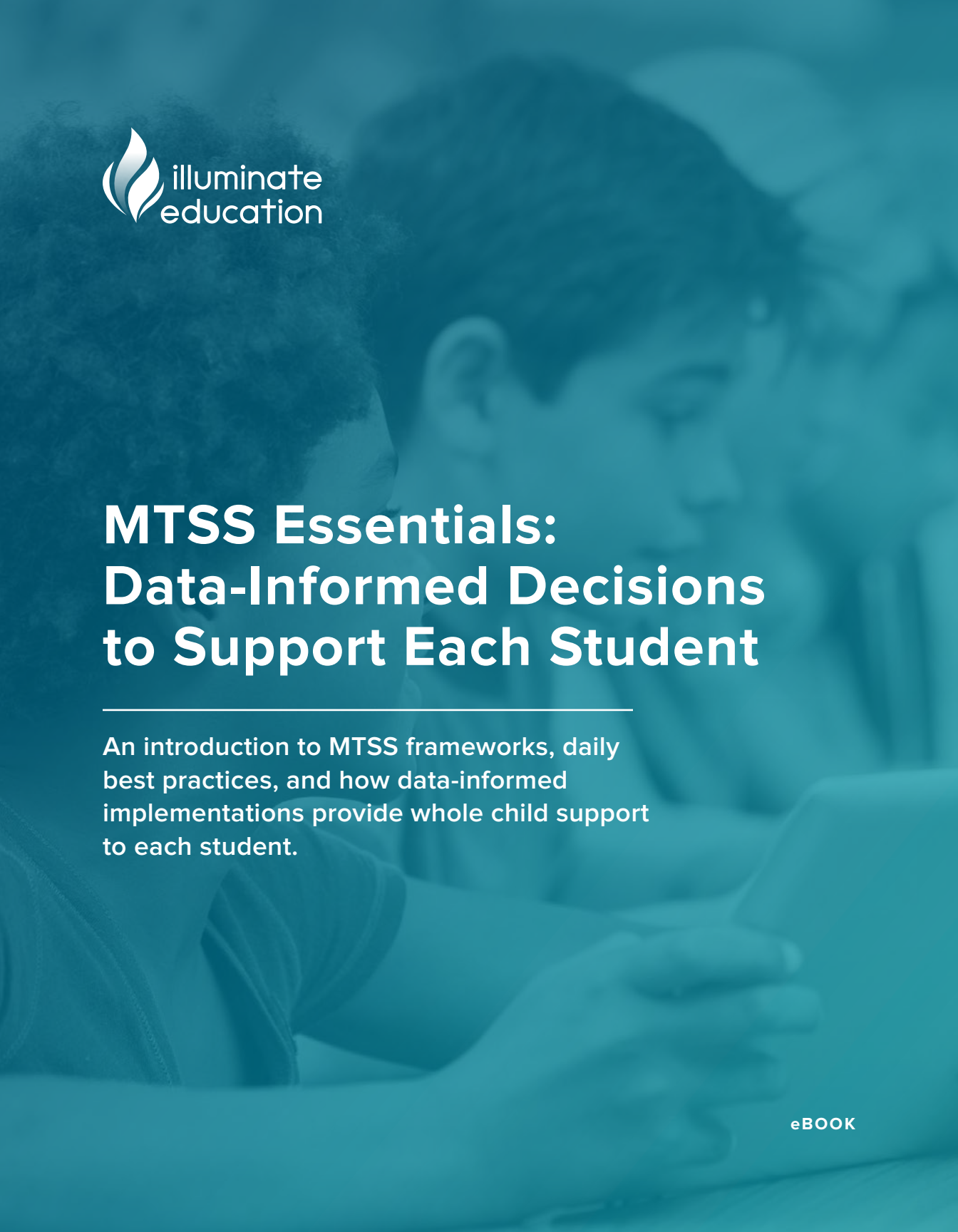


illuminate education

MTSS Essentials: Data-Informed Decisions to Support Each Student

An introduction to MTSS frameworks, daily best practices, and how data-informed implementations provide whole child support to each student.

eBOOK

CONTENTS

Section One

WHAT IS MTSS?

A multi-tiered system of support or **MTSS** is a framework with a tiered infrastructure that uses data to help match academic, social-emotional, and behavioral assessment and instructional resources to each and every student's needs.

In this tiered, data-informed framework, educators work to ensure that the majority of students respond to core instruction. Students who need additional supports for enrichment or remediation are identified by data and provided that support with the right focus and intensity. MTSS helps educators to be thoughtful about using resources appropriately and impactfully, and use data to continually monitor and improve the effectiveness of their actions. MTSS makes the district-wide system more effective and ensures we're supporting the needs of every student.

MTSS streamlines and brings cohesion to the good work and best practices that are already happening in a district, so that those efforts are no longer happening in isolation. MTSS also helps districts to fill gaps in their standard practices that might exist due to common challenges, like limited resources, difficulty collaborating, and a lack of visibility in program effectiveness.

To better understand MTSS, let's look at an analogy.

An MTSS Analogy: The Dentist's Office

Each day, we are all providing universal, general care for our teeth in the form of brushing and flossing. Most communities also resource a dentist office, where general practitioner dentists are staffed to provide regular cleanings. These high-quality, universal best practices—flossing, brushing, and regular cleanings—are intended to be effective for the vast majority of patients.

They are also intended to prevent a high number of patients who need advanced care, such as oral surgery. Oral surgery is an intense treatment, demanding more resources, more training, and specialized staff. Data (such as pain or medical examinations) may reveal that some patients truly need that intensive care, in which case it's important to provide support that is well-aligned to the patient's need in a timely manner. But if there are many people who need that intense treatment, our available resources are exhausted by the demand. By providing, monitoring, and continually improving our universal supports and preventative actions, we're able to better care for all patients and limit the need for intensive treatment.

In schools, MTSS is similar. Educators work to have highly effective instruction in the classroom so that fewer students need intensive interventions to be successful. And if we have a smaller number of students who need additional supports and services, we have the resources needed to provide it—and the data needed to align our actions to the need.

MTSS Changes Adults, Not Students

In the pages that follow, you'll notice a common theme: MTSS is about changing, improving, and supporting our actions as educators, because student outcomes and school systems improve by supporting educators in changing how they work. MTSS is exactly that: a framework that supports educators in changing the way they work and approach problem-solving.

In the next sections, we'll briefly explore the historical context of MTSS and why it's being implemented in districts. Then, we'll unpack a typical MTSS framework and what MTSS looks like in day-to-day best practices.

Section Two

A BRIEF HISTORICAL CONTEXT FOR MTSS

Why Districts are Implementing MTSS

There are many reasons that states, districts, and schools choose to implement MTSS. These might include:

- **Improving the outcomes for all students in terms of academic, behavioral, and social-emotional learning**
- **Addressing the unmet needs of various students and subgroups**
- **De-siloing systems to ensure processes are more effective and connected**
- **Moving students towards progress regardless of current level (at, above, or below)**
- **Taking a whole child approach to supporting students**
- **Complying with federal policy (ESSA)**

Many educators have questions around what ESSA says about MTSS, and how it fits in with other frameworks tied to policy—such as Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) and Response to Intervention (RtI). We'll briefly explore these concepts next.

Examining the Shifts in Historical Policy Leading to MTSS

Introduced in the 1970s, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) established the need for districts to provide special education services to students. Over the years, IDEA has been reauthorized many times.

1997: Reauthorization of IDEA

The reauthorization of IDEA encouraged districts to consider and provide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). PBIS is a framework that calls for actively teaching positive behaviors and delivering evidence-based preventative/responsive interventions to support student academic achievement and well-being. Initially, PBIS was a response to the exclusion of students with disabilities from educational opportunities due to behavior issues and disorders. Since it was introduced as part of IDEA, it implied the availability of funding for districts to apply towards special education.

2001: Passage of NCLB

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) led to a focus on academic results and accountability reporting in schools, particularly regarding Math and Reading proficiency state standard assessment results. As a result, there was a significant increase in the number of assessments that schools were required to administer to students. NCLB was also the impetus for some of the key data analysis measures we see in districts today such as reporting by subgroups.

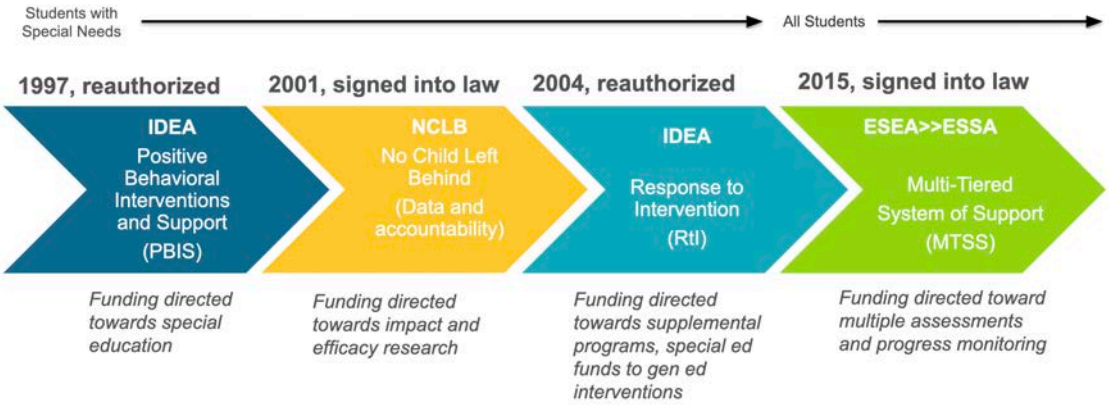
2004: The Introduction of RTI

Congress recognized the increasing number of students referred to special education with a specific learning disability (SLD)—the largest learning disability at that point in time—and that many of those referrals were considered preventable if targeted, effective instructional interventions had been put in place. While the 2004 IDEA amendments did not mandate Response to Intervention (RTI) implementation, it adjusted SLD identification requirements to allow “a process based on the child’s response to scientific, research-based intervention.” This meant research-based interventions could be implemented prior to referring a student to special education. The goal was to help ensure that students who needed instructional support could be kept in general education, and not automatically referred to special education. This shaped the focus of many districts today on early intervention and prevention, and impacts the ability to monitor how students respond to interventions that are put into place.

2015: Passage of ESEA/ESSA

MTSS is introduced in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which calls for "a multi-tier system of supports for literacy services." ESSA also shifted the focus from special-needs students specifically to all students and drove a focus on data-informed decisions based on multiple measures that we see today.

FIGURE 1: POLICY LEADING TO MTSS



Although the term "multi-tiered systems of support" was introduced in ESSA, MTSS is not federally mandated. However, the inclusion of MTSS in ESSA means availability of funds for districts around its implementation.

The term "multi-tiered systems of support" is intentionally lower-cased because there's no singular, objectively correct framework for MTSS. The approach towards the framework is not mandated by the legislation—it was left open for districts and states to develop.

In our next section, we'll dive into what an MTSS framework typically looks like.

Section Three

ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS OF AN MTSS FRAMEWORK

Now that we have an understanding of what MTSS is and why districts are implementing it, this section will unpack the essential components that typically make up an MTSS framework

A Note About State and District Frameworks

As mentioned in Section 1, there is no one correct approach to MTSS. As a result, there can be quite a few differences in the frameworks adopted by various states and districts.

One state might refer to a "Multi-Tiered System of Support" while another to a "Tiered System of Supports for Students." District and states can adopt different essential components within their frameworks or see variance in the specific verbiage used to define or describe those components.

Yet, there tends to be more similarities than differences among MTSS frameworks. For instance, many frameworks call for a team-based or collaborative approach to addressing student needs. Many frameworks also call for tiered supports and data-based decision making, as well as valid and reliable assessment systems.

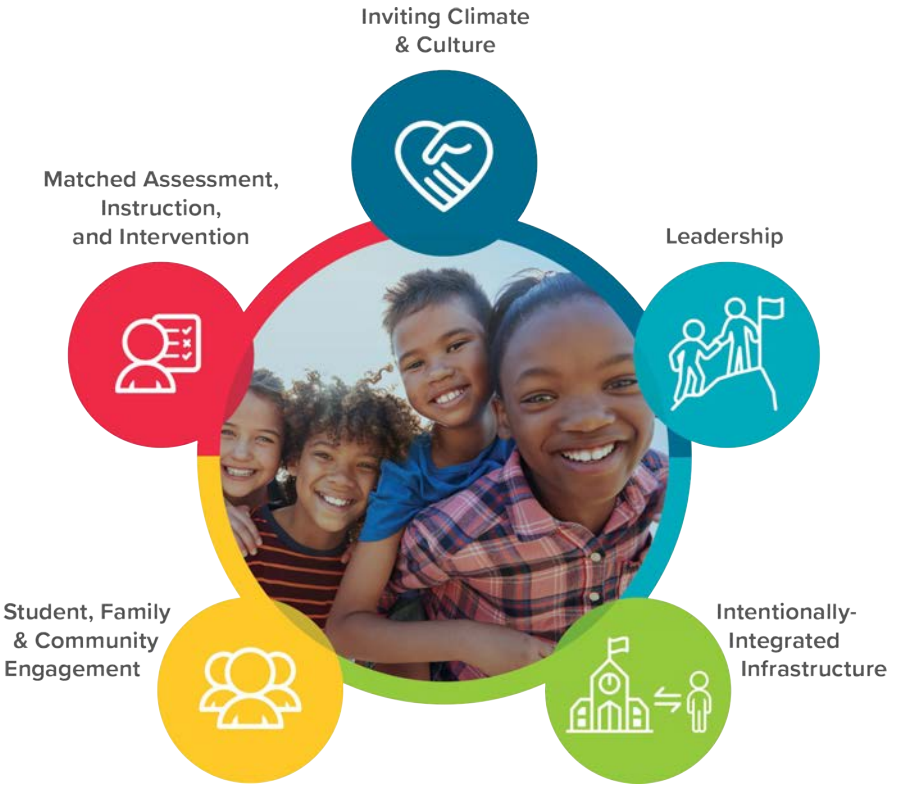
The purpose of this section is not to supplant, challenge, or correct the existing framework of any state or district. Rather, it is intended to provide a general framework to depict the fundamental processes, tools, and practices that are generally included in MTSS from a national perspective and show the importance of fitting these previously disparate elements into a cohesive framework.

The Essential Components of MTSS

For the purposes of this eBook, we'll focus on five essential components:

- **Matched Assessment, Instruction, and Intervention**
- **Inviting Climate and Culture**
- **Leadership**
- **Intentionally-Integrated Infrastructure**
- **Student, Family, and Community Engagement**

FIGURE 2: A GENERAL MTSS FRAMEWORK



Matched Assessment, Instruction, and Intervention

Assessment, instruction, and intervention are interconnected, effective, aligned to student needs, and informed by data.

This component typically includes:

- **Whole Child Measures (Academic, Behavior, Social-Emotional)**: Analyzing data from multiple sources to better understand student needs (as opposed to a singular focus on the academic lens).
- **Comprehensive Assessment System**: A complete set of high-quality assessment tools that enables careful selection of the right assessment at the right time to provide the right information to inform next steps.
- **Tiered Instruction and Supports for All Students (Tier 1, 2, and 3)**: A system-level approach to aligning supports at the right intensity according to the student's need.

Inviting Climate and Culture

Districts, schools, and classrooms are safe, welcoming, and non-discriminatory environments in which students can focus on learning and feel accepted and supported.

This component typically includes:

- **Culturally- and Linguistically-Sustaining Practices**: Ensuring systemic actions support and encourage all students.
- **Emotional, Physical, and Mental Wellness**: Dedicated curriculum is implemented to support student well-being as an important component of student success.
- **Bullying Prevention**: Prevention of physical and virtual bullying.

Leadership

Deliberate allocation of time and resources for district and site leaders to build capacity and foster continual improvement.

This component typically includes:

- **Systematic Analysis for Patterns and Trends with Responsive, System-Level Strategic Action**: Leadership provides the vision, tools, and time necessary to proactively analyze and improve.
- **Dedicated Review of Resource Allocation**: Visibility into (and data-driven decisions around) programming, staff, and other resources.
- **Capacity Building, Communication, and Expectations**: Provided around culturally, linguistically, and community-minded instructional leadership.

Intentionally-Integrated Infrastructure

Districts and schools are intentionally developing, prioritizing, investing in, and providing system-level support to a connected and collaborative ecosystem of people, processes, and tools.

This component typically includes:

- **Collaborative Professional Learning**: Support of one another in continually growing and better supporting students.
- **Aligned Policies, Communication, and Data Processes**: De-siloing efforts to support students and provide stakeholders access to data and tools required to be successful.
- **Intervention and Program Effectiveness and Evaluation**: Continually evaluating the impact of actions to continually increase effectiveness.

Student, Family, and Community Engagement

Shared involvement, communication, and investment in students' success across their wider environments.

This component typically includes:

- **Collaborative Process and Shared Responsibility**: Working directly with parents to help them understand their child's needs so they can be supported at home; working with the community to provide supports and educational opportunities that the district does not have the resources to accommodate.
- **Transparency of Progress and Goal Setting**: Engaging parents and communities as consumers of data.
- **Student Identity, Voice, and Choice**: Actively involving students as the primary stakeholder in their own learning.

The Power of a Cohesive Framework

Many of the components of MTSS are not new practices. They're the high-impact actions that school practitioners have been doing for years. In the past, however, there was a lack of explicit emphasis on aligning those efforts. Many educators would provide supports to a student without any idea that concurrent interventions were happening. District-wide data analysis would occur without connecting findings to resource allocation or program needs.

MTSS isn't reinventing the wheel—it's simply bringing cohesion to the student-centered practices while de-siloing the data-driven decisions that already happen in many districts. When implemented effectively, it not only helps us increase the effectiveness of our existing efforts, but it also uncovers areas in which we may need to adjust or increase our efforts.

In the next section, we'll explore a few best practices around MTSS.

Section Four

MTSS IN ACTION: BEST PRACTICES

In the previous section, we took a high-level view of the components of MTSS. In this section, we'll look at some of the daily actions of MTSS.

Most of the day-to-day work of implementing MTSS falls into the Matched Assessment, Instruction, and Intervention component. For the purposes of this eBook, we'll highlight the following processes:

- **The Problem-Solving Cycle**
- **Whole Child Data**
- **Tiered Instruction and Supports for All Students**
- **Evaluating Effectiveness at Multiple Levels**

The Problem-Solving Cycle

We'll start by looking at the Problem-Solving Cycle as this data-driven process fuels many practices in MTSS—from identifying a specific student's need to evaluating district-level program effectiveness. The cycle is ongoing and constantly repeating, not just a one-time event.

The steps of the cycle are:

- Identifying students' strengths and needs based on data
- Analyzing and forming a plan
- Implementing the plan
- Reflecting and evaluating

At each step of the cycle, data are used to guide next steps. The following section covers the types of data most commonly used in an MTSS implementation.

FIGURE 3: THE PROBLEM-SOLVING CYCLE

Whole Child Data

MTSS supports the "whole child," which means supporting student success and well-being through many interconnected, data-informed lenses and shifting away from a singular focus on academics.

So, what data might this include?

Whole child data is typically organized into three categories of data: academic, behavioral, and social-emotional. Each category encompasses a number of data sources. Figure 4 provides some common examples for each.

Academic data is the most familiar to most educators. This involves sources such as assessment data, grades, and daily assignments. The second category, behavioral data, can play a huge part in identifying students in need of support or challenge—and help us peel back the layers to understand the true nature of the need. Behavioral data includes data points such as office referrals and classroom-recorded incidents that may not involve administrative action. Information such as location, setting, and administrative response are often included. Attendance data can signal issues that impact how a student is performing in the classroom (as well as additional behavior issues). Recording information like health office visits can signal avoidance behaviors that link to how a student performs in the classroom.

The third category encompasses social-emotional learning data. Some of these data include actual social-emotional screeners or surveys, providing SEL risk and competency information. This also features data around mental health and trauma, which often exist as qualitative data.

FIGURE 4: WHOLE CHILD DATA MEASURES

Comprehensive Assessment Systems

Assessment falls into the academic category, which is the set of data typically most familiar to educators. But it's important to understand some of the key assessment tools in a comprehensive assessment system that are critical to MTSS, yet often surrounded by confusion.

Many of us think of assessment systems as being made up of three main types of assessments: just-in-time assessments (formative), interim assessments, and summative assessments.

- **Just-in-Time Assessments** are part of the formative assessment process. They confirm that specific learning has taken place and provide data to inform instruction that follows.
- **Interim Assessments** measure students' standards proficiency periodically throughout the year.
- **Summative Assessments** evaluate, certify, and/or grade learning at the end of a specific period of instruction.

However, as seen in Figure 5, a comprehensive assessment system is more complex and includes specialized tools: universal screening, skills analysis/diagnostic, and progress monitoring assessments.

FIGURE 5: A COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENT SYSTEM AT-A-GLANCE

Universal screening assessments identify students who are at-risk or in need of additional support in order to meet learning goals. Universal screening assessments are administered at the beginning of the year (then one or two additional times throughout the year) to all students, generally in the areas of Reading, Math, and Behavioral screening.

Diagnostic assessments are administered to students, grade levels, or groups who are flagged by universal screening (particularly for those who indicate an intense need) to pinpoint the specific area of academic, behavioral, or social-emotional need. For example, if the universal screener indicates a student struggles in math, the diagnostic assessment might then pinpoint calculation or application as the specific skill within that respective area of math. Diagnostics, in conjunction with other whole child data, help ensure that interventions are tightly aligned to the need. They can be included as a part of a high-quality universal screening assessment. If not, diagnostic assessments are administered immediately after the universal screener.

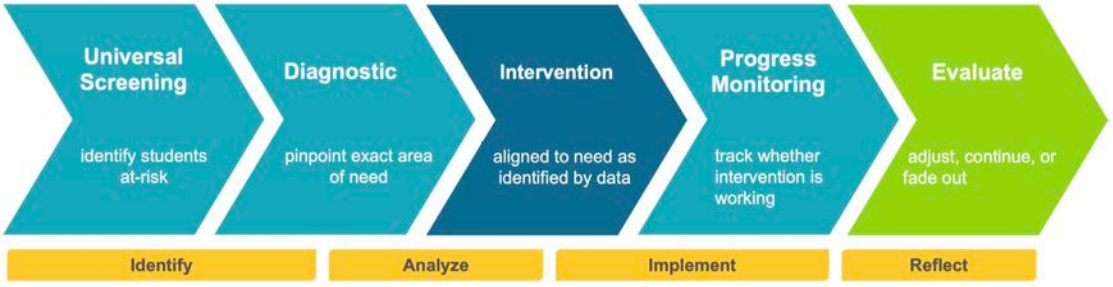
Progress monitoring assessments evaluate progress toward a learning target, per the rates of improvement (ROI) for the specific skill being targeted by an intervention. Progress monitoring assessments are administered to all students receiving a Tier 2 and Tier 3 intervention, usually weekly or bi-weekly. They're very sensitive to growth and measure whether an intervention is working and if it's working fast enough.

There are two types of progress monitoring assessments: General Outcome Measures (GOMs) and Skill-Based Measures (SBMs). GOMs track whether a student is "generally" on track for mastering grade level expectations. SBMs measure progress on the specific skill being targeted by the intervention. GOMs and SBMs should be alternated every other week.

Whereas interim assessments measure mastery of standards or learning targets, universal screening, diagnostic, and progress monitoring assessments are used to measure the foundational skills needed to master those standards. Without these skills, it's difficult to master the content of a given lesson, unit, or grade.

It's important that all assessments are valid and reliable in order to provide quality data for informed decisions. Figure 6 highlights how these special tools fit into MTSS and align to the Problem-Solving Cycle. We'll unpack this process in the following section.

FIGURE 6: ASSESSMENT AND INTERVENTION FLOW IN MTSS



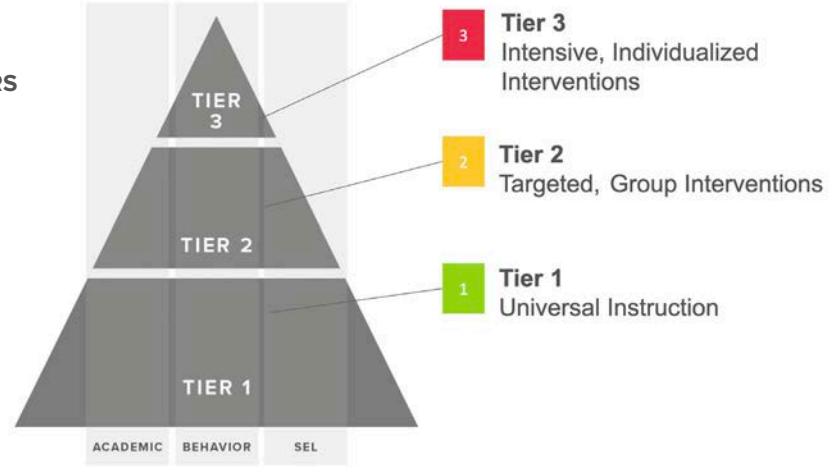
Tiered Instruction and Supports for All Students

In MTSS, student instruction and supports are tiered. In other words, whole child data are used to align students to the instruction and supports they need—at a correct level of intensity and frequency—for their academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs. These interventions and instruction opportunities should be available for all students and at different levels, or tiers.

There are three tiers of instruction and intervention:

- **Tier 1 – General Instruction**: The high-quality classroom instruction that all students receive. This tier encompasses best practices and differentiated instruction, and is constantly refined by what is working at Tier 2 and Tier 3. Generally, districts aim to see 80 to 90 percent of students responding and succeeding in Tier 1 general instruction.
- **Tier 2 – Targeted, Group Interventions**: The research-based supports provided to students who are identified as struggling or not responding to Tier 1 instruction. Tier 2 interventions are often implemented in small group settings, based on a similar need identified via data and for the sake of systematic efficiency. Districts typically expect to see five to 15 percent of students in Tier 2.
- **Tier 3 – Intensive, Individualized Interventions**: The more frequent, intense, and individualized interventions provided to students with a greater need or who are not responding to Tier 2 supports. If students still do not respond, they may be referred for special education evaluation. Usually, districts expect to see one to five percent of students in Tier 3.

FIGURE 7: MTSS TIERS



Keep in mind that students can be in different tiers for different needs at the same time. For example, a student might be in a Tier 2 or Tier 3 intervention for a social-emotional need (such as self-management), while at the same time succeeding in Tier 1 for math.

The goal is aligning supports to needs while also being mindful of resources. Effective Tier 1 instruction ensures that we aren't escalating a high number of students into Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions. In Tiers 2 and 3, resources are more scarce and more costly in terms of dollars, time, and staff. If we neglect our Tier 1 efforts, we will overload and debilitate our Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports rather than attending to the source of the problem.

What Are Interventions?

As previously stated, our whole child data, including our universal screening and diagnostic data, helps us target an intervention to the student's area of need. But what is an intervention?

An intervention is an **instructional resource or support** aligned to student needs. When we intervene, we adjust our instructional actions to better match the student's need. High quality interventions are research-based, which features evidence that other students with a similar need have responded to the intervention.

Interventions can look like a lot of things. It can be a program that the district adopts to support skill development, (e.g., a computer-based product or hands-on workshop) or a change in a teacher's instructional approach (e.g., a double-dose of explicit systematic instruction). A menu of interventions is often developed district by district, offering programs and supports that are aligned to its unique student population.

In the context of MTSS, keep in mind that interventions aren't implemented only for students who are struggling or strictly for academic needs. When we take a whole child approach to MTSS, we're systematically looking at each student to identify academic, behavioral, or social-emotional areas of need. This could mean interventions for students in need of more challenge as well as students who are at risk.

Implementing Interventions

The process of implementing interventions follows the Problem-Solving Cycle (shown in Figure 3).

Identify Student's Need

The student's need is identified based on data. Universal screening and diagnostic data are examined carefully, along with the student's other whole child data sources.

When determining whether a student needs additional support, many teams rely on decision rules. Decision rules are the guidelines or criteria for making instructional decisions for students. They outline things like:

- What do we consider at, above, and below benchmark?
- At which specific cut points should students start receiving intervention?
- Which data and assessments do we use in the decisions?

Analyze & Form a Plan

A plan is created to document the student's need and the actions that will be taken to support the student. A plan can be written for an individual student, or for a group of students with a similar need.

Plans usually outline the specifics of an intervention (i.e., which intervention, how often, in which setting, implemented by which trained staff member, etc.) and the measurable goal for the student's progress. Not only do plans inform the implementation step, but they also serve as a critical reference in the reflection step.

Implement the Plan & Collect Data

The plan is carried out as specified in the plan documentation. Data is collected from progress monitoring assessments. Data are also recorded about the intervention's implementation such as:

- Attendance and minute counts
- Student's participation and engagement
- Intervention comments or qualitative data

Rich data around the fidelity of the intervention implementation is just as important as the progress monitoring data when reflecting and evaluating. It becomes its own set of data in the whole child data picture.

Reflect and Evaluate

Teams determine whether an intervention is working and if it's working fast enough. Based on the determination, the plan is updated and action steps are assigned. This step is also guided by decision rules.

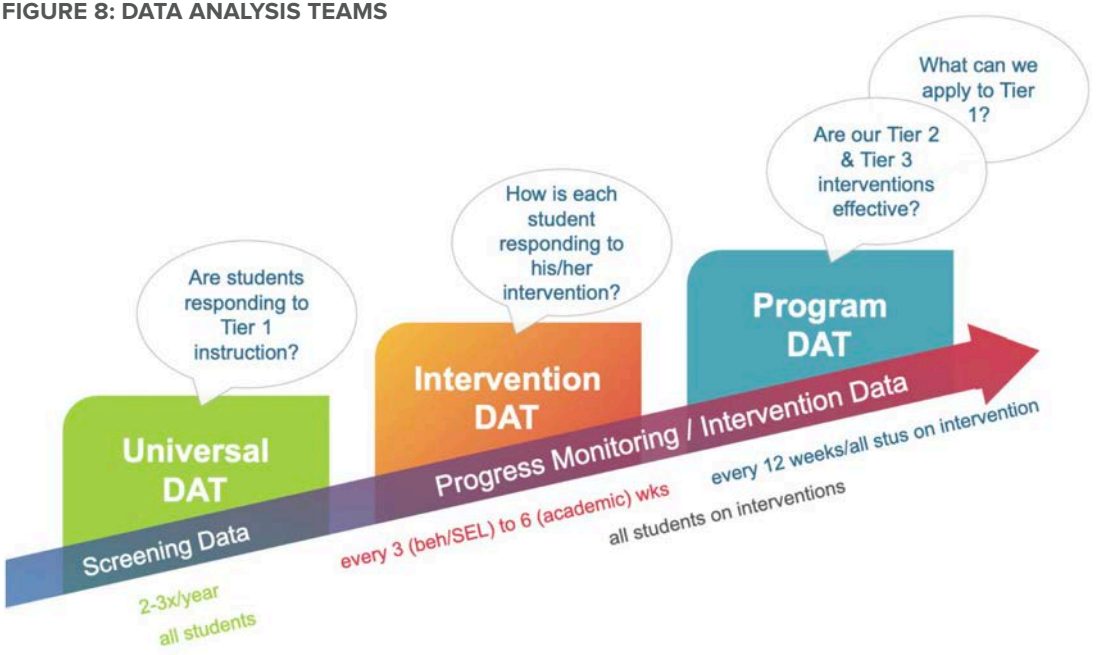
If the intervention appears to be effective, the team will likely choose to keep the student on the intervention until he or she is on track. At that point, the intervention is faded out to ensure a smooth transition.

If the intervention is not working (or working too slowly) to reach the goal in time, the implementation is reviewed to determine if issues are related to fidelity, or if the intervention is indeed being implemented as prescribed but requires change or adjustment. In some cases, it may be determined that special education services may be needed.

Often, the final phase poses the most challenging for districts: evaluating in order to adjust, continue, or fade out the intervention. This struggle could stem from either a lack of decision rules, or a lack of easy-to-use tools for recording intervention data, progress monitoring, and managing plan documentation.

Evaluating Effectiveness at Multiple Levels

FIGURE 8: DATA ANALYSIS TEAMS



Throughout our MTSS implementation, we need to ask (and be able to answer) the question: Is what we're doing working? We need to be able to answer this question at the student, class, group, school, and district levels. However, many districts struggle to answer that question, particularly in real-time in order to make informed decisions throughout the year.

The final section of this eBook will outline a structure for building these evaluative processes into your MTSS implementation.

Data Analysis Teams

Most districts create teams to monitor and evaluate whether actions are improving student outcomes—and if not, to determine why that might be. While various districts employ different terms, we'll use the term "Data Analysis Team," or DAT, coined by Joseph Kovaleski. There should be different teams for different purposes.

Universal DAT

The purpose of a Universal DAT is to monitor Tier 1 instructional effectiveness and identify students in need of additional support. This team meets about 3 times per year to review universal screening, interim assessment, attendance, and behavior data to determine if at least 70 percent of students are responding to general classroom instruction.

If a higher percent of students are not responding, it means that an adjustment is needed at the universal, core instructional level. Otherwise, the district will overload its Tier 2 and Tier 3 resources; instead, a core adjustment is needed to better serve the majority of students at the universal level.

Questions to Ask When Diagnosing Tier 1 Issues:

- Have our educators received adequate training in the curriculum or programs used to teach this skill or standard?
- Are we using research-based curriculum or methods?
- Are standards taught at the same Depth of Knowledge (DOK) level as they are assessed?
- Are we using ongoing formative assessment processes to address learning issues and adjust instruction in-the-moment?
- Are the assessments and data sources used to detect this issue valid and reliable?
- Are our attendance or behavior risk thresholds appropriately set?

Intervention DAT

The purpose of an Intervention DAT is to monitor individual students receiving interventions to determine whether an intervention is working and if it's working fast enough. It typically meets every six weeks for academic interventions and every three weeks for behavioral and/or social-emotional learning interventions.

As described in the previous section, the Intervention DAT is typically looking at the student's progress monitoring data, measuring things like rate of improvement, trendline, and trend compared to goal. The intervention data itself is also reviewed: fidelity, attendance, engagement, and whether it was implemented exactly as prescribed in the plan. If a student is not responding to an intervention, why not?

They leverage the data to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention, determine whether the intervention should be continued, adjusted, or exited, and specify any action items. Input is provided by the parents and classroom teacher, and any resulting decisions are shared with other stakeholders.

Program DAT

The purpose of a Program DAT is to determine the effectiveness of our overall system-level intervention program. It typically meets every 12 weeks to look at data for all students on Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions (academic, behavioral and social-emotional) and determine whether at least 70 percent of students are responding to their interventions. If students are not responding, what are the causes, and what needs to change?

Questions for Program DAT to Ask:

- How many students are responding to their interventions?
- Are there trends by intervention, interventionist, time of day, or duration?
- Are we implementing interventions with fidelity?
- Were students engaged?

Section Five

CONCLUSION

MTSS provides districts and educators with a framework to bring cohesion to their efforts around supporting student learning, using data to align instruction and intervention, aligning the usage and allocation of resources to student needs, and scaling whole child supports to all students.

MTSS improves the way educators go about their work—and how they work together—to improve the whole child success and well-being of our students.

How Illuminate Supports MTSS

In order to implement MTSS effectively and successfully, educators need the right assessment, whole child data visualization, intervention tracking, and effectiveness reporting tools. They also need methods of easily collaborating and recording their decisions, actions, and next steps.

Illuminate Education supports districts nationwide in effectively implementing MTSS. Illuminate provides:

- Whole child data visualization, including academic, behavioral, social-emotional learning, attendance, and intervention
- A comprehensive assessment system, including valid, reliable, evidence-based universal screening, diagnostic, and progress monitoring assessments
- Intervention tracking for academic and behavioral interventions
- Intervention fidelity, attendance, and effectiveness reporting
- Program effectiveness reporting
- Collaboration tools
- Intervention plans and student forms
- Early warning systems

Would you like to learn more? Visit our website or reach out today.

REFERENCE

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