district folks dedicated to Multi-Tiered System of Supports for instruction and one dedicated to behavior. That is critical in support that is needed for the schools. Our area is 19 schools and 5 charters with over 10k students spread out over 125 miles from one end to the other. It takes a village and a voyage to assure readiness and support to staff to lay the foundation for a strong instructional and behavioral Multi-Tiered System of Supports.

Simply stated, Multi-Tiered System of Supports is the system to organize the practices. Teachers need to learn the system and the instructional practices to teach. That has never changed, but they need the clarity of a system that organizes their work so they can be responsible and accountable to doing their part... So Multi-Tiered System of Supports as a system needs to be owned by the leadership of the school who explains the systems. Professional development is the way leadership supports the practices or interventions for students. District supports the implementation and assesses for implementation challenges and triages support based on school readiness to adopt Multi-Tiered System of Supports and the interventions needed within it.

Keeping Multi-Tiered System of Supports as the system is critical because it does not change.... people come and go and will constantly need to learn the practices, but there needs to be a commitment from leadership to communicate the system that needs consistent review and improvement and support for how it works. If schools want to be proactive, they need to organize with a system. If schools prefer to be reactive, we all know the tier 3 interventions that are thrown at kids in crisis. Those in crisis get the help, because we wait for the crisis to call in the help. If schools want to be proactive they must communicate their systems and how the system works and how folks play a part in the system, and how they will be supported to do the interventions required by the system. It should start with instruction and with behavior... and a strong foundation in Tier One!"

(3) "Much of what the Board member is referencing is a growing issue with teachers and teacher organizations. What the Board member is describing is something many districts are wrestling with right now, especially those serving large numbers of emergency-certified teachers who did not come through traditional educator preparation programs.

Multi-Tiered System of Supports in its original design, was intended to be a supportive framework, not a prescriptive one. It was meant to help schools organize supports, monitor progress, and respond more intentionally to student needs while still allowing teachers to use their professional judgment, creativity, and instructional style. When Multi-Tiered System of Supports is experienced as rigid or stifling, that is usually not because of the framework itself, but because of how it is introduced, taught, and reinforced.

Training plays a central role here. When teachers are trained to see Multi-Tiered System of Supports as a set of steps to follow 'correctly,' rather than as a way to think about students, instruction can become routine and compliance-driven. This is especially true for teachers who are newer to the profession or unfamiliar with educational frameworks. Without strong, practical training, many default to scripted approaches because those feel safer and more manageable in the face of uncertainty.

In districts with high numbers of emergency-certified teachers, Multi-Tiered System of Supports training must be more explicit, concrete, and classroom-focused. Teachers need to see what creativity looks like within Multi-Tiered System of Supports, not just how to document interventions. They need examples of hands-on instruction, flexible grouping, project-based learning, and relationship-centered practices that still fit comfortably within the tiered framework. When that connection is missing, Multi-Tiered System of Supports can feel like it replaces good teaching rather than supports it.

Time is another critical factor. If teachers are asked to implement processes related to Multi-Tiered System of Supports without protected time to plan, collaborate, and reflect, the framework can unintentionally crowd out the very instructional practices that make learning engaging in the first place. Creativity requires space. Without it, even well-designed systems can feel mechanical.

It's also important to clarify that Multi-Tiered System of Supports is not meant to limit instructional choices. Tier 1 does not mean "one way to teach," and Tier 2 and Tier 3 do not require abandoning engaging instruction. Instead, the tiers help schools align supports around students while allowing teachers to adapt how they teach, based on who is in front of them and what those students need.

Ultimately, the concern the Board member raises is less about Multi-Tiered System of Supports as

a concept and more about how we prepare teachers to understand it. When training emphasizes purpose, flexibility, and classroom application, and when teachers are supported rather than pressured, Multi-Tiered System of Supports can actually expand instructional options rather than narrow them. When training is rushed, overly technical, or compliance-focused, it risks doing the opposite. So, it looks like training is the key....

The Board member's observation highlights an important truth: frameworks do not teach students; teachers do. Multi-Tiered System of Supports should exist to support that work, not replace the professional creativity that makes learning meaningful....”

Is this topic being discussed in your locale?

Please let us know so we can share the info widely. Send to ltaylor@ucla.edu

For discussion and interchange:

>School Improvement and Making Educational Practice “Scientific”

From: *What If Only What Can be Counted Will Count? A Critical Examination of Making Educational Practice “Scientific”*

“In recent decades, federal policymakers have pushed for education to be a more “scientific” endeavor. While scholars have considered the implications of this orientation for educational researchers, less attention has been given to its impact on educational practitioners....

Implementation leaders invoking research to inform practice can sometimes silence practitioners rather than foster their substantive involvement and understanding. This marginalizes certain types of knowledge that can contribute to understanding students’ needs, and it forces practitioners to be data-deferent rather than data-driven. The concept of implementation fidelity also needs to be reconsidered—not as an absolute good but with the necessary flexibility afforded to practitioners who are

- (1) educated in the essential components of available interventions,
- (2) able to become fluent through practice, and
- (3) allowed to exercise their professional expertise and judgment as appropriate.”

No one argues against using the best science available to improve professional expertise. However, the evidence-based practices movement is reshaping public policy in ways that have raised concerns. A central concern is that practices developed under highly controlled laboratory conditions are being pushed prematurely into widespread application based on unwarranted assumptions. This concern is especially salient when the evidence-base comes from short-term studies and has not included samples representing major subgroups with whom the practice is to be used.

Here’s a cautionary statement about how data are used – attributed to Yankelovich:

The first step is to measure whatever can be easily measured.

That’s okay as far as it goes.

The second step is to disregard that which can’t be measured or give it an arbitrary quantitative value.

That’s artificial and misleading.

The third step is to presume that what can’t be measured easily isn’t very important.

That’s blindness.

The fourth step is to say what can’t be measured really doesn’t exist.

That’s suicide.

It seems evident that public education is at a crossroads. Its future depends on moving in new directions to enhance equity of opportunity. The status quo is not an option.

Just tinkering with and tweaking old ideas will only produce more of the same. Much needs to be done to enable the *Every Student Succeeds Act* to live up to its name. Of critical concern is transforming how schools address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage disconnected students.

For more on this concern, see our Center Resources

- >[*Evidence-Based Practices in Schools: Concerns About Fit and Implementation*](#)
- >[*Bringing Empirically Supported Prototypes/Practices to Schools*](#)
- >[*Being Rational & Analytical in Bringing Evidence-Based Practices into Schools*](#)
- >[*About Empirically Supported Therapeutic Relationships*](#)
- >[*Implementation Science and School Improvement*](#)

For discussion and interchange:

- >[*Embedding Trauma-Informed Practices into a System for Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching*](#)

Last week we sent out a commentary about:

- >[*Addressing Student Trauma Involves More than Reactive Crisis Responses*](#)

We emphasized that reactions to trauma producing events as yet one more reactive response to meeting one set of the many challenges facing our schools.

If we want to help students recover from threats to their well-being – not just emotionally but academically – we must move beyond short-term, crisis-driven initiatives. Schools need a comprehensive, integrated system of student and learning supports that reaches every school, not only those damaged by disaster.

What is a Trauma-Informed School?

As defined by the [**National Child Traumatic Stress Network**](#) (NCTSN),

“a trauma-informed school system (K-12) is one in which all teachers, school administrators, staff, students, families, and community members recognize and respond to the behavioral, emotional, relational, and academic impact of traumatic stress on those within the school system. Addressing the impact of trauma exposure on students and school personnel directly, resisting punitive responses, and providing practical skills and supports to manage traumatic stress reactions are essential for building a positive school climate for students and teachers. There are many ways to integrate trauma-informed approaches into school systems, including strategic planning by administrators, staff training, direct intervention with traumatized students, and building knowledge and communication in a variety of domains, all with a focus on creating and supporting environments that best enhance academic and educational achievement.

Embedding the Focus on Trauma into a Transformed System of Student/Learning Supports

Our work over many years has stressed the need to embed mental health concerns into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports. Schools have many resources in place – counselors, psychologists, social workers, nurses, community partners, afterschool programs, family liaisons. But their efforts are fragmented and marginalized. A transformed system can weave school and community resources together so that barriers to learning – trauma, anxiety, housing instability, disengagement – can be proactively addressed in a more unified, comprehensive, and equitable way. It can also support the development of social and emotional growth.

Emotional Problems Do Not Resolve in a Two-year Cycle

Recovery does not happen in pockets. And learning cannot thrive when mental health is treated as an “add on.” Reactive initiatives need to be turned into a meaningful beginning for major systemic changes. They signal recognition of the urgency of supporting student well-being; they need to be pursued as an opportunity to build on that recognition – to be embedded in lasting, equitable systems of student and learning support that can benefit all our students in the years ahead.

Let’s use such moments not just to respond to crisis, but to reimagine how we care for young people every day. Our students deserve that commitment.

The following may be helpful for discussions of moving forward:

- >*Student/Learning Supports: A Brief Guide for Moving in New Directions*
- >*Embedding Mental Health as Schools Change*
- >*Trauma-Informed Schools for Children in K-12: A System Framework*

>Links to a few other relevant shared resources

- >**Warning: These Mistakes Will Destroy Your Multi-Tiered System of Supports**
- >**Pursuing the public good (podcast)**
- >**From Isolation to Belonging: Practical Strategies to Strengthen School Communities**
- >**How we group students matters**
- >**Child and adolescent strengths through the course of trauma-focused treatment**
- >**How a Philadelphia high school is fighting AI slop and internet lies**
- >**The 90/10 Gap: Research Shows Struggling Students Falling Behind Since 2005**
- >**Want to reduce the achievement gap?**
- >**Schools Banning Smartphones: Pros & Cons**

A Few Upcoming Webinars

For links to the following and for more webinars, go to the Center’s Links to Upcoming/Archived Webcasts/Podcasts
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/webcast.htm>

- 3/25 Teens, trends and turning points
- 3/25 Improving attendance for homeless students
- 3/31 Improving relationships with staff and students
- 3/31 Engaging community with a focus on youth involvement
- 4/9 Transforming school culture through student voice
- 4/15 Multi Tiered System of Support in Action
- 4/15 Communicating with your child's IEP team
- 4/15 Supporting Grief-Sensitive Classrooms
- 4/20 Strengths based approach for autistic students
- 4/22 Talking to kids about mental health
- 4/22 How to de-escalate children in distress
- 4/28 Supporting immigrants students
- 5/5 Understanding social anxiety
- 5/18 Understanding school avoidance
- 5/26 Understanding eating disorders

Watch for our quarterly e-journal

Contents

> *California's Youth Behavioral Health Initiative: What's it About?*

> *The Wellness Coach Model for Enhancing Student Supports*

California is undertaking one of the nation's most ambitious expansions of school mental health. It involves two major statewide initiatives:

- > the Children and Youth Behavioral Health Initiative (CYBHI), a multi-billion dollar, multi-agency effort to redesign youth behavioral health across settings; CYBHI focuses on the health system, including but not limited to schools.

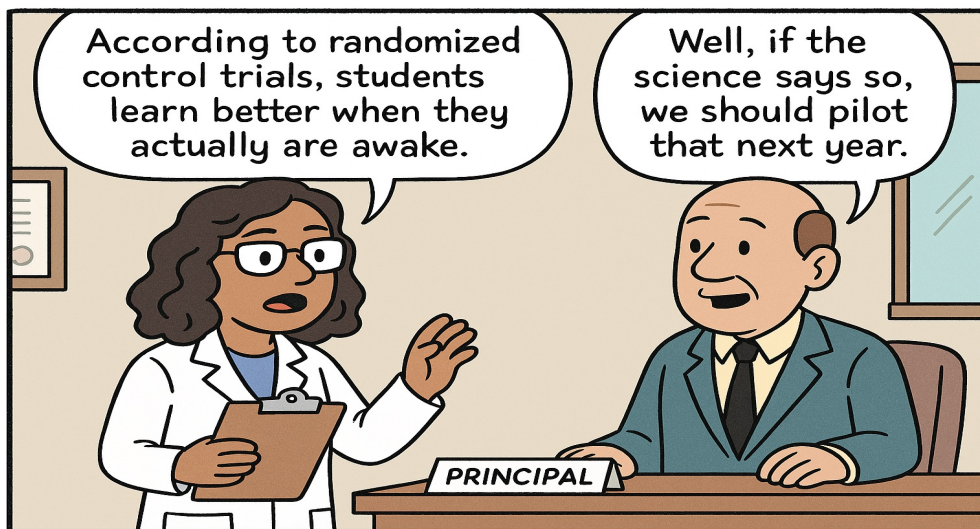
and

- > the California Multi Tiered System of Support (CA MTSS), a multi-million dollar effort to have schools frame academic, behavioral, social-emotional, and mental-health supports as a full continuum of interventions that addresses students' needs. MTSS focuses on the education system, specifically academic behavioral SEL integration inside schools.

These initiatives are intended to improve student well-being, mental health access, equity, and academic success. Individually, each initiative addresses aspects of a comprehensive learning supports system. Together, they aim to improve a "whole child," equitable support system that addresses children and youth well-being and learning conditions. They bring unprecedented investment, infrastructure, workforce.

And, they offer a historic opportunity to build a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports across the state and exemplify new directions for others to consider.

Our article highlights the *Children and Youth Behavioral Health Initiative*.



(cartoon characters generated by AI)

To Listserv Participants

- Please share this resource with others. (Everyone has a stake in the future of public education and this is a critical time for action.)
- Let us know what's going on to improve how schools address barriers to learning & teaching and reengage disconnected students and families. (We can share the info with the over 140,000 on our listserv.)

For those who have been forwarded this and want to receive resources directly, send an email to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

Looking for information? (We usually can help.)

Have a suggestion for improving our efforts? (We welcome your feedback.)

We look forward to hearing from you! Contact: Ltaylor@ucla.edu

THIS IS THE END OF THIS ISSUE OF THE PRACTITIONER*

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

**Send resources ideas, requests, comments,
and experiences for sharing
Ltaylor@ucla.edu**

*Who Are We? Our national Center was established in 1995 under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project (which was established in 1986). We are part of the Department of Psychology at UCLA. The Center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor.