MULTI-TIERED
SYSTEM OF SUPPORT

RECA

Novak
EDUCATIONAL
CONSULTING
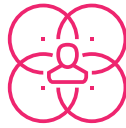
Why MTSS?

All students are capable of success. While Massachusetts leads the nation in performance on multiple measures, we still have students who are not experiencing the success they deserve.

Recent reports such as the "Review of Special Education in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts: A Synthesis Report" by Hehir and Associates (2014) and "No. 1 for Some: Opportunity and Achievement in Massachusetts" by the Massachusetts Education Equity Partnership (2018) demonstrate the consequences of an inequitable education system for students with disabilities, students who are English learners, economically disadvantaged students, and students of color in Massachusetts.

This is not because these students can't or don't want to learn. We must recognize that many of our schools are not organized to meet the needs of all learners (Meyer, Rose & Gordon, 2014).

Although some students face barriers that have the potential to interfere with their ability to make optimal progress, there is evidence that schools and classrooms can raise student achievement despite these barriers (Hattie, 2018; Meyer, Rose, and Gordon, 2014).

For example, through efforts such as wrap-around services, the use of high-quality core curricular materials, evidence-based interventions, trauma informed practices, and strategies to engage all learners, schools have the ability to address factors that may impact student learning. Schools can minimize or eliminate barriers and improve student outcomes when they design equitable, tiered, universally-designed systems of support that address students' academic, behavior, and social emotional well-being in ways that are culturally sustaining.

MTSS is a framework designed to meet the needs of all students by ensuring that schools optimize data-driven decision making, progress monitoring, and evidence-based supports and strategies with increasing intensity to sustain student growth. MTSS is not just about tiered interventions, but rather how all the systems in a school or district fit together to ensure a high quality education for all students.

To realize this success, multi-tiered systems must be supported by leadership, competency, and implementation drivers to ensure that district resources and efforts are focused on supporting all students, who can and will learn and succeed with our support.

MULTI-TIERED SYSTEM OF SUPPORT (MTSS)

What is MTSS?

According the [Every Student Succeeds Act](#) (ESSA, 2015), a multi-tiered system of support is "a comprehensive continuum of evidence-based, systemic practices to support a rapid response to students' needs, with regular observation to facilitate data-based instructional decision making."

Harlacher et al. (2014) described six key tenets of the MTSS framework:

★ All students are capable of grade-level learning with adequate support.

★ MTSS is rooted in proactivity and prevention.

★ The system utilizes evidence-based practices.

★ Decisions and procedures are driven by school and student data.

★ The degree of support given to students is based on their needs.

★ Implementation occurs school-wide and requires stakeholder collaboration.

The current MTSS model in Massachusetts has been refined from previous versions. For example, this blueprint more explicitly focuses on equitable access and universal design for learning (UDL) and fully integrates social emotional and behavioral supports with academic supports (Lane, Oakes, Cantwell, & Royer, 2016).

What is the difference between MTSS and RtI?

Response to intervention (RtI) was added to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 2004 as an alternative evaluation procedure.

The goal of RtI was to provide screening for all students, deliver academic interventions, monitor student progress, and use the students' responses to those interventions as a basis for determining special education eligibility (Turse & Albrecht, 2015).

ESSA distinctly references multi-tiered systems of support, but there is no reference to Response to Intervention (RtI), and in fact they are two distinct tiered approaches.

While RtI focuses on direct services, supports, and interventions for students at risk, MTSS is a systematic approach that addresses conditions for creating successful and sustainable system change while also supporting students and staff.

As opposed to a reactive model that responds to student achievement declines as a rationale for resources and services, MTSS puts the onus on the system, not the student, and is proactive in getting all students what they need.
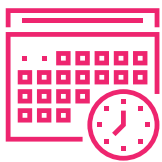
BLUEPRINT COMPONENTS

Foundational Framework & Focus

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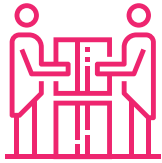
Tiered Support

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System Drivers

Foundational Framework and Focus

This blueprint will unpack the components of a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) through the foundational framework of universal design for learning (UDL) and a focus on equitable access.

Tiered Support

MTSS provides a continuum of supports, which are typically conceptualized across three levels of increasing intensity (Rodriguez, Loman & Borgmeier, 2016).

These tiers represent the level of support a student may need at any point in his/her/their schooling. All tiers are universally designed using the principles of UDL and ensure equitable access for all students.

★ Academic
★ Behavioral
★ Social Emotional

System Drivers

This section will review the conditions and systems necessary to support a robust and effective MTSS approach, inclusive of the following drivers.

★ Leadership Drivers
★ Competency Drivers
★ Implementation Drivers

UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING

Competency Drivers

Academic

Behavioral

Leadership Drivers

TIER 3
Intensive Support

TIER 2
Targeted Support

TIER 1
Universal Support

Social Emotional

EQUITABLE ACCESS

Implementation Drivers
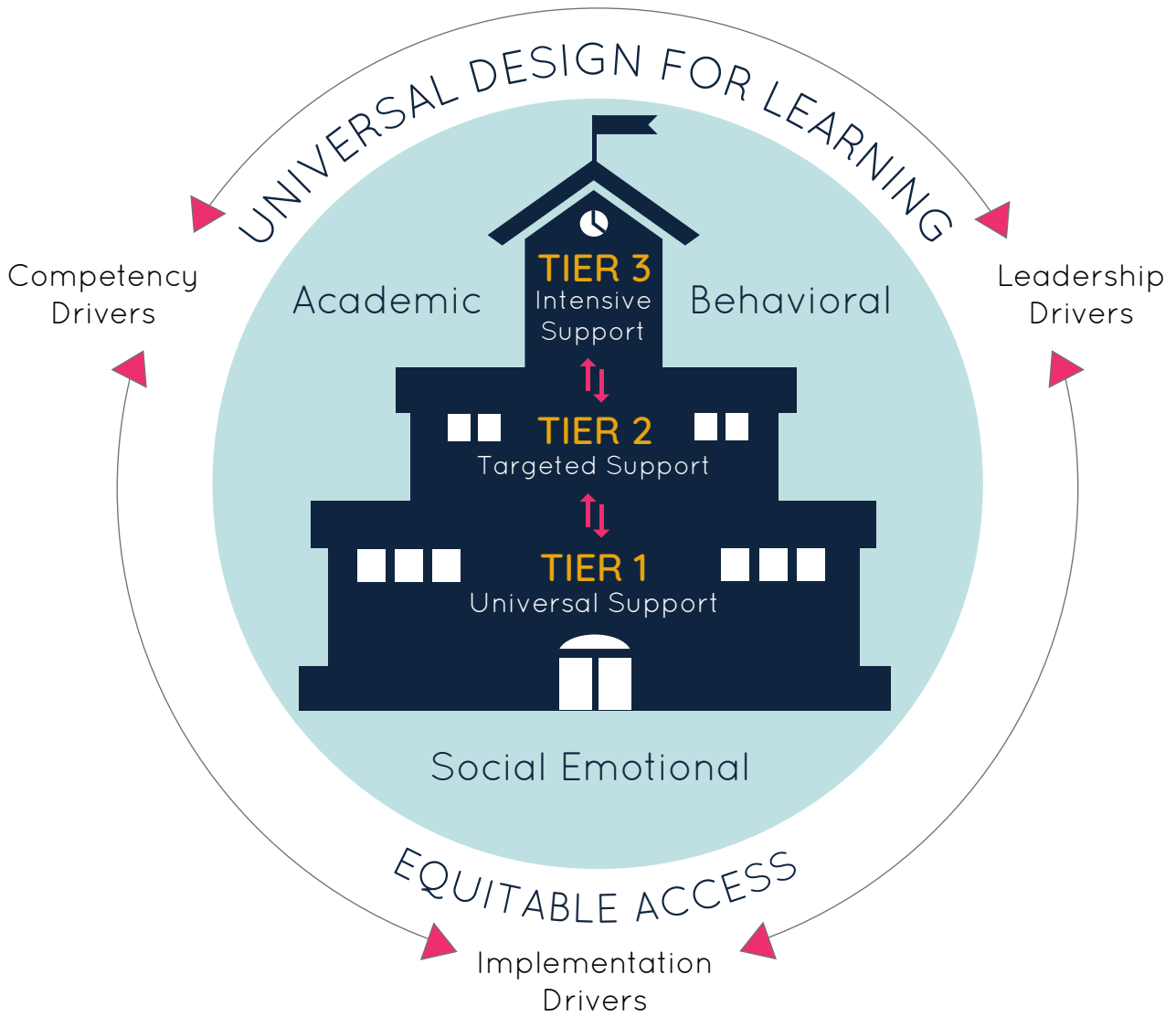
MULTI-TIERED
SYSTEM OF SUPPORT

FOUNDATIONAL FRAMEWORK & FOCUS

UDL (Universal Design for Learning)

Universal design for learning (UDL) is a framework that reduces barriers in instruction, proactively provides appropriate accommodations and supports, and allows for high-achievement expectations for all students, regardless of their unique strengths and challenges. This is done by providing options and choices for students to personalize their learning. UDL is an educational framework based on research in cognitive neuroscience that guides the development of flexible learning environments that can accommodate learner variability.

UDL FRAMEWORK COMPONENTS

Multiple Means of
Engagement

The Why of Learning

Multiple Means of
Representation

The What of Learning

Multiple Means of
Action & Expression

The How of Learning

The UDL framework, first defined by David Rose, Ed.D. of the Harvard Graduate School of Education and the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) in the 1990's, calls for creating curriculum from the outset that provides:

★ Multiple means of engagement to tap into learners' interests, challenge them appropriately, and motivate them to learn,

★ Multiple means of representation to give learners various ways of acquiring information and knowledge, and,

★ Multiple means of expression to provide learners with options for demonstrating knowledge and skills.

Instructional planning, as defined in the UDL literature, has four parts: goals, methods, materials, and assessments (Meyer, Rose & Gordon, 2014). UDL is intended to increase access and engagement in learning by reducing physical, cognitive, intellectual, and organizational barriers, as well as other obstacles. Instructional goals, through the UDL lens, focus on standards-based instruction and the design of instruction that allows all students to have equitable access to grade-level standards in learning experiences that are engaging and personalized to their needs. UDL principles also lend themselves to implementing inclusionary practices in the classroom, including behavioral and social emotional teaching and learning.

Equitable Access

All students receive challenging, grade-appropriate tier I instruction and have equitable access to high quality, universally designed academic, behavioral, and social emotional curriculum and instruction that integrates culturally sustaining pedagogy and is linguistically responsive. In our planning, it is important to ensure equitable access to highly qualified teachers along with comprehensive efforts to diversify our workforce.

Piper et al. (2006) define access as the ability to obtain a seat in a classroom or to receive services, whereas equity is the ability to obtain that seat or service regardless of "ethnicity, language spoken at home, gender, rural or urban location, or regional differences" (p. 2). All students, regardless of disability, English language proficiency status, income, race, or academic performance can receive tier 1, 2, and 3 services.

Culturally sustaining pedagogy "describes teaching and learning that seeks to perpetuate and foster linguistic, literary, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling and as a needed response to demographic and social change" (Paris, 2017, p.2). To provide equitable access to tier 1, districts need to ensure that all teachers have access to high-quality curricular materials that support them in crafting learning experiences that are inclusive and socially just for all students. To do this, school systems have to implement asset and strength-based approaches to teaching and learning.

For example, we must ask ourselves how we can support the dynamic mix of abilities, races, ethnicities, classes, genders, neighborhoods/regions, religions, and interests of our students, staff, families, and communities. When planning instruction, we must consider critical questions like, "Do our schools represent the students and families as they believe themselves to be?," "What interests and engages our students, staff, families, and community?," and "How do we leverage the skills, capacities, and strengths within our community as we design learning experiences that meet the needs of all students?"

To ensure equitable access, districts must recognize all students as general education students first, and recognize diversity and inclusion as a necessary good. As a result, the focus of MTSS should be creating strong tier 1 systems and supports that are supplemented, not replaced, by tier 2 and tier 3 supports.

TIERED SUPPORT

The problem-solving process in MTSS is an ongoing methodology for effective decision making at all levels of the system and across all three tiers (Council of the Great City Schools, 2012). The tiers in this model represent instruction and supports.

Within the MTSS model, universal supports such as high quality, universally designed, culturally sustaining, and evidence-based curriculum, instruction, and assessments are provided for all students.

Movement amongst the three tiers is fluid and is not determined or defined by specific designations, such as diagnosed disabilities. Rather, movement is supported by data from universal screeners, diagnostic assessments, progress monitoring, and how a student responds to one level of intervention.

TIER 3
Intensive Support

TIER 2
Targeted Support

TIER 1
Universal Support

Any and all students should have access to supports when they need them. In addition, obtaining services at one point does not mean that students will always need that level of support. The MTSS process is not always linear, but rather oriented around problem-solving.

When data suggests that students require more or less intensive supports to aid either remediation or enrichment, they will move throughout the tiers based on that need.

No student should be labeled by an intervention tier. For example, a child is not a "tier 2 student" but rather a student requiring tier 2 supports in a specific skill/content area(s). In addition, when a student receives interventions in tier 2, it should not replace tier 1 supports. These supports build upon one another. Moreover, students can move fluidly through tier 1, 2, and 3 supports as needed. For example, if data suggests that students are not meeting the standards, what additional supports may they need? Similarly, if students significantly exceed the standards, what tier 2 supports may be necessary to optimize challenge and promote growth? It's also important to note that students may need tier 2 supports in one area (e.g., math standards) but may need only tier 1 supports in another area (e.g., relationship-building).
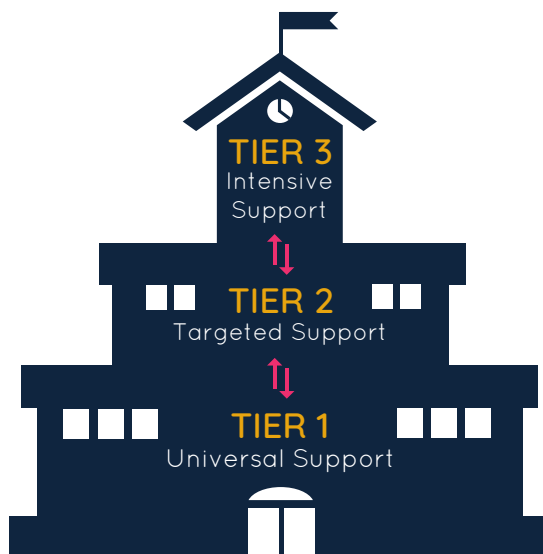
Tier 1

These are supports available to **all students** through a general education program. Inclusive practice, which is linguistically responsive and culturally sustaining, is a cornerstone of tier 1. Inclusive practice is defined as "instructional and behavioral strategies that improve academic and social emotional outcomes for all students, with and without disabilities, in general education settings" (Educator Effectiveness Guidebook for Inclusive Practice, 2017). For example, providing students with a high-quality, coherent curriculum that provides options and choices for how they learn (i.e, access to books, videos, or direct-teacher instruction), what materials, scaffolds and supports they need to learn (i.e., visuals, exemplars, graphic organizers, rubrics, etc.), and how they can express what they have learned will allow more students to access rigorous, standards-based instruction.

TIER 1
Universal Support

Tier 2

Tier 2 supports occur in addition to the supports that are provided in tier 1 settings. These supports are generally done in **small groups** and include additional opportunities to practice the skills necessary for core instruction or strategies for enrichment.

TIER 2
Targeted Support
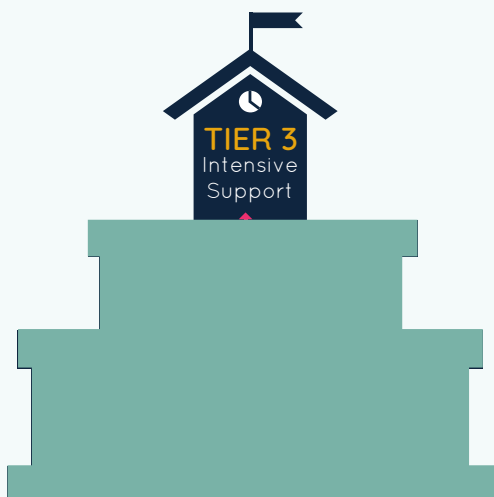
Tier 3

Tier 3 provides more intensive support. These are often explicit, focused interventions that occur **individually** or in **very small groups**. It is important to note that tier 3 is not synonymous with special education. Students with disabilities may not need tier 3 support and students not identified with a disability may in fact need tier 3 supports.

TIER 3
Intensive Support

Case in Point: Tiered Support

Imagine a grade 6 classroom where all students have access to a high-quality core curriculum that is universally designed and attends to social emotional learning in all content areas. There is also a strong school-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) system, which is supported by teacher classroom management.

The classroom teacher utilizes universal screening tools with all students, consistently monitors their progress, and receives high-quality professional development in evidence-based practices and ongoing coaching support aligned to the curriculum.

All students receive tier I supports in the classroom and the teacher frequently monitors student progress. While reviewing student data with the school data team, the team notes that there are a few students whose needs are not being fully met by the tier I supports.

The teacher has two students who have recurring behavioral challenges during her literacy class. The grade/cohort level team should compare notes on whether those students have persistent behavioral challenges or if they only occur during literacy. If the former, they may collectively confer with the student support worker and decide whether a social skills/tier 2 or tier 3 support would be helpful and appropriate. If the latter, it may have more to do with that particular teacher's instructional style or relationship with the students.

Two additional students struggle with decoding multi-syllabic words, which significantly affects their reading comprehension. In addition to working with the students in small groups during reading workshop, the teacher refers those students to the reading specialist who determines that they would benefit from an evidence-based reading intervention. After six weeks, the data team will review student progress and determine next steps.

Although these students have varying needs, MTSS allows all of them to access rigorous and engaging learning opportunities in tier I as well as research-based supports in tiers 2 and 3.

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SYSTEM DRIVERS

Leadership Drivers

Implementation requires leaders who address the adaptive issues (such as consensus building and identifying/removing barriers that interfere with the development of an effective multi-tiered system) paired with technical support (such as finding time for teachers to collaborate and providing curriculum resources). Hall and Hord (2011) found a .74 correlation (significant to the .01 level) between the adaptive leadership style of an administrator and implementation success. This driver also refers to the structures that foster collaboration and stakeholder input.

Shared Responsibility & Collaboration

In an effective multi-tiered system, representative stakeholders with decision-making authority team together to collaboratively lead planning and implementation efforts using communication feedback loops and purposeful meeting structures. District and school leadership teams regularly use formative and summative data to evaluate systems, strategies, policies, and student outcomes. This data is used to inform action plans at the district, school, classroom, and individual student levels.

Leaders are encouraged to consider the process of supporting MTSS as a long term commitment. Robust changes take ongoing prioritization and commitment along with long-range planning. Without thoughtful planning, initiatives are not likely to be implemented with fidelity. We sometimes refer to this pattern as the "rain not hitting the ground" (i.e., high level decisions are made but the changes and practices are not seen at the classroom level).

Leaders should consider the following stages in their planning. The planning stages below were adapted from the National Implementation Research Network[1]:

EXPLORATION
During the exploration stage, the team learns more about multi-tiered systems and recognizes the need to build a system that meets the needs of all students. During this stage, teams may ask themselves:

★ What is MTSS?
★ What will it take to implement a multi-tiered system of support in our school or district?
★ How will we assess our readiness for change so we can eliminate barriers that may prevent successful implementation of MTSS?

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1. National Implementation Research Network, 2018. Used with permission.

PLANNING

During the planning stage, teams create strategic plans for how they will acquire the resources needed to create an effective multi-tiered system of support. For example, providing initial training for staff, finding or establishing performance assessment tools to measure success, and ensuring teachers have access to high-quality curricular materials are steps that need to be in place before the work can be done effectively. During this stage, teams may ask themselves:

★ What are our goals and do we have a defined action plan?
★ What early professional learning needs to occur to build the foundation for implementation?
★ How will we measure success?
★ How do we engage all stakeholders in understanding the relevancy of this work?

INITIAL IMPLEMENTATION

During the initial implementation phase, schools and districts begin to implement a multi-tiered system of support. During this stage, teams may ask themselves:

★ What structures are in place (e.g., new schedules) to support early implementation changes?
★ How do we support early innovators with robust scaffolds and supports such as PD and coaching?
★ How are we using data to drive our work?
★ How much time is provided for early adopters to collaborate and reflect on their new practices? (Senge & Kleiner, 1999).

FULL IMPLEMENTATION

Full Implementation is reached when 50% or more of the intended practitioners, staff, or team members are implementing the identified strategies with fidelity and seeing strong outcomes for all students.

During this stage, teams may ask themselves:

★ How will we scale up the professional learning options to meet the needs of the early adopters as well as those just beginning?
★ How are we using data to refine our system of support?
★ How do we maintain a focus on this work through transitions in leadership?

Below are samples of what this may look like in practice.

★ **Leadership Team -** There is an active leadership team that takes on the responsibility of ensuring that systems meet the needs of all learners. The team has the authority to make resource, scheduling, programmatic, and staffing decisions and has representation from a range of stakeholders (including curriculum & instruction, student support, special education, and English learner departments).
★ **Communication & Collaboration Structures -** The leadership team uses effective mechanisms to not only collaborate internally (e.g., agendas, protocols), but to regularly seek input and feedback from key stakeholders (including staff, students, families, and the community) and to communicate important information and decisions. All stakeholders are committed to the work and regularly participate in planning and implementation activities.
★ **Policies and Procedures -** Policies are established by the school committee to support equity (e.g., ensuring the annual budget funds schools equitably according to need; requiring an equity audit to be conducted on a regular basis to determine factors such as institutional bias). Similarly, administration defines procedures to ensure that all students can be successful in the school system (e.g., proportional scheduling is used to ensure that all students have access to higher level courses; codes of conduct are developed with an equity lens). All policies and procedures are followed with fidelity.

★ **Scientifically-Based Planning Model -** A multi-year planning process is used to thoughtfully examine data and identify priorities, conduct a root cause analysis and develop a logic model for how to address those priorities, and create an action plan to sustainably roll out, implement, and monitor the required systems and strategies identified through the logic model. The action plan is integrated into existing district and school improvement/strategic plans and details who is responsible for what, by when, and what foundational actions need to be taken so that the work can occur.

Resource allocation

It is essential that resource mapping occurs and districts prioritize and allocate their people, time, and funding in a way that optimizes the tiered systems needed to support their students. The National Implementation Research Network (NIRN) (2018) outlines how proactive, vigorous, and enthusiastic attention by the administration is used to reduce implementation barriers while supporting practitioners.

School leaders are encouraged to make strategic use of staffing, scheduling, and budgeting. Resource allocation is a tangible way that leaders show their priorities. If MTSS is a focus, what resources have been provided to support it? How is staffing prioritized to support tiered systems of support? How have we organized our schedules to support tiered instruction? Do we offer substantive time for professional development? These questions can be used as starting points to determine priorities for building effective multi-tiered systems.

Below are samples of what this may look like in practice.

★ **Tiered Scheduling -** The schedule allows time for evidence-based instruction and interventions to be delivered across all three tiers in order to meet the academic, social emotional, and behavioral needs of students. In addition, the schedule does not remove students from the school's educational program to receive intervention (i.e., schools are supplementing and not supplanting tier 1 services and are not removing students from lunch/recess and specials like physical education and music). The schedule allows for time to administer assessments to determine the specific needs of all students.

★ **Common Planning Time -** Time is scheduled for department-, grade-, and student-level team collaboration and critical follow-up activities. Common planning times allow for planning across grade levels and content teams and are inclusive of interventionists, special educators, English learner teachers, and student support staff. There are effective protocols to guide these meetings. There is also time allotted for staff to analyze assessment data and determine the appropriate supports for each student (e.g., who needs support in intervention blocks; time for the pre-referral process) and what monitoring is needed.

★ **Inclusive and Equitable Resources -** The budget, staffing models, and master schedule are reviewed with a lens of inclusion and equity (e.g., do we ask questions like, "What is the typical proportion of learners with diverse needs in the general education classroom—for example, students who are English learners (ELs) or students with individualized education programs (IEPs)?" and "What is the composition of students enrolled in advanced, honors, and AP courses?"). Based on answers to those questions, the team makes decisions to modify the schedule and allocation of resources to move toward a more inclusive learning environment. Student needs and performance data drive the fiscal and asset management process.

Student, Family, & Community Engagement

Collaboration between students, staff, families, and community partners is a key component in determining and providing appropriate supports for all students. Defined strategies for engagement are essential, such as the use of collaboration protocols, communication plans, feedback loops, stakeholder surveys, targeted outreach efforts, etc. (Đurišic & Bunijevac, 2017). Involving families in the development of an effective tiered system helps to ensure the development of culturally sustaining and linguistically appropriate models of support.

Below are samples of what this may look like in practice.

★ **Welcoming Environment & Relationships -** The district and schools create a welcoming culture and environment for all families/caregivers, students, school staff, and community members. Stakeholders are valued and connected to each other in support of high academic expectations, achievement, and healthy development and wellbeing.

★ **Effective Communication -** Families/caregivers, school/district staff, and administration engage in regular, meaningful dialogue about learning, high academic expectations, and the healthy development of students. Schools systematically share information using multiple communication pathways and solicit input about school goals and initiatives with students, families, and the broader community.

★ **Engagement in Student Support -** Families/Caregivers and students are actively engaged in student support processes/decisions and regularly informed about progress. Families/ caregivers receive the information they need to advocate for their children and are informed of their rights to request a special education evaluation at any time during the tiered support process.

Competency Drivers

Competency drivers revolve around building educator capacity to affect positive student outcomes through thoughtful staffing models, offering high quality professional development, research based coaching strategies, and effective, aligned systems for feedback and evaluation (NIRN, 2018).

Staff Recruitment, Selection, & Onboarding

We need to look at our students' needs and specifically hire staff who have the relevant expertise to meet them. This requires a mindset and belief that all students can learn at high levels. This belief should be evidenced in our procedures for recruitment, in the staff we select, and how we purposefully integrate our core beliefs in our onboarding programs (O'Connor & Freeman, 2012).

Below are samples of what this may look like in practice.

★ **Core Understanding and Beliefs -** All staff have a firm understanding of the components and value of MTSS and believe that all students can be successful with appropriate levels of support.

★ **Hiring and Onboarding -** Hiring criteria, recruitment, and selection for all district/ school administrators, educators, and other staff include knowledge, skill, and experience implementing MTSS. Onboarding programs and strategies support the building of MTSS expertise and skill sets.

★ **Staffing Design -** The staffing model and staff roles are designed to support implementation of MTSS based on students' needs. Careful consideration is given to staff titles and duties to foster a positive approach to meeting the needs of all students. In addition, staff are (re) allocated based on student need annually and throughout the year (e.g., if additional tier 2 supports are identified as a need, staff schedules should be adapted to offer the necessary supports).
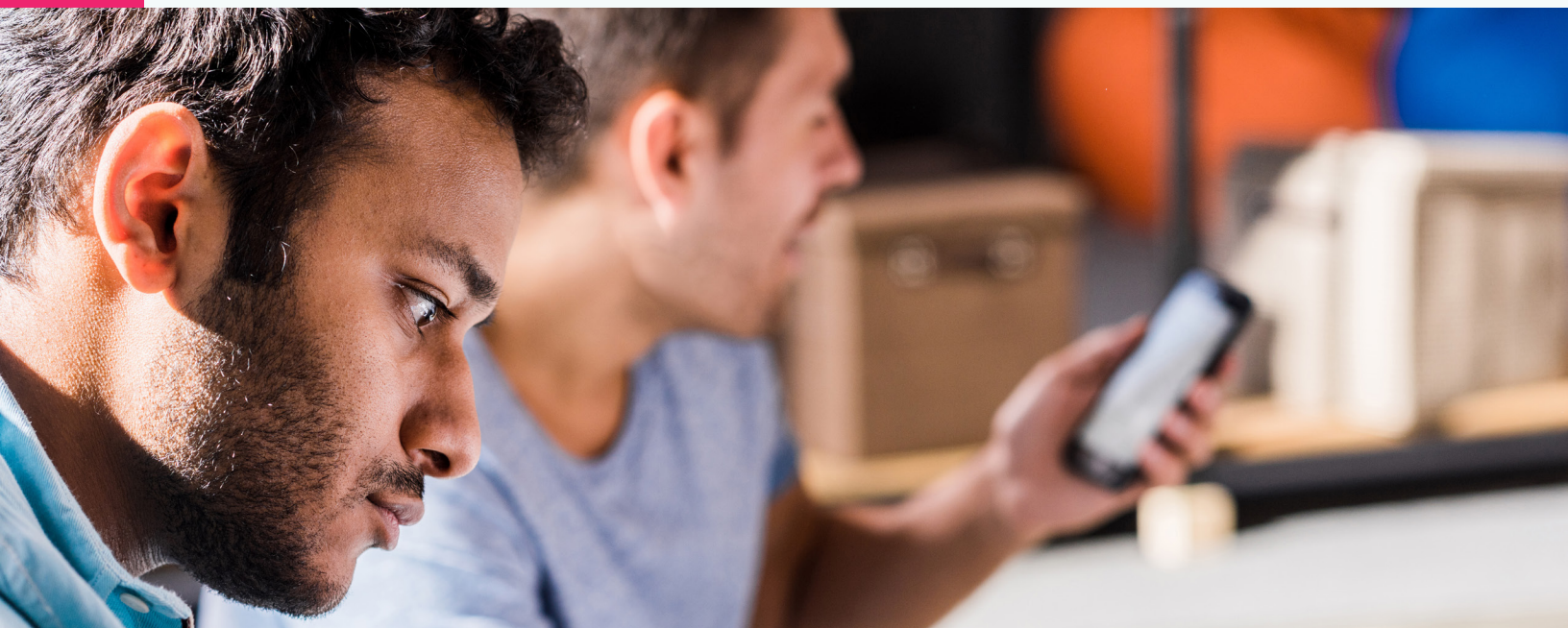
Professional Development & Coaching

Districts need a sustainable professional development plan that offers high-quality, on-going support, individualized and team professional development and coaching, as well as options to establish academic, behavioral, and social emotional expertise at all three tiers (Freeman, Miller, & Newcomer, 2015). This professional development needs to be designed to meet the needs of all learners while also aligning to the Massachusetts Standards for Professional Development (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2015). These standards remind implementation teams to ensure that professional development is goal-directed, data-informed, and collaborative so that all educators are engaged in learning experiences that allow them to apply the professional learning in their practice.

Facilitators of professional development should model good pedagogical practice and engage all educators using the principles of universal design for learning (UDL), the same principles that increase access and engagement for students in a multi-tiered system (Novak & Rodriguez, 2016). Designing professional development using UDL principles ensures that all educators have options and choices to learn about multi-tiered systems of support in ways that are relevant, authentic, and meaningful; have access to numerous scaffolds and resources that support both understanding and implementation; and have numerous opportunities to demonstrate their understanding and application of multi-tiered systems and receive feedback on their professional journey. Teachers need ongoing, job-embedded professional development opportunities to practice skillful use of the district's curricular materials and deepen their understanding of how strong tier 1 instruction supports greater access to grade-appropriate content for all students.

In addition to high-quality professional development, educators need coaching systems to apply their conceptual understanding of MTSS by implementing new skills, engaging in reflective dialogue with someone with experience in using the strategies, and embedding these skills into daily practice (Freeman, Miller, & Newcomer, 2015).

Below are samples of what this may look like in practice.

★ **High Quality PD -** Adequate time is provided for professional development to support the foundations of MTSS (such as PD on universal design for learning and culturally sustaining practices) and those professional learning options are embedded into the district and school PD plans. Staff actively participate in high-quality, universally designed, and ongoing PD with the goal of improving instructional practice and student outcomes. The PD meets the Massachusetts Standards for Professional Development and focuses on student academics as well as the social emotional/behavioral/mental health dimensions of learning.

★ **Adult Learning Culture -** District and school culture is conducive to adult learning, where all staff hold themselves jointly responsible for student outcomes and regularly share their strengths and struggles in the spirit of helping each other continually improve practice. Professional development offerings are guided by data and student outcomes.

★ **Coaching -** Specific staff are identified for advanced training in meeting the academic, social emotional, and behavioral needs of students (i.e., coaches). Coaches use multiple points of evidence to identify potential professional development priorities for teachers. Both teachers and their coaches work to draw out the connections between teacher actions, student actions, and student outcomes. Coaches work with teachers to determine the most appropriate professional development activities to efficiently close gaps in their practice or to build upon existing strengths. Coaching needs and functions are identified at both the district and school-levels and are reviewed at least annually.

Feedback & Evaluation

It is also important to align MTSS efforts with the Massachusetts Educator Evaluation Framework. Existing DESE resources (e.g., the Educator Effectiveness Guidebook for Inclusive Practice (2016b)) support these efforts with resources such as sample SMART goals, sample artifacts/evidence of practice, and related rubric elements.

DESE's Turnaround Practices Research (2016a) provides some examples of how to support feedback and evaluation.

★ **Defined expectations for rigorous and consistent instructional practices -** School leadership has identified a clear instructional focus and shared expectations for instructional best practices that address clearly identified, student-specific instructional needs

★ **Administrative observations leading to constructive, teacher-specific feedback, supports, and professional development -** There is a defined and professionally valued system for monitoring and enhancing classroom-based instruction across the school and for individual teachers. The system includes frequent observations of instructional practice and the impact of instruction on student work, team-based and job-embedded professional development, and teacher specific coaching, when needed.

In addition, feedback loops will help with fidelity checks. It is important to ask students and staff for their opinions about MTSS implementation from the end-user standpoint.

Below are samples of what this may look like in practice.

★ **Feedback to Support Implementation -** The district utilizes feedback data (e.g., learning walk data; evaluation ratings) to inform ongoing PD, planning, and implementation support.

★ **Academic Focused Feedback & Evaluation -** The educator evaluation process is used to provide formal and informal feedback related to meeting the academic needs of students. The feedback is used to develop meaningful, actionable goals to improve practice and impact student achievement. Academic and social emotional/behavioral practice goals are integrated where appropriate.

★ **Social Emotional & Behavioral Focused Feedback & Evaluation -** The educator evaluation process is used to provide formal and informal feedback related to meeting the social emotional and behavioral needs of students. The feedback is used to develop meaningful, actionable goals to improve practice and impact student outcomes. Social emotional/behavioral and academic practice goals are integrated where appropriate.

Implementation Drivers

Implementation drivers are the organizational systems that leaders create in order for tiered instruction and interventions to take place.

Tiered Continuum of Evidence-Based Practices

Evidence-based practices, instruction, and systems are provided to students by tier. Universally designed practices and supports are intrinsic to all tiers. The supports provided to students are defined by their needs.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) emphasizes the use of evidence-based activities, strategies, and interventions (collectively referred to as "interventions").

The term "evidence-based"means an intervention that demonstrates a statistically significant effect on improving student outcomes or other relevant outcomes. The criteria for identifying "evidence-based" interventions based on each of ESSA's four levels are as follows:

★ **Strong evidence** from at least one well-designed and well-implemented experimental study;

★ **Moderate evidence** from at least one well-designed and well-implemented quasi-experimental study;

★ **Promising evidence** from at least one well-designed and well-implemented correlational study with statistical controls for selection bias; or

★ **Demonstrates a rationale** based on high-quality research findings or positive evaluation that such activity, strategy, or intervention is likely to improve student outcomes or other relevant outcomes; and includes ongoing efforts to examine the effects of such activity, strategy, or intervention.

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) has identified the following required and allowable uses of the ESSA evidence-based provisions. Unless otherwise specified, "evidence-based" means "meets any of the four evidence levels described above."

Below are samples of what this may look like in practice.

★ **Academic Supports & Interventions -** Tier 1 academic expectations are articulated and known by all. Within tier 1 there is a range of supports to meet the needs of all learners. In addition, there is a range of tier 2 and 3 academic interventions (supplemental to tier 1) targeted to specific skills/needs of the student and identified by assessment data. All instruction, interventions, and supports are evidence-based, culturally sustaining, and universally designed. Data is used to monitor the effectiveness of interventions regularly.

★ **Social Emotional and Behavioral Supports & Interventions -** Tier 1 social emotional and behavioral supports are articulated and known by all. Within tier 1 there is a range of supports to meet the needs of all learners. In addition, there is a range of tier 2 and 3

social emotional and behavioral interventions (supplemental to tier 1) targeted to specific needs of the student and identified by data. All instruction, interventions, and supports are evidence-based, culturally sustaining, and universally designed. Data is used to monitor the effectiveness of the interventions regularly.

★ **Supporting Students with Disabilities -** IEPs are designed to enable the student to progress effectively in the content area of the general curriculum and within the life of the school. This ensures the student has access to the least restrictive environment and tiered supports as appropriate. Inclusive practice and inclusion are cornerstones of educational programming.

★ **Supporting English Learners -** The district and schools ensure English learners are able to access the general curriculum and the tiered system of support. Data (e.g., ACCESS) is used to measure student proficiency in reading, writing, listening, and speaking English, as well as the progress they are making in learning English. This data is used to inform supports provided to students.

Implementation Fidelity

Often, schools deliver professional development to staff but then do not have systems in place to follow up on whether staff are utilizing the practices effectively. A core component of this work is to establish a systematic approach to monitoring our adherence to the designed tiered system of support. In addition to practice, it is important that we have mechanisms to review future improvement plans, planning procedures (e.g., the budgeting process), and policies to support MTSS throughout the implementation stages.

Below are samples of what this may look like in practice.

★ **Measures & Processes to Monitor Fidelity -** Fidelity measures are identified to assess the implementation of evidence-based strategies, instruction, and interventions. Measures can be at the district, school, and classroom levels and build a common understanding of what success looks like (e.g., you might regularly assess that evidenced-based curriculum and instructional systems exist through curriculum reviews and classroom observations). Clear processes are in place to determine how, when, and who will assess the fidelity measures.

★ **Mid-course Corrections & Continuous Improvement -** Based on the data collected through the fidelity monitoring and feedback loops, decisions are made about how to enhance the effectiveness of the work (e.g., shifting approaches, providing additional professional development and support, etc.). These processes are designed to support open communication and productive feedback to ensure the work can be successfully implemented and sustained.

Data-Based Decision Making

Teams of educators use formative and summative evaluation procedures to make decisions about student intervention/instruction using scientifically-validated assessments for screening, diagnostic, and progress monitoring purposes. These teams engage in a strategic problem solving process to identify student needs and designate intervention and progress monitoring protocols. The district and school leadership teams will also use student assessments to evaluate district/school-wide outcomes, consider how to make programmatic and instructional decisions based on those outcomes, and use this data to inform the MTSS action plan.

Below are some examples of what this looks like based on the DESE Turnaround Practices, 2016a.

★ **Teachers and teacher teams use student data to adapt and improve instructional strategies -** Teachers use and analyze a variety of student-specific data to assess the effectiveness of their instructional strategies and practices and modify instruction to meet their students' needs as identified.

★ **Using data to identify student-specific academic, social emotional, and behavioral needs -** Administrators and teachers use a variety of ongoing assessments (formative, benchmark, and summative) to frequently and continually assess instructional effectiveness and to identify students' individual academic needs (e.g., content or standard-specific academic needs) in order to provide student-specific interventions, enrichment, and supports.

★ **Monitoring progress to evaluate the effectiveness of an intervention -** The school engages in ongoing monitoring of the impact of tiered interventions and adjusts school's structures and resources (e.g., time, staff, schedules) to provide interventions to students throughout the year.

Below are additional samples of what this may look like in practice.

★ **Data Culture and Competency -** A culture exists that supports the use of data not solely for accountability purposes, but to drive instructional decisions and identify and address inequities. Staff can articulate the value of using aggregated and disaggregated data to support all students and professional development time is dedicated to help staff learn how to use data to drive instruction and monitor interventions. Data is used to assess systems in the district and schools that may be impacting equity and outcomes for all students. For example, regular equity audits are conducted at the school and district levels to identify where students are disproportionately impacted by policies, practices, and/or instruction.

★ **District and School Data Systems -** District and school-level data systems are used to track student performance over time. These data systems are used to provide regular performance feedback to school teams, coaches, and individual staff for problem solving, professional development, and action planning. Data systems are not only inclusive of the data sets/platforms, but the meeting times and protocols needed to utilize the data effectively.

★ **Assessment Maps -** The district and schools have annual assessment maps. The assessment map includes universal screeners, diagnostic assessments, and progress monitoring tools focused on academic skill development as well as social emotional and behavioral development.

High Quality Curriculum and Instruction

Educators should not see the implementation of standards as a distinct initiative from the focus on MTSS. We must assess the resources and planning tools we use at all three tiers and review their alignment to the standards. Whether we are using grade level standards or entry and access points, planning models for all students should focus on foundational skills in collaboration with standards.

Below are samples of what this may look like in practice.

★ **Universally Designed and Culturally Sustaining Instruction -** The district has a process to review instructional methods and strategies to ensure that they are universally designed (e.g., to determine accessibility and engagement) with a lens of equitable access (e.g., materials are free of bias). In turn, teachers' pedagogy reflects the principles of UDL and is culturally sustaining.

★ **Standards Incorporated Into Tiers -** State standards are addressed across all three tiers. For example, the instructional goals and resources used at all three tiers are reviewed and assessed for their alignment to the standards (grade level, access, or entry points).

★ **High Quality Materials -** Materials across all three tiers exhibit a coherent sequence of target skills and knowledge (i.e., they are vertically and horizontally aligned), have an empirical evidence of efficacy, and include engaging content and inclusive design.

FOCUS AREAS

To optimize student success, schools must address the academic, behavioral, and social emotional needs of students through tiered support. All three areas are mutually-reinforcing and should be at the core of our MTSS work. Depending on local context and needs, many districts may choose to broaden the scope of their MTSS approach to explicitly include tiered supports for safety, physical & mental health needs, and social & family service needs. The systems and principles of the MTSS Blueprint can also be applied to those domains (or others).

Academic Support

The design of academic instruction should allow all students equitable access to grade-level standards, or entry points, in learning experiences that are engaging and personalized to meet their needs. Academic instruction integrates evidence-based practices in all content areas so students can make effective progress. Below is an excerpt from the Resource Guide to the Massachusetts *Curriculum Frameworks for Students with Disabilities* that explains the role that entry points plan in this work.

> "Students with disabilities are expected to achieve the same standards as their non-disabled peers. However, they may need to learn the necessary knowledge and skills differently, including their presentation at lower levels of complexity, in smaller segments, and at a slower pace. While the standards define the concepts, skills, and content that should be taught and learned by all students in each grade, the 2018 Resource Guide identifies "entry points" for each standard that allow educators to teach standards-based skills that encourage students to approach the grade-level standard. It is especially suited for instructing students with significant disabilities who take the MCAS Alternate Assessment (MCAS-Alt) because it aligns less complex skills and content with grade-level subject matter, and allows students to progress along a continuum as they approach grade-level complexity (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2018)."

Students need to be actively involved in the learning process using evidence-based curriculum and pedagogical strategies to foster engagement. For example, the principles of UDL remind educators to provide options and choices for students to set goals for their improvement as they work toward standards, choose the appropriate level of challenge by selecting the methods and materials that will increase motivation, select the scaffolds and supports that best meet their learning needs, and minimize threats and distractions in the classroom so all students can work collaboratively on their personalized learning plans with support from the teacher. When implementing the principles of UDL, all students have opportunities to engage in rigorous academic work, as this access is a primary predictor of student achievement (Council of the Great City Schools, 2012).
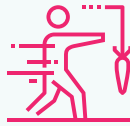
Case in Point: Academic Support

In many classrooms, teachers design a "one-size-fits-all" academic curriculum for learners. For example, when designing instruction, many teachers expect students to read printed text like novels, primary source documents, and/or textbooks to learn content and then answer questions about the content using textual evidence in predictable formats, like the five-paragraph essay.

Printed materials result in barriers for some students, who may not be able to access the text because they cannot decode at that level, have visual impairments, or are English learners.

In a universally designed high school classroom, students may have options about which texts to read, or they may be encouraged to choose a novel based on interest, that is relevant, authentic, and meaningful as they work to meet the standard.

If reading the same text, students may have the option to read the hard copy or access the text online, where they can customize the display of information, listen to the audio version, translate the document into their first language and/or collaborate with peers to highlight important information and summarize sections to build comprehension.

When expressing their understanding of the text, teachers may ask questions at different depths of knowledge and encourage students to answer in writing in a traditional constructed response, or using dictation software, through a short presentation, in an infographic, or through video or audio mediums.

As they are working, students may have access to multiple materials such as exemplars, sentence stems, graphic organizers, highlighters, peer-editing, and writing conferences with the teacher.

When students have options and choices to access texts and express what they have learned in more flexible ways, they can be educated together in an inclusive classroom, regardless of variability.

> When students have options and choices to access texts and express what they have learned in more flexible ways, they can be educated together in an inclusive classroom, regardless of variability.
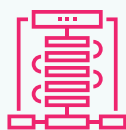
Behavioral Support

Educators expect to teach academic skills, but when it comes to behavior, often the response is a simple set of rules that students are expected to follow and a series of negative consequences if they fail to do so. However, in schools implementing MTSS, educators understand that behavior, like academics, is learned. As a result, those skills must be explicitly taught, modeled, and positively reinforced and students must be given ample feedback and opportunities for practice.

Tiered behavioral systems use primary, secondary, and tertiary levels of support to provide a proactive and preventative approach to behavior for all students. The use of a multi-tiered model provides students with supports built into daily routines where staff and students review expected behavior, and teach that behavior across the school building. In addition, consistent school-wide systems are in place to support frequent methods to provide both positive and corrective feedback to students. It is important that data is incorporated to both identify needs across these tiers, as well as provide feedback on the on-going effectiveness of various individual, classroom, and school-level efforts. Because it is systematic and comprehensive, tiered behavioral systems allow schools to implement screening to identify students who may be at risk, and provide increasingly intensive support for those who need it (Menzies & Lane, 2011).

Behavioral approaches should support all students, and school teams should work with families and the community to determine how to contextualize support so that it is reflective of the values and norms of the community in which the school is located. Similarly, data should be reviewed regularly to examine how behavioral systems and supports differentially impact specific student groups (e.g., disaggregated by race, ethnicity, gender, disability, etc.).

Effective classroom management and positive behavior supports are essential for supporting teaching and learning. Schools can maximize success for all students when they: a) develop tiered behavioral systems that are data-driven and responsive to student needs, b) emphasize that classroom management and positive behavioral supports must be integrated and aligned with effective academic instruction, and c) establish a positive, safe, and supportive school climate that is culturally sustaining.

Case in Point: Behavioral Support

A middle school worked with staff and students to develop the core values of P.R.I.D.E. (Patience, Respect, Integrity, Determination, and Excellence). Visuals are placed on the walls and video monitors in hallways, classrooms, the cafeteria, and media center, reminding students and families about expected behaviors in all school settings.

All the faculty and staff in the school setting have received training about adult expectations and receive ongoing in-service training specific to universal screening, progress monitoring, and effective, inclusive classroom management techniques.

School staff have worked with families to identify what P.R.I.D.E. looks like at home and the community. They have identified engaging positively in the community, sharing successes and challenges, making healthy choices, and leading by example as guiding principles. This is reviewed with all interactions between school and family members.

> Students are reminded about expected behaviors in all school settings.

Occasionally students require greater support, and additional interventions have been identified at the secondary level. Two interventions are commonly utilized at this level, including mini social skills lessons and Check-in Check-out (CICO). The latter, CICO, is a standardized intervention whereby students receive more frequent reminders and review of expected behavior, as well as increased formalized feedback throughout the day.

Social Emotional Development

For a growing number of schools and districts, social emotional learning (SEL) is recognized as a critical dimension to support student success. SEL is the process through which students acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.

Self-awareness

When students receive social emotional supports that are aligned with academic and behavioral efforts, they fare better on many indicators including academic achievement metrics, positive social behaviors and attitudes, skills such as self-regulation and teamwork, and graduation rates. They also have fewer conduct problems, less emotional distress, and lower drug use, among many other benefits.
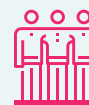
Self-management

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines the key SEL competencies as:

★ Self-awareness
★ Self-management
★ Responsible decision making
★ Relationship skills
★ Social awareness

Responsible decision making

Relationship skills

DESE's Guidance

Developing students' social emotional competencies can provide an opportunity to develop a sense of positive self-worth in connection to a student's race, color, sex, gender identity, religion, national origin, and sexual orientation. Educators should develop examples and illustrations of these competencies that are congruent with the social and cultural experiences of their students. SEL instruction that is not culturally responsive can risk becoming a source of acculturative stress for students who are not members of the dominant group.

Social awareness

SEL needs to be embedded in school and district strategic plans, staffing, professional learning, and budgets. It must guide curriculum choices and classroom instruction — both direct practice in SEL as well as integrated instruction with reading, math, history, and other subjects and enrichment opportunities. It drives schoolwide practices and policies and supports how adults and students relate with each other at all levels of the system, creating a welcoming, participatory, and caring climate for learning. Integrating SEL into an effective multi-tiered system shapes partnerships with families and community members, highlighting engagement, trust, and collaboration.

Case in Point: Social Emotional Support

In a middle school, social & emotional learning is integrated into all educational priorities at the classroom and school levels. The school-wide SEL focus for the quarter includes building self-awareness and relationship management skills. Before the quarter started, teachers were given professional development to support the integration of these competencies into their lesson plans. At weekly common planning meetings, teachers are asked to reflect on their capacity to incorporate these strategies and given support to improve their practice.

At the tier 1 level, in a 7th grade science classroom, students are working on a group lab experiment. To foster self-awareness, before beginning the experiment students are asked to reflect individually and engage in small group discussions about how they might react if the experiment goes well or poorly. Students then reflect on those reactions after the experiment. Students are also asked to set group norms around how they will work together and collaborate on the experiment. At the end, students reflect on their group's dynamics, how well they followed their norms, and how they might improve their collaboration in the future.

In the cafeteria, students and staff write "Conversation Starter" cards to help foster communication and deeper relationships at lunch. These are replicated for the teacher's lunch room as well.

At their bi-weekly data team meeting, the eighth grade team noted that five students were struggling to form meaningful relationships with peers. The team created a plan to check-in individually with each student to unpack their perception about the context and contributing factors of the situation. Ultimately the team, with input from these students, established an opportunity for them to meet weekly as a small group to focus on relationship building with the guidance counselor.

> Social & emotional learning is integrated into all school priorities.

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