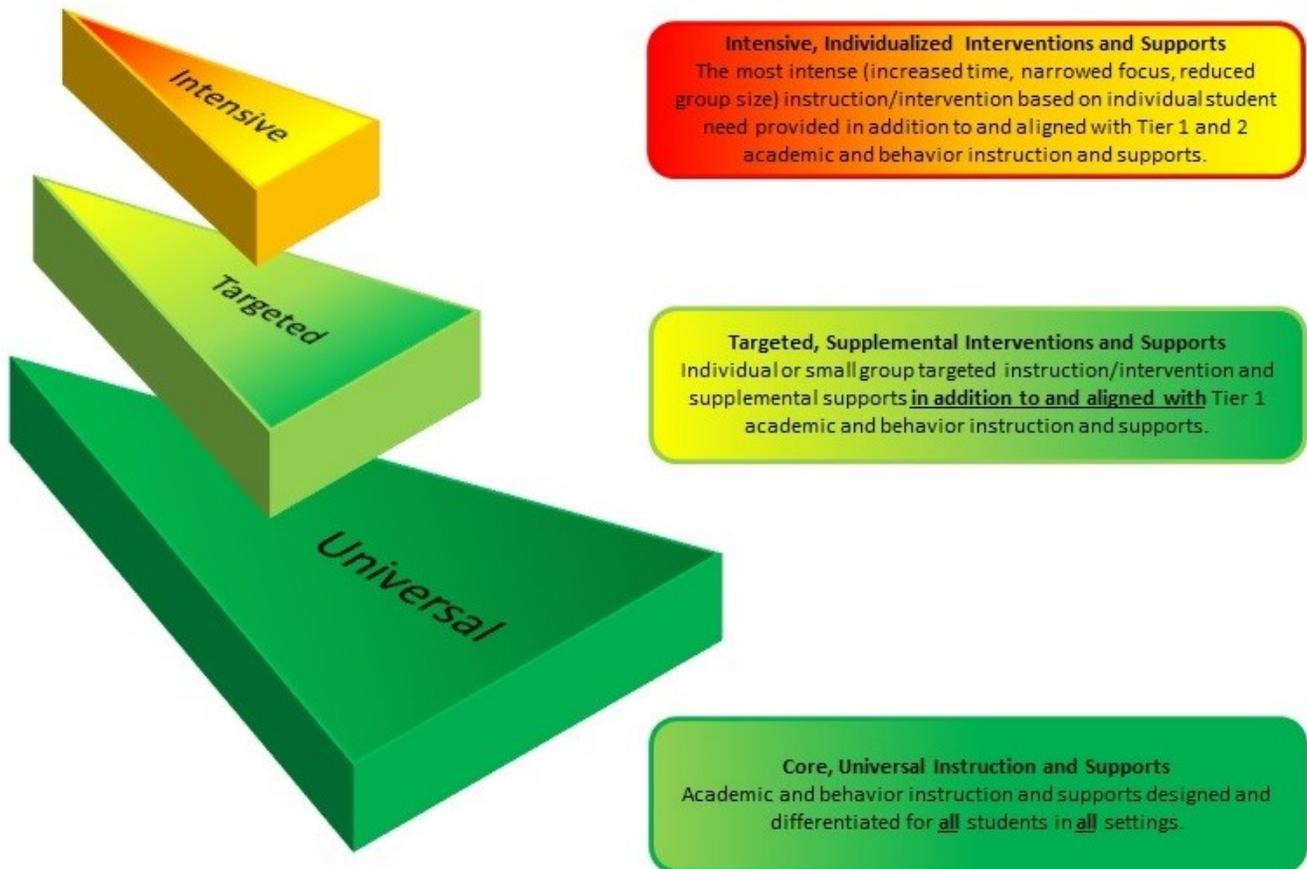# Implement a Tiered Framework of Supports

Supporting Research

Providing supports using a layered framework – often referred to as a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) – is one way to help ensure that all students are receiving relevant interventions matched to their individual needs. MTSS is most often conceptualized as a three-tiered system, in which Tier 1 (Universal Level) represents supports provided to all students, Tier 2 (Targeted Level) represents a secondary level of intervention for some students who require additional support and Tier 3 (Intensive Level) includes individualized supports for relatively few students. This recommendation supports using a tiered framework to organize and deliver strategies that can increase student engagement and the likelihood of high school graduation. While effective practices within multi-tiered systems of support are already in use in our state, this recommendation also calls for additional training and technical assistance so that school personnel can effectively implement successful programs and strategies.

What is a Tiered Framework?

Figure 1 below illustrates the concept of a tiered framework of supports that can be used to facilitate academic, behavioral, and social emotional learning and positive student outcomes.

Intensive, Individualized Interventions and Supports
The most intense (increased time, narrowed focus, reduced group size) instruction/intervention based on individual student need provided in addition to and aligned with Tier 1 and 2 academic and behavior instruction and supports.

Targeted, Supplemental Interventions and Supports
Individual or small group targeted instruction/intervention and supplemental supports in addition to and aligned with Tier 1 academic and behavior instruction and supports.

Core, Universal Instruction and Supports
Academic and behavior instruction and supports designed and differentiated for all students in all settings.

MTSS is an umbrella term that provides an organizing framework for the many supports that can be provided for students. It is a school-wide framework of prevention programming and interventions that support the emotional, behavioral, and academic success of all students. The tiered levels of support can occur both in school and during out of school time. The goal of MTSS is to identify students before they fail and intervene to support their success. At the core of this model is a team approach that often involves collaboration with other staff. Collaborative teams typically review student data (e.g., academic performance, attendance, behavior referrals), problem solve, and organize instruction or interventions to improve outcomes.

Although there are variations on the number of tiers included in MTSS models, it is most often conceptualized as a three-tiered system, in which Tier 1 (Universal Level) represents supports provided to all students that are prevention oriented. Research suggests that this programming is generally effective for 80-90% of the students. Tier 2 (Targeted Level) represents a secondary level of intervention for students who require additional supports to be successful. Tier 3 (Intensive Level) are supports geared for relatively few students. As illustrated by Figure 1, each consecutive tier serves as the foundation for the tier above. During their school career, students may receive support across tiers at different times and in various areas.

Critical Features of MTSS

MTSS is usually used as an organizing framework for academic instruction (Response to Intervention or RtI) and behavioral interventions (Positive Behavior Supports and Interventions or PBIS). Both PBIS and RtI have a significant body of research and literature devoted to theory and practice. Information about PBIS in Minnesota can be accessed at www.pbismn.org. In academics, RtI relies on multiple tiers of instruction that work together as a safety net to prevent school failure and increase academic success. The Minnesota Department of Education lists five critical features of this framework (http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/dse/mtss/):

A system of assessments to screen, monitor progress and provide summative data about students.
- **High-quality, evidence-based instruction** for students that occurs at multiple levels.
- **Core instruction for all students** as part of the general curriculum that is standards based, of high quality and delivered with fidelity.
- **Supplemental interventions** (tier 2) for students who are not on track to be proficient.
- **Data-based decision making** to improve organizational supports and instruction and to make decisions about students at risk of not meeting grade-level expectations.

MTSS Can Also Be Used as an Organizing Framework for Dropout Prevention

A similar tiered model that includes the process and critical features of MTSS can be used as a framework of supports to improve students' likelihood of graduating from high school and achieving success in postsecondary opportunities. In the case of dropout prevention, Tier 1 supports include academic rigor, high expectations, evidence-based effective core instruction and safe school environments. Tier 2 supports may include behavior supports, service learning, mentoring, afterschool programs, and college readiness. Tier 3 (Intensive Level) supports for students who are clearly disengaging may include wrap-around services, mental and chemical health counseling, and/or programs for teen parents.

Washington Survey Results on Tiered Supports for Dropout Prevention

A 2013 survey in Washington collected responses from 230 districts (78% of districts) regarding dropout prevention and intervention strategies being used across a continuum of tiers of support; from school-wide to intensive reengagement efforts for students that had dropped out. Many of the districts used a multi-tiered system of support framework to help organize their work, creating a safety net around all students in the school.

- **Tier I Interventions** were categorized as school-wide efforts and often addressed school culture and climate as well as student and parent engagement. Although specific programs were not mentioned by respondent districts, efforts relative to safety, building school-wide expectations, guidance and counseling were described. Strategies to address academic needs included attention to core instruction, hiring and supporting highly-qualified teachers, employing an advisory program and conducting student led conferences.

- **Tier 2 Interventions** specifically targeted students at risk of academic failure and were designed to address the needs of the 10–15 percent of students who were "off-track" at any given point in their education. Several districts referenced the implementation of mentoring-type programs, including the use of graduation coaches. Specific programs mentioned focused on boosting skills necessary for academic success such as; Advancement via Individual Determination (AVID), Gear UP, Jobs for Washington's Graduates (JWG) and Check & Connect.

- **Tier 3 Interventions** were the most intensive and were designed to serve the top 5 percent of the student body who are at risk or had dropped out of school. These intensive services were often delivered by community agencies, either at the school or offsite. These interventions included mental health services, substance abuse treatment and home visits.

The Importance of Partnerships in the MTSS Model

The Washington Statewide Survey also asked districts who they partnered with in their dropout prevention efforts. Schools and communities must work collectively to support students and assist with both academic and non-academic barriers to learning. Of the districts reporting, 60 percent identified community partners. Trends in the survey data showed districts reporting effective collaborations with health-based organizations (focused on mental health, chemical health), family resource centers, reengagement programs, and youth serving organizations (Boys & Girls Club, Communities in Schools, YMCA). Other notable partnerships included: civic organizations, city and county agencies (e.g., police), faith-based groups, workforce agencies, parents and local volunteer programs.

Student Engagement and Dropout Prevention Strategies are Multidimensional

Since 1986, the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (NDPC/N) has collaborated with researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to further the mission of reducing America's dropout rate. The NDPC/N has identified 15 Effective Strategies that have the most positive impact on reducing school dropout. Although they can be implemented as stand-alone strategies, positive outcomes are more likely when program improvement plans are developed that use multiple strategies to address identified needs. These strategies are grouped into four general categories and can used within a tiered model at the universal, targeted or intensive levels of support.

- *Foundational Strategies* include a) Systemic Approaches focused on addressing school policies, practices, and organizational structures b) School-Community Collaboration and c) Safe Learning Environments
- *Early Interventions* include a) Family Engagement b) Early Childhood Education (birth to age five) and c) Early Literacy Development focused on reading and writing skills
- *Basic Core Strategies* include a) Mentoring/Tutoring b) Service-Learning that connects meaningful community service experiences with academic learning, c) Alternative Schooling and d) After-School/Out-of-School Opportunities
- *Managing and Improving Instruction* includes a) Professional Development for teachers who work to feel supported and have an avenue by which they can continue to develop skills, techniques, and learn about innovative strategies, b) Active Learning that engages and involve students in the learning process, c) Educational Technology, d) Individualized Instruction, and e) Career and Technology Education (CTE)

Summary

In many schools and districts, engagement strategies, resources and supports for students who are disengaging or at risk of dropping out are available but they may not be systematically applied, or their use may not be well coordinated. To introduce a more systemic approach, schools and districts are increasingly organizing specific strategies or programs into tiers that are based on the intensity of the interventions. Generally, the models involve a three-tiered intervention system in which Tier I interventions are applied to all students in the school, Tier II interventions are moderately intensive and applied to small groups of students with common needs, and Tier III interventions are the most intensive and are provided to individual students with the highest level of need. It is important to establish procedures for ensuring fidelity of the interventions –the extent to which they are being implemented as intended. Fidelity of the MTSS model must also be measured to determine the degree to which the essential features (e.g., data based decision making) are being implemented as intended. Ongoing measurement of how the model is being implemented, as well as the interventions and supports that are being provided, is critical to ensure continuous improvement and achieve positive outcomes.

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