A Framework for Supporting All Students: One-Size-Fits-All No Longer Works in Schools

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A FRAMEWORK for Supporting All Students

One-size-fits-all no longer works in schools

Steve Goodman and Hank Bohanon
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ver the past decade, a greater emphasis has been placed on matching educational supports to student need. We have come to realize that a “one-size-fits-all” approach to education is not working for every student. An educational framework for improving outcomes for all students is called a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS). The MTSS framework consists of a continuum of evidence-based practices that are matched to student needs. MTSS also involves gathering information to facilitate decision making in the classroom, school, and district levels of the educational system. Through MTSS, schools and districts efficiently organize resources to support educators to implement effective practices correctly. Schools that adopt an MTSS approach will focus on preventing both academic and behavior problems. Additionally, strategic intervention that is based on assessment occurs for students who have more intensive and persistent challenges. Recently, the new Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) has recognized the use of multi-tiered system of supports as a means to improve services to students.

KEY COMPONENTS OF MTSS
The MTSS framework is characterized by several key components. Each of these items needs to be present in order for MTSS to be implemented correctly. These components include:

The selection of educational practices based on evidence for effectiveness.

1. Interventions that are organized along a tiered continuum. This begins with a focus on a strong academic core program, with intensified interventions matched to student needs.

2. Assessment is used to identify students for more intensive interventions and for choosing the interventions.

3. Data are collected on student performance to drive program decisions and improvement.

4. Systems are created to ensure that MTSS is implemented correctly.

Sometimes educators may think that they are “doing MTSS” when they choose to implement only one or two of the above items. Unfortunately, this does not result in a true implementation of MTSS. To be effective, all components are necessary. We would not expect to see improvements in student outcomes without the total MTSS package in place. We often hear concerns that MTSS does not work for schools, when in reality, the framework is not applied correctly. Sometimes there is also confusion that MTSS must look the same in each school. The implementation of MTSS will differ across schools and districts based on the needs of students, the expertise of staff, and the availability of resources. As long as the core MTSS features are present, there are acceptable variations in how MTSS is applied. For example, while in MTSS it is necessary to collect student data, these assessments may vary from school to school. These data provide insights for schools to implement interventions through tiers of support.

TIERS OF SUPPORT
There are typically three tiers of support in MTSS. Tier 1 supports, sometimes called primary or universal supports, include evaluating and implementing effective instruction for all students. Examples of tier 1 supports provide effective teaching such as guided practice, providing clear and specific instructions, use of phonics-based reading, teaching behavioral expectations, and teaching self-regulation strategies. Tier 1 supports also include using an evidence-based core curriculum for academics and behavior. Tier 2 supports are for those students who are not adequately responding to the universal supports alone. Tier 2 supports are sometimes also called targeted, strategic, or secondary supports. The purpose of tier 2 supports is to provide short term interventions to remediate problems and get students back on track. Typically, tier 2 supports are provided to students in small groups for efficiency in the allocation of resources. An example of tier 2 supports might include a high school student - who we’ll call “Sean” - who has difficulty learning math. To ensure academic success, Sean benefits from taking a preparatory class in math concepts each day before going to algebra 1. Or, take Sarah, who was “acting out” for attention. She is provided with a check in and check out program that helps her connect with positive attention from adults in the building. Supports at this level are linked by a sense of the student’s underlying needs.

Tier 3 supports, sometimes called intensive supports, are the most individualized interventions designed to address distinct student needs. The tier 3 supports involve
more comprehensive assessments to determine factors that contribute to the student’s difficulty. Diagnostic assessments are used to identify academic problems. For student behavior problems, assessments used to determine the function of the behavior (e.g., seeking attention, escaping difficult work) are conducted. Tier 3 supports need to have interventions tailored to the unique needs of the students based on the results of these academic and behavioral assessments. Due to the complex nature of tier 3 supports, a team is required to develop the support plan. Examples of tier 3 supports can include connecting students to mental health resources in the community, providing intense academic remediation, developing a behavior intervention based on the purpose (i.e., function) behind the student’s behavior (e.g., gaining attention from adults, avoiding work), or helping students develop a plan for their future.

In each level, students have access to the previous tiers as they move into additional supports. They are also not simply placed in a class or program but receive supports based on data that are relevant to their needs. Successful implementation of a tiered MTSS approach depends on the willing participation of the staff, the skill level of interventionists, and availability of resources (e.g., staff time, curriculum) to support students and staff. It is important to point out that this approach is not meant to label students or provide hurdles for receiving special education services. Through a multi-tiered framework, we define (label) the supports provided and not the students needing the supports. We say “a student needs tier 3 intensive support in reading” rather than saying “that is a tier 3 student.” Increasing the staff’s willingness to adopt MTSS may take time.

IMPLEMENTATION
For instance, think about the last time you purchased a car. Odds are you simply did not walk in and purchase the first car you saw on the car lot. Instead, you probably thought about your needs, did some research on the best cars for your family, test drove a few, and then eventually purchased the vehicle. Like purchasing a car, you have to be able to help the staff buy-in to MTSS effectively. Establishing an MTSS framework takes time and certainly cannot occur overnight. Dean Fixsen and his colleagues have suggested a model for defining implementation as a process through a series of stages. These stages relate to what is called implementation and innovation science. Implementation, like making a major purchase, should be done in steps. In the initial stage (adoption), you explore the need for the approach before adopting it. You establish a sense of priority for why the approach is needed. In the next stage (installation), you are installing systems, such as creating a team, to guide MTSS implementation. During the third stage (initial implementation), time is invested to pilot parts of MTSS before rolling it out to the entire staff. Once you’ve developed the infrastructure and tried out the MTSS practices at a pilot level, you are now ready for the next operating stage (full implementation). At this stage, staff are expected to implement MTSS as a part of their current roles (e.g., teaching behavior expectations to all students, using effective instructional strategies). You will also see MTSS language become a part of the language of your district (e.g., job descriptions, handbooks, improvement plans). While these stages imply a linear sequence of implementation, in reality, you will likely find yourself in initial implementation for universal supports, but in the exploration stage for tertiary supports. Implementation is not a single event, but a process over time. Additionally, setbacks may cause implementation efforts to move to an earlier stage.

Full implementation of MTSS ensures that practices are supported by systems, guided by data, and evaluated by relevant outcomes. Systems for MTSS include supports at the district and school levels such as the allocation of resources for training and coaching. MTSS systems also include a multi-disciplinary team to guide the efforts, backing from the administration, development of an action plan to guide implementation work, and connecting MTSS with other district and school priorities. As we stated before, MTSS practices should also be evidence-based. While the diverse content areas of MTSS (e.g., academic, behavioral, social, emotional) involve different practices, the systems and principles (e.g., use of data for decision making) behind the practices are similar. Even with the best practices, you still need data to guide efforts for continuous improvement.

Einstein was reported to have said, “If I had an hour to solve a problem I’d spend 55 minutes thinking about the problem and 5 minutes thinking about solutions.” Data provide teams with the ability to identify problems effectively. Teams need to efficiently access data to be able to make decisions. For example, in order to identify areas where students are struggling academically, staff review quarterly reports of curriculum-based measures to determine if students are progressing across content areas. If
students are struggling with behavior concerns, staff might review summaries of the number and types of discipline referrals to the office. Staff also use screening assessments to identify students who are in need of additional support. Outcomes, while related to data, provide the long-term evidence whether your efforts are working or not. These can include graduation rates, standardized assessments, or the number of students who access post-secondary education. The researcher, Mark Greenberg, recommends that schoolwide data, as well as data on subgroups, be collected over time when considering the impact of interventions on students. Only looking at aggregated general outcomes for all students could mask needs of students who might benefit most from your efforts. Involvement with MTSS at the district level can certainly improve staff efforts to implement MTSS.

ENHANCING DISTRICT PRIORITIES WITH MTSS

As a district, you have goals related to academic outcomes for your students. These might include areas such as reading or math instruction. You also might have goals related to career and college readiness that are targeted towards more long-term outcomes for your students (e.g., reaching college, entering a career). Increasingly, under the revision of the ESSA, districts and schools are selecting goals related to non-academic areas such as social and emotional learning or mental health. Having a continuous growth mindset, where diverse goals are monitored using data, is an important yet daunting task. However, having comprehensive goals and data sets allows districts and schools to consider the needs of the whole child, including those who are young, at risk, or gifted. Addressing these seeming unrelated goals in some type of cohesive plan can appear daunting. Because MTSS provides an aligned framework for the systems and data you need to implement practices, it can support the implementation of interventions that address each goal for improvement. For example, within an MTSS framework, you have a district level team that would be aware of the needs of your schools based on your goals. Currently, you have district specialists with expertise in curriculum and instruction, discipline, safety, attendance, and social and emotional learning. Depending on district size, these individuals have access to resources and funding they can use to support programs under their care. Within an MTSS framework, these individuals work together on a common district/school level team to see how their efforts can benefit the overall goals of the district/school.

It is important that schools and districts develop effective systems to support the correct implementation of MTSS. These systems make sure that all educators understand the core features of MTSS so that the educators know if they are implementing MTSS correctly or incorrectly. These systems may involve training and coaching for educators. Once the knowledge and skills of what MTSS is have been developed, it is important to develop an evaluation system so that educators can determine implementation effectiveness. Information on implementation is shared with the teachers, leadership teams, and administration. This information is used to provide feedback to the implementers and also for problem solving to continuously improve implementation efforts. Problems tend to arise when we assume that educators fully understand what MTSS is and how to implement it.

SUPPORTING ROLE OF SCHOOL BOARD IN MTSS

The school board plays an important role in ensuring that MTSS is done well. The board can promote visibility and priority for MTSS implementation. When administrator positions become available, it is helpful to encourage the selection of individuals who are experienced and philosophically aligned with implementation of an MTSS framework. Also, communications to district personnel and to families might highlight the importance of supporting all students through MTSS. The board can also request periodic updates on the number of schools implementing MTSS, how well the schools are implementing MTSS, and the impact on student outcomes. Sometimes there are issues where it is important to align policy with MTSS practices. The school board should keep a focus on student outcomes but understand that educators need to implement MTSS correctly to produce successful student outcomes. In order for educators to implement MTSS correctly, districts need effective and efficient systems of support to help educators to sustain the correct implementation of MTSS.

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