The Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) Guide

Everything you need to know about the Multi-Tiered System of Support and how to implement it successfully

BRANCHING MINDS
Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) is a framework that helps educators identify students’ academic, behavioral, and social-emotional strengths and challenges and provide differentiated support for students depending on their needs. MTSS grew out of the integration of two other intervention-based frameworks: Response to Intervention (RtI) and PBIS. Given the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a growing need to bring the whole child lens to our classrooms and provide both academic and social-emotional support to all students. MTSS is gaining great momentum as a solution to overcoming the challenges associated with instructional loss and as a way to drive equity in education.

In this guide, we explore definitions and essential elements of MTSS and provide best practice recommendations and requirements for implementing an effective MTSS framework. The guide also outlines instructions for gathering accurate and reliable data, using data to make meaningful instructional changes for students, and establishing effective MTSS teams and system-level practices.
What is MTSS?

Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) is a collaborative, evidence-based, approach to differentiating and personalizing instruction and intervention, across academics and behavior for all students—so that every student can achieve academic and life success.

MTSS is one of the most effective ways to provide an equitable educational experience because it leverages collective knowledge and expertise to help teachers understand their learners’ needs and make informed and strategic decisions that best support them.

MTSS begins with teachers assessing the skills of everyone in the class, to proactively identify who may need additional support in an area (e.g. reading, math, behavior). Students then receive support (research-based, targeted instruction or intervention) matched both to their skills and level of need. Those students’ progress is monitored closely to ensure that the additional support is helping. If the achievement gap has resolved, the additional support in that area is no longer required; if it does not improve, then the level of personalization increases, further problem solving to understand why each student struggles, and to design a customized plan to support their needs in a defined and systematic way.

MTSS is not new. There are many academic experts and learning scientists ready to share the dos and don’ts of supporting the diversity of student learning needs. There are 1000s of research-backed interventions to choose from, tons of best practices to keep in mind, and so many data points to inform our data-driven decision-making. There is tremendous evidence supporting the power of an effective MTSS system to improve student outcomes for struggling learners, but there is also solidly convincing research that it improves student outcomes for ALL learners. A rising tide raises all boats.
What are the essential components of MTSS?

According to the Center on Multi-Tiered System of Supports, at the American Institute for Research, a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) is a proactive and preventative framework that integrates data and instruction to maximize student achievement and support students social, emotional, and behavior needs from a strengths-based perspective. MTSS offers a framework for educators to engage in data-based decision-making related to program improvement, high-quality instruction and intervention, social and emotional learning, and positive behavioral supports necessary to ensure positive outcomes for districts, schools, teachers, and students. The MTSS framework is comprised of four essential components: 1) screening, 2) progress monitoring, 3) multi-level prevention system, and 4) data-based decision. Depending on state law, MTSS data may also support the identification of students with learning disabilities or other special education needs.

### Screening

Screening is generally conducted 3 times a year, to identify students who may be at risk for poor outcomes, and need additional academic, social, emotional, and behavioral support. Screening is also used to identify patterns and trends of learning and achievement at the school- and grade-levels.

### Multi-Level Prevention System

Multi-level prevention system includes a continuum (tier 1, 2, and 3) of integrated academic, social, emotional and behavioral, instructional and intervention supports that are evidence-based and culturally and linguistically responsive.

### Progress monitoring

Progress monitoring uses valid and reliable tools and processes, to assess performance, quantify improvement of responsiveness to intervention and instruction, and evaluate the effectiveness of instruction, interventions and support.

### Data-Based Decision Making

Data-based decision making includes data analysis and problem solving through team meetings, to make decisions about instruction, intervention, implementation and disability identification (in accordance with state law).
What are the guiding principles of MTSS?

There are 7 guiding principles of MTSS:

1. **MTSS is for ALL students.**
   - a. Educators must work proactively to support students’ learning needs.
   - b. ALL students can learn.
   - c. ALL available resources are accessible to teach all students.

2. **Leadership is vital.**
   - a. Strong administrative support ensures clarity around protocol and commitment to time and resources.
   - b. Administration supports teachers by sharing the common goal of improving instruction (core, supplemental, and intervention).
   - c. MTSS team builds internal capacity and sustainability over time.

3. **Scientific, research-based core instruction and intervention is the foundation for success.**
   - a. **Core Curriculum:** To ensure students have the best chance at success, use strategies with a scientific, research-base.
     - i. Core curriculum and instructional approaches must have a high probability of success for most students (80%).
     - ii. Implementation of core curriculum must be verifiably implemented with fidelity.
   - b. **Tiered Levels of Support:** Beyond the core curriculum, match students’ instruction/support to the level and intensity of their need. The levels of support provided to students are based on increasing level of student needs, which is organized through a tiered framework:
     - i. Tier 1 is whole class core instruction
     - ii. Tier 2 is whole class core instruction + additional targeted instruction (often small group)
     - iii. Tier 3 is whole class core instruction + additional targeted instruction + intensive intervention
Instructionally relevant, valid and reliable assessments are critical for students on a continuum of needs.

There are 3 types of assessments, which vary in administration and use:

a. Summative assessments are administered to all students annually to determine students’ mastery of grade-level standards and provide educators with information about adequate yearly progress at site and district levels.

b. Universal screening assessments are administered to all students three times per year to proactively and objectively identify which students are potentially in need of educational supports / enhancements to supplement the core curriculum. Furthermore, evaluation of universal screening data is conducted to ensure the core curriculum is resulting in success for a sufficient percentage of students. These assessments should be nationally or state-normed and predictive of performance on summative assessments.

c. A Response Protocol refers to the method and approach used when determining student needs and how to address them--it defines, “who gets what and when.”

b. The Response Protocol outlines a plan for using research-based, targeted interventions and enrichment services with increasing levels of cumulative support.

c. The Response Protocol outlines the roles and responsibilities of staff and clarifies the procedures and processes within the model (e.g., requirements to intensify to a Tier 3 level of support for a student, procedures for notifying parents, etc.).

d. There are three types of Response Protocols:
   i. A Standard-Treatment Protocol (STP) is used when all students struggling with a similar area receive the same support plan.
   ii. A Problem-Solving Protocol (PSP) is used when a student receives an individual plan designed for their specific needs.
   iii. A combined approach (ST/PSP) uses elements from both protocols to design additional support.
Data guide instructional decisions.

Educators are also respected as diverse learners.

a. Data are used to align curriculum and instruction to assessment.
b. Data are used to allocate resources.
c. Data drive professional development decisions.

a. Educators require professional development to ensure effectiveness and integrity at all levels of instruction.
b. Educators receive ongoing training and support to assimilate new knowledge and skills in a diversity of ways.
   i. This support can be in the form of follow-up modeling and coaching.
   ii. This support can be provided in person, via webinar, in groups, one-on-one, through tutorials, articles, etc.
c. Educators anticipate and are willing to meet newly emerging needs based on student performance.

Related Resource

How to use progress monitoring data to guide decision making in an MTSS practice

MTSS Implementation Fidelity Reference Guide

MTSS/RTI fidelity assessments review the most critical features of MTSS/RTI school-wide practices and help identify the critical missing steps to inform what schools should do next.

Use this MTSS/RTI Implementation Fidelity Reference Guide to figure out where your school is at in its implementation, and keep track of your infrastructural growth towards fidelity. Download the Guide
Problem-solving in MTSS

A Response Protocol is used to make support decisions for students on a continuum of needs.

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- **Combined Approach (ST/PSP)** uses elements from both protocols to design additional support.
The combined Standard Treatment Protocol / Problem-Solving (STP-PS) Model with Branching Minds drives the decisions made in the MTSS system, and includes 4 steps:

1. **Problem Identification**
   - (“Who and what are we concerned about?”): the difference between what learning and/or behavior is expected and what actually occurs is clearly defined.

2. **Problem Analysis**
   - (“Why do we think the problem is occurring?”): multiple sources of data are used (e.g. formative and summative assessments, attendance data, the BrM Insight Surveys, etc..) to generate possible cause(s) of the problem.

3. **Plan Implementation**
   - (“What can we do about it?”): using the BrM platform, an intervention plan is developed collaboratively and implemented. The plan contains learning goals, support activities that are research-based strategies from the BrM library that maximize the likelihood of success, and a plan for monitoring progress.

4. **Plan Evaluation**
   - (“Was our support successful?”): Progress data are reviewed to determine if the plan was delivered with fidelity and the extent of impact in closing the gap toward expected performance. If positive impact is not evident, the problem-solving process begins again.

It is critical to understand that MTSS is based on this premise: the earlier we can identify a problem, analyze it so we can best understand our learners’ needs, implement a plan providing each student the level of support they need using research-backed interventions matched to their specific challenges, and monitor frequently for fidelity and effectiveness, the higher the likelihood we can help our students achieve success more easily, more quickly, and more commonly within the general education setting. MTSS is how we provide an equitable and successful education for ALL students.
Data systems in MTSS: The different assessment types within MTSS

Instructionally relevant, valid, and reliable assessments are critical for providing proactive and reactive support. There are 3 types of assessments, which vary in administration and use:

1. Summative assessments are administered to all students annually to determine students’ mastery of grade-level standards and provide educators with information about adequate yearly progress at site and district levels.

2. Universal screening assessments are administered to all students three times per year to proactively and objectively identify which students are potentially in need of educational supports/enhancements to supplement the core curriculum. Furthermore, evaluation of universal screening data is conducted to ensure the core curriculum is resulting in success for a sufficient percentage of students. These assessments should be nationally or state-normed and predictive of performance on summative assessments.

3. Progress monitoring assessments are given to students receiving intervention support and are administered weekly or every other week, depending on the intensity of need. These data should come from Curriculum-Based Measurements (CBMs), because they provide a reliable and valid measure of students’ growth in a particular skill area.

Related Resources

- Webinar - Using Screening Data to Tier Students for RTI/MTSS
- Blog - How to Create a Seamless Data-Driven School Culture Through MTSS
Tiers in MTSS

A three-tiered system of service delivery is a necessary structure to efficiently and effectively support all children, not just those who struggle in school. The three-tiered system of service delivery is crucial in the attempt to ensure all students achieve at high levels and all students achieve college and career readiness.

The 1st step in building an MTSS system involves examining system effectiveness, which must occur prior to examining students individually. This section describes each tier in detail, and how to examine the effectiveness of a school’s system of service delivery.

At Tier 1, all students receive scientific, research-based core instruction implemented with integrity and emphasizing grade-level standards and school-wide behavioral expectations. Instruction at Tier 1 should be explicit, differentiated and include flexible grouping and active student engagement. To ensure 80% of students’ needs are met at Tier 1, high quality instruction is essential. Features of high quality, research-based instruction include (Chard et al., 2008):

a. **Standards-Based Curriculum**: a curriculum based upon state standards.

b. **Systematic Explicit Instruction**: Skills are taught from less to more complex using direct, clear and concise instructional language.

c. **Differentiated Instruction**: Students have different levels of background knowledge and school readiness; differentiated instruction engages each student in active learning according to his/her needs. The content of instruction, delivery of instruction, and targeted level of instruction can be differentiated.
d. **Flexible Grouping:** A combination of whole group, small group, and individual instruction allows teachers to create fluid groups that meet the needs of all students.

e. **Active Student Engagement:** Ensuring all students are actively involved during instruction and are not passive recipients; this can be accomplished with high rates of opportunities to respond, ample time to practice skills, and prompt corrective feedback.

f. **Classroom Behavior Strategies:** Proactively and explicitly teaching the expected behaviors and routines, frequent use of reinforcement and praise (4:1 positive to negative feedback loop), quick and efficient transition times, and consistent instructional response to misbehavior.

A solid Tier 1 should be sufficient to help *80%* of students meet or exceed grade level expectations as measured by a standardized summative assessment. If Tier 1 instruction is not successful in meeting the needs of 80% of the school’s population, the school team should evaluate the quality of the curriculum and its delivery and also consider possible solutions to create a better match between students’ needs and the core curriculum and instruction (e.g., improving explicit instruction, differentiation strategies, use of flexible grouping, and maximizing active student engagement).

**Learn more about:**

- [High-Leverage Tier 1 Interventions for Elementary Schools?](#)
- [Tier 1 Enrichment and Support?](#)
- [Supporting our Tier 1 Students: Best Practices of Data Analysis and Differentiated Instruction for Educational Leadership](#)

**Tier 2: Targeted Group Intervention**

At Tier 2, students identified as being at-risk academically or behaviorally through universal screeners are provided scientific, research-based interventions in addition to the core. Approximately 10-15% of students will need supplemental instruction at a Tier 2 level of support to become proficient. Tier 2 interventions are implemented with groups of students demonstrating common skill deficits or social/emotional/behavioral risk characteristics. These students should be observed on a platform or a system where a collaborative intervention plan is developed, monitored, and documented.
Targeted group interventions typically involve an additional 60-90 minutes of instruction (outside of core instruction) provided each week (e.g., two to three 30-minute intervention periods).

Targeted group interventions must be more explicit: more intensive than core instruction; more supportive in the form of encouragement, feedback, and positive reinforcement; carefully scaffolded; and ideally occur in groups of approximately 3 to 5 students, for elementary, and 6 to 8 students or tier 2 support classes broken into a few groups of 6 to 8 students, for middle and high schools.

Students who have not demonstrated progress with targeted group interventions at a Tier 2 level of support require more time in more intensive interventions. Tier 3 interventions are distinguished from Tier 2 interventions because they are individualized based on data collected in individual problem solving, occur with smaller student-teacher ratios (e.g., ideally 1-on-1, however, groups of 3 to 5 students or a larger group broken into a few groups of 3-5 students, is acceptable for middle and high schools), and possibly occur for a longer duration of time (e.g., more daily minutes or more weeks spent in intervention). About 5-10% of students will require this level of intensive support.

Tier 3 intervention plans include more than what occurs during intervention time. They also include strategies for maximizing student outcomes during core instruction or Tier 1, as well as supports to use at home or in the community.

Learn more about:

Understanding Tier Patterns and Movement in MTSS
## Intervention planning in MTSS

Teachers spend a lot of time and effort discussing student needs, creating plans, providing differentiated support, and documenting the work; however, without the right intervention plan, the work becomes a documentation process instead of the intended problem-solving practice.

The key components of successful intervention plans are:

| 1 | Goals | When setting goals, a helpful acronym to use is SMART, to ensure that each goal is Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time-bound. When goals include these features it makes it clear when problem-solving whether or not the goal was achieved. |
| 2 | Progress monitoring | Progress monitoring is the process of tracking student growth towards the goal. These are typically short, skill-based assessments that are administered using alternate forms that are also comparable in difficulty, instead of giving the exact same assessment multiple times. The assessments should also be reliable and valid in that they are able to accurately discriminate between growth, decline, and stagnation in a specific subject area. This ultimately provides reliable and valid information that can be used in problem-solving meetings as to whether or not the student is responding to the intervention and showing improvement. |
| 3 | Interventions | Intervention plans always need to include the actual intervention that will be used to help students reach their goal. In MTSS, interventions are targeted instructional programs, activities, lessons, strategies, or tools used to improve a specific skill. It is also important to point out what strategies are NOT interventions. In MTSS homework help, test prep, and reviews of core content are not considered interventions. Although they are included in intervention plans, locations and people are not the actual interventions themselves. For example, only including in an intervention plan that the student went to the library for support or met with an academic support teacher does not identify what was done to support the student. |
Therefore, when planning these intervention activities is it important to again think about what information will be needed for future problem-solving meetings. For example, what was done? What skill was it trying to target? How long, how frequent, and where?

Many of these key pieces of information for problem-solving are not only important when developing the plan, but are also critical when selecting interventions.

PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT
How the practice of MTSS intervention planning has evolved in Mineola UFSD, with the support of Branching Minds
CHECK OUT THE SLIDES
Request a demo to learn about How to select and document evidence-based supports for struggling students on the Branching Minds platform.
REQUEST A DEMO

Related Resources
- Webinar - Successful intervention planning in RTI / MTSS to improve student outcomes
- Blog - Intervention Planning in MTSS: How to Balance Best Practices and Feasibility
The different types of meetings in MTSS: Three types of MTSS meetings

An effective MTSS practice is comprised of three different types of meetings that have three different functions and agendas:

1. **The School Level MTSS Meeting**
   - This meeting is conducted three times a year following the administration of universal screening assessments. The goal of this meeting is to understand the health of school-level MTSS practice by looking at the percent of students who are adequately being served by the core, the equity of instruction across demographics, grades, and classrooms, and improvement in student outcome measures since the last meeting. These metrics are used to evaluate the quality of practice across tier 1, 2, and 3 levels of support and guide school-level improvement plans.

2. **The Grade/Content Team MTSS Meeting**
   - This meeting is conducted by each grade or content team on a monthly basis to discuss all students receiving tier 2 and 3 level support. The goal of this meeting is to ensure students at greater levels of risk are receiving support and making progress, that patterns/trends in student growth are identified, and that plans are adjusted or support is provided to teachers based on observed trends in student need.

3. **The Individual Problem-solving MTSS Meeting**
   - This meeting provides the time and space for individualized deep dive problem-solving for students not making sufficient progress when supported by the Grade/Content Team, e.g. students not making progress after receiving tier 2 or tier 3 level support.
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<td><strong>THE SCHOOL LEVEL MTSS MEETING</strong></td>
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<td>Evaluate school-wide health and wellness of MTSS practice</td>
<td>1 hour, 3x per year (post-universal screeners)</td>
<td>• Principal Data specialists (e.g., AP or counselor) &lt;br&gt;• Student service/ instructional service representative &lt;br&gt;• Special Ed representative/ teacher &lt;br&gt;• Grade-level rep (large schools) OR Gen Ed teacher rep (small schools)</td>
<td>• Examine the percent of students adequately served by the core &lt;br&gt;• Examine equity of core instruction (across demographics, grades, and classrooms) &lt;br&gt;• Evaluate student body growth and tier movement &lt;br&gt;• Evaluate equity of student growth and tier movement &lt;br&gt;• Evaluate quality of intervention delivery &lt;br&gt;• Plan for improved support</td>
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<td>Monitor progress of tier 2 students, look for trends in support needs at the system, teacher, or student level.</td>
<td>1 planning period a month</td>
<td>All teachers and specialists who are working with Tier 2 students in that grade or content area.</td>
<td>First meeting after screener &lt;br&gt;• Tier and/or review tier placement of students &lt;br&gt;• Create tier 2 groups and plans &lt;br&gt;• Schedule tier 3 student problem solving meetings &lt;br&gt;Follow-up meetings &lt;br&gt;• Review progress of tier 2 groups &lt;br&gt;• Look for trends in student growth &lt;br&gt;• Make course corrections to promote growth (e.g., provide support to teachers, change strategy) &lt;br&gt;• Schedule individual problem-solving for students if necessary</td>
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<td>Deeper dive problem-solving for students not making sufficient progress, and to create/revise Intervention Plans.</td>
<td>Weekly or bi-weekly ½ or full day meetings (depending on the size of Tier 3 population)</td>
<td>• MTSS lead (principal, AP, or school psych) • Intervention specialist(s) • Rotating gen ed teacher of student being discussed</td>
<td>• Teacher presents data • Team evaluates student progress • Team analyzes and identifies problems • Team creates intervention plan to support student **Should avg 4-5 students in a ½ day, or 8-10 students in a full day</td>
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**Related Resources**

- Webinar - Effective meeting structures in a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) / response to intervention (RTI) practice
- Guide - The MTSS Meetings Guide: How can we make our RTI/MTSS meetings work better?
How to build the right MTSS team?

The MTSS team is a school-based, problem-solving team; it is the engine that drives the MTSS system. The MTSS team proactively addresses system needs by reviewing school-wide data (within grade levels and classrooms) and supports individual student growth by helping to monitor progress and make decisions for students at Tier 3.

The site administrator designates the composition of the MTSS team. MTSS team membership is determined both by standing members who contribute expertise from their respective disciplines and those who may be invited to address a specific concern. Examples of standing members on the MTSS team include: administrator, general education teacher, school psychologist/counselor, dean, content area specialist, ELL teacher, special education teacher, and grade-level or department representatives.

MTSS Team duties are as follows:

Meet regularly with a structured agenda that varies throughout the month to:

- Review universal screening data;
- Review school-wide data, consider feedback and concerns from PLCs, and make data-based decisions;
- Provide input on professional development as it relates to the school’s MTSS system and Tier 1 needs;
- Provide input regarding school site intervention/enrichment schedule, curriculum, and/or course offerings;
- Support grade levels/departments in serving students during intervention blocks in collaboration with general education teachers;
- Discuss and communicate with the site administrator on issues relevant to the MTSS process;
- Consult and collaborate with administrators, counselors, teachers and parents about MTSS, problem-solving process, and procedural integrity;
- Hold problem-solving meetings (that include parents) for individual students;
- Refer students for comprehensive special education evaluations when data indicate this step is warranted.
The following list describes roles/responsibilities that are assigned by site administrators (or their designees) to various members of the MTSS team, given individual strengths and abilities. Some responsibilities are shared among team members:

**Administrative Representative**
- Facilitates monitoring of instructional integrity within grade levels/departments
- Provides leadership at MTSS team meetings
- Ensures weekly progress monitoring for all students in Tiers 2 and 3 (both for students with IEPs and those without IEPs)

**MTSS Team Coordinator/Facilitator**
- Provides leadership at MTSS team meetings
- Coordinates and sets agenda for MTSS team meetings
- Provides expertise to MTSS team regarding problem-solving protocol
- Provides expertise in data analysis
- Identifies trends in student/staff need across school

**Grade-level/Content Area Representative**
- Serves as a liaison between PLC/grade-level/department team and MTSS team
- Attends grade level PLC/MTSS meetings on a regular basis
- Identifies trends in student/staff need across grade-level or content area
- Presents data/background information on student being discussed (in absence of classroom teacher)

**Specialists (e.g., ELL teacher, speech/language pathologist, intervention teacher, behavior specialist)**
- Provides expertise to MTSS team regarding interventions and skill remediation
- Supports MTSS team with data interpretation and ensures linkage of data to selected interventions
- Gathers progress monitoring data from PLCs and Tier 3 interventionists for review during MTSS meetings
- Consults/collaborates with classroom teachers regarding differentiated instruction

**Classroom teacher**
- Provides experience with and knowledge of student being discussed
- Presents data/background information on student
- Ensures next steps are documented and communicated with student and/or family
The MTSS Teams: Staff, Roles, and Responsibilities

Critical to the functioning of an effective MTSS team is communication and collaboration between all school personnel. It is important to remember as we identify roles within an MTSS system that, as educators first, we all own the success of all students.

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Related Resource

*Blog - Developing successful MTSS teams*
About the Branching Minds solution:

Branching Minds is an MTSS/RTI system-level education platform that brings together innovative, easy to use technology with the latest insights from the learning sciences to help drive student and school success, while making teachers and administrators work easier and more effective. Branching Minds connects data, systems, interventions, and stakeholders so that educators, administrators, and families can work better together to support students’ holistic needs.

Branching Minds provides so much more than just a solution to our problem. Branching Minds has illuminated a path forward for developing the foundational systems and processes we need to truly personalize supports for our students. In addition, Branching Minds multiplies our capacity to identify and respond to student needs.

— Sarah Guerrero, Principal, Northbrook Middle School, Spring Branch ISD, TX