

Leveraging MTSS to Ensure Equitable Outcomes

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A Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) is a preventive, data-based framework for improving the academic, social, and behavior outcomes for all students. Through this framework, schools create a continuum of supports using evidence-based instruction and interventions. This data-based approach allows schools to create a system that supports students before they falter and prevent the negative outcomes of schooling, which has become predictable for many student groups. Students of color, students from low-income families, English learners, and students with disabilities consistently have lower academic performance, higher dropout rates, poor behavior and social outcomes such as suspensions and expulsions, delinquency, and lower rates of employment. Today, 55% of students are culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD); however, these students consistently have the lowest academic, social, and behavioral outcomes (Office of Special Education Programs, 2021). Today, as the student population becomes more diverse, a student's race remains a significant predictor of academic outcomes, even when controlling for poverty (Anyon et al., 2014; Hopson & Lee, 2011). The disproportionate representation of CLD students in special education is a long-standing issue that has been discussed in special education literature for more than 30 years (Artiles et al., 2004; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Dunn, 1968; Klinger et al., 2005). In addition, higher suspension and expulsion rates, lower graduation rates of CLD students are reflected in the current graduation gap between White and minority students. In 2018–19, the graduation rate for public high school students was 86 % overall, however this was much lower for Black (80%), Native American (74%) and Hispanic students (82%) compared to white students (89%; Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2021).

MTSS is a prime opportunity for schools to intentionally create a system that eliminates barriers and produces positive outcomes. MTSS has the potential to address these long-standing issues and build a new path forward given the flexibility inherent in the framework. MTSS incorporates foundational practices for addressing equity in education through data-based decision making and evidence-based tiered supports to address and prevent academic and behavioral challenges.



How Can MTSS Address Equity?

Many researchers recommend the implementation of MTSS to address issues of disproportionate and inequitable outcomes among students (Cartledge et al., 2016; Castro-Villareal et al., 2016; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Harry & Klingner, 2006; Losen & Orfield, 2002). As shown in Figure 1, MTSS has the components necessary to address disproportionality (Hosp & Madyun, 2007) however these need to be implemented with intention and include features that are likely to produce positive outcomes for all students, particularly culturally and linguistically diverse students. The components of MTSS make it a viable approach to address inequitable outcomes for the following reasons:

- *MTSS includes culturally responsive assessments and instruction.*

Research has shown that culturally responsive teaching can bridge the gap between teachers and CLD students that can play a role in learning (Delpit, 1995; Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Pollock, 2004). Orosco and Klingner (2010) specifically reported on the benefits of intense, well-developed interventions for reading gains among English learners. The Center on MTSS encourages the use of culturally responsive assessments and instruction across the tiers (Brown et al., 2017).

- *MTSS promotes early intervention.* In their review of literature on MTSS to address disproportionality, Cartledge et al. (2016) found three of the 10 articles specifically noted the positive impact of early intervention for African American students. Given the poor outcomes typically associated with CLD students who show risk, this is promising.

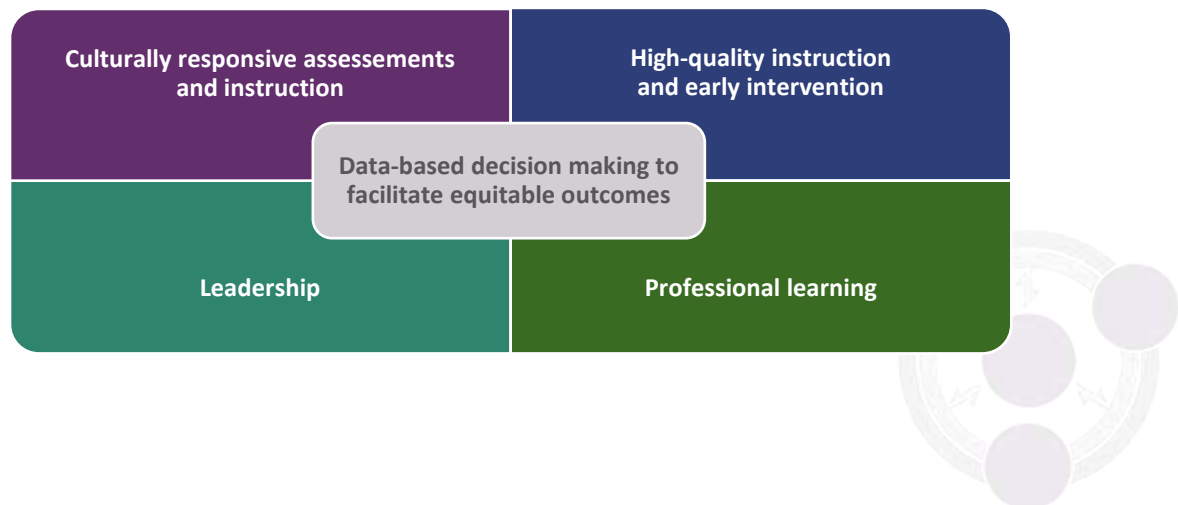
State Example: Massachusetts



In their blueprint for MTSS (2018), Massachusetts explained its foundational framework focus, definition of tiered support, and system drivers for implementation. As shown in this graphic, equitable access is a foundational focus of MTSS in the state. In this framework, teachers provide access to all students regardless of race, class, language, or ability and use culturally sustaining pedagogy. For more information, see <https://www.doe.mass.edu/sfss/mtss/>.

- *Within MTSS, decisions are data based.* MTSS is driven by a collaborative data-based decision-making process and focused on outcomes. Too often, eligibility for special education and access to higher level courses are based on subjective decisions. With a focus on data, educators can make objective instructional decisions that result in positive student outcomes (Center on Response to Intervention, 2014; Kressler et al., 2020).
- *MTSS has a strong emphasis on high-quality instruction.* Research on educational equity posits that there is differential access to quality instruction between students in high- and low-income areas (Goldhaber et al., 2019). There also are historical and structural factors, such as a lack of available resources and opportunities to access rigorous instruction that either hinder or facilitate positive student outcomes (Carter, 2013; Darling-Hammond, 2004).
- *Team-based decision making and strong leadership are core drivers of the work.* A foundational principle of MTSS is the notion that MTSS leadership teams can use data to identify and eliminate many barriers that students face in school. MTSS teams that include administrators, teachers, parents, and other stakeholders can change the processes and procedures that result in educational inequities and hinder student learning. However, MTSS teams must be committed to producing more equitable outcomes and implementing MTSS with fidelity.
- *Professional development helps teachers examine bias and learn ways to use culturally sustaining instruction and assessment.* Becoming a culturally competent educator is a journey in personal and professional reflection and learning and building new skills. Within the MTSS framework, professional learning is a key element. Teachers and leaders continuously build their knowledge and skills to effectively implement MTSS in a culturally sustaining way that eliminates systemic and linguistic barriers to learning for all students (Brown et al., 2017; Freeman-Green et al., 2021).

Figure 1. Components of MTSS That Facilitate Equitable Outcomes



A Systemic Approach

MTSS is a systemic approach to addressing student needs. Given the long-standing nature of inequitable outcomes, a systemic approach gets at the practices, policies, and procedures that produce unequal outcomes. **Many strategies have been put forth to address inequity in education but without success.** To address inequity, we must take a systemic approach. MTSS is a systemic approach to addressing the needs of all students. Education inequity must be viewed and understood with the historical backdrop of segregation and long-standing policies that upheld unfair treatment of students of color and students with disabilities. Given this history, the outcomes currently produced in schools are largely the result of inequitable systems that have been in place for many years. Addressing equity should be the overarching goal of systemic change done in collaboration with existing frameworks, such as MTSS (Sullivan et al., 2015).

State Example: Minnesota Is Making Systemic Changes

In 2021, the Minnesota Department of Education published [Ten Minnesota Commitments to Equity](#) and opened a new equity, diversity, and inclusion center to address long-standing disparities between White students and Black and Native American students in the state. Through this center, Minnesota plans to help schools address bias and provide training and mentoring for schools. The state also recently passed a policy to address achievement gaps in the state. For more information, see [SF 446 Status in the Senate for the 92nd Legislature \(2021–2022\)](#) and [HF 217](#).

Data-Driven Decisions and Tiers of Support Provide Opportunities for Change

Data-Based Decision Making With a Focus on Equitable Outcomes

Too often, MTSS teams make decisions about supports for students based on convenience or tradition, thinking “this is the way we’ve always done it.” This mindset and practice holds patterns of underachievement for certain student groups constant often unintentionally. Another common misstep is making decisions based on student-level, rather than system-level, needs. This misstep creates an opportunity to “blame” students for their lack of performance because of characteristics perceived as inherent deficits to the learner, rather than the system’s inability to support all learners from the start. We must do our due diligence from the onset to prevent and address inequities caused by inattention to systemic changes needed. Data-based decision making also offers an opportunity for schools to create changes to the system—resource allocation, service delivery, curriculum, and other programming factors—based on student data and school needs. The data-based decision making process is where schools can create an equitable and culturally responsive system.

The following example demonstrates the difference between ineffective and effective data-based decision making toward equitable outcomes:

After examining schoolwide office discipline referrals, a school team recognized that most of the student referrals were for students with disabilities (specifically emotional disturbance and other health impairment) and Hispanic students. The majority of the referrals were for “insubordination” or “noncompliance with adult requests.”



Ineffective:

The team decided two next steps.

First, the team will follow up with the special education department about the students with individualized education programs to notify them of the issue. Second, the team will have a security guard who is a person of color meet with the Hispanic students with multiple referrals to discuss their behavior.



Effective: The team decided to convene a stakeholder meeting with educators, community and family members, and students (Bal et al., 2016). At this meeting, the team shared that their role is to listen to the school community to inform needed improvements. The team shared the data and asked the stakeholders to write down their thoughts on sticky notes or verbalize their thoughts. This information was taken back to a leadership team meeting, and the leaders decided on three next steps. First, they will have all staff participate in professional development focused on understanding implicit and explicit bias in relationship to how they view behavior and social and emotional learning (SEL) competencies. Second, they will operationalize their definitions of insubordination and noncompliance to include examples and nonexamples to reduce referrals for minor infractions that are likely resulting from educator bias. Third, they will conduct a series of classroom walkthroughs to ensure that effective instructional practices are in place to engage students in active learning and follow up with all staff at a faculty meeting with areas of strength and improvement related to instructional engagement.

This example demonstrates one way in which educational teams can **support equity through data-based decision making** by ensuring that families are partners and intentionally analyzing data gaps between student groups. Families and caregivers are children’s first teachers and bring deep expertise about their development, experiences, culture, and learning needs. These insights and perspectives are critical to informing, supporting, and sustaining SEL efforts. This is just one example of how to use data-based decision making to address inequity; however, engaging in work to recognize and address bias, using tools that are culturally sensitive, and having a strengths-based approach also are important within MTSS decision making.

Tiers of Support Integrate Culturally Sustaining Instruction and Transformative SEL

The tiers of support provide an opportunity for educators to employ culturally sustaining instructional practices at all tiers. [Culturally relevant instruction](#) (currently referred to as culturally sustaining) and transformative SEL should be integrated into instruction across the tiers of support. When educators’ pedagogy is from the perspective of transformative SEL, instruction can be validating and empowering for students.

State Example: Hawaii’s Multi-Tiered System of Support

Hawaii’s MTSS centers equity and access and focuses on system structures. Hawaii’s framework rests on the foundational principle of equity and access and centers on the rich cultural and linguistic diversity of Hawaii. For more information, see [SEAC HMTSS Slide Deck 12.13.19](#).

Jagers and the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (Jagers et al., 2019) stated that to dismantle the systemic inequities in education, we must acknowledge and “seek to effectively address issues of power, discrimination, prejudice, social justice, empowerment and self-determination” (p. 163).

Want to Know More?


The Learning Policy Institute series titled [Design Principles for Schools: Putting the Science of Learning and Development Into Action](#) (2021) names integrated support systems as a key principle. In this principle, the authors explain the risks created by discrimination and inequality and discuss ways to integrate culturally sustaining principles into a comprehensive tiered support system.


For more information, see https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/SoLD_Design_Principles_Principle_5_Integrated_Supports.pdf.

In their brief titled *States Leading for Equity: Promising Practices Advancing the Equity Commitments*, Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO, 2021) defined educational equity to mean that “every student has access to the educational resources and rigor they need at the right moment in their education across race, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, sexual orientation, family background and/ or family income” (p. 3). Transformative SEL places this objective at the forefront. It aims to foster more equitable learning environments and produce equitable outcomes for all students. This includes examining biases and practices plus eliminating and doing away with old systems and procedures; instead, the goal is to build new mindsets, practices, and environments for students and communities. In addition, this self-awareness requires teachers to identify when they need additional or different tools to connect with and understand students. For more information on transformative SEL, see Jagers et al. (2019), Jagers et al. (in press), and the website of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning for SEL and equity webinars.

The following is an example of effective and ineffective instruction within the tiers of support:

A fourth-grade intervention teacher is providing a reading intervention using a research-based program. However, when she goes to work with CLD students, they are reluctant to come to her room for fear of their peers judging them, so when they are in the intervention they are not engaged in learning.

 **Ineffective:** The teacher begins administering office discipline referrals for students who do not willingly come or do not actively participate in the intervention. This process is what she has always done because she finds it unacceptable for students to refuse to do their work. She also believes that these students need more discipline, which is part of the reason why they are in her intervention.

 **Effective:** The interventionist finds a time when she can talk with each student and better understand their background and reasons for being reluctant. She hosts “lunch bunches,” where students are able to talk with her and build a positive relationship with her and others in the intervention group. The teacher finds out that students are experiencing bullying and racial teasing from other students for being in the group. In addition, she finds out that many students have experienced reading difficulty for years. She begins to plan how she can integrate positive and affirming words into her instruction, instead of punishment. She also changes how students come to her class and allows them to self-advocate and come without her help so that they feel empowered to get the help they need.

Conclusion

Addressing educational equity is not as simple as developing a new policy or implementing new evidence-based practices. Leaders and education professionals must have a cultural-historical perspective, acknowledging and understanding the systems, structures, policies, and practices in place that uphold oppression and discrimination of marginalized groups. The U.S. education system has been built on a long history of racialized oppression and discrimination that inevitably has remnants that live on today (Jagers et al., 2019). The common systems, structures, policies, and practices result in consistently inequitable outcomes for certain groups of students. To address inequity in education, leaders must intentionally attend to biases, practices, and systems.

MTSS provides the opportunity for educators to increase connectedness and student belonging through positive student–teacher relationships built on teachers being self-aware of their biases, culture, and identity that they bring to school. Through the tiers of support, schools create an environment where students are encouraged to bring their full selves—including their cultural, linguistic, and sociopolitical background to schools. With equity at the forefront, schools can become spaces that cultivate strength and brilliance in all students, value diversity, and teach all students the skills needed to understand and appreciate others. Through intentional equity-focused implementation of MTSS, schools can facilitate learning in an environment where students feel safe, valued, and seen.



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