

## CHAPTER 1

# WHAT AND WHY OF MTSS

**THE WHAT:** MTSS, a framework that provides schools with structures for designing multi-tiered systems of support and the alignment of resources across all areas of academic and social well-being.

**THE WHY:** Equity, access, and inclusivity for *all* students; current state of implementation; and implementation challenges

In order to know what it is you are beginning to implement, you need to define Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), its purpose, and the roles and responsibilities of all the stakeholders involved to make implementation a success. We relate the MTSS work to both organizational theory and improvement science components; in short, we provide a process to ensure that implementation is working and ways to identify where to improve/address barriers in implementation. According to Bolman and Deal (2007), in their book *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership*, organizational theory refers to a set of interrelated concepts and definitions that explain the behavior of individuals, groups, or subgroups who interact with one another to perform activities intended toward the accomplishment of a common goal.

In their book, Bolman and Deal (2007) depict the results of an organization when stakeholders are working in silos. They share an example from 9/11 about the courageous police officers and firefighters. In short, they explain how both groups responded to the serious crisis and did their jobs exactly as they were trained to. But the authors also highlight that, unfortunately, the two groups approached that crisis in silos at first because there was not enough time during the crisis to really coordinate, align, and work together to respond to it. We see at times this type of misalignment and mis-coordination of work/resources within schools as we coordinate efforts to support students (e.g., an English learner development teacher who will pull out and work with English learners, the special education [SPED] teacher who only works with students on an Individualized Education Program, or the school psychologist whose job is only testing for SPED), rather than a collective and coordinated effort to support *all* students while utilizing the expertise of the entire staff.

We wrote this book to help you *start the work* of MTSS implementation correctly and with ease, rather than following a fill-in-the-blanks approach later. The design of this book is simple. You will begin with an audit of the entire MTSS (readiness and assessment system). This will allow you to take an honest look at your current state of implementation. After you complete that

component, you will read about the beginning start-up indicators of MTSS implementation and fill in any component of your readiness or current state audit that needs work. The book will end with additional information on how to utilize the elements of continuous school improvement to ensure that what you are doing is working throughout. Remember this is a start-up guide!

As former school site leaders, we were once in this exact position—the very beginning of establishing MTSS work. We first needed to know what the definition of MTSS even was. How is it different from what we currently had in place with Response to Intervention (RTI)? We work with schools and districts throughout the nation, so we wanted to have a general definition that captured the essence overall. Before we provide the definition we derived based on our investigation of the various definitions of MTSS in each state department of education across the United States, we want you to examine what your current definition of MTSS is, including the key components, and what you think the purpose of MTSS implementation is. Come back to your definition after you have read the next section, and finally write down what your operational definition will be at your school or district so everyone implementing MTSS is starting with the same definition. How does this definition align with your school's mission/vision (your school's fundamental purpose and what it aspires to become)? This is really important because if the stakeholders do not know the *why* of the implementation, the *what* does not really matter. Every policy, practice, and support for academics and social well-being should be scrutinized by the school leadership to align with your mission/vision and with schoolwide MTSS goals.

**Define MTSS.**

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**What are the key components of MTSS?**

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**What is the purpose of implementing MTSS at your school?**

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**Write your school's operational definition of MTSS and the purpose of implementing it here.**

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Come back to the last prompt after you have read the next section to see how you did and write the operational definition of what MTSS is or will be at your school. *Note:* You may have a definition defined by your district or state level; that is fine, write that down. The important thing here is that you all are consistently defining what it even is that you are implementing and why it is necessary to do so.











Also, understand that an acronym is not going to fix or improve a school; the actual implementation and understanding of what we are doing to work together to improve the school, and why, are going to give you the outcomes that are best for your students and adults.

What did we find in our investigation of MTSS in all the state department of education definitions? To be honest, we found every version of a combination of or a rebranding of RTI at Work, Professional Learning Communities (PLC) at Work, Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), and Universal Design for Learning (UDL). In a way this was a relief to us because we always believed that MTSS was interchangeable with what RTI was designed to be when implemented with true fidelity and that it wasn't an entirely new concept. Although this book is not a replacement for trainings in any of these frameworks, it is designed to help you get started in this work. If you are interested in the best-practice work of RTI and PLC, we strongly recommend the books *Taking Action, Learning by Doing*, and *Behavior Solutions*; for SEL or behavior systems work, we recommend the CASEL website (<https://casel.org/>), PBIS Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 handbooks, and *Building Behavior* as your deep dive for these content areas. So, based on our investigation of the definition of MTSS and our shared experiences working with schools throughout the nation, we have synthesized this work into a universal MTSS Model that encompasses the commonalities of the key evidence indicators utilized in the various state frameworks across the county.

This MTSS Model is defined as a systemic framework that requires the alignment and coordination of all the structures, conditions, and supports in place for designing levels or tiers of *prevention (all)*, *intervention (some)*, and *remediation (few)* for both academics and social well-being based on student data. The goal of implementing MTSS in this fashion is to create a school designed to serve the "whole child." The primary focus is on *equity, inclusivity, and access* for all students, with the shared ownership and collaboration of all stakeholders (i.e., students, teachers, staff, administrators, families, the community, policy makers and lawmakers, partnerships, etc.).

*The MTSS Start-Up Guide* is designed to provide an evidence indicator-oriented framework and success criteria for each of the 10 indicators identified.

This book identifies and describes the MTSS start-up indicators and success criteria, explains how to assess your system's current state relative to each indicator, and provides some practitioner tools and tips to start MTSS implementation. To build a strong implementation of MTSS in your school, the following 10 essential indicators must be in place.

The 10 Indicators of MTSS Implementation		
1		<b>Indicator 1:</b> Establish an MTSS team (i.e., team-driven and shared leadership).
2		<b>Indicator 2:</b> Assess stakeholder beliefs, perceptions, shared values, and identity, and establish the mission and purpose of the MTSS team and all stakeholders (i.e., families, school, community, partnerships, etc.).
3		<b>Indicator 3:</b> Establish and apportion roles and responsibilities among MTSS team members and all stakeholders (i.e., shared ownership and responsibility).
4		<b>Indicator 4:</b> Audit current organizational structures and evidence-based practices (i.e., tiered processes/continuum of supports in place, programs, teams, human resources/expertise/training, initiatives, interventions) for academics and behavior.
5		<b>Indicator 5:</b> Assess the current state of academic and behavior instruction based on multiple data points (i.e., data-based problem-solving and decision-making).
6		<b>Indicator 6:</b> Develop and share MTSS SMART* goals and actions for academics and behavior (i.e., based on assessment, screener, trend, qualitative, and quantitative data).
7		<b>Indicator 7:</b> Set up a progress-monitoring system/benchmarks for MTSS, and ensure that assessment and data are up-to-date and available for decision-making.
8		<b>Indicator 8:</b> Set up clear communication structures between the MTSS team and all stakeholders.
9		<b>Indicator 9:</b> Set up ongoing MTSS professional learning for all stakeholders.
10		<b>Indicator 10:</b> Set up a process for ongoing evaluation and continuous improvement of MTSS implementation effectiveness and fidelity.

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\***Note:** SMART refers to specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timely.

Before you delve into these 10 indicators with your team, it is important for you to know some frequently asked questions from the field, acquaint yourself with common MTSS implementation start-up scenarios, and audit your current state.

