Special Education within a Multi-Tiered System of Supports

A Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) is a systemic, continuous improvement framework in which data-based problem-solving and decision making is practiced across all levels of the educational system for supporting students. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 2004), supports implementation of a Multi-Tiered System of Supports because it has proven to be effective in accelerating learning for all students, including students with disabilities. When the MTSS framework is implemented with fidelity, students' educational needs are more intentionally addressed by designing, developing, and delivering needed, appropriate supports. How students with disabilities' needs are addressed should be documented in an Individualized Education Program (IEP).

In Colorado, the Essential Components of an MTSS framework represent the integration of existing evidence-based educational reform initiatives, Response to Intervention (RtI) and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). This document explores the connection of special education to each of the MTSS Essential Components.

Shared Leadership

A Multi-Tiered System of Supports restructures the educational system by creating a culture in which there is a shared responsibility and collaboration between general education and special education for the purpose of ensuring that the educational needs of every student are met. General and special educators work closely together within collaborative learning groups to create instructional plans that are rigorous and purposeful. These educators collect and analyze data to plan, organize, and deliver supports that reflect the Colorado Academic Standards and students' needs.

Data-Based Problem Solving and Decision Making

The special education eligibility and IEP development process becomes informed, valid, and instructionally-driven when a team-based problem-solving approach is implemented. Decisions about the supports and/or services a student needs are based on multiple sources of student-centered data and the student's response to evidence-based instruction and intervention. This process of problem solving and using data should also be used to make ongoing instructional decisions for students who are continuing to receive special education services, by helping to guide measurable goal-setting and monitoring of progress at home and school. The goal of problem solving is to intentionally design, develop, and deliver instruction and supports matched to student needs, which may or may not include accessing special education resources.

Definition of MTSS

*A **Multi-Tiered System of Supports** is a whole-school, prevention-based framework for improving learning outcomes for every student through a layered continuum of evidence-based practices and systems.*

MTSS Essential Components
1. *Shared Leadership*
2. *Data-Based Problem Solving and Decision Making*
3. *Layered Continuum of Supports*
4. *Evidence-Based Instruction, Intervention, and Assessment Practices*
5. *Universal Screening and Progress Monitoring*
6. *Family, School, and Community Partnering*

Layered Continuum of Supports

A well-designed MTSS framework has hierarchical tiers of instruction and supports available to every student within the school. These tiers are layered so that the first layer of universal supports is supplemented with additional supports that increase in intensity as needed. Movement within the tiered system of supports is fluid, not static, and is determined through the data-based decision making process. Tiers represent instruction and supports, not categories or groups of students. They are not pre-established based on specific programs or environments, disability categories, or related services. As students respond positively to the instruction and supports, the intensity of the support will be gradually and carefully faded.

Every student has access to
Universal supports
Some students also receive
Targeted supports
Few students also receive
Intensive supports
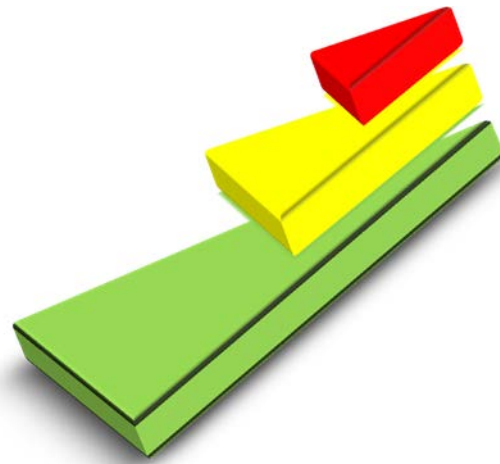
Every student has access to universal instruction and supports for both academics and behavior. The federal law IDEA (2004) mandates that students with disabilities be educated in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), specifically that "to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities . . . are educated with children who are not disabled." A Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) presumes the participation of every student, including those with disabilities, in the core curriculum, which includes small and large group instruction.

Effective interventions and supports at the universal tier can reduce the need for supports at subsequent tiers; however, students (including those who are eligible for special education services) may require supports at multiple levels. Receiving intensive, individualized interventions and supports does not automatically mean that a student will be evaluated for special education eligibility. Not all students who receive intensive supports are identified as students with disabilities, and not all students identified with a disability need intensive supports in all areas. Additionally, students do not need to receive intervention in all tiers before consideration for special education services or supports. The initiation of formal evaluation procedures for a student suspected of having a disability can and should occur at any time that the parent(s)/guardian(s) and/or educator(s) express their suspicion of a disability.

Evidence-based Instruction, Intervention, and Assessment Practices (Both Academic and Behavioral)

Evidence-based practices are the use of instruction, interventions, and strategies which have been proven effective through scientifically-based research and a comprehensive collection of studies. These studies demonstrate a strong, positive cause-and-effect relationship between the intervention and improved outcomes for individuals when implemented with fidelity (*Colorado MTSS Essential Components, January 2014*).

Every student with identified needs at any tier should receive necessary supports through the utilization of evidence-based instruction which is planned and delivered using a viable curriculum that has been developed according to the state standards. Instruction is differentiated so every student can access the core curriculum. Sound assessment practices, including universal screenings and progress monitoring should be used throughout the year to make appropriate, informed instructional decisions for every student, including those with disabilities.

General educators share the responsibility for every student in their classrooms. It is imperative that general and special educators, including related service providers, work collaboratively to align their efforts to accelerate the performance of every student to achieve and/or exceed proficiency.

Universal Screening and Progress Monitoring

Universal screening is characterized by the administration (usually three times a year) of <u>quick</u>, <u>low-cost</u>, and <u>repeatable</u> data collection of academic and behavioral skills of every student. Progress monitoring is a systematic approach to gathering academic and behavioral information using a variety of data collection methods (*Colorado MTSS Essential Components, January 2014*). Schools must have a comprehensive assessment system in place utilizing multiple assessment tools and strategies to produce meaningful student data that guides instructional decision making.

Every student's progress, including those identified with an educational disability, is monitored to ensure that needed supports are provided. The team makes adjustments and improvements to instruction/intervention when progress monitoring results indicate that the student, or group of students, is progressing beyond expectations, not progressing, or decreasing in rate of progress. Adjustments and improvements in instruction, in addition to progress towards goals and objectives, are documented within the student's learning plan. For students with disabilities, that is the student's IEP (per IDEA 2004 guidelines).

Family, School, and Community Partnering

To develop true collaboration, parents and families must be fundamentally involved in the entire educational experience. Schools should acknowledge that families are active partners with educators to support children's learning. Additionally, partnering with community supports contributes to students' success and should be strategically tied to specific school and family needs.

Families of each student in the school, along with community resources, are seen as key partners in all aspects of MTSS, but their roles may shift at each level of support. At the universal level, they can be involved in determining what constitutes high-quality instruction, collaborating on the development of instructional practices, and provide ideas for culturally responsive materials. Also, families can reinforce classroom behavior and academic expectations, partnering with teachers at the universal level. At more advanced levels of support, families are active participants in the evaluation of data and in the design, implementation, and monitoring of interventions. Throughout the tiers, their expertise regarding the individual student is vital as they provide unique information and participate in home-school coordinated learning.

When there is suspicion that a student may have an educational disability, active partnership allows for seamless teaming during the eligibility and IEP process, with a continual emphasis on a continuum of learning supports focused on student success.

Conclusion

A Multi-Tiered System of Supports allows for flexibility, rather than determining a student's need for supports based on specialized categories and/or funding streams that are pre-determined by federal and state laws. Connecting MTSS with special education enables teams to blend the resources and expertise of both general and special education personnel to provide a unified system of supports that meets the needs of every student. Applying MTSS logic to the educational disability identification process and IEP development reinforces the requirements for the use of ongoing progress monitoring, instructional responsiveness, and data-based decision-making towards the specific goal of improving outcomes for every student.

Resources

Guidelines for Identifying Students with Specific Learning Disabilities

http://www.cde.state.co.us/sites/default/files/documents/cdesped/download/pdf/sld_guidelines.pdf

Guidelines for Determining Eligibility for Special Education for Students with Serious Emotional Disability

http://www.cde.state.co.us/sites/default/files/guidelinesfordeterminingeligibility_sed_0.pdf

Where can I learn more?

Colorado Multi-Tiered System of Supports www.cde.state.co.us/mtss

The Colorado Department of Education
201 E. Colfax Ave., Denver, CO 80203 • 303-866-6622 • www.cde.state.co.us/mtss