# Providing Mental Health Services within a Multi-Tiered System of Supports

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Supporting children's mental health is critical to their success in school and life. Mental health services for children and youth are most effective when provided as a continuum of care that integrates schools, families, and communities. This continuum of care is most commonly known as a *multi-tiered system of supports* (MTSS). School-based and community-based providers bring specific expertise and levels of service to the process, and MTSS keeps the focus on meeting student needs within the right settings, with the right services, and with the best qualified personnel. The MTSS framework encompasses prevention and wellness promotion, universal screening for academic and behavioral barriers to learning, implementing evidence-based interventions that increase in intensity as needed, monitoring the ongoing progress of students in response to implemented interventions, and engaging in systematic decision making about programming and services needed for students based upon specific student outcome data.

School mental health professionals can be effective advocates for moving toward an MTSS approach for school-based mental health services at the systems level. Knowing and being able to articulate the benefits of MTSS and the steps toward implementation is critical to such advocacy.

## BENEFITS OF AN MTSS FRAMEWORK FOR SCHOOL MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

**Multi- tiered systems of support that include prevention and intervention services improve behavior.** Teachers frequently cite student behavior as a barrier to effective instruction. Among teachers who leave the profession, a significant percentage cites student discipline problems (Ingersoll, 2001) as a reason for their dissatisfaction and decision to leave. Positive behavioral interventions and supports is one example of an evidence-based multi-tiered system of support in which students have access to a wide range of behavioral and mental health interventions by highly trained school-employed and community-based personnel. This type of whole-school intervention has been shown to decrease behavior problems while improving academic success (Luiselli, Putnam, Handler, M. W., & Feinberg, 2005; Nelson, Martella, & Marchand-Martella, 2002). When students are engaged and demonstrating appropriate behavior, teachers are able to focus on what they do best, which is to provide high quality and rigorous instruction to students.

**Multi-tiered systems of support improve access to needed services and resources.** Comprehensive and collaborative mental health services within an MTSS model involves collaborating with a variety of professionals, including community-based professionals. Although schools do have a responsibility to address mental health concerns that impede a student's ability to learn, there may be circumstances in which a continuum of supports are necessary that include both school-based services and services within the community. Sometimes these services are co-located within the school. Sometimes they are located at community mental health agencies or other community settings. In either case, in an MTSS model, these services are collaborative and involve active coordination between school- and community-employed professionals. Implementing MTSS in the school increases student access to school-based services, and provides an avenue for identification of available resources in the community. Coordination of these services and resources can address additional needs of students and families and help them be successful in all aspects of their lives.

**Multi-tiered systems of support improved engagement and collaboration.** The very nature of MTSS encourages collaboration among the home, school, and community. In fact, many models mentioned in this chapter emphasize the role of the community in determining specific services needed at each individual school.

MTSS improves collaboration among staff members in the school and with parents. One key component of a response-to-intervention (RTI) framework is creating partnerships between the school and family. Research indicates that family–school partnerships positively impact children's school success (Christenson, 2004) and that school–based behavioral consultation helps to remediate both behavioral and academic difficulties for children (MacLeod, Jones, Somer, & Harvey, 2001).

One of the best ways to attain buy-in for a new initiative or for changes in existing programs is to seek input from all those who will be effected by the change. MTSS is not driven by one person's opinion about what may work. All teachers, administrators, specialized instructional support personnel, and other staff are involved in identifying students who may need extra support, collaborating with parents to determine the most appropriate interventions, and monitoring the progress of the

intervention. Utilizing this framework helps to make sure everyone's voice is heard and ultimately results in better outcomes for all students.

**Service delivery within a multi-tiered system of supports increases student engagement and improves achievement.** The ultimate goal of building principals and district superintendents is to maximize achievement so that students can achieve scholastic and career goals. Comprehensive school-based mental health programs provide a wide range of prevention and intervention services that are based on student need and that address students' behavioral, emotional, mental, and social functioning. Rigorous instruction and effective leadership contribute to student achievement; however, students who receive social–emotional support and prevention services achieve better academic outcomes (Greenberg et al., 2003). These types of whole-school interventions, delivered within an RTI framework, have also been shown to improve school climate. Improving school climate and student engagement and connectedness is associated with increased achievement in reading, writing, and math (Spier, Cai, & Osher, 2007).

## TIPS FOR BUILDING AN MTSS MODEL

Understanding the benefits of an MTSS model is only valuable when the model is adopted and implemented in reality. There are several important steps for advocates of this model to consider in the quest for its adoption.

1. **Convene an MTSS Community of Practice (COP) with a shared commitment of working toward the implementation of a comprehensive and coordinated system of learning supports.** Given the complexity of relationships involved in developing effective partnerships across complex systems (schools and communities), it is necessary to utilize a model for working together that can bring together a variety of stakeholders on a level playing field. Based on the work of Wenger (2006), a community of practice brings together a group of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and, through their interactions with one another, learn how to do it better. A key feature of establishing the COP is engaging a broad base of stakeholders impacted by this work and empowering them as collaborative decision makers.

2. **Assess existing needs, resources, and conduct a gap analysis.** The COP will examine the existing needs and resources in the system and then analyze these data to determine where needs are not matched by available resources.

3. **Determine the infrastructure goals, objectives, and desired outcomes.** After studying the assessment and analysis, the COP can set a shared mission, vision, and goals to drive their work. These goals should speak to the current and needed investments of the systems and what it will take in order to achieve the desired outcomes.

4. **Determine strategies for effective collaboration.** One critical feature of an effective MTSS system is that the services and supports are truly collaborative and coordinated. These services should include investing in the school's infrastructure while also supplementing the existing resources and services available in the schools. Open communication, active coordination, shared decision making, and shared accountability are all critical elements to effective collaboration.

5. **Implement comprehensive and coordinated services and supports.** Most systems adopting an MTSS approach will benefit from having written agreements (Memorandums of Understanding/MOU) that will guide the collaborative work. These MOUs could include agreements related to a variety of issues including finances, settings, services, roles, and responsibilities.

6. **Monitor progress and evaluate system strengths and needs. Revise and reevaluate as warranted.** An effective MTSS system will include regular monitoring of student and program outcome data and analyses focused on continual improvement. This process will be ongoing and adopted within the operations of the COP as normal part of interacting.

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