



TOOLKIT TOPIC 2

Leveraging MTSS for Equitable Behavioral Supports

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The ongoing impact of COVID-19 has exacerbated behavioral concerns and learning difficulties among students. Illinois schools can adopt the Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) framework to address these challenges. MTSS offers academic, behavioral, and social-emotional instruction and support on a tiered continuum, from universal to intensive interventions. Data-driven decision-making is fundamental, which enables regular assessment and adjustments in support levels. Coordinated teams within schools and districts oversee implementation of MTSS, focusing on early intervention and equitable practices. Equity-driven MTSS practices aim to mitigate disparities by analyzing disaggregated data and engaging in ongoing professional development. Schools that implement MTSS can effectively support students at all levels, promoting academic success and well-being for all.

INTRODUCTION

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic continues to be felt within the classroom. As a result, there have been increases in behavioral concerns and learning difficulties. Schools can use Multi-Tiered Systems of Support to ensure they are meeting students' learning and behavioral support needs. MTSS is a framework Illinois schools use to decide the most efficient ways to select, deliver, and evaluate scientifically supported academic, behavioral, and social-emotional instruction and supports provided in a school.ⁱ MTSS is delivered along a tiered continuum that becomes more involved and intensified based on student needs. Most MTSS models -- but not all -- use three tiers, beginning with Tier 1 (universal supports and instruction), which is offered to all students in the building; followed by additional Tier 2 (secondary/group); and Tier 3 (tertiary/individual) supports given to students who are not successful with only being given Tier 1 or Tier 2 supports.ⁱⁱ MTSS systems and structures are used similarly to address students' academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs. For example, the MTSS framework can incorporate positive Interventions and behavior supports, which can support students' behavioral and social-emotional success.



USING DATA TO MAKE DECISIONS

The use of data allows the school team to make informed decisions about the effectiveness of MTSS and whether students are succeeding with the tiered level of instruction and support they are receiving. If they are not, then changes should be made by a team using regularly collected and reliable data. Decision rules should be in place to determine the following:

1. When a student is not benefitting from the instruction and support and should move to a more intensive tier of support, and
2. The current instructional or intervention plan requires modification.ⁱⁱⁱ

For example, if a student exceeds their goals while receiving intensive Tier 3 support, the team could decide that the student may be successful at a Tier 1 or Tier 2 level of support. Data should be collected continuously for all Tier 1 interventions through regular data screening efforts to determine if the student meets expected goals (often called “benchmarks”). If they are not, additional support in Tier 2 and possibly Tier 3 would be warranted. Students who are not making progress in any tier should not languish. If a student is stagnating in Tiers 2 or 3, an MTSS team meeting should be convened to determine what adjustments should be made. This might include a change in services or a development of

a Behavioral Intervention Plan (BIP) for students with identified disabilities. The MTSS team should discuss whether students who are not receiving services under Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) or Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act should be referred for a comprehensive evaluation using federally required procedures.

Data that are current, reliable, and accessible are essential for team members to make decisions about students' movement within the various tiers of support regardless of whether the focus is on behavior, academic, or social-emotional areas. These data help the team determine how students respond to the support they are receiving and identify students who need additional interventions. In this way, students who are not finding success are not left without the support they need. Likewise, the team also uses these data to make sure that students do not stagnate in Tier 2 or 3 when they can be moved back to Tier 1 support^{iv} or even to general education with no extra MTSS support at all.

For example, these data can include existing data found in school-wide information systems intervention-specific data, data gathered as part of a Functional Behavioral Assessment process, and assessments given as part of the social-emotional learning curriculum.

MTSS supports are for all students, including those suspected of having or already identified as having a disability under IDEA.^v (e.g., emotional/behavior disability, learning disability) or under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. Students with or without identified disabilities who meet the criteria of the most intensive Tier 3 individualized supports (e.g., Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA) and BIPs) should still be exposed to less intensive supports such as the general education curriculum and universal systems of behavior support (e.g., schoolwide positive behavior support). This must be balanced with the need for systematic team-based decision-making to move students fluidly across tiers.

THE MTSS PROCESS

Critical systems and structures are in place for MTSS to effectively implement in any school or district. One of the most vital pieces is establishing a team structure where all members know their roles and functions.

The primary purpose of an MTSS team is to coordinate and oversee the tiered support systems. The team uses data to decide which support students should receive, evaluate how students respond, and make changes.^{vi} Typically, each school has an MTSS team and a dis-



trict-level team that provides leadership to each building, such as professional development and money for curriculum and intervention materials.

TEAMING

The structure of the MTSS teams can vary from school to school. These structural differences can be seen in behavior, social-emotional learning (SEL), and academics for their students. Other schools may utilize multiple frameworks with one focusing on social/emotional and behavior (e.g., universal behavior/mental health team, Positive behavioral Interventions and Supports team) and a second one that supports academics (e.g., Response to Intervention team).

An MTSS team needs to have a process for data review to see how its behavior support systems and structures are working. Some examples of data schools use to evaluate how their practices are working are as follows:

- Discipline data like the number and type of office discipline referrals, numbers of suspensions, school climate data, and other behavior/discipline metrics to decide how to structure tiered behavior supports.
- School climate surveys like the 5Essentials Survey.
- Schoolwide social-emotional and mental health screening tools.
- Classroom observation data/teacher surveys.
- Attendance and chronic absenteeism data.
- Academic progress monitoring data.

Students with mental health concerns can be identified through discipline/behavior screening like office disciplinary referrals or mental health screening tools.

MTSS BEHAVIOR PRACTICES

The MTSS team responsible for behavior/social-emotional support is responsible for organizing, delivering, and evaluating students who receive solid Tier 1 services that are directly taught to students. The entire school community must receive training and have buy-in for this to succeed. The MTSS team determines the additional support provided at Tiers 2 and 3 and reviews evaluation data for students at every tier to see their progress. Data are collected more frequently with students who are receiving Tiers 2 and 3 support. For example, students at Tier 3 may receive weekly evaluations or progress monitoring. It is the job of the MTSS team to review these data on an ongoing basis and make decisions accordingly. It is common for behavior/emotional support-focused MTSS teams who support students at Tier 2/Tier 3 to have school-based mental health professionals (e.g., school psychologists, school social workers, school counselors, special educators) and allied professionals such as board-certified behavior analysts. These individuals could also collaborate with teams to address students who have internalized mental health concerns like anxiety and depression. Students with mental health concerns can be identified through discipline/behavior screening like office disciplinary referrals or mental health screening tools.

The focus on behavior and social-emotional skills matches well with early childhood. Implementing the MTSS framework within early childhood addresses all developmental domains and content areas. It leverages student strengths and tackles learning barriers, focusing on the “whole child” in early childhood education. MTSS focuses on behavior and social-emotional skills, addressing pre-academic and developmental challenges that may impact future academic achievement. It is crucial for the MTSS team to have expertise in early childhood development when developing support strategies.

For further information about Early Childhood and MTSS, please see [Illinois Early Childhood Multi-Tiered System of Supports](#).



TABLE 1.1**Example of a school’s MTSS plans for behavior/social-emotional supports**

Tier	Description of Behavior/Social-Emotional Supports	Provider	Audience
1	Schoolwide positive behavior support ^{vii} ; social-emotional learning curriculum; restorative community-building	All staff	All students
2	Conflict resolution, group supports, peer mediation, restorative chats, peer support groups	Special Education teacher, social worker, behavior interventionist	20% of student population
3	FBA/BIP, social-emotional supports, coordination with school-based mental health professionals and community agencies/service providers, individual mental health counseling	Special education teacher, social worker, behavior interventionist, mental health counselor, board-certified behavior analyst	1–5% of student population

TIER 1

Tier 1 is universal instruction in preventative behavioral support for all students in the school. An average of 80% of students are sufficiently supported by Tier 1 services, requiring no higher-intensity support. However, if less than 80% of students are successfully meeting the systemwide benchmark set by the school in behavior and social-emotional supports, this means that the school will want to look at its universal (schoolwide) systems to consider revising its universal Tier 1 behavioral/social-emotional instruction.

TIER 2

About 20% of students in a system will still likely struggle despite being provided with high-quality Tier 1 behavioral and social-emotional instruction. School teams identify these struggling students via ongoing data collection and implement Tier 2 support. Typically, Tier 2 support provides small group or supplemental instruction that allows increased attention and individualization of learning, building upon solid Tier 1 instruction and support.

TIER 3

A small number of students in a school will continue to struggle when receiving Tier 1 and Tier 2 instruction in social-emotional skills -- typically, 5% of students in the building when universal Tier 1 systems are working well. Using assessment data as a guide, MTSS teams may decide to move a child immediately into Tier 3 support or provide Tier 2 supplemental instruction. These decisions will be based on data review and aligned with team decision rules, resources, and support capacity. The most intensive support is typically provided through one-to-one, highly individualized instruction and interventions with relevant school personnel. More intensive assessment and planning may be completed to ensure a student receives the most appropriate support, including a referral for special education services depending on data and need.

EQUITY-DRIVEN MTSS PRACTICES

It is critical for MTSS teams to review disaggregated data to determine if racial/ethnic disproportionality exists and to take steps to rectify it^{viii}. This is due to the racial, ethnic, and additional forms of disparities (e.g., having an Individualized Education Program [IEP], identifying as LGBTQ+) in academic support, over-representation in special education identification, segregated special education placements, and disproportionate exclusionary discipline. A primary role of MTSS teams in ensuring more equitable and less biased practices is to engage in root cause analysis of racial/ethnic and other forms of bias, continual critical self-reflection when making decisions, and to make available ongoing system-wide professional development in mitigating racism and other forms of bias (e.g., training in anti-racism and implicit bias).^{ix} Black and Indigenous students are the most likely racial/ethnic group to experience academic and behavioral bias and inequities. For example, well-documented research shows that Black students are four times more likely to be suspended and expelled, despite not engaging in more severe behaviors to warrant such punitive responses^x. As another example, Black students are less likely to be referred for gifted education. They are over-represented in special education categories of emotional disabilities and placed in the most restrictive special education settings.^{xi} Students with disabilities are twice as likely to be subjected to suspension, despite having federal protections in place under IDEA^{xii}.

For further information regarding school discipline, please refer to the [ISBE School Discipline](#) webpage.

BRIDGE TO PRACTICE

Santiago: Bored and Disruptive

Santiago is a 16-year-old student who qualifies for special education services under the category of Orthopedic Impairment. He utilizes an electronic wheelchair for mobility and spends part of the school day participating in standards-based academic instruction in Resource classrooms and the other in the Life Skills program working on independent living and vocational skills. While assessments have repeatedly shown that Santiago has the academic knowledge to participate in math and science instruction in general education settings, he has thus far been deemed ineligible due to his disruptive behaviors. Collected data show that Santiago has been tardy to 10 classes so far this semester, and anecdotal notes from school-based professionals report that he frequently talks during instruction, plays games on the iPad he has been given for scheduling and communication support, and sleeps. School personnel decided that general education placements for Santiago are not an option until his behavior improves, and he has been moved to Tier 2 behavioral supports. The behavior intervention chosen is Check-in/Check-out. Santiago has had a teacher or paraeducator sign his Check-in/Check-out sheet every morning and afternoon. Still, no significant changes in the identified behaviors have been noted. The team knows that Check-in/Check-out is an evidenced-based intervention and part of the school's MTSS behavior model in Tier 2, so the best it can do is continue implementing the intervention and hope that something finally "clicks" for Santiago.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

The team members decide to complete a functional assessment of the behaviors impacting to Santiago's success in his current resource classrooms. Check-in/Check-out is an evidence-based behavior intervention, but they know that it is not the right solution for every student or every problematic behavior and may not align with the identified function of the behavior. Based on the Check-in/Check-out data, Santiago has languished in Tier 2 support since last school year. The intervention being implemented does not meet Santiago's needs. If the primary function of Santiago's behavior is to gain attention from adults, then Check-in/Check-out might be an effective way for him to have that need met in a way that is less distracting to classroom instruction. However, if the behaviors serve another purpose, Check-in/Check-out will do little to impact the behaviors.

Santiago's team begins collecting data and developing a hypothesized purpose for the identified problematic behaviors. (See [ISBE IEP Instructions](#) for detailed instructions about completing an FBA.) After reviewing the data, the team agrees that Santiago is disengaged and disruptive in class because he is bored. Academic assessments have repeatedly shown that he can learn math and science at a level at or beyond that of his peers without disabilities. Hence, the material and pacing of the resource curriculum are below his capabilities. The team members realize that not only were they utilizing an intervention that did not address his need for a more intellectual engagement, but that they had unwittingly underestimated his academic capabilities. Based on assumptions about his abilities, he was also placed in a more restrictive environment (Resource) than he should have been. As a result, Santiago's behavioral needs were not met. The team met with Santiago and his father and agreed that the best course of action would be to change his placement from Resource to general education for math and science and to implement behavior interventions to help ensure his success in all classes. Santiago and his team created a behavior contract that clearly outlines both behavioral expectations for Santiago and responses to those behaviors by school-based professionals and staff. The team also identifies replacement behaviors for Santiago to engage in when he is bored or disengaged from classroom instruction and makes these skills a structured part of his existing independent living instruction.

BRIDGE TO PRACTICE

Lexi: Quietly Failing

Lexi is a 10-year-old student who qualifies for special education services under the category of Emotional Disability and Specific Learning Disability. Lexi has been in foster care since she was 7, and records show that she has averaged three placements a year since she entered the foster system. The primary language spoken when she was still living with her biological parents at home was Spanish. Since she was placed into the foster care system three years ago, she has been in foster placements with families who speak primarily or exclusively English. School-based professionals report that Lexi causes few disturbances in class but has disengaged from schoolwork and her peers. In addition, she has a history of self-harm that has resulted in multiple hospitalizations. Quiet obstinance, non-compliance, and frequent self-harm are the main reasons foster placements cite when they turn in their notice to remove her from their home. Lexi is earning C's and below in all subjects except art, where she currently has an A.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Lexi's case carrier, Ms. Chan, knows that meeting Lexi's social, emotional, behavioral, and academic needs will take a concerted effort from various team members. Although Lexi is receiving Tier 1 universal supports, Ms. Chan developed a support plan for Lexi that includes Tier 2 behavior support and targeted instruction focused on age appropriate SEL standards. Even though Lexi is 10 years old, Ms. Chan does not want to assume that Lexi knows the behavioral expectations at this school or has the SEL skills required to manage the complex interactions required by social and academic engagement. Other parts of Ms. Chan's plan include a review of records from all of Lexi's prior schools, a language assessment, and begins the FBA process. (See [ISBE IEP Instructions](#).) She also contacts the school's social worker and current foster parents and invites them to join Lexi's team. Ms. Chan's goal is for the team to have a complete picture of Lexi's social, emotional, linguistic, medical, and academic strengths and needs to create a collaborative and strengths-based plan. Ms. Chan is setting Lexi up for long-term success by conducting a comprehensive review of existing records, collecting new data related to Lexi's progress in Tier 1 supports and SEL instruction, and getting buy-in from all team members. The team hopes that by working together, implementing a solid ongoing data collection plan, and utilizing evidence-based behavior interventions, Lexi will have the skills and supports that will allow her to engage in less self-harm, have more positive school and social engagements, and find stability in both home and school environments. If these interventions prove unsuccessful, Lexi also may need further evaluation and consideration for more intensive counseling support or other more intensive therapeutic interventions.

KEY TERMS

Accommodation

A specific and intentional change in a student's environment, curriculum format, or equipment that assists with comprehension of the content and completion of tasks.

Behavioral intervention

An intervention based on the methods and empirical finds of behavioral science designed to influence the behavior of one or more individuals.

Behavioral Intervention Plan (BIP)

A written behavioral plan developed as part of an IEP to address a serious behavioral problem. It is based on a functional analysis of the student's behavior, and describes the interventions to be used, methods of evaluation, and provisions for coordinating with the home.

Benchmark

Expected short-term goal used to develop an understanding of students' strengths and weaknesses and evaluate progress towards end of school year goals.

Equity

Fairness in a sense that it takes into consideration current disparities amongst subsets of people and reparations that must occur before equality can be met; equity intersects with data, systems, and practices in education and beyond.

Exclusionary discipline

A school disciplinary practice, usually a suspension or expulsion, that removes or excludes a student from their typical educational setting.

Expulsion

Removal of the student from school for a period reflected in the school's code, up to two years. Expulsion, which constitutes a change in placement, requires a revision to the IEP. Expulsion is a prohibited intervention when there is a cessation of services.

Fidelity

The extent to which procedures put into place measure and what they are intended to measure (e.g., the implementation of MTSS in a school).

Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA)

An analysis process for gathering information used in the development of behavioral interventions. The objective of an FBA is to understand the structure and function of a target behavior to develop and strengthen more appropriate alternative behaviors. A detailed description of the target behavior is developed by using functional analysis. Antecedents and consequences of the behavior are noted, controlling variables are identified, and the communicative and functional intent of the behavior is determined. A functional analysis may include many procedures, including interviews with school-based professionals, parents, students; direct observation across times and settings; environmental modification; and completion of other assessment instruments.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2024

A law requiring a free appropriate public education (FAPE) to eligible children with disabilities.

Individualized Education Program (IEP)

A plan that describes the special education instruction, supports, and services that students with disabilities are legally entitled to receive. An IEP is developed by school staff members, the student's parents/guardians, and the student (when appropriate).

Interventions

Interventions use a specific program or set of steps to target an academic or behavioral need. They are often used to help students who have trouble with reading, math, or learning replacement behavior.

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)

A proactive and systematic framework that integrates data and instruction to maximize learning for all students with the support necessary to grow their social emotional compacity.

Positive interventions and behavior supports

A schoolwide approach that focuses on establishing a positive social culture and the behavioral support needed for all children.

Progress monitoring

An assessment to determine if a student receiving instruction is making progress and using the data to make decisions.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973

Section 504 covers qualified students with disabilities who attend schools receiving federal financial assistance. To be protected under Section 504, a student must be determined to (1) have a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities; or (2) have a record of such an impairment; or (3) be regarded as having such an impairment. Section 504 requires that school districts provide FAPE to qualified students in their districts who have a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities. Major life activities, as defined in the Section 504 regulations at 34 C.F.R. 104.3(j)(2)(ii), include functions such as caring for oneself, performing manual tasks, walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, learning, and working. While this list is not exhaustive, reading and/or writing could fall under the function of "learning." Thus, students struggling in those areas would be protected if their challenges substantially limit major life activities.

Social-emotional learning (SEL)

The process through which children and adults acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills they need to recognize and manage their emotions; demonstrate care and concern for others; establish positive relationships; make responsible decisions; and manage challenging situations constructively.

Social and interpersonal skills

The process through which children develop awareness and management of their emotions; set, and achieve important personal and academic goals; use social-awareness and interpersonal skills to establish and maintain positive relationships; and demonstrate decision-making and responsible behaviors to achieve school and life success.

Tier 1

Core instruction for all students.

Tier 2

Targeted interventions for some students.

Tier 3

Intensive individualized intervention for a few students.

BEHAVIOR INTERVENTION EXAMPLES

ADAPTATIONS/MODIFICATIONS

Adaptations and modifications are strategies used in education to make learning environments and materials more accessible and appropriate for individuals with diverse learning needs. Adapting or modification of instructional assignment to increase the student’s motivation, attention, success, etc. and decrease undesirable behavior. While the terms “adaptations” and “modifications” are often used interchangeably, they are different. Adaptations involve altering instructional strategies, materials, or tasks to better align with a student’s learning style, strengths, or challenges without fundamentally changing the learning goals. Adaptations aim to provide support and accommodations that allow the student to access and engage with the curriculum effectively. Modifications involve making substantive changes to the curriculum or learning goals to meet the unique needs of individual students. Modifications are typically employed when students require significant adjustments to the content or learning outcomes due to cognitive, developmental, or other disabilities. Both adaptations and modifications can be used to help increase desired behavior.

Examples of Adaptations:

Providing additional visual aids or manipulatives to support understanding, offering extended time for completing assignments or assessments, breaking down complex tasks into smaller, more manageable steps, allowing flexible seating or positioning options to accommodate physical needs, providing preferential seating closer to the teacher or away from distractions, and using assistive technology tools, such as text-to-speech or speech-to-text software are examples of adaptations.

Examples of Modifications:

Simplifying or reducing the complexity of assignments or tasks, adjusting the curriculum to focus on key concepts or essential skills, modifying grading criteria or assessment methods to account for individual abilities, offering alternate or modified versions of reading materials or texts, and providing individualized learning plans that target specific learning goals are examples of modifications.

BEHAVIOR INTERVENTION EXAMPLES

TOKEN ECONOMY

A behavior support system that utilizes tokens as a form of reinforcement to encourage and reinforce desired behaviors. In a token economy, students earn tokens as a reward for exhibiting appropriate behaviors or achieving specific goals. Token boards serve as a visual reminder of what can be earned and are used to teach delayed reinforcement (earning something rewarding later). Common token examples include stickers, stars, points, or tokens in the form of chips or coins. Oftentimes a student's favorite character might be used as a token. Token economies should be implemented consistently, with clearly defined behaviors, meaningful rewards, and a gradual fading of token reinforcement as desired behaviors become more internalized and self-regulated. Additionally, individualized considerations should be taken into account, ensuring that the chosen rewards are relevant and motivating for each participant.



BEHAVIOR INTERVENTION EXAMPLES

VISUAL SCHEDULE

Visual schedules are a visual strategy that provides a visual representation of the daily or routine activities throughout a student's day. They may use real objects, pictures, symbols & icons, or written words to depict the sequence of tasks or activities that a student is expected to engage in throughout the day. Visual schedules serve as a visual support to help students understand and anticipate what will happen next, promoting structure, organization, and independence. Visual schedules are valuable tools in the classroom setting as they promote structure, predictability, and independence, supporting students in understanding and navigating their daily routines and activities.

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Behavior Interventions video:



RESOURCE LINKS

- » [ISBE - Tiered Supports and Resources](#)
- » [ISBE - Catalog of Supports and Resources](#)
- » [CASEL School Based Social Emotional Learning](#)
- » [ISBE Comprehensive System of Learning Supports](#)

This is not an endorsement nor an exhaustive list of possible resources. Please consult with your individual district, Regional Office of Education, and the Illinois State Board of Education for additional resources. [Illinois State Board of Education](#)

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ENDNOTES

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