

INTRODUCTORY ARTICLE

Journal of Multitiered System of Supports

Multitiered System of Supports: Conceptual Clarity and Vision for the New Journal

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ABSTRACT

Multitiered system of supports (MTSS) is a widely adopted framework for improving academic, behavioral, and social-emotional outcomes for students. Despite substantial research and widespread implementation, there remains confusion regarding processes and implications for subsets of students. This article traces the historical development of MTSS, presents its conceptual foundations, and identifies evidence-based core instruction, universal screening, targeted interventions, progress monitoring, and implementation fidelity as its core components. We also introduce the Journal of Multitiered System of Supports, a new international journal dedicated to advancing MTSS research and practice. The journal seeks to bridge the research-to-practice gap by publishing rigorous empirical research, systematic reviews, conceptual discussions, and exemplary school-based applications.

Education is constantly evolving. At the heart of all educational reform is the need and desire for our educational systems to improve so that our students will do better. Multitiered system of supports (MTSS) is an innovation that has become a pervasive framework for how schools operate and which improves outcomes for students. MTSS is promoted by government agencies and education leaders internationally. With the growing numbers of descriptive large-scale demonstrations (Chaparro et al., 2020; Goodman, 2017) as well as rigorous experimental research (Bradshaw et al., 2021; Fien et al., 2021; Gage et al., 2023), MTSS has earned its place as an innovation worthy of global dissemination.

MTSS is a framework defined by the systematic use of assessment data to most efficiently allocate instructional and intervention resources to enhance outcomes for all students. MTSS also includes professional learning and coaching systems to support educators in their delivery of instruction and assessments integrated to support the students' academic, behavioral, and social emotional health. Thus, MTSS is not a special education practice, nor is it primarily designed to reduce the number of students receiving special education. MTSS is meant to improve student learning, social-emotional development, and behavior, and those are the variables that should be assessed in MTSS research. Although MTSS is frequently studied, a search of Google Scholar with "MTSS" since 2000 had a resulting count of 28,600, there remains considerable confusion about MTSS processes (Braun et al., 2020). There is also confusion regarding specific issues such as how to best support students with the most intense needs (Chidsey-Brown, 2024) and using assessment data to improve instruction for culturally and linguistically diverse students including Emergent bilinguals (Chaparro et al., 2021; Linan-Thompson et al., 2022).

The prolific publication of research articles and continued confusion regarding MTSS suggest that the field needs better access to the research and that the research needs to be more consumable for school-based practitioners. It is the juxtaposition of accessible and translational research that is the gap that the *Journal of Multitiered System of Supports* aims to fill. It is nothing short of amazing that there is yet no journal that is completely dedicated to publishing research about MTSS. Multiple high-quality journals publish MTSS research, but none have MTSS as its explicit focus. None of the existing journals publish research about MTSS for reading, math, behavior, social-emotional learning, and the integration of them all with the goal of publishing research that centers the importance of implementation demonstrations. Moreover, the Journal of Multitiered System of Supports also has an explicit focus on translating research into practice and focusing on the systems aspect of MTSS and not just specific interventions or singular content components.

The purpose of this article is to introduce the Journal of Multitiered System of Supports and contextualize it within the development of MTSS. We will also present our vision for the journal and the research that we intend to publish.

Foundations of MTSS

MTSS in the United States has its roots in special education. First, the National Center on Positive Behavior Interventions (PBIS) was funded by the Office of Special Education Programs in the U.S. Department of Education in 1998. Second, six years later the 2004 revision of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) allowed for a process of determining if a child responded to research-based intervention as part of the process for evaluation for a specific learning disability (SLD), which was called response-to-intervention (RTI) and was implemented with MTSS. Although PBIS was funded in 1998 and RTI included in federal law in 2004, the roots of MTSS extend well before either of those two major milestones (I-MTSS Research Network, 2023).

MTSS-Academic

Jim Ysselydke was the principal investigator of the Institute for Research on Learning Disabilities (IRLD) at the University of Minnesota from 1977 to 1983, and Stan Deno was the Co-Principal Investigator. The IRLD produced 144 reports that examined how to identify SLD, and concluded that traditional approaches, such as the

ability-achievement discrepancy, were not effective. Instead, schools should intervene at the point of referral and use student progress data for eligibility decisions (Ysseldyke et al., 1983). That finding laid the groundwork for RTI to be included in IDEA.

The research at the IRLD pointed out a problem and provided the solution. Deno (1989) used a data-based decision-making approach to analyze problems to intervene at the point of referral. The problem-solving model included five steps, 1. Identify the problem, 2. Define the problem and the goal, 3. Explore possible solutions to the problem, 4. Implement the solution, and 5. Evaluate the effects of the solution (Deno, 1989). The Minneapolis Public Problem-Solving Model that started in 1982, The Ohio Intervention Based Assessment that began in 1985, and Building Assistance Teams in Heartland Area Education Agency in Iowa that began in 1993 were all early MTSS models (Burns et al., 2004) and all were extensions of the problem-solving model espoused by Deno to address student academic needs.

MTSS-Behavioral Health

While the academic-focused scholars built out the foundations of the problem-solving model others were focused on supporting individual students with severe behavioral needs. Initially in the 1970s the work targeted answering questions about which teacher-delivered interventions benefited a subset of students with the most challenging behaviors (Horner et al., 2017). In the 1990s the questions focused on how to take effective behavioral interventions from the individual teacher and scale them to the school level to create an environment that would prevent the challenging behavior from occurring at all (Sugai & Horner, 2020). In 1996 a group of thought leaders from the University of Oregon published an article promoting the application of a public health prevention model to schools and student behavioral health (Walker et al., 1996). In that article they introduced the three-tiered model of prevention, secondary, and tertiary prevention services that were facilitated by early identification methods such as universal screening.

The Center on PBIS was founded in 1998 and it continues to be the technical assistance center with the longest duration of consistent funding and has facilitated dissemination efforts in the United States to over 25,000 schools. There is also a proliferation of professional associations to support the work of PBIS implementers internationally starting the U.S. based Association of Positive Behavior Supports (APBS). There are PBIS initiatives in over 35 countries represented by such organizations as the UK PBS Alliance, BSP Australia, PBS Europe, and local demonstrations. For example, Japanese scholars have reported on the adoption of PBIS in 400 schools (Otsui et al., 2022). It is understandable that with the widespread dissemination of tiered systems in academics and social emotional behavioral health there remain questions about the defining characteristics of MTSS.

What is MTSS?

MTSS is a framework. A framework provides an organized structure of complicated concepts and how they work together. A model is more specific because it moves away from naming just the larger constructs (e.g., assessment and intervention) and labels more precise actions (e.g., screening, progress monitoring, and diagnostic assessment). In this paper we will define MTSS as a framework with the understanding that countries and even within countries, states, provinces will have their own MTSS models. Just in the United States, all but two states included a three-tiered model on their website and forty of those used the term MTSS or some variation thereof (Zhang et al., 2023).

Essential Components

The essential core mechanism of MTSS is data-based decision making (Arden & Pentimonti, 2017). The process of reviewing different types of data at different points in the school year to answer varying questions to improve student outcomes, connects all the core constructs of evidence-based core instruction, universal screening, evidence-based intervention matched to student need, progress monitoring assessments, and implementation fidelity. Each of these essential components is supported by decades of research.

Evidenced-based Core Instruction

What differentiates core instruction from intervention in an MTSS framework? In this context the foundation of MTSS is the high-quality instruction delivered to all students using curricula, instructional delivery strategies, and classroom behavior management that is supported by research. Some of the features of high-quality core instruction include consistency between classrooms (Christopher & Nesbitt, 2023), options for differentiated instructional strategies and content (Am et al., 2023), and incorporating explicit and systematic instruction for teaching reading, math, and language development (Stockard et al., 2018). There is also promising evidence to suggest that instructional design principles such as cultural responsiveness (Cantrell et al., 2023), universally designed learning opportunities (Almeqdad et al., 2023), and alignment to grade-level standards (Mahoney et al., 2021) can improve instructional quality and outcomes for students.

Evidence-based core instruction in an MTSS framework provides a strong foundation for all learners as it creates equitable learning opportunities for all students and increases the likelihood for success for the tiered interventions. There are other efficiencies gained from a universal focus on high-quality instruction that impact professional learning and instructional coaching as well. When all teachers can collectively train on a similar repertoire of research-based instructional elements then they can support each other, fostering a collaborative environment.

Universal Screening

Just as instruction and intervention are multileveled, the same is true for the assessment used as the foundation for the data-based decision-making process within MTSS. The purpose of integrated universal screening is to have a standardized process to quickly and effectively identify students who may be at risk for academic, behavioral, or social emotional difficulties. There are a number of proven methods and protocols available for schools to implement that take an evidence-based approach to universal screening (Lane et al., 2014; Reinke et al., 2025). All assessments administered as part of MTSS must have demonstrated sufficient levels of technical adequacy, meaning they result in reliable data and valid decisions related to the constructs they measure. Universal screeners are typically administered to all students, and they can identify individual students who may need additional instructional support as well as identify the effectiveness of the core instruction.

Given that universal screeners allow educators to identify students in need of additional supports before there are significant gaps in student performance occur, the data can help prevent more serious and chronic concerns in the future. It is in using universal screeners that MTSS fulfills its prevention of pervasive needs. Universal screeners can also help leaders plan for the type and amount of resources needed to meet the needs of all learners, and teachers can use the information to plan their core and differentiated instruction. Universal screening typically occurs at the beginning of the year, and a similar type of assessment occurs throughout the year which is also referred to as benchmarking.

Evidence-Based Intervention

Once a student is identified as needing support, then she or he receives a supplemental intervention at Tier 2 or an intensified intervention at Tier 3. Interventions need to be evidence based. The National Center on Intensive Intervention provides reviews of the evidence base for several academic

<https://charts.intensiveintervention.org/aintervention> and behavior <https://charts.intensiveintervention.org/bintervention> interventions. However, effective interventions for academic and behavioral difficulties also need to occur frequently (at least 3 times per week; Coddling et al., 2016) and have several essential components such as providing explicit instruction in the skill with sufficient practice for it to be retained and generalized, ensuring learning tasks are not too difficult or too easy so that optimal skill acquisition can occur, and providing behavior-specific praise or immediate corrective feedback as needed (Burns & Contesse, 2024).

Interventions are also more effective if they are matched to student needs based on diagnostic or functional assessment data (Hall & Burns, 2018; Jeong & Copeland, 2020), even for Tier 2 interventions. However, the data used to identify Tier 2 interventions are from assessments of global academic (e.g., reading comprehension, fluency, phonics, and phonemic awareness; Burns et al., 2020) or behavior (e.g., hyperactivity/inattention, peer problems, emotional symptoms, conduct problems, and prosocial behavior; McDaniel et al., 2015) domains. Data used for Tier 3 are much more precise (Cook et al., 2018) to identify environmental variables that can be modified to intensify interventions for individual students (Cumming & O'Neill, 2019; Burns et al., 2025). Thus, it is the level of analysis that differentiates Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions rather than other variables such as intervention group size.

Progress Monitoring

Progress monitoring data help educators evaluate the effectiveness of tiered interventions or if a change is needed. Effective progress monitoring measures are brief, sensitive to growth, include multiple equivalent forms for frequent assessment, and result in reliable data and valid decisions. The primary value of progress monitoring lies in evaluating trends across multiple observations rather than interpreting individual scores. Trendlines based on at least 12 to 14 data points can provide highly reliable estimates of student growth, whereas decisions based on fewer observations are more susceptible to error (Christ et al., 2012).

Schools often progress monitor two ways using a general outcome measure (GOM) and a subskill mastery measures (SMMs; Fuchs & Deno, 1991). Data collected from a general outcome (GOM) measure are designed to show progress on a global domain (e.g., reading, math, behavior) and to have high technical standards with well-established and validated criteria to evaluate growth. SMMs are more precise measures of an individual skill such as spelling tests to assess how well the student learned a specific grapheme-phoneme correspondence in reading or assessing how often a student complies within 10 seconds. SMMs data are often less rigorous and used for more informal decisions, but GOM data can be used for MTSS decisions such as moving a student from Tier 2 to Tier 3 or from Tier 2 to Tier 1.

Implementation Fidelity

Arguably, the assessment of implementation integrity is a fourth type of assessment (in addition to screening, diagnostic, and progress monitoring assessments) that is critical to MTSS, but it is also the least likely MTSS component to occur (Burns et al., 2025). Tiers 2 and 3 can include monitoring of intervention implementation fidelity but increasingly there are several assessment tools used to measure and monitor the infrastructure and implementation progress of MTSS overall. These fidelity tools are widely used at the school level and are typically focused on specific content areas within MTSS such as reading and behavior. For example, the *R-Tiered Fidelity Inventory* is a tool with established technical adequacy for reading and literacy instruction with versions available for both elementary and secondary (St. Martin et al., 2023).

Similarly, there are widely used implementation fidelity tools for behavior tiered systems. Not only are schools using these measures but it's been reported that when schools assess Tier 1 instructional fidelity it predicted an increased likelihood of sustained tiered systems overtime (McIntosh et al., 2018). Moreover, schools who achieve desired thresholds of Tier 1 fidelity, frequently used data to make decisions, had a leader who shared and used

data, and were more likely to sustain MTSS for behavior implementation (McIntosh et al., 2018). A recent technical review identified 31 MTSS fidelity tools, 21 states had adapted an already existing tool, but technical adequacy was reported for only one tool (Schiller et al., 2020). The administration, collection, and use of MTSS implementation tools remain a fruitful area for inquiry.

The Journal

Given the considerable research on MTSS and consensus on the core components, but the continued confusion regarding daily operations and implications for specific subsets of students, the Journal of Multitiered System of Supports was created to address an urgent need. The Journal of Multitiered System of Supports started with a conversation at a national conference in Chicago in April of 2025. Joan Schumann, the now Executive Director of the International MTSS Association (IMA), made it her personal mission to start a professional association dedicated exclusively to all things MTSS and to help close the research-to-practice gap in doing so. A few months later in August of 2025, the IMA began with a Board of six Executive Directors and an Advisory Council with 20 members. Today, after just over 1 year, the IMA has over 3,000 members from 30 countries, has held an international summit, and is planning multiple professional development opportunities for the future.

The Journal of Multitiered System of Supports was designed to be the primary research-to-practice source for the IMA. We were excited to take on the challenge of leading the journal by serving as the Founding Co-Editors, and were equally excited that Chris Borgmeier, Rachel Brown-Chidsey, John Hosp, Sara McDaniel, and Monica Romero agreed to be the Founding Associate Editors. A list of the entire Editorial Board can be found at <https://www.mtssassociation.org/journal-of-mtss-jmtss>.

The primary mission of the Journal of Multitiered System of Supports is to advance the science and practice of MTSS by building a solid evidence base for MTSS and ensuring educational leaders benefit from diverse research methods, practitioner insights, and international contexts. The journal will have two sections, Research Articles and Practice Briefs. The Research Articles will consist of original research (e.g., randomized trials, quasi-experimental studies, single-case designs, correlational designs, and qualitative designs), systematic reviews, and discussion papers with compelling implications for research and practice. The Practice Briefs will be shorter (2,000–3,000 words as compared to 6,000 to 8,000 words for Research Articles) and will consist of descriptions of exemplary school-based applications.

We will welcome a broad range of submissions to the Journal of Multitiered System of Supports, but all papers must contextualize the data or exemplary practice within MTSS. For example, we would not consider a paper regarding small-group interventions that are not conducted in school-based applications with at least some description of the school and Tier 1 instruction. Moreover, all submissions must include clear implications for MTSS practice or for future MTSS research so that the journal can advance the science and practice of MTSS. Finally, being an international journal, international submissions are especially welcome.

There remain important research questions including ways to better integrate academic and behavior MTSS frameworks and methods to ensure culturally responsive MTSS implementation that considers the social, cultural, and language backgrounds of each student. Additional research is also needed to better understand how to implement MTSS in different settings such as early childhood education, secondary schools, and international schools with contexts and policies that are considerably different from schools in the United States. One area of particular importance is research to better understand implementation, sustainability, leadership, and methods to translate policy into practice.

Conclusion

The Journal of Multitiered System of Supports is a remarkable opportunity for researchers and practitioners from all over the globe to join in one of the most important conversations happening in schools today. Although there are 327 million more students in the world attending school today than there were in 2000, 273 million children and youth remain out of schools (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2026). The stakes are high. Schools need a framework to efficiently and effectively manage daily operations to give children the best chance possible for a successful life. The Journal of Multitiered System of Supports is an invitation to join the conversation.

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