



# **MTSS Essentials: Data-Informed Decisions to Support Each Student**

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An introduction to the MTSS framework, daily best practices, and how data-driven implementations provide whole child support to each student

eBOOK

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## Section One

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# WHAT IS AN MTSS?

**A multi-tiered system of support** or **MTSS** is a framework with a tiered infrastructure that uses data to help match academic and social-emotional behavior (SEB) 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. An 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. The framework makes district-wide systems more effective and ensures teams are supporting the needs of every student.

An 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. An 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 explore this more, 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, an 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 a smaller number of students need additional supports and services, there are enough of those specialized resources available to meet those students' needs.

## MTSS Changes Systems and Resources, Not Students

An MTSS is a framework that supports educators in changing the way they work and approach problem-solving. It's not about labeling or "changing" students, but rather shifting resources and leveraging system-level efficiencies to meet students where they are and help them move forward in their learning.

The next sections briefly explore the historical context for the MTSS framework and why it's implemented in districts today. Then, this eBook unpacks a typical MTSS framework and what an MTSS looks like in day-to-day best practices.

# Section Two

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## A BRIEF HISTORICAL CONTEXT

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

- Improving the outcomes for all students in terms of academics and SEB
- Addressing the unmet needs of various students and groups of students
- De-siloing systems to ensure processes are more effective and connected
- Helping all students grow regardless of where they start
- Taking a whole child approach to supporting students
- Complying with federal policy (ESSA)

Many educators have questions around what ESSA says about implementing an 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). This section briefly explores these concepts.

## Shifts in Policy Leading to the MTSS Framework

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 practices we see in districts today such as reporting by groups of students.

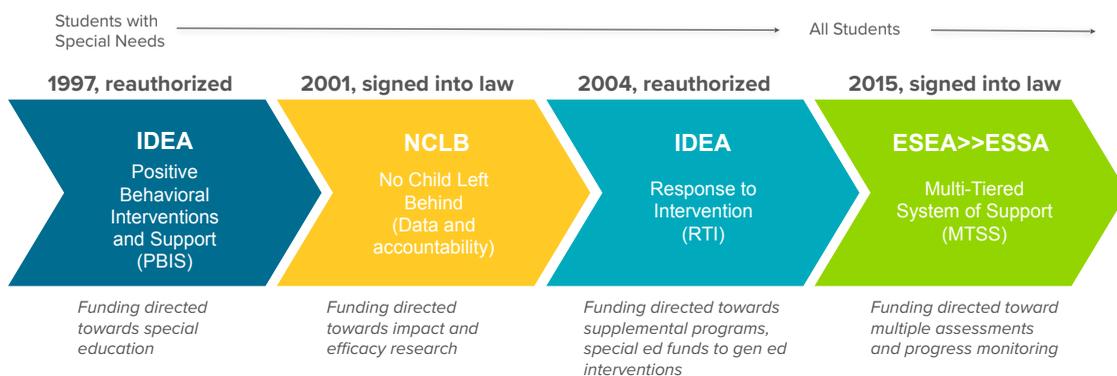
### 2004: The Introduction of RTI

Congress recognized the increasing number of students referred to special education with a specific learning disability (SLD)—the most common 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 on early intervention and prevention seen in districts today.

## 2015: Passage of ESEA/ESSA

The term 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 the focus on data-informed decisions based on multiple measures seen in schools today.

**FIGURE 1: POLICY LEADING TO THE MTSS FRAMEWORK**



Although the term “multi-tier system of supports” 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.

This section of this eBook explores the components of an MTSS framework.

# Section Three

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## ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS OF AN MTSS FRAMEWORK

### A Note About State and District Frameworks

As mentioned in Section 2, there is no one correct approach to an MTSS. As a result, there can be 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 an MTSS from a national perspective and show the importance of fitting these previously disparate elements into a cohesive framework.

# The Essential Components of MTSS

MTSS frameworks typically include 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, & Intervention

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

This component typically includes:

- **Whole Child Measures (Academic and SEB):** 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 & 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, & 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 an 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.

Implementing an MTSS isn't reinventing the wheel—it's simply bringing cohesion to student-centered practices while de-siloing the data-driven decisions that already happen in many districts. When implemented effectively, an MTSS helps teams increase the effectiveness of their existing efforts and uncover areas which may need more examination or changes to current practices.

The next section highlights a few key best practices for data-driven, student-centered MTSS implementations.

Discover all the resources you need to kickstart or enhance your own data-driven MTSS.

[EXPLORE RESOURCES](#)

# Section Four

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## AN MTSS IN ACTION: DAILY BEST PRACTICES

Most of the day-to-day work of implementing an MTSS falls into the Matched Assessment, Instruction, & Intervention component. This section highlights four key elements that fall under this category:



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



## The Problem-Solving Cycle

The Problem-Solving Cycle is a data-driven process that fuels many practices in an 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**



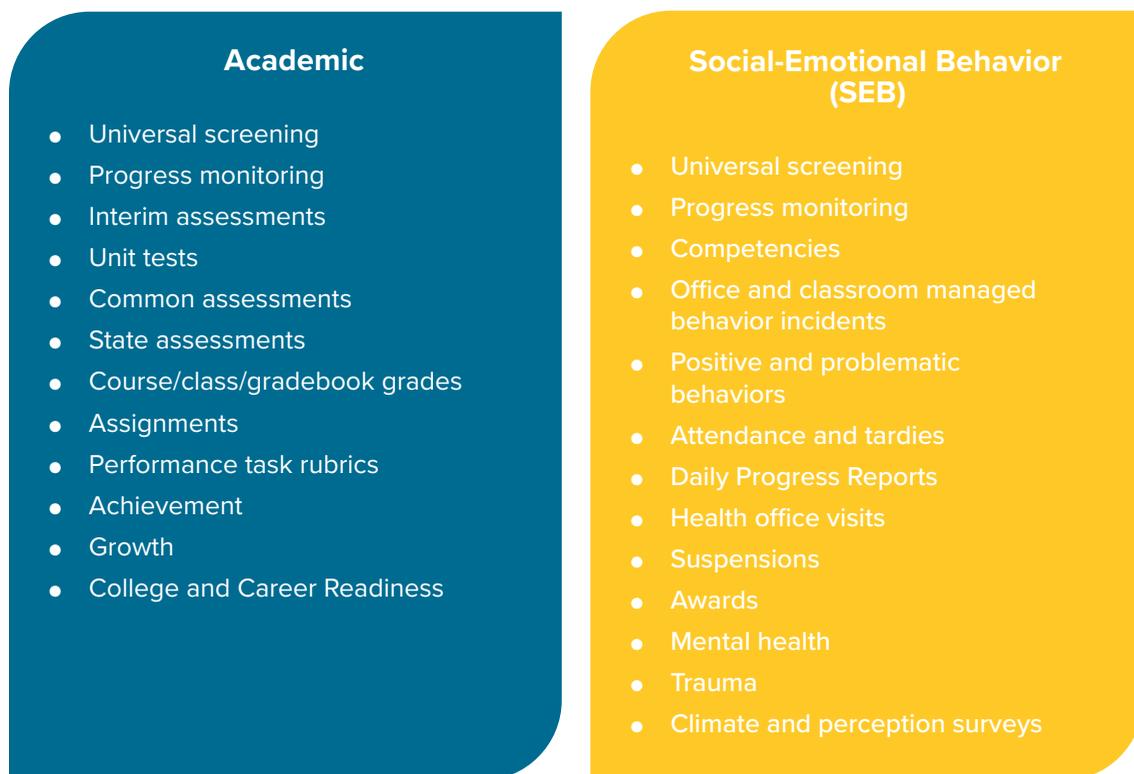
## Whole Child Data

An MTSS shifts away from a singular focus on academics and takes a “whole child” approach to supporting student success and well-being through many interconnected, data-informed lenses.

Whole child data can be organized into two categories of data: academic and SEB. Each category encompasses a number of data sources. Figure 4 provides some common examples for each.

Academic data is familiar to all educators. These data include sources such as academic assessments, grades, and daily assignments. The second category, SEB data, can play a huge part in identifying students in need of support or challenge—and helps teams peel back the layers to understand the true nature of a student’s need. SEB data includes data points such as SEB screening and progress monitoring data, attendance, and behavior incidents. Recording information like health office visits can signal avoidance behaviors that link to how a student performs in the classroom.

**FIGURE 4: WHOLE CHILD DATA MEASURES**



## Comprehensive Assessment Systems

Although MTSS incorporates student data beyond assessments, it's important to note that a key foundation of the whole child data picture is provided by a comprehensive and balanced assessment system.

A comprehensive and balanced assessment system is a cohesive set of high-quality assessment practices and tools that promotes an informed, intentional selection of assessments for the right purpose and supplies all stakeholders with the right information to inform next steps. A comprehensive assessment system (as overviewed in Figure 5) provides educators with valid and reliable tools to measure students' academic and SEB learning and needs.

Many educators think of assessment systems as being made up of three 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 includes additional tools: universal screening, diagnostic, and progress monitoring assessments.

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



**Universal screening** is the process of analyzing academic and SEB data about all students in a class, grade, school, or district. Screening helps identify which students are at risk on various skills and pinpoints needs within the universal tier. Universal screening assessments are administered at the beginning of the year and then one or two additional times throughout the year to all students.

**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 or SEB 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. Diagnostic reporting is sometimes included as a part of a high-quality universal screening assessment. If not, diagnostic assessments are administered following 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.

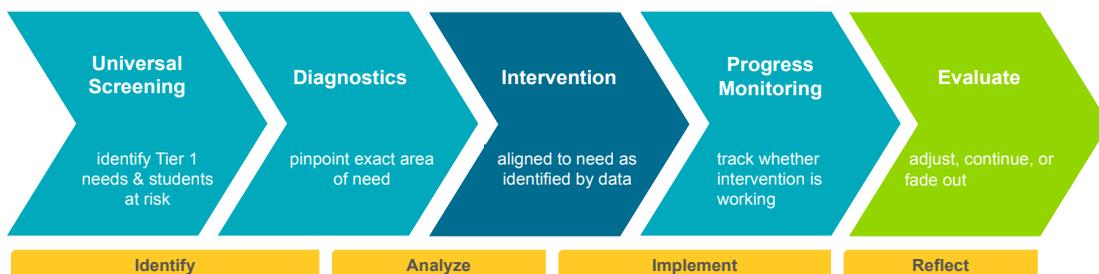
There are two types of progress monitoring assessments: General Outcome Measures (GOMs) and Skill-Based Measures (SBMs). GOMs track whether a student is “generally” on track for mastering grade level expectations. SBMs measure progress on the specific skill being targeted by the intervention. GOMs and 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 that underpin the standards. If a student does not possess the skills needed to master a given standard, it makes it very difficult to succeed in that learning objective.

Figure 6 highlights how these assessment tools fit into an MTSS and align to the Problem-Solving Cycle. All assessments should be valid and reliable in order to provide quality data with which to drive decisions.

**FIGURE 6: ASSESSMENT AND INTERVENTION FLOW IN MTSS**



## Tiered Instruction and Supports for All Students

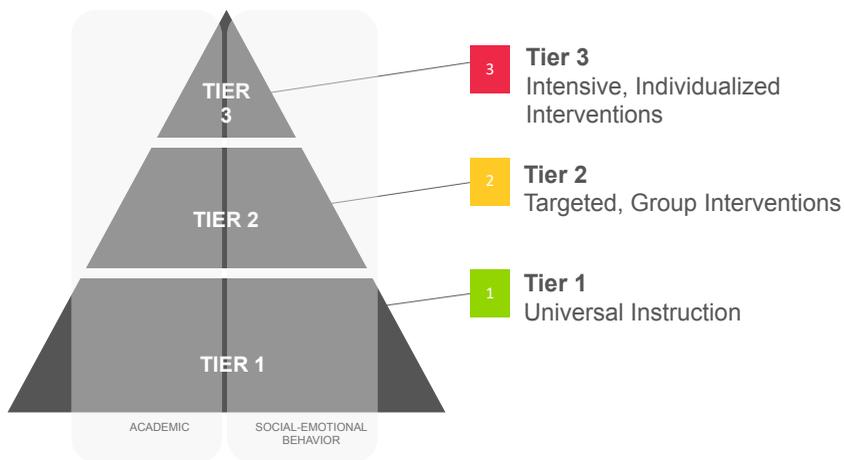
In an MTSS, student instruction and supports are tiered. In other words, whole child data are used to align students to the instruction and supports they need—at a correct level of intensity and frequency—for their academic and SEB needs.

There are three tiers of instruction and intervention:

- Tier 1 – Universal, Core Instruction:** The high-quality classroom instruction that all students receive. This tier ensures that students are not struggling due to poor instruction. This tier encompasses all resources available to all students 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 to Tier 1 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**



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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 an SEB need (such as self-management), while at the same time succeeding in Tier 1 for math.

The goal is to align supports to students' needs while also being mindful of resources. Effective Tier 1 instruction ensures that teams aren't escalating a large percentage of students into Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions where resources are more scarce and costly in terms of dollars, time, and staff. When a district attempts to provide interventions for more students than it truly has the capacity to support, the interventions become overloaded and ineffective.

For this reason, districts should address widespread needs at the universal tier—not through Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions. By focusing resources around practices and professional learning that improve Tier 1, districts are able to address the needs of all students without overloading their intervention program, while providing students with the greatest level of need with the most intensive supports. 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, whole child data, including universal screening and diagnostic data, help teams target an intervention to a student’s specific area of need. But what is an intervention?

An intervention is an instructional resource or support aligned to student needs. 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 by the district, offering programs and supports that are targeted to the needs of its unique student population. All implemented interventions should be research-based.

In the context of an MTSS, interventions aren’t only implemented with students who are struggling or with students demonstrating academic needs. By taking a whole child approach to MTSS, educators are systematically looking at each student to identify academic and SEB areas of need. This could mean providing interventions for students in need of more challenge as well as for 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 should outline the specifics of an intervention (e.g., which intervention, how often, in which setting, implemented by which trained staff member) 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:

- Intervention 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.

The team will decide whether to:

- Continue the intervention because progress is evident, although the goal has not been met (a new review date must be agreed upon).
- Change the intervention because the goal has not been met.
- Fade intervention because the student has met the goal. Ongoing monthly monitoring will occur.

## Evaluating Effectiveness at Multiple Levels

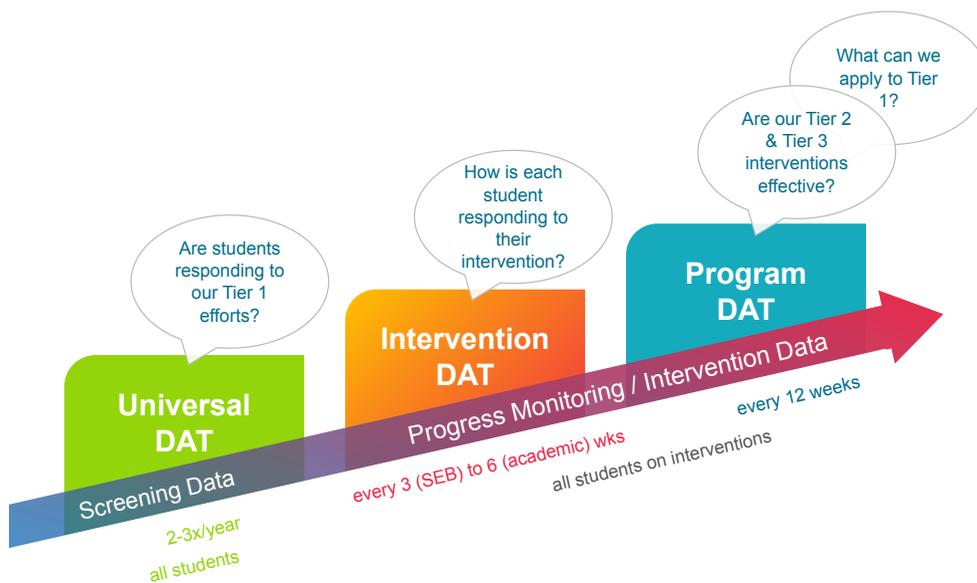
In a data-driven MTSS, teams must ask (and be able to answer) the question "Is what we're doing working?" at the student, class, group, school, and district levels.

The final section of this eBook outlines a structure for building these evaluative processes into an MTSS implementation.

## Data Analysis Teams

Most districts create teams to monitor and evaluate whether actions are improving student outcomes. While various districts employ different terms, this eBook uses the term "Data Analysis Team," or DAT, coined by Joseph Kovalski. There should be different teams for different purposes.

**FIGURE 8: DATA ANALYSIS TEAMS**



Evaluate effectiveness at every tier to continually inform resource allocation, drive system-level improvement, and guide investments in effective programs that impact outcomes.

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## Universal DAT

The purpose of a Universal DAT is to monitor Tier 1 instructional effectiveness and identify students in need of additional support. This group typically meets three times per year (after each screening period) and includes interventionists, school psychologists, data analysts or instructional coaches, the principal, and often teachers.

The universal tier is usually considered “effective” when at least 80% of students are succeeding and on track while having only received core instruction (with no additional intervention supports). Districts use this 80% rule because they typically only have the resources (e.g., staff, programming, time, and dollars) to provide Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions to approximately 20% of students. For this reason, if data show that more than 20% of students require interventions in academics or SEB, districts should address those widespread needs at the universal tier—not through Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions.

### Key Questions for Universal DATs to Ask About Screening Data:

1. Are at least 80% of students meeting low-risk targets?
2. Are at least 95% of students who begin the year at low risk growing enough to stay at low risk at the end of the year?
3. Do we see different results for different groups of students (e.g., by ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, teaching modality)?

## 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 SEB interventions.

The Intervention DAT looks at the student's progress monitoring data to evaluate rate of improvement (ROI), trendline, and trend compared to goal. The intervention data are also reviewed: fidelity, participation, engagement, and whether it was implemented exactly as prescribed in the plan.

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.

### Key Questions for Intervention DATs to Ask About Progress Monitoring Data:

1. Do the progress monitoring data show that the student is responding? Is the student responding fast enough to meet the goal in time?
  - a. Are there enough data to make a decision?
  - b. Is there a lot of variability in the data?
  - c. How does the student's rate of improvement (ROI) compare to the ROI goal?
  - d. What is the student's growth percentile?
2. If not, was the intervention implemented with fidelity?
  - a. Was it implemented as prescribed?
  - b. If not, why not?

## Program DAT

The purpose of a Program DAT is to determine the effectiveness of an overall system-level intervention program. This team meets every 12 weeks and typically includes a principal, school psychologist, and district-level curriculum administrator.

The team reviews effectiveness of individual intervention strategies to identify which interventions are working for students and, therefore, should perhaps be expanded or maximized to support additional students. Just as importantly, it identifies which interventions are either not being used or are not effective, suggesting that those programs can be eliminated to save dollars and professional development hours.

The Program DAT also reviews data for all students receiving Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions to see if those additional supports are helping them to catch up on general outcome measures.

### Key Questions for Program DATs to Ask:

1. How many students are receiving this intervention district-wide? By school?
2. Is it effective?
  - a. Are at least 70% of students responding to the intervention (on-track to meet their goal on time)?
  - b. Of the students receiving this intervention, are fewer at risk according to our universal screening data?
  - c. Of the students receiving this intervention, are proficiency levels increasing according to our interim data?
3. If not, why not?
4. Which interventions are showing to be effective? Should those interventions be expanded or used with additional students or schools?
5. Which interventions are not showing to be effective? Are there any that should be dropped?

# Section Five

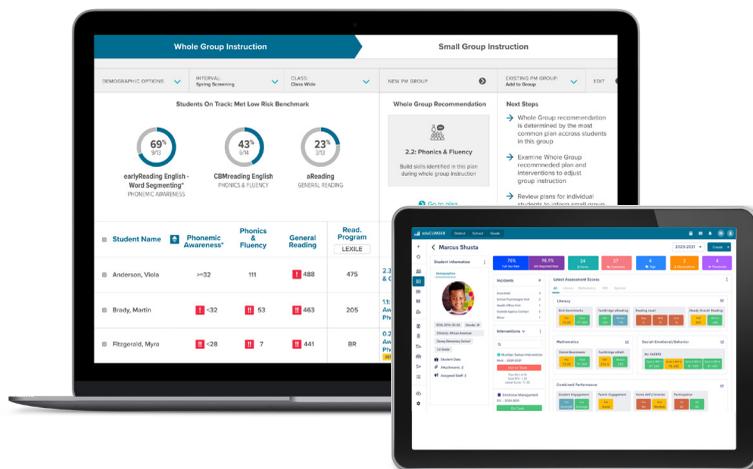
## CONCLUSION

An MTSS provides districts and educators with a framework to bring cohesion to their efforts around supporting student learning, using data to inform instruction and intervention, driving system-level resources to meet student needs, and scaling whole child supports to all students.

An MTSS framework informs and improves the way educators go about their work—and how they work together—to bolster the whole child success and well-being of each student.

## Supercharge your MTSS with Illuminate

Illuminate's [MTSS Management Solution](#) provides screening and progress monitoring assessments for academics and SEB, combined with whole child data visualizations and built-in tools for key MTSS practices. [Reach out to learn more.](#)



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