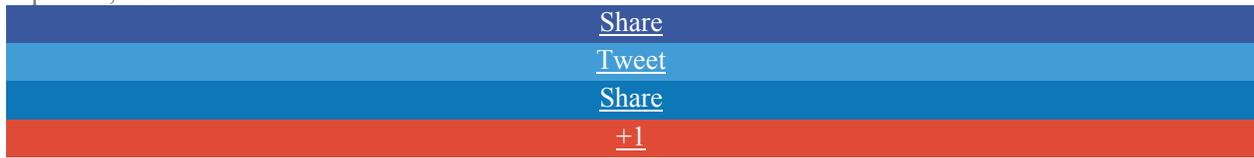


Effective Leadership within an MTSS Framework

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The [Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports \(MTSS\)](#) framework has quickly emerged as a methodology for improving outcomes for all students. Through this framework, high-quality instruction is tailored to student needs and implemented using a data-based decision-making framework. In fact, a recent national survey of K-12 administrators indicated that 61% of respondents have fully implemented or are in the process of implementing an MTSS framework district-wide, up from 24% in 2007 (Spectrum K-12 Solutions, 2010). While it is encouraging that so many school districts around the country are implementing the MTSS framework, the focus needs to shift from implementation to sustainability. At this point, the problem for educators is not how to initiate MTSS; rather, it is how to implement changes in process and performance that will endure. We know that issues will arise, within individual districts, as implementation occurs on a national level. We can predict themes that will occur if key components are not addressed or not implemented with fidelity. The field of education is full of examples of school districts implementing an innovation with great enthusiasm at the beginning, but later abandoning it. MTSS could be the latest in the long list of programs that were “tried years ago.” School leaders need to institutionalize MTSS in ways that preserve the positive changes and resist efforts to revert back to the old ways of doing things.

The Importance of Leadership

Leadership is second only to teaching in its impact on student achievement. Principals are responsible for 25% of school effects on student learning. The Wallace Foundation has produced study results indicating that when, (a) principals focus their efforts on improving instruction, (b) teachers trust the principal, and (c) the principal works to develop shared leadership within the building, higher scores on standardized tests of achievement result. Key leadership responsibilities include communicating a vision of high standards, creating an engaging and safe environment, encouraging leadership by others, focusing on improving instruction using data, and improving outcomes through collaboration. Meeting these responsibilities will require that instructional leaders (i.e., principals) are results-oriented and data-informed. They must be responsive to feedback and be effective communicators. Above all, they must work to build consensus and articulate a vision for the building that aligns with district priorities.

Effective principals realize that putting vision into action is only possible through setting ambitious goals and then mobilizing their teams to meet these goals. Conveying a clear vision, the intended benefits, and a plan of the supports that will be provided is thought to contribute toward readiness and acceptance when implementing a change. When we talk about vision as it relates to implementation of the MTSS framework, district leaders need to be cognizant of how MTSS relates to the district’s strategic plan and goals. Efforts need to be made to explicitly communicate how MTSS fits within other district initiatives (e.g., braiding initiatives). For

example, many districts are implementing professional learning communities (PLCs), [benchmark assessments](#) for all students, [progress monitoring](#) for some students, Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), anti-bullying programs, standards-driven instruction, and pay-for-performance systems. A leader with good vision will explicitly show how each of these initiatives fit within an MTSS framework and are related to each other. Without this clear vision, staff members will be confused.

Necessary Components of an MTSS Framework

In a webinar conducted this week, I discussed five components that need to be addressed within an MTSS framework: (1) assessments, (2) data-based decision making, (3) multi-level instruction, (4) infrastructure and supports, and (5) fidelity and evaluation. Each is summarized below.

Assessments

Schools need to have assessment systems that address three areas. First, they need to have reliable and valid screening measures that are administered at multiple points per year to assist in evaluating the impact of universal instruction and to determine which students are exceeding, meeting, and not meeting grade level standards. Second, they need to collect diagnostic information on some students to determine skill gaps and target interventions. Third, they need to collect progress-monitoring data on students receiving interventions to determine if these interventions are effective. We never know in advance whether an intervention will be effective for a particular student. The only way to gauge effectiveness is to monitor progress using valid and reliable measures. Progress monitoring tools need to have multiple alternate forms of equal and controlled difficulty with minimum expected growth standards specified. Finally, educators need to recognize the importance of multiple sources of data when making decisions. Important decisions should never be made based on one piece of information.

Data-Based Decision Making

The process for data-based decision making requires that decisions about participation in intervention levels is data-driven, involves teams, and is operationalized with clear decision rules. Schools must have data systems in place to access data in a timely manner. These systems should allow for the graphical display of data and a process for setting and evaluating goals. In determining a student's [response to intervention](#), decisions must be made using only reliable and valid data. In addition, the team members need to know how to interpret a student's rate of improvement as well as confirm whether the intervention was implemented accurately.

Multi-Level Instruction

Within an MTSS framework, there are typically three levels or tiers of instruction: universal (Tier 1), supplemental (Tier 2), and intensive (Tier 3). In designing effective universal instruction, attention should be taken to ensure that curriculum materials are research-based and aligned to standards. Teachers should be able to articulate teaching and learning standards both within their grade levels and across grade levels (below and above). Differentiated instructional practices should be used to ensure that students are receiving instruction close to their instructional level. Finally, opportunities should be implemented consistently across grade levels for students exceeding grade level expectations.

Supplemental instruction and interventions (Tier 2) should be evidence-based, aligned with universal instruction, and supplemental to universal instruction. All three of the following conditions must be met: (1) the interventions are standardized; (2) secondary-level interventions are led by staff trained in the intervention according to developer requirements; and (3) group size and dosage are optimal (according to research) for the age and needs of students.

Intensive instruction and intervention (Tier 3) needs to involve data-based interventions adapted to student needs and address the general curriculum in an appropriate manner for students. All of the following conditions must be met: (1) the intervention is individualized; (2) intensive interventions are led by well-trained staff experienced in individualizing instruction based on student data; and (3) the group size is optimal (according to research) for the age and needs of students.

Infrastructure and Support

This area involves the knowledge, resources, and organizational structures necessary to operationalize all components of MTSS in a unified system to meet the established goals. Necessary infrastructure includes a district-wide prevention focus, and leaders must make decisions that proactively support the essential components of the MTSS framework at the school. Additionally, support for MTSS needs to be a high priority. Building leaders must set up schedules that support multiple levels of instruction. School-based professional development must be institutionalized and structured so that all teachers continuously examine, reflect upon, and improve instructional practice, data-based decision making, and the delivery of interventions. Resources must be provided to support implementation, and structures need to be established to communicate regularly with parents and teachers. Finally, building teams must be established with clear structures and processes to guide decision making.

Fidelity and Evaluation

Finally, districts must regularly assess fidelity of implementation. Both of the following conditions should be met: (1) procedures are in place to monitor the fidelity of implementation of the core curriculum and secondary and intensive interventions; and (2) procedures are in place to monitor the processes of administering and analyzing assessments. Districts need to evaluate their implementation by establishing action plans and evaluating short- and long-term goals. Student data should be reviewed for all students and subgroups of students across the essential components to evaluate effectiveness of the MTSS framework (i.e., core curriculum is effective, interventions are effective, screening process is effective). Finally, implementation data (e.g., walkthroughs) should be reviewed to monitor fidelity and efficiency across all components of the MTSS framework.

In closing, we need to move from implementation to sustainability. Implementing an MTSS framework requires system change on many levels. Some researchers have suggested that school districts will have the best probability of implementation success if they implement the MTSS framework in phases over time. The hope is that educators and systems can institutionalize MTSS in ways that preserve the positive changes, and instill resilience to resist efforts to revert back to the old ways of doing things, and ultimately improve outcomes for all students!

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