Lessons Learned Through a Statewide Implementation of a Multi-Tiered System of Support

by Steve Goodman

A Statewide Initiative

The implementation of a Multi-tiered System of Support (MTSS) has a long and successful history in Michigan. Initial support for MTSS began in 2000 through a U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs model demonstration grant. In 2003, Michigan's Office of Special Education created a statewide initiative to promote the implementation of MTSS. This state project, Michigan's Integrated Behavior and Learning Support Initiative (MIBLSI), provides intensive technical assistance for the development of local capacity for an integrated MTSS focused on improving behavior and reading. Thus, MTSS has become sustainable and scalable (Ervin, Schaughency, Goodman, McGlinchey, & Matthews, 2006; McGlinchey, & Goodman, 2008; Russell & Harms, 2016).

The Michigan initiative increased the fidelity of MTSS implementation with corresponding student-level improvement in reading and behavior (Russell & Harms, 2016) through effective personnel development (Nantais, St. Martin, & Barnes, 2015) and effective technical assistance (Morrison, Russell, Dyer, Metcalf, & Rahschulte, 2014). In its first year, the initiative worked directly with 22 schools. Over time, the project has supported MTSS implementation in more than 800 schools in 260 districts across the state. Through this initiative, we have learned five key lessons from the scaling up of MTSS. These lessons are presented below.

Lesson 1: Clearly Define MTSS

It is important to carefully define MTSS so educators can determine if they are implementing MTSS correctly. Without fidelity of implementation, students will not fully experience the benefits of an MTSS approach. A clear definition of the critical features of MTSS is also necessary to determine adequate state and district coordination and resources to both schools and districts. Clarity in defining MTSS improves communication on implementation efforts to relevant stakeholders. Ambiguous or vague conceptualization of MTSS leads to problems in evaluation and associated action plans. We want to be sure that those who implement MTSS know what it is and how to do it.

Michigan's Integrated Behavior and Learning Support Initiative defines MTSS as a framework for schools and districts to organize resources to support educators in the implementation of effective practices with fidelity so all students succeed academically and behaviorally. Core features of MTSS include: 1) interventions selected based on confidence for effectiveness, 2) interventions that are organized along a tiered continuum with an emphasis on prevention and intensifying support matched to student need, 3) collection of student performance data to drive improvement, 4) data-based decision making and problem solving, and 5) emphasis on assessing and ensuring implementation integrity.

To sufficiently define the critical features of MTSS, we conducted a review of the research literature. Additionally, we reviewed definitions of MTSS from other states and districts. Results from the review were incorporated into practice profiles (Metz, 2016). Practice profiles operationally define expected implementation actions and unacceptable variations. For example, a critical feature of MTSS is the utilization of interventions that are organized along a tiered continuum with focus on strong core, intensifying support matched to student need. An unacceptable variation would include a "one-size-fits-all" approach to curriculum or providing instruction that is not linked to specific skill deficits of students.

The MTSS model espoused by the initiative focuses on the integration of positive behavioral interventions and supports (Sugai & Horner, 2009) and a multi-tiered reading approach (Gersten et al., 2008). The initiative integrates both reading and behavior supports into a multi-tiered framework because both are critical for school success and both share critical features of data-based decision making. Multi-tiered approaches to behavior and reading utilize data for screening, progress monitoring, formative assessment, and for diagnostic/functional assessment purposes. Teams act on these data sources to improve educational effectiveness. Reading and behavior MTSS are based on a tiered prevention model. Additionally, both incorporate a team approach at the school level, grade level, and individual student level. The district level team provides guidance and content expertise to support school level implementation.

There is an interdependent relationship between effective behavior supports and effective instruction. Quality instruction can reduce student engagement in problem behaviors (Filter & Horner, 2009; Sanford & Horner, 2013). Implementation of schoolwide positive behavior support leads to increased academic time and enhanced academic outcomes (Algozzine & Algozzine, 2007; Lassen, Steele, & Sailor, 2006). Students are sometimes excluded from instruction due to interfering problem behaviors, limiting the effects of quality instruction. Students who fall behind academically are more likely to find academic work aversive and will try to avoid academic tasks (McIntosh, Sadler, & Brown, 2012). We have found that students with the most significant and persistent difficulties in reading may have a greater need to integrate reading and behavior in a unified system of supports.

Abbreviations

MIBLSI: Michigan's Integrated Behavior and Learning Support Initiative

MTSS: Multi-tiered System of Support

Lesson 2: Use Data and Focus on Outcomes to Ensure Fidelity

It is important to direct project efforts towards meaningful student impact by improving fidelity of MTSS implementation for educators. We have all seen projects that have not resulted in the desired effects because there was not a logical and measureable theory of action to connecting project activities directly to student results. An emphasis on producing outcomes moves us to increase our precision in adjusting project activities to enhance student success. By focusing on results, we increase our confidence that we add value through the project. Demonstrating meaningful outcomes for students increases our likelihood for political and financial support.

Key to a focus on outcomes is the establishment of an effective evaluation system. Evaluation helps us to be a self-modifying system, perfecting MTSS over time. A comprehensive evaluation approach also makes it easier for us to share our successes with key stakeholders to make sure they see how our work adds value. At the student level, we need specific protocols for linking assessment to intervention, especially when emphasizing supports for students with significant and pervasive needs. This requires the use of integrated diagnostic reading assessment and functional behavior assessment.

Michigan's Integrated Behavior and Learning Support Initiative has carefully selected valid and efficient assessments for measuring student outcomes, district capacity, reading and behavior support fidelity, and perception of effectiveness (from teachers, students, and family members). Implementation teams are trained on how to correctly administer the assessment and use the information for data-based decision making. Data analysis links the assessment results to an action plan. We also provide tools for easy collection and use of data. The project has invested in an online database where capacity, fidelity, and student outcomes data are stored in one location. Teams review dashboard charts at school, district, or regional level or print reports to help in action planning. A few assessments used in the project include: District Capacity Assessment, Reading (Ward et al., 2015). Reading Tiered Fidelity Inventory (St. Martin, Nantais, Harms, & Huth, 2015), DIBELS Next (dibels.org), and Early Warning Indicators (earlywarningsystems.org) to help identify students in grades 5-12 who are at risk for dropping out. This comprehensive evaluation system helps us to better determine if we are doing the right things and if we are doing these things in the right way.

Lesson 3: Scale Up Strategically

Simply adding more and more schools does not guarantee an effective scale up of MTSS efforts. Strategic scaling from 20 to 200 sites requires a different approach. Effective scale up of an MTSS framework necessitates a strategic and systematic process (see Figure 1). This process begins with model demonstrations, followed by replication sites and then full scale-up to additional sites using existing resources and funding.

Model demonstrations are pilot sites supported by considerable investments in resources and technical assistance to demonstrate successful results. Project activities that support model demonstrations focus on determining if the model is feasible and usable while producing valued outcomes. The project initially provided coaching and training supports as well as

stipends (for materials and staff time) to offset MTSS implementation costs. Significant technical assistance is necessary when implementing a new initiative because of the necessity to acquire new learning and to change current practice. Model demonstrations provide the opportunity to learn how to implement MTSS effectively while managing risks on a small scale. Part of this learning is how to set up standard procedures that can be contextualized, given the unique educational settings. We usually implement model demonstrations in settings with educators who are most willing to participate. This helps us to "try things out" with willing and motivated school partners.
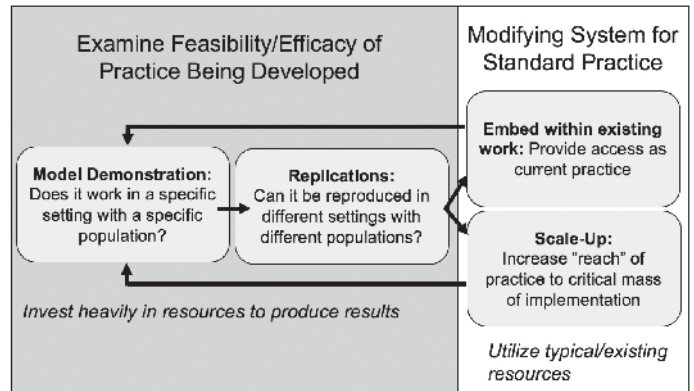

Figure 1. Moving from Model Demonstration to Standard Practice

After it has been demonstrated that MTSS can be successfully implemented with the model sites, we replicate the MTSS approach in other settings. This takes place by adding sites in different locations with different school configurations and different populations. Learning and implementation revisions from the initial model demonstrations are applied to the replication sites. We work towards continuous learning and improvement through the iterative process. With each new implementation, we strive to understand barriers to implementation, work to overcome the challenges, and provide supports to make MTSS implementation more efficient and effective.

Ultimately, we need to implement MTSS in typical settings with typical resources. This involves the development of local implementation supports for the general conditions found in schools and districts. As the model is further improved through several implementation iterations, what works and what doesn't becomes clear. We learn not only what components of the practices are effective but also how to effectively support implementation with fidelity. The mature model is then used in scale-up efforts. In the scale-up phase, we expand the number of implementation sites while utilizing the existing resources that commonly occur within these settings.

As we scale our efforts, we rely on districts to develop training, coaching, and technical expertise in reading and behavior and evaluation supports. For smaller districts with limited resources, we have relied on services provided through Intermediate School Districts (the intermediary unit between the state and local districts). We collaborate with these intermediate units to provide training, coaching, and technical expertise in reading, behavior, and evaluation supports. As we scale up, participating schools and districts no longer receive stipends for MTSS implementation.

Lesson 4: Invest in Local Implementation Capacity

To scale up statewide technical assistance with limited resources, the initiative needed to utilize existing local educational structures and systems to support implementation of MTSS. Local capacity encompasses key features that drive implementation of practices with fidelity, durability and scalability (Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005). The drivers include: 1) competency of educators to implement MTSS, 2) leadership to guide implementation, and 3) hospitable organizational environments that promote fidelity.

Local implementation capacity is dependent on the interconnected system of district and schools in supporting MTSS. Figure 2 illustrates this interconnection. District leadership teams provide visibility and political support for the initiative, systems alignment, allocation of resources, and means to overcome barriers to implementation. The district also provides implementation supports through training, coaching, and technical assistance.

The school is where the true implementation of MTSS takes place. A school leadership team manages the process and distributes resources. Implementation of the MTSS practice of working with students through a tiered approach to instruction and supports is provided by educators at the school level.
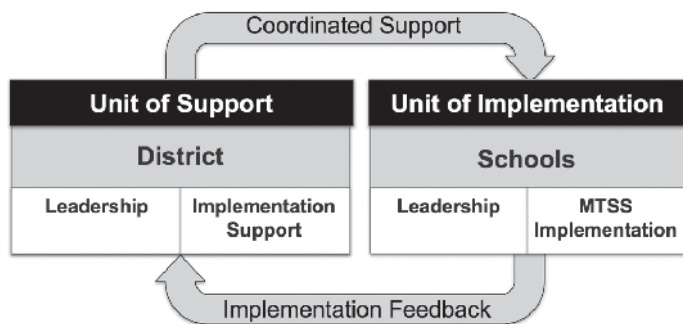

Figure 2. Coordinated Implementation and Supports in Districts and Schools

A leadership team is key to MTSS planning, implementation and improvement at the school and district levels. A leadership team helps to implement and sustain the practices and organizational systems needed to ensure teacher effectiveness, MTSS fidelity, and positive outcomes. We have found that you cannot scale up MTSS unless implementation sites continue with the framework, despite change in leadership and other personnel. A lack of sustainability results in time-consuming efforts to start over. Local capacity provides the supports needed to sustain and expand MTSS implementation within the district or region. Additionally, developing local leadership and responsibility for MTSS ensures appropriate allocation of resources and allows districts to address policy and practice barriers at a level not possible by the state.

A district-level MTSS approach has many advantages over a school-based approach (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). Schools can only go so far without district supports. The district provides standardization of implementation supports with considerations of the contextual needs of schools. Schools access professional development and technical assistance from the district. The district administration establishes priorities for accountability and allocating appropriate implementation resources. Additionally, a district can facilitate schools through various stages of implementation from adoption to full implementation (Freeman, Miller, & Newcomer, 2015).

Lesson 5: Align MTSS with Key Initiatives

Aligned systems are more likely to be implemented correctly and sustained over time when implementers can see clear connections between MTSS and other mandates and requirements. Often educators feel overwhelmed with the various requirements (e.g., training, implementation activities, assessments) associated with multiple educational initiatives or they struggle with prioritizing their time and cognitive energy. We know that district initiatives serve a variety of purposes, but not all are equal in producing effective outcomes for students and their families.

Some key initiatives are required by state and federal agencies while others are adopted by districts to meet a need or provide opportunity for improving educational effectiveness. MTSS may be strategically connected to other key federal, state, and district initiatives by aligning their respective core features. Alignment builds on initiatives by leveraging funding, training, and evaluation in ways to improve MTSS implementation. It also supports efficient, effective, and sustainable practices. For example, one district that participated in the project had over 12 different reading initiatives. The district leadership team decided to eliminate several of the initiatives that were not producing desired student outcomes. In another example, a district utilized three different assessments that measured phonemic awareness. The team choose one measure and focused the recovered time to providing instruction.

Resource mapping of all initiatives taking place in the district and schools helps determine potential ways to leverage resources (National Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavior Interventions and Support, 2017). The process begins with an inventory and assessment of current initiatives, which helps align current initiatives, eliminate discretionary initiatives that don't enhance the mission and guides decisions when considering new initiatives. To assist educators to better understand how the MTSS work is connected to key state and federal priorities, we have created a document in a table format that identifies the key initiative, a brief description of the initiative, and how each initiative helps enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of the current educational system (see Table 1 for a sample imitative and value added through participation). For example, in Michigan, all schools and districts are required to develop an improvement plan. Through the project, we work to embed MTSS within the school improvement process by defining an aligned professional development and evaluation plan.

TABLE 1. Example of Key State Initiative and Value Added		
Topic	**Description**	**Value Added Through MIBLSI Project**
State Board of Education Strategic Goals to Make Michigan a Top 10 Education State in 10 Years	Seven strategic goals have been adopted by Michigan's State Board of Education with the intent of Michigan becoming a top 10 education state within 10 years.	• Supports and alignment of these supports that benefit district, school, classroom, and individual students. • Successfully use evidence-based practices in behavior and reading so every student has access to and benefits from high-quality instruction necessary for high academic and social outcomes.
Third Grade Reading Legislation (Public Act 306)	Guidelines for developing a school-wide system of support necessary for preventing and remediating reading difficulties so students can be proficient readers by the end of third grade. The components emphasize data, systems, and practices that have evidence for improving reading outcomes.	• Support to school leadership teams as they work to install the components of a school-wide reading system. Professional learning emphasizes the "five major reading components" and how to use universal screening, progress monitoring, and diagnostic reading data to adjust instructional decisions.

An Ongoing Process

Over years of supporting the implementation of MTSS, we have learned that scaling up is a process rather than a single event. It takes strategic planning and time to move from model demonstration sites to large-scale implementation. We have found that when implementation of MTSS is done correctly, there is resulting improvement in student achievement. If MTSS is not implemented with fidelity, we should not expect to see successful student outcomes. To make sure MTSS is implemented well, we need to invest in systems to support educators so that they learn to implement MTSS effectively and efficiently. We need to set the stage for students to be ready to learn and teachers to effectively teach.

Simply saying you are doing MTSS and *actually* doing it correctly are two different things. Implementation is ongoing; we always strive to get better. Because of the potential benefit of MTSS for all students, and particularly for students with disabilities, we have worked hard to scale up implementation. Effective practices are necessary for student outcomes, and systems for support are essential for teacher effectiveness. The result is effective implementation of MTSS and ultimately increased student success.

References

Algozzine, K. M., & Algozzine, B. (2007). Classroom instructional ecology and school-wide positive behavior support. *Journal of Applied School Psychology*, 24, 29–47.

Ervin, R. A., Schaughency, E., Goodman, S. D., McGlinchey, M. T., & Matthews, A. (2006). Merging research and practice agendas to address reading and behavior schoolwide. *School Psychology Review, 35*, 198–223.

Freeman, R., Miller, D., & Newcomer, L. (2015). Integration of academic and behavioral MTSS at the district level using implementation science. *Learning Disabilities: A Contemporary Journal*, 13, 59–72.

Filter, K. J., & Horner, R. H. (2009). Function-based academic interventions for problem behavior. *Education and Treatment of Children, 32*, 1–19.

Fixsen, D. L., Naoom, S. F., Blase, K. A., Friedman, R. M., & Wallace, F. (2005). *Implementation research: A synthesis of the literature*. Tampa, FL: University of South Florida, Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute, National Implementation Research Network (FMHI Publication #231).

Gersten, R., Compton, D., Connor, C. M., Dimino, J., Santoro, L., Linan-Thompson, S., & Tilly, W. D. (2008). *Assisting students struggling with reading: Response to Intervention and multi-tier intervention for reading in the primary grades. A practice guide.* (NCEE 2009-4045). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/rti_reading_pg_021809.pdf

Good, R. H., Kaminski, R. A., Cummings, K., Dufour-Martel, C., Petersen, K., Powell-Smith, K., Stollar, S., & Wallin, J. (2011). *Dynamic indicators of basic early literacy skills next*. Longmont, CO: Sopris. Available at http://dibels.org/

Lassen, S. R., Steele, M. M., & Sailor, W. (2006). The relationship of school-wide positive behavior support to academic achievement in an urban middle school. *Psychology in the Schools, 43*, 701–712.

McGlinchey, M. T., & Goodman, S. D. (2008). Best practices in implementing school reform. In A. Thomas and J. Grime (Eds.) *Best practices in school psychology V*. Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

McIntosh, K., & Goodman, S. (2016). *Integrated multi-tiered systems of support: Blending RTI and PBIS*. New York, NY: Guilford Publications.

McIntosh, K., Sadler, C., & Brown, J. A. (2012). Kindergarten reading skill level and change as risk factors for chronic problem behavior. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions, 14*, 17–28. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1098300711403153

Metz, A. (2016). *Practice profiles: A process for capturing evidence and operationalizing innovations*. National Implementation Research Network White Paper. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, National Implementation Research Network.

Morrison, J. Q., Russell, C., Dyer, S., Metcalf, T., & Rahschulte, R. L. (2014). Organizational structures and processes to support and sustain effective technical assistance in a state-wide multi-tiered system of support. *Journal of Education and Training Studies, 2,* 129–137.

Nantais, M., St. Martin, K., & Barnes, A. (2015). Best practices in facilitating professional development of school personnel in delivering multi-tiered services. In P. Harrison & A. Thomas (Eds.) *Best practices in school psychology 6*. Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

National Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavior Interventions and Support. (2017). Technical guide for alignment of initiatives, programs, practices in school districts. Eugene, OR: Retrieved from www.pbis.org

Russell, C., & Harms, A. (2016). Michigan's integrated behavior and learning support initiative: A statewide system of support for MTSS. In K. McIntosh & S. Goodman *Integrated multi-tiered systems of support: Blending RTI and PBIS*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Sanford, A. K., & Horner, R. H. (2013). Effects of matching instruction difficulty to reading level for students with escape-maintained problem behavior. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions, 15*, 79–89.

St. Martin, K. A., Nantais, M., Harms, A., & Huth, E. (2015). *Reading tiered fidelity inventory (elementary-level edition)*. Lansing, MI: Michigan Department of Education, Michigan's Integrated Behavior and Learning Support Initiative.