



Designing the K-12 Achievement Curriculum: Strategies for Delivering Multi-Tiered, Equitable Instruction

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Introduction

Every student both struggles and excels in his or her own way. By designing multi-tiered instructional frameworks with competency and equity in mind, K–12 educators can provide students with differentiated instruction—including remediation, acceleration, and other academic supports—at exactly the right time, and in the right measures, to meet individual learning goals.

Commonly called Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), tiered instructional solutions ensure that educators can address the academic needs of all students. By meeting learners where they are and using proven curricula and advanced technologies to differentiate instruction at all tiers, teachers are empowered to optimize the quality of instruction that every single student receives.

The goal of this paper is to provide a helpful guide for educational leaders who are developing curricula programs that provide MTSS in the K–12 classroom to serve increasingly diverse and special populations of students, close performance gaps, and propel achievement for all.

How the Multi-Tiered System of Supports Benefits Students

Most schools already offer multiple forms of support for students who are struggling in different forms, including tiered interventions, special education classes, and English language learning programs. However, teachers aren't always given clear guidelines for how and when to use these supports, and when they are used, the experience may occur in a silo.

The MTSS model describes a comprehensive, district- and school-wide system that provides consistent, high-quality, standards-based instruction and interventions that may be accessed as needed to address the individual needs of each student. Within MTSS, interventions are a part of a more holistic system for supporting students.

What is a Multi-Tiered System of Supports?

Districts may define this term slightly differently, but at its core, an MTSS is a comprehensive, preventative educational approach that allows teachers to quickly identify student needs and match the best methods—whether academic, behavioral or both—to meet those needs, as well as state and federal standards, to ensure the greatest degree of success for every student.

MTSS frameworks are not limited to academic solutions. Successful frameworks will support social and emotional learning (SEL), and include Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), to advance schoolwide and classroom behavior strategies for all students, as well as strategies for supporting the individual student. Although developing prosocial behaviors is critical to a holistic MTSS strategy, behavioral intervention strategies are not addressed in this paper.

MTSS frameworks are rooted in a standards-based curriculum that can accommodate and support students at all levels of academic progress and English-language-speaking abilities, regardless of whether a student is on-level, struggling, or has advanced learning needs. The policies and practices in MTSS may also help eliminate implicit and unconscious biases that may result in exclusionary discipline that prevents certain students from regularly attending school (SRI International, 2016).

Furthermore, MTSS ensures that academic interventions are consistently and appropriately administered and tracked to help administrators, teachers, students, and their families coordinate their efforts. In many cases, MTSS is proactively applied to prevent academic problems before they start and to shore up strategies around equity and access.

MTSS generally offers three (sometimes four) tiers of instruction and support designed to help teachers provide the best instruction to all students.

Tier 1

Tier 1 includes the instruction and support provided to all students through regular, standards-based teacher instruction. Typically, the goal of most districts is for 75-85 percent of students to successfully learn the core curriculum through Tier 1 instruction. Tier 1 classes can support students who may be struggling as well as on-level and advanced learners.

For instance, over half of the students who have an identified disability spend 80% of their school day in general education classrooms (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2017). English language learners constitute more than 9% of all public-school students, and most are placed in Tier 1 classrooms within a year, before they are fully proficient in English (NCES, 2017).

Schools need to develop a comprehensive curriculum solution that can support teachers and ensure all students can succeed. MTSS guidelines provide teachers with a resource to quickly identify challenges, understand the levels of support available for each student, and use data to ensure that support is effective.

Tier 2

While all students receive Tier 1 core or alternative core instruction, some need more intensive support to be successful. Tier 2 uses alternative strategies, such as working in small groups, to help students overcome challenges. Tier 2 is appropriate for students who are below benchmark and at risk for failure, but not at a high risk for failure.

Teachers identify candidates for Tier 2 instruction through regular assessments, and they use ongoing evaluation to track student progress, as occurs in all tiers. When students are not responding to Tier 2 instruction, they may benefit from Tier 3 supports.

Tier 3

Students who need intense individual or small group support may benefit from Tier 3 instructional supplements. Tier 3 differs from Tier 2, in that Tier 3 students work for longer periods in very small groups and receive more intensive progress-monitoring. For instance, a student who is demonstrating significant difficulty with an instructional unit in math might be better able to catch up to peers through intensive, one-on-one instruction for 60 minutes, four days per week.

To qualify for Tier 3, a student must be at a high risk for failure as measured through assessments. Tier 3 is usually reserved for about five percent of students who need highly targeted, individual and/or small-group instruction (AASA, 2017).

Progress monitoring is an essential tool within the MTSS. According to Lynn and Douglas Fuchs, assessment plays three important roles: (a) to identify who should be targeted for attention, (b) to quantify responsiveness to intervention among those targeted for attention, and (c) to tailor individualized instructional programs for the most unresponsive subset of children (Fuchs and Fuchs, 2008)

Ultimately, the goal is to right-size the interventions used to deliver positive long-term outcomes for the greatest number of students, while reserving more expensive and serious interventions for those students who will benefit the most from them.

The Importance of Equitable Instruction and Access

Raising the level of equitable instruction and access supports educational equity, which means that every student has access to the resources and educational rigor they need at the right moment in their education, despite race, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, family background, or family income.

The newly-developed Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), rooted in equity, calls on educational leaders to examine equity in current practices and set a high bar of education excellence for all students. State leaders have made equity a top priority, and many are considering implementing multi-tiered learning environments to foster a culture of continuous improvement while supporting underserved populations.

What is Equitable Instruction?

Every student is unique in terms of his or her gender, race, economic class, religion, and physical or mental abilities. Providing an equal education to every student cannot be accomplished using a universal approach. Equitable instruction supports educational equity by ensuring that all students gain access to the same educational opportunities to learn, regardless of their differences, and that they are supported when they are unable to keep pace with their peers.

For instance, a student who struggles to read may be taught the same core content at his or her own reading level. Students who are learning English may be given access to the lesson in both English and their native language to ensure they can participate. Fairness is at the core of equitable instruction. When supports can be provided to students to help them succeed, they should be.

A key component of this shift must be a review of how districts and schools assess children who are struggling. These struggling and at-risk learners frequently include those 19.1% of poverty status children under 18 and the 12.9% of students age 3-21 with disabilities served under IDEA Part B (U.S. Dept. of Education, NCES). Mark Shinn points out three research-supported errors in how students have traditionally been assessed (the discrepancy model) that make it necessary to re-address assessment practices (Shinn, 1998):

1. That disability was not solely a within-student phenomenon, especially the ability-achievement discrepancy, but was attributable to where the student lives;
2. Students with severe achievement had to fail for considerable periods of time (i.e., years) to become eligible, (i.e., the “wait to fail” model); and
3. Students with more severe achievement problems were often less likely to receive services than students with less severe achievement needs.

An equity agenda requires finding ways to serve all students in a timely manner through unbiased, competency-based education. Developing a problem-solving approach to assessing students versus simply categorizing them allows educators to gauge a student’s current stage of academic development more accurately, compare it to the desired level of performance, and take steps to address the difference every day through adjustments to the curriculum and learning environment as well as ongoing assessments.

How MTSS Supports Equitable Instruction

MTSS frameworks can assist with equitable instruction practices by helping address educational inequities. By implementing curricula within the MTSS framework, educational leaders give students access to a standards-based curriculum that supports them at all academic tier levels—Tier 1 general education through the intensive intervention of Special Education—and helps educators better tailor their approaches to each student, so all students can thrive.

MTSS allows educators to target areas in which students are struggling by addressing the academic, social, emotional, and behavioral issues that are preventing them from succeeding.

While there are other instructional approaches that give all students access to a standards-based curriculum while helping teachers tailor instruction, they are often not as comprehensive as the MTSS framework, which is implemented at the district level and ensures consistency and collaboration across all classrooms. MTSS requires the active participation and cooperation of everyone involved, including administrators, teachers, social workers, school psychologists, behavioral coaches, speech pathologists, parents, and students themselves.

Not Just Another Name for RTI

MTSS is not synonymous with Response to Intervention (RTI). Rather, it is a comprehensive framework designed to meet the needs of all learners by providing a range of supports, incorporating models such as RTI, PBIS and others.

Districts applying MTSS frameworks must be explicit about when, why, and how students should be supported while empowering teachers to address unique student needs. This requires an emphasis on cross-functional teamwork that ensures all educators are on the same page with how they monitor and evaluate the academic and behavioral needs of each student. MTSS also provides support for students who are not struggling, but rather advancing faster than their peers. These students are provided with more challenging work, ensuring they do not lose motivation.

English Learners in the Classroom

Educators today must help ensure all learners attain English proficiency, including the growing number of students whose native language is not English. According to the most recent data from the Center for Immigration Studies, nearly one in five American students ages 5 to 17 speaks a language other than English at home. Surprisingly, of the nearly 62 million foreign-language speakers, 44 percent (27.2 million) were born in the United States (Center for Immigration Studies, 2017).

Often, a disproportionate number of English Language Learners (ELLs) are identified as students with disabilities. For example, in 2014–15, 665,000 ELL students were identified as students with disabilities under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). EL students with disabilities represented 13.8 percent of the total ELL population enrolled in U.S. public elementary and secondary schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

These figures bring to light the complexities of creating a level field for all students. It can be difficult to unpack the complex challenges presented when learning a new language from similar challenges associated with learning disabilities. MTSS frameworks can provide those learning English with comprehensive support at all tiers, including Tier 1. According to the National Center on Response to Intervention, English language instruction is not considered an intervention, but is a part of core instruction. An effective core academic program will take diversity and culture into account to effectively support English language learners through high-quality, evidence-based instruction.

MTSS and Academic Standards

Within MTSS, the foundation must include a high-quality, standards-based curriculum. Aligning to state-specific standards within a framework of an MTSS will help ensure that all students have evidence-based instruction to assist them in achieving success. National and state efforts toward driving school improvement, and the move toward full inclusion, exposed the need for a model of services for addressing all learners including “at risk” and “high risk” learners. In many states, MTSS is a preferred choice for addressing those needs.

By maintaining a state standards-based instructional model as the foundation of MTSS, students are assured a curriculum that prepares them for college and careers. Students are also assured that, regardless of their academic challenges and the interventions in which they participate, they will ultimately receive the same high-quality education as every other student in their school.

In 2005, the National Association for State Directors of Special Education (NASDE) identified eight core principles of successful RTI:

1. We can effectively teach all children.
2. Intervene early.
3. Use a multi-tier model of service delivery.
4. Use a problem-solving method to make decisions within a multi-tier model.
5. Use research-based, scientifically validated interventions/instruction to the extent available.
6. Monitor student progress to inform instruction.
7. Use data to make decisions (this is a central concept to RTI).
8. Use assessment for three different purposes: screening, diagnostics, and progress monitoring.

While these recommendations still hold true today, how we monitor students and respond to the results of assessments has changed substantially. Today, educators have more sophisticated digital assessment tools at their disposal, as well as online curricula that adjust to the needs of students as they progress through core content. One of the biggest issues leaders face today is aligning districts, schools, parents, and students around the implementation of MTSS.

The Challenges of Evolving Policies on Curriculum, Assessments, and Accountability

The passage of ESSA in 2015, which reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), inspired educators to rethink K–12 education. Many districts and school systems focused on providing more differentiated and personalized solutions, which meant changing policies on curriculum, assessments, and accountability. These approaches often included new systems of assessments that meet students where they are in their learning by identifying successes or issues in real-time, and using multiple measures of student learning and growth for accountability. However, in many cases, there have been significant disconnects between tiered academic systems and the requirements of federal and state laws.

Additionally, new initiatives are often introduced to teachers without a cohesive strategy for integrating them into what they are already doing. This can cause confusion and limit the effectiveness of MTSS frameworks. When interventions are not applied consistently, and/or the results of an intervention aren't shared with subsequent teachers, the student suffers. For instance, if a third-grade teacher provides an effective intervention for a student struggling in math, that child's fourth-grade teacher should be aware of what worked to keep the child on track for success.

As Hayes and Lillenstein (2015) note, "If the instructional practices evaluated in an educator effectiveness model do not align with the instructional practices needed to propel students toward college and career readiness, then teachers receive instructional feedback that is disconnected from their practice and their students' needs. Likewise, if instruction in an MTSS is not linked to the evidence-based instructional practices proven to be effective for at-risk learners, then it is unlikely that the achievement gap will be narrowed."

For many districts, such challenges have created significant hurdles to implementing MTSS, which is why building consensus among critical leaders and staff members and setting up infrastructure is essential for incorporating a system of supports that propels achievement for all learners.

District and school administrators and teacher-leaders must work together to create, sustain, and enhance multi-tiered academic frameworks. The leadership functions of many district leadership teams include:

- setting performance targets aligned with board-adopted district goals;
- monitoring performance against the targets;
- building a foundation for data-driven decision making on a system-wide basis;
- designing system planning and focused improvement strategies, structures, and processes;
- facilitating the development and use of collaborative structures;
- brokering or facilitating high-quality professional development consistent with district goals for instruction and achievement; and
- allocating system resources toward instructional improvement.

Implementing a multi-tiered framework within a district is an investment, and one that must be secured by ongoing support to deliver gains in student learning. School leaders must provide the necessary tools, resources and ongoing coaching that staff and students need to be successful. That means delivering differentiated and personalized academic supports within each tier for all students. This includes those who are on-level or exceeding benchmarks, those who are at risk in socio-economic terms, students with IEPs and students without, students for whom English is a first language, and students who are facing physical and psychological challenges.

All students must have access to a state standards-based curriculum, receive support based on evidence of mastery of core priorities, and receive targeted supports at the leading edges of their zones of proximal development (ZPD).

Six Actionable Strategies for the K-12 Achievement Curriculum

Each student enters school with his or her own challenges, whether those are cultural, academic, or developmental. It is the job of educational leaders to address inequities in learning with a system-wide approach that supports all students and their teachers. When implemented successfully, MTSS is one such approach.

Many district and school achievement, improvement, and transformation plans help schools develop a curriculum action plan that balances effective frameworks like MTSS with a standards-based curriculum, so they can accelerate or remediate learning while ensuring high outcomes for all students.

The Intervention and Acceleration group at McGraw-Hill Education has identified six essential strategies for educational leaders to consider when it comes to delivering multi-tiered, equitable instruction. Schools and districts that apply these strategies can potentially gain an advantage when it comes to addressing all students' academic needs.

1. Ensure diversity & inclusion.

The benefits of a comprehensive instructional solution such as MTSS is that it can accommodate the needs of any student using multi-tiered, equitable instruction. Educational leaders can foster their program's success by emphasizing the importance of whole-school, student-centered thinking. Developing a readiness mindset among students will empower them to believe that they can achieve, regardless of their individual challenges. Instilling this mindset early can also prevent later academic difficulties. Likewise, encouraging teachers to understand both grade-level expectations and the interventions available to help students meet those expectations can provide clarity and purpose. Students who are struggling need teachers who believe in them and their abilities to overcome difficulties, and it requires educators who understand how to use assessments and differentiated curricula to understand and support them.

2. Provide an optimized curriculum balance.

Multi-tiered systems call for educators to provide differentiated curriculum supports and resources for ensuring student success. Differentiation is defined as "classroom practice with a balanced emphasis on individual students and course content" (Tomlinson and Imbeau, 2010). True differentiation requires educators to optimize the balance between a student's needs and the rigor of standards-based instruction, to ensure that every student becomes college and career-ready. School leaders can better align acceleration and

intervention strategies with student proficiency by considering interests, preferred learning modality, and level of readiness. Above all, differentiated learning requires personalization and balance in five areas: student agency and involvement; content, structure, and format of learning experiences; level and type of resources and materials; affective needs, support services and guidance; and extended learning opportunities beyond the classroom.

3. Apply data-driven assessment & performance monitoring.

Educators can only effectively address issues in student learning when they understand the challenges a student is facing. Traditional instructional models and interventions only provide feedback every few weeks, so adjustments to the teaching approach are fewer and farther between. Digital assessments are especially effective at identifying when a student needs additional support—or a greater challenge—regardless of which tier of instruction he or she receives. Data-driven assessments and dynamic performance monitoring can help isolate gaps in learning, so teachers can focus on building specific skill sets the student is lacking. This approach empowers teachers to problem-solve based on real-time information about how a student is progressing, and quickly adjust their approaches based on that feedback. By uncovering and addressing issues as they arise, teachers are better able to help students build a solid foundation within the curriculum.

4. Use blended learning models.

Blended learning and digitally enhanced learning environments enhance MTSS and enable schools and educators to engage students, respond to challenges, and adapt the instruction in real-time, so students feel supported at all times. Blended learning works for students regardless of grade-level, instructional tier, or level of English proficiency, because digital tools are designed to bridge those skills gaps with differentiated, individualized lessons and built-in supports. Blended learning environments also provide teachers with more freedom, allowing them to focus on certain students or groups of students as needed, while those who are working on-level or beyond continue to feel challenged and rewarded.

5. Focus on professional development.

MTSS involves many components that must be executed well in order for them to work. Tiered systems require ongoing professional learning at all levels and for all roles to drive system-wide transformation. Providing teachers with the training to effectively create blended learning classrooms, use digital assessments and support programs, and understand when and how to refer a child for intervention or challenge programs is critical. All teachers need targeted training to help their students to close gaps and become more academically proficient. Professional learning should be consistent, classroom-based, and collaborative. Ideally, training should be job-embedded, so that teachers can immediately apply what is learned. A good professional development program will help ensure that teachers know how to implement curricula within the MTSS, and it can improve teacher retention.

6. Choose programs based on evidence.

Educators will have more confidence in their MTSS if they also choose high-quality learning programs and resources—in core instruction, supplemental courses, and for interventions—that are backed by scientific evidence. When programs are aligned to individual student needs, proven effective by rigorous research, and implemented with high fidelity, teachers have the tools they need to unlock the full potential of each learner. Choose curriculum partners who are dedicated to the highest standards in research, and who have willingly tested and retested their programs to ensure their effectiveness.

Conclusion

Comprehensive MTSS models can transform K–12 education and improve the educational outcomes of all students. However, they must be implemented through collaboration and with a commitment to a district-wide approach. MTSS models that adhere to state standards, promote equity and access, and include data-driven assessments can effectively deliver differentiated, individualized instruction and built-in supports.

Implementing a holistic solution can help replace interventions in academic silos with an integrated multi-tiered approach, mitigate the challenges of educational inequity, and provide a holistic, student-centered framework that provides every K–12 student with the opportunity to reach his or her greatest potential.

Educational leaders in K-12 schools who apply the six strategies of Inclusion, Curriculum Balance, Performance Monitoring, Blended Learning, Professional Development, and Evidence-Based Curricula can optimize academic systems of support, and propel student achievement.

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