



The Research Behind MTSS

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Introduction

MTSS is an important framework used in schools in every state to support all students with academics, behavior, social and emotional learning, and mental health. MTSS also targets the needs of adults by improving teacher effectiveness through professional development, providing resources, and supporting adult wellness. This framework includes preventative strategies and targeted intervention support for students with the primary goal being to identify needs quickly and provide evidence-based and matched supports.

MTSS has a rich history of research supporting its effectiveness and has been shown to improve academics, behavior, social competencies, relationships, well-being, and teaching effectiveness (e.g. VanCamp, et al., 2020). Research has shown that schools utilizing the MTSS framework have fewer discipline referrals, suspensions, and expulsions and show higher academic achievement scores. Because of this, more schools are implementing MTSS (Sugai & Horner, 2020) and there has been a

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decrease in exclusionary discipline due to the focus on preventative strategies that teach and expect prosocial behaviors (Musu, et al., 2019). Research on MTSS demonstrates that when applied with fidelity, this approach can also reduce the number of students referred for special education or behavioral services (e.g. Alfonso & Flanagan, 2018). In addition, MTSS has been shown to decrease disproportionate placement of minorities in special education by as much as 40% (Torgeson, 2009).

In an MTSS framework, several evidence-based approaches are integrated into a more comprehensive, cooperative, and cohesive framework to support school districts more efficiently and effectively. It is the continuum of services that makes these framework effective, and key components for success include a tiered approach to service delivery, team-based leadership, universal screening and assessment, data-based decision making, effective and efficient professional development, and evidence-based instructional practices.

RethinkEd's MTSS solution is based on research-supported frameworks and the science of:

- Response to Intervention (RTI)
- Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS)
- Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA)
- Social Emotional Learning (SEL)
- Mental Health
- Universal Screening, Assessment, and Data-Based Decision Making
- Differentiated Instruction

MTSS incorporates the components of the RTI and PBIS frameworks using multi-tiered levels of support and targets academics, behavior, and SEL. As a school-wide or optimally district-wide model, MTSS targets all persons in the school community including educators, social workers, psychologists, counselors, behavior analysts, paraprofessionals, all school staff, students, administrators, parents, and members of the community.

Response to Intervention (RTI)

RTI is a multi-tiered approach to identify and support students with academic and behavioral needs (RTI Action Network, 2022). It was designed to address the achievement gap of students from varying backgrounds and to better assist students who are struggling with academics (Ticha, Abery, Karapetyan, & Svajyan,

2018). The RTI framework begins with universal screening and evidence-based instruction in the general education classroom and adds intensity and services for students who are identified as having academic or behavioral difficulties. U.S. legislation including the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002) and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) make schools accountable for meeting the needs of all students, including students with disabilities. Increasing levels of instruction and intervention are provided for students needing more intensive supports through both general education programming and special education services. These decisions are data-based and rely on measuring each student's response to intervention or instruction. There are 3 tiers of instruction or intervention:

RTI is a multi-tiered approach to identify and support students with academic and behavioral needs.

Tier 1: All students in general education. About 80-85% of students.

All students should receive high-quality, evidence-based core instruction and should be

screened regularly for academic or behavioral challenges (RTI Action Network, 2022). Students who are at-risk or show difficulties in a certain area should receive supplemental instruction or accommodations within the general education classroom and their progress should be measured to ensure that they are able to get back on track. If these students are not responsive to intensified Tier 1 instruction and supports, they may need Tier 2 supports. In many approaches to RTI, Tier 1 is often referred to as the “primary prevention” level and refers to all the general instruction that needs to be offered in a general education classroom (e.g., Simmons, et al., 2011). This includes the core curriculum, differentiated instruction, evidence-based classroom management practices, and accommodations that allow all students to access the general education curriculum and activities. Universal screening and classroom performance measures are used to identify students who may need Tier 2 or Level 2 supports.

Tier 2: Students with some risk factors. About 10-15% of students.

Students needing more targeted academic instruction may require Tier 2 intervention to access the curriculum, which may be provided within the classroom. Students who are not making adequate progress at this level may be considered for more intensive and individualized Tier 3 supports. Multi-stage screening can help in avoiding false positives (i.e., students being identified as needing Tier 2 supports who may not) and for identifying students who need more intensive Tier 3 supports (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2012).

Tier 3: Students at high risk. About 5-10% of students.

These students require more intensive and individualized instruction and may be considered for special education services. The data from Tier 1 and Tier 2 instruction and intervention are used to determine student needs and matched supports. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA, 2004), parents can request a formal evaluation

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for special education at any time and do not need to wait to see if their child is responsive to Tier 1 or Tier 2 supports. Although schools should be using careful and methodical assessment and data-based decision making at all tiers, as more individualized and intensive supports increase, so do data requirements and intervention planning.

RTI has proven effectiveness for math (e.g., Duhon, Mesmer, Atkins, Gerguson, & Olinger, 2009), reading (e.g., Gettinger & Stoiber, 2007), and other academics (e.g. Kovaleski, Gickling, Morrow, & Swank, 1999). Studies also show decreases in behavior problems (e.g. Fairbanks, Sugai, Guardino, & Lathrop, 2007) and decreases in special education referrals and placements (e.g., VanDerHeyden, Witt, & Gilbertson, 2007). While research shows that RTI can help minimize special education placement, RTI is not designed to prevent placement but to prevent the negative consequences of inadequate supports such as school dropout, unemployment, incarceration, health problems, and other consequences of poor academic and behavioral supports (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2012). It is important to note that tiered supports are not an indication of a permanent status or categorization for a student. Effective RTI frameworks have a fluid system where students may need more supports or may be ready to decrease supports at any time (Mellar, McKnight, & Jordan, 2010).

Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS)

The RTI framework is primarily focused on academic achievement but many students who are struggling with academics also demonstrate behavioral challenges that can make

them fall further behind academically and can isolate them from their peers and general education services. PBIS is an evidence-based system that is designed to prevent behavioral challenges, respond appropriately to behavioral challenges, and to pro-actively teach positive replacement behaviors with the purpose of creating a safe and positive learning environment (Bradshaw et al, 2008). Like RTI, PBIS focuses on a continuum of evidence-based behavioral strategies and interventions to support social competence and academic achievement, educator effectiveness, positive student behavior, and includes data-based decision making (Ticha, Abery, Karapetyan, & Svagyan, 2018).

In addition to improved academics and decreased behavioral challenges, research on PBIS demonstrates improved school connectedness and school climate, and can improve staff job satisfaction (Waasdrop, Bradshaw, & Leaf 2012). PBIS has also been shown to improve bullying and peer rejection (Waasdorp, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2012).

Academic Outcomes

Academic outcomes are a core component of a quality MTSS framework. MTSS builds on the original ideas of RTI and PBIS but is more of a preventative and pro-active approach. The addition of SEL, behavioral supports, and professional development for adults has

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a significant impact on academic outcomes (Sprick, 2013). This whole-school approach ensures that not only are academic needs being met, but that the student's and staff's other needs are also being met by consistently evaluating progress and dissecting what works and what doesn't for everyone. Like all parts of the MTSS framework, universal screening, and identification of issues in academics is essential as a preventative approach. Students who are showing signs of falling behind should receive more intensive supports to fill in the gap necessary to catch up to other students.

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Differentiated Instruction

Whether it be academics, behavior, SEL, or other instructional practices, MTSS must include resources to support the adaptation of Tier 1 for all students. Differentiated instruction is the method for teachers to make accommodations and modifications for learning activities to address the individual needs of all students

(Tomlinson & Allan, 2000). This provides flexibility, creativity, and varying instructional practices to include all students. In other words, one size does not fit all. Some students require more visual supports, some need tasks broken down into smaller steps, some need help reducing distractions, some need more social support. Differentiated instruction allows for the educator to make decisions about what modifications may be needed and to consider the different needs of students. This includes evaluating language, cultural, social, behavioral, physical, and cognitive differences. Even within Tier 1, it is important to use differentiated instruction and when more targeted interventions are required, Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports can be added.

Behavior Supports

Like all MTSS components, behavior should be targeted first as a preventative framework that applies to all students. Best practices include instruction, modeling desired behaviors, classroom management, and practicing culturally responsive expectations. SEL is one approach for maximizing pro-social behaviors and reducing behavioral challenges. Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) is another evidence-based approach that can be implemented at all tiers to improve student behavior. While many people associate ABA with services for autism spectrum disorders, it is a more universal intervention that can help prevent and respond to behavioral challenges, as well as help to improve pro-social behaviors including communication skills, social skills, learning, and student motivation (Cione-Kroeschel, 2021). In fact, many of the intervention components of PBIS derive from ABA research though it also involves other types of science including prevention science, self-determination, person-centered planning, and mental health supports (Loukus, 2015).

Group contingencies work well for Tier 1 for decreasing challenging behavior, increasing pro-social behaviors, and even improving academic performance at a classroom level. For instance, the Good Behavior Game, established in 1969 and adapted in many studies over the years, uses points and group contingencies and has shown to be very effective (e.g., Ford, et al., 2020). This approach is based on the science of ABA and uses reinforcement of low rates of problem behavior and/or reinforcement of high rates of positive behavior. Feedback and reinforcement systems are a straight-forward way for teachers to acknowledge appropriate

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behaviors leading to students earning reinforcement as appropriate (e.g., preferred activities, attention, or breaks). Studies utilizing technology for this approach have also shown decreases in disruptive behaviors, improvements in cooperation and conflict resolution, and increased academic motivation (e.g., Groves & Austin, 2017).

Some students require more targeted behavioral supports (Tier 2) and may need additional interventions such as a behavioral contract or a check-in/check-out system that clearly sets up expectations and consequences and is agreed upon by the teacher and the student. Behavioral contracts are effective because they offer behavioral choices and empower the student to be a part of the solution. This improves self-knowledge, emotional regulation, and self-management, and works for students at all grade levels, and at different tiers of support (Bowman-Perrott, et al., 2015).

Tier 3 supports often require more detailed and intensive intervention and assessment. This can include a behavior plan that clearly defines the problem behaviors and the function of the behavior (i.e., escape, attention, access to activity or object, or sensory). A Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) is often required and includes identifying what happens prior to the behavior (antecedent), objectively defining the behavior in measurable terms (behavior) and identifying what happens after the behavior occurs (consequence) (Schwartz, 2021). These ABCs can be quickly and efficiently taught to educators to help in the development of the most effective behavior plan. Behavior plans can include a variety of evidence-based options such as manipulating the antecedent by changing the environment to prevent the problem behavior from occurring. For example, a teacher can provide a schedule or reinforcement system, set up the student's work environment to have less distractions, provide more frequent breaks, teaching and rewarding replacement behaviors, improving communication skills, or modifying

instructional materials to reduce stress or anxiety. Consequence-based interventions can also be applied such as reinforcing positive behavior, ignoring attention-motivated behaviors, or removing reinforcers for inappropriate behaviors. It is important to monitor problem behaviors as well as replacement behaviors daily to determine the effectiveness of the intervention.

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Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

Social and emotional learning (SEL), refers to how we develop healthy identities, understand and manage our emotions, experience empathy, set and achieve goals, create and maintain healthy relationships, and engage in responsible decision making (CASEL, 2022).

SEL works best in a schoolwide framework that builds foundational support and plans systematically for SEL implementation, focuses on building adult SEL competencies, provides frequent opportunities for students to develop SEL competencies, and uses data-based decision-making for continuous improvement (CASEL, 2022). When implemented with fidelity, SEL programs often improve academics, behavior, relationships, and social skills (Taylor, et al., 2017).

As a preventative and targeted intervention, SEL fits nicely into the MTSS framework. To be effective, the system must include screening, progress monitoring, data-based decision making, a continuum of supports for all tiers, and effective professional development and training (Weingarten, Brown, & Marx, 2020). Tier 1 SEL should be a universal approach centered on instruction that benefits all students, Tier 2 should build on targeted specific SEL skills that are more challenging for some students, and Tier 3 should be an intensive

intervention that is more individualized and can help in addressing IEP goals or special education needs (Center on MTSS, 2020).

SEL skills such as cultural competency, self-efficacy, empathy, and relationship building have been shown to improve teachers' behavior management abilities and to reduce the disproportionality of the reporting of externalizing behaviors of students (Larson, et al., 2018). While SEL has numerous benefits for students, it is clear from the research and practice that professional development in SEL and mental health is also important for educators and leadership. In fact, studies show that the most effective SEL programs are ones in which the SEL culture comes from instructional leadership and that top-down frameworks are more effective because teachers are more effective, leadership is supportive, and students thrive (Taylor, et al., 2017).

A multi-tiered SEL model embedded into a district wide MTSS framework can also benefit from a focus on mental health. At a Tier 1 level, educators and students can improve their knowledge of mental health issues, build support systems, and learn to identify red flags that may help themselves or others get the help that they need. Tier 2 interventions and supports can help target students or staff who show signs of needing help or who may need short-term supports (e.g., trauma). For students needing more intensive supports, Tier 3 interventions can include help from psychologists, counselors, social workers, or behavior analysts. SEL and Mental Health are crucial components of a successful MTSS framework.

For more information on the science behind SEL and Mental Health, please see [The Research Behind RethinkEd's SEL Curriculum.](#)

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Success in school is often tied to mental health and well-being (Furlong, et al, 2014). Measuring student resilience, stress, anxiety, and other components of mental health can help to identify how well a student is able to function and learn (Huebner, et al., 2007).

Many schools have yet to apply critical components of MTSS to mental health, particularly universal screening, assessment, and data-based decision making (Splett, et al., 2018). Identifying students at-risk can help to prevent and reduce mental health issues, which in turn can improve behavior and academic outcomes. In addition, identification of strengths and challenges can help inform interventions and instruction for all students.

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Universal Screening, Assessment, & Data-Based Decision Making

While academic assessments are widespread, not all districts screen for behavioral, social-emotional, or mental health needs. Often, these needs are addressed reactively

after a student displays problem behavior or a decline in academic progress. In the MTSS framework, students should be universally assessed at least 2 times per year to measure progress, identify needs, and assess the quality of intervention at all levels. It is important for screening to include a review of multiple data points monthly to assess behavioral changes and not just trends in discipline, academics, etc. Behavioral, social-emotional, and mental health should also be screened, and progress measured throughout the school year. Students who need Tier 2 or Tier 3 supports should be assessed more frequently to monitor progress and determine what interventions are working or not working.

Data-based decision making is core to any successful MTSS framework and requires assessing student skills, setting attainable goals, creating and implementing an instructional and intervention plan, monitoring progress, and making decisions based on the data (Van Geel, et al., 2016). Usability and feasibility are core components of successful measurement and research shows that schools who do not have user-friendly tools typically do not benefit from the positive outcomes of MTSS (Brann, Daniels, Chafouleas, & DiOrio, 2022).

Professional Development

School leadership must have a thorough understanding of MTSS and provide the required staff training, consultation, coaching, interventions, and progress monitoring to make it successful (Brown-Chidsey & Bickford, 2016). On-going professional development is often more effective than the training offered in courses in universities (McHatton, et al., 2010) and should be based on on-going data collection and problem solving (Dulaney, et al., 2013). Professional development in MTSS can help leadership and educators feel more confident in improving school climate, closing the achievement gap, and providing

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each student with what they need to thrive (Stahmer, Oliver, & Schetter, 2020). High quality professional development in MTSS can improve staff retention (NCTAF, 2003) but it is important to extend this training beyond special educators and include leadership, general educators, paraprofessionals, and support staff (Stahmer, Oliver, & Schetter, 2020).

Like all aspects of the MTSS framework, it is essential that professional development is evidence-based. In addition, to be effective, it needs to be relevant to school staff to motivate learning and create buy-in for implementation (Tooley & Connally, 2016). Like any successful school program, success starts at the top and professional development is important not only for implementation and student instruction, but for planning, training, and setting priorities for everyone.

RethinkEd's MTSS Solution

[The RethinkEd MTSS program](#) is based on the above evidence-based practices and offers a comprehensive set of multi-tiered resources to align to the MTSS framework including focused interventions for academics, behavior, SEL, mental health, and professional development. It includes comprehensive curricula for each target area and includes progress monitoring and analytics tools for data-based decision making. To foster the success of every student and educator, the RethinkEd MTSS professional learning suite provides a comprehensive, tiered, and scalable training solution to help educators, leaders

and staff meet the Academic, Behavioral, and Social and Emotional needs of all students while building and promoting a positive school culture and climate. MTSS training suite includes: 33 On-Demand learning modules that cover topics addressing academic, social emotional and behavior supports for instruction, intervention, and progress monitoring using engaging videos and interactive sessions with embedded extension activities, practice opportunities in individual and group formats, checks for knowledge comprehension, and pertinent implementation resources and fidelity checks. Knowledge quizzes follow each module to check for understanding and support documentation of professional development participation and completion.

Based on implementation science best practices, RethinkEd collaborates with school districts to support the change management necessary for a successful implementation and to achieve meaningful outcomes for students and educators. This model supports regular reviews of implementation success, and affords for timely, data-based decisions to be made regarding changes or updates to ensure our partner satisfaction and on-going desired outcomes.

For more details on the RethinkEd MTSS framework:

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About Us

RethinkEd was founded on a simple, yet powerful idea: To re-think education. To make it better and easier. To unburden school districts and empower educators. To improve outcomes and elevate accountability. To promote collaboration and inspire learning. And most importantly, to make a difference in the school day for everyone – administrators, educators, and students.

The RethinkEd solution is part of RethinkFirst, a global company that is transforming behavioral healthcare. Similar to RethinkFirst's other solutions that are innovating and improving outcomes for clinicians and employers globally, RethinkEd is pioneering EdTech with our relentless pursuit of innovative methods that put evidenced-based, data-informed, digitally delivered instruction and assessments into the hands of educators, clinicians, and parents who share our singularly minded focus: To power the potential of all children and to work together to help them succeed.

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