

Multi-tier System of Supports

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MOST EDUCATORS ARE AT LEAST superficially familiar with the term “Response-to-Intervention,” or “RTI.” Since the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA), which prohibits states from requiring school districts to use IQ-achievement discrepancy criteria in the identification of students with specific learning disabilities and encourages the use of Response-to-Intervention, a scientific, research-based approach (Mandlawitz, 2007), “doing RTI” has become a veritable catchphrase in schools and classrooms throughout the country. RTI refers to the practice of providing high-quality, multi-tier instruction and interventions matched to students’ needs, monitoring student progress frequently, and evaluating data on student progress to determine the need for special education support (Batsche et al., 2005; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). While numerous examples of the model have been proposed, most of these have several common features (Batsche et al., 2005; Gresham, 2007), including universal screening of all students, multiple tiers of intervention service delivery, a problem-solving method, and an integrated data collection and assessment system to inform decisions at each tier of service delivery.

Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports

Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports, or PBIS, represents somewhat of a parallel model, in which preventative behavioral instruction is delivered to the whole school population in an effort to



foster a positive school climate. Like RTI, PBIS espouses a multi-tier, data-based approach to service delivery. The first tier includes teaching a set of appropriate behaviors within the whole school; the second tier activates behavioral interventions for students who do not respond to the primary instruction, and the third tier involves individualized behavior support plans for students who do not respond to primary or secondary prevention support (McIntosh et al., 2010).

While their foci are different, the underlying principles of both RTI and PBIS draw upon the U.S. Public Health Service’s conceptual multi-tier pyramid model of prevention, which involves primary, secondary and tertiary approaches (Walker et al., 1996). This framework provides a source for understanding how RTI and PBIS originated and how they can be woven together, offering the foundation for a Multi-Tier System of Supports (MTSS).

Multi-Tier System of Supports

The RTI and PBIS approaches involve targeting specific areas in which students are struggling and then applying increasingly research-based interventions until the barriers to learning are addressed. Integrating both models directly addresses the academic, social, emotional and behavioral development of children from early childhood through adolescence. This represents the foundation of a comprehensive MTSS framework. MTSS leverages the principles of RTI and PBIS and integrates a continuum of systemwide resources, strategies, structures and practices. Numerous school districts and states, including Los Angeles, Boston, Kansas and Utah, have adopted an MTSS framework in an endeavor to more cohesively, comprehensively and coherently meet the needs of all learners.

MTSS, rooted in the data-informed practices of RTI and PBIS, explicitly offers a multi-tier approach. Emphasis is placed

on schoolwide, differentiated universal core instruction at Tier 1; Tiers 2 and 3 provide intensive and increasingly individualized interventions (Batsche et al., 2005). Tier 1 refers to the core curriculum delivered to all students that has a high likelihood of bringing the majority of students to acceptable levels of proficiency.

Tier 2 provides supplemental instruction to those students who display poor response to the core instruction provided at Tier 1. Tier 3 involves the application of intensive instructional interventions designed to increase the rate of student progress. Tier 3 services may or may not include special education. A structured

problem-solving process and integrated data-collection system, based on the RTI and PBIS approaches, is utilized at each tier of the model. The effectiveness of instruction at each tier is determined by collecting data about students' progress in a recommended monitoring schedule. With its emphasis on evidence-based instruction and collaborative, iterative problem-solving, MTSS acknowledges that instruction and/or contextual issues, not student inability, could be the reason why students are not learning.

In addition to offering a multi-tier approach to assessment and intervention, MTSS integrates a systemwide continuum of supports. Such structures activate home-school-community relationships and bring together partners from the education, mental health, family, social service, medical, juvenile justice, recreation and cultural domains within the multi-tier system. These collaborations, together with educational leadership at the district and school levels, promote the formation of wrap-around structures, supports and practices to help students succeed in school.

Bringing MTSS to Scale

Previous educational change initiatives often have failed due to policymakers not meaningfully involving educators in decision-making or considering schools in the context of their larger social systems (Sarason, 1990). Working within the MTSS framework requires that all school district staff, including teachers, central office personnel, school leaders and student support specialists, change the way in which they have traditionally worked.

Castillo et al. (2010) have developed technical guidance that provides an organizational blueprint for considering how to facilitate sustainable change within complex educational systems. Drawing from this work, successful implementation of MTSS within a systems change perspective generally involves three stages: consensus development, infrastructure building and implementation (Batsche et



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al., 2007; Castillo et al., 2010).

District and school leaders must first achieve consensus on using MTSS practices, then build the necessary infrastructure to establish and sustain MTSS practices, and finally, facilitate and evaluate the implementation of data-informed problem solving across a multi-tier service delivery framework. Using these stages to guide and inform the work will improve the sustainability of MTSS implementation. A description of each of the three components of the change model follows.

Consensus

Key stakeholders in a district or school (e.g., superintendent, curriculum directors, principals, teachers, instructional support personnel, student services personnel) should arrive at consensus regarding the importance of MTSS implementation and commit to its adoption and

sustainability. This is done through a discussion of beliefs and assumptions about teaching and student learning in which educators at the district and school levels identify their own perceptions regarding the need for MTSS practices and together construct their vision of the MTSS framework enacted.

Infrastructure

The development of infrastructure involves creating the structures required to facilitate and support implementation of the MTSS framework model. A district must examine its current goals, policies, resources and personnel responsibilities with regard to their alignment with a MTSS model of service delivery. The following are examples of structures that school districts must consider to enhance their capacity to implement MTSS:

- Have training and technical assistance

to build the capacity of all educators

- Recalibrate district office roles that cross-functionally support implementation
- Identify key district stakeholders whose primary focus will be on planning, implementation and ongoing evaluation
- Integrate and manage data
- Identify Tier 1, Tier 2 and Tier 3 assessment and intervention practices across academic and behavioral domains
- Establish decision criteria at each tier
- Identify community and family resources and partnerships
- Identify a systemwide continuum of supports across each domain
- Modify schedules to include problem-solving meetings, intervention delivery, universal screening and progress monitoring, and professional development
- Have a provision of greater principal autonomy for determining school resource allocation to support MTSS

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- Align district and school professional development with MTSS framework
- Have a provision of technology support around efficient and useful data collection and display
- Develop and/or align with district procedures, policies and structures to promote common understanding and application of the MTSS framework with a focus on implementation fidelity

Implementation

Castillo et al. (2010) note that while the likelihood of successful implementation of system change practices is improved when consensus and infrastructure development occurs, Sarason (1990) suggests that many education change initiatives fail due to a lack of cohesive implementation, implying a need to evaluate the extent to which critical components of MTSS are being implemented with long-term support. Educators must identify the critical elements of the MTSS framework and at

what level of detail and in what manner to measure those elements before being able to evaluate whether the framework has actually impacted student outcomes (Castillo et al., 2010).

Business as Usual Isn't Enough

The MTSS framework requires that all school district staff change the way in which they have traditionally worked.

Business as usual is no longer enough to address the educational interests and needs of students. Training and technical assistance provide a critical catalyst for (1) facilitating understanding of MTSS and the development of consensus around MTSS practices, (2) establishing the necessary infrastructure, and (3) evaluating implementation fidelity to appreciate progress and understand results. When thoughtfully designed and executed with necessary training and other supports, the MTSS framework offers the potential to create systemic change that yields markedly improved academic and social outcomes for all learners. **DA**

Resources

Center on Instruction
www.centeroninstruction.org
Global Scholar
globalscholar.us
National Center on
Response to Intervention
www.rti4success.org
RTI Action Network
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