

2018-19 Evaluation of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)

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At-a-Glance

Starting in the 2018-19 school year, the Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) framework in the Dallas Independent School District (Dallas ISD) replaced the Response to Intervention (RTI) system which functioned in a comparable, but more limited way. Compared to RTI, MTSS is designed to function more holistically, focusing on prevention and early intervention, while taking into consideration the healthy development of the whole child – with regard not only to academics, but to social and emotional development as well, since the latter are now well-understood to correlate with academic success (see Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg & Walberg, 2007). The American Institutes of Research conceptualizes MTSS as a larger umbrella under which RTI may fall, and similarly notes that, traditionally, RTI is limited to academic interventions while MTSS includes both academic and behavioral interventions.¹

The MTSS framework aims to provide struggling students with immediate support in areas where they experience difficulty (academics, language², and/or engagement) and offers campus personnel set procedures and guidelines to assist students.³ In this way, it is preventative in nature as it seeks to intervene early, before problems affect other areas of development. Intervention efforts increase in intensity and duration for students who fail to respond appropriately to the core academic program.

The Dallas ISD 2018-19 Title II, Part A workscope for MTSS states that, “the long-term objective for MTSS is to use universal screening to intervene early, provide targeted support to struggling students, and implement a schoolwide approach to student support that focuses on the academic, behavioral, social and emotional needs of the whole child.”⁴ Key goals MTSS staff identified for 2018-19 centered on effective training of Dallas ISD staff in MTSS concepts and procedures and increasing awareness of the importance of universal screening.

Evaluation Purpose and Scope

This evaluation focused on efforts to implement the MTSS program in 2018-19. It examined the nature of

the MTSS framework, as well as efforts to train campus staff in MTSS concepts and practices.

Specifically, this evaluation examined the budget for the MTSS program in Dallas ISD; the human resources (central staff) employed to execute MTSS operations; additional detail on the goals that the program’s administrators have set for school years 2018-19 through 2020-21; the count and nature of MTSS intervention plans created in the PowerSchool Module in 2018-19; training in MTSS concepts and procedures provided to campus staff; and findings from a survey administered to campus staff regarding the training in and implementation of the MTSS framework in 2018-19.

What was the budget for implementing the MTSS framework in 2018-19?

The evaluator requested MTSS program budget information from the MTSS program manager. The total amount of funding provided for 2018-19 was \$427,530. Of this, \$250,856 (59%) funded professional and support staff positions and \$146,174 (34%) funded professional development activities. Other funding categories included employee travel (4%, such as for conferences) and equipment (3%).

What were the human resources employed to implement the MTSS framework in 2018-19?

MTSS efforts in 2018-19 were led by one program manager and three coordinators, each with specialization in one of the three pillars of the MTSS framework (academics, language, and engagement). Primary duties of these staff included planning, organizing, and leading training sessions on MTSS concepts, specific pillar domains, intervention procedures, and online resources, documentation, and reporting processes. In addition, MTSS staff provided support and guidance to campus staff throughout the year regarding inquiries about program implementation, including via social media, facilitating discussions such as a Twitter Chat in spring 2019.

¹ American Institutes of Research (Washington, DC), Center on Response to Intervention: <https://rti4success.org/video/mtss-and-rti-are-often-used-interchangeably-what-it-separates-them>

² Language interventions are intended for use with both English learners and native English speakers and focus on needs that may extend beyond basic differentiated instruction.

³ <https://sites.google.com/dallasisd.org/dallasisdmtss>, retrieved 9/28/18.

⁴ MTSS 2018-19 Title II Workscope, Section 3.

What goals did MTSS staff articulate for the MTSS program for 2018-19 and beyond?

The evaluator requested program plans from MTSS staff for 2018-19 as well as for the next few school years. Examination of program documents identified the following goals (provided in Table 1, verbatim):

Table 1: MTSS Goals (From MTSS Three-Year Plan)

MTSS Goals for 2018--2021	
2018-19: Build Capacity	
• Provide professional development sessions to define the MTSS framework; • Strengthen the awareness of Tier I supports by collaborating with RLA, Mathematics, Bilingual/ESL, and Student Engagement departments and include information of Tier I best practices in professional development sessions; • Equip teacher teams to 1) perform root cause analysis, 2) conduct universal screening data analysis, and 3) select and deliver interventions and/or extensions that align with achievement and assessment data; • Develop a data management system (PowerSchool Interventions Module) to document selected interventions, the delivery of interventions, and students' responses to interventions.	
2019-20: Evaluate Systems	
• Implement a more robust universal screener suite; • Determine districtwide support/intervention impact through professional development surveys, 6-week checks, and student achievement and assessment data; • Review interventions and purchased resources used for return on investment.	
2020-21: Refine Practices	
• Expand school – home – community involvement; • Refine intervention menus of support for the three pillars (academics, language, and engagement); • Align professional development to best practices.	

Source: Three-Year MTSS Program Action Plan, provided by MTSS program staff, September 2018.

Which students were served by the MTSS program in 2018-19?

MTSS is a districtwide effort in prevention and early intervention services. Therefore, in 2018-19, all 155,237 students in the district were considered participants in MTSS programming.

Tier Characteristics and Placement Determination

As noted previously, one element of the MTSS framework is the practice of universal screening. Screening is intended to cover issues related to academics, language, and engagement.

Based on universal screening outcomes, a student may be kept in Tier 1, where core instruction is provided, and no intervention is needed. When screening data

indicate that some intervention or special instruction is warranted, the student is placed in Tier 2. Students in Tier 2 receive intervention based on screening findings in addition to core instruction. If Tier 2 interventions do not produce the desired outcome, the student may be placed in Tier 3. Students in Tier 3 receive intensive intervention—in addition to prescribed Tier 2 intervention and core instruction (Tier 1). Tier 3 interventions are intended for a smaller number of students compared to Tier 2. If Tier 3 interventions still fail to produce the desired outcome, the campus Student Support Team may provide additional referrals for specialized services outside of the MTSS structure.⁵

Table 2: Characteristics of Intervention Levels (Tiers)

	Tier 1	Tier 2	Tier 3
Instruction / Intervention Approach:	Comprehensive research-based curriculum	Standardized, targeted small-group instruction	Individualized, based on student data
Group Size:	Class-wide (some small group instruction)	3-7 students	No more than 3 students (ideally)
Progress Monitoring:	Once per term	At least once per month	Weekly
Population Served:	All students	At-risk students	Students with significant & persistent needs

Source: Table created by Dallas ISD Evaluation and Assessment department, based on PowerPoint presentation from the American Institutes of Research Center on Response to Intervention (Peterson, A., et al., 2017. *Hot Topics in MTSS*).

Intervention Plans Created in 2018-19

Analysis of program records from PowerSchool showed that, as of June 1, 2019, a total of 19,340 Tier 2 intervention plans had been created for students in the PowerSchool MTSS Intervention Module. Of these, 12,055 plans were for unique students (7.8% of the 2018-19 districtwide enrollment); 7,285 students had more than one plan in the system. A total of 96.8 percent of all intervention plans were in "Final Document" status ($n=18,717$); the remaining were marked as being in either "Draft" ($n=508$) or "Review" status ($n=115$). In terms of the focus area for these intervention plans, the majority were for academic issues (79.9%), followed by engagement issues (17.1%) and language issues (3.1%).

What training opportunities did MTSS staff provide to campus staff in 2018-19?

The evaluator requested documentation from MTSS staff detailing training opportunities provided by MTSS staff to campus staff on the MTSS framework in 2018-19. Documents showed a total of 33 training sessions offered during the school year. A large proportion of training took place early in the school year – August through October 2018 ($n=14$ sessions with 594 attendees, Table 3). Attendees included teachers,

⁵ Refer to the Dallas ISD MTSS website: (<https://sites.google.com/dallasisd.org/dallasisdmtss/mtss-model>) for

more information. Tier placement information accessed December 2018.

school counselors, campus administrators, dyslexia interventionists, and campus instructional coaches.

Table 3: Fall 2019 and Spring 2018 MTSS Training Sessions

Title	Sessions Count	Attendance Count
Fall 2018		
Paving Pathways to Possibilities: MTSS Team Training – August, September and October 2018	14	594
Single-campus MTSS trainings	5	65
MTSS Overview for Instructional Lead Coordinators, Urban Specialists, and Campus Instructional Coaches	5	N/A
MTSS Power Hour	3	33
MTSS Fall Diagnostician Training	1	123
MTSS Overview and Root Cause Analysis for Dyslexia Interventionists	1	117
Spring 2019		
MTSS PowerSchool Interventions Module for Dyslexia Interventionists	1	96
Engagement Overview at Skyline HS	2	31+
Overview of Designated Supports and the PowerSchool Interventions Module at Wilmer Hutchins	1	23

Source: MTSS program staff, provided December 2018 & May 2019.
Note: N/A=Count not available in MTSS program documentation.
 HS=high school. "+" = count not available for 1st session.

How did campus staff perceive the efficacy of MTSS trainings?

Background and Methodology

In the spring of the 2018-19 school year, the evaluator administered a survey to better understand the experiences of district staff trained on the MTSS framework and procedures. Survey questions were crafted in collaboration with MTSS staff and administered via SurveyMonkey (an online survey design and administration tool) to all known Dallas ISD staff who attended a training during the 2018-19 school year, including campus administrators, teachers, school counselors, central staff, and other specialists. A total of 793 Dallas ISD staff were invited to participate in the survey from April 30, 2019 until May 16, 2019. In all, 255 staff completed the survey, translating to a response rate of 32.1 percent.

The survey's largest respondent group was school counselors (24% of respondents), followed by teachers (18%), assistant principals (17%) and principals (12%). Other groups were central staff (10%), dyslexia interventionists (7%), special education evaluators (7%) and instructional coaches (4%).

Survey Findings

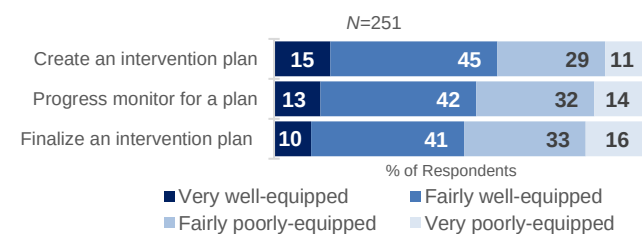
All campus principals were asked how many staff from their campus attended a MTSS training session during 2018-19. In all, 91 percent of principals indicated that either they alone (40%) or they and at least one additional staff member (51%) attended a training; 36

percent specified that four or more staff members from their campus attended an MTSS training in 2018-19.

All respondents were asked about their level of understanding of aspects of the MTSS framework following the training they received from MTSS staff. Approximately 80 percent of respondents indicated that they understood the MTSS tiered framework "fairly" or "very" well. Regarding their understanding of what appropriate interventions for each of the three "pillars" look like, fewer respondents indicated that they understood what proper interventions for engagement issues and language issues looked like (70% indicated they understood interventions for these "fairly" or "very" well) compared to those for academic issues (77%).

Regarding how prepared respondents felt to carry out MTSS procedures (such as, create an intervention plan), most respondents (70%) indicated feeling "fairly" or "very" well-equipped to access MTSS resources online (provided by district MTSS staff); 72% reported feeling "fairly" or "very" well-equipped to access the MTSS Intervention Module in PowerSchool. Fewer felt "fairly" or "very" well-equipped to create (60%), progress monitor for (55%), and finalize an intervention plan (51%, Figure 1).

Figure 1: Preparedness to Create, Progress Monitor, and Finalize MTSS Intervention Plans



Source: 2018-19 MTSS Survey, Dallas ISD Evaluation and Assessment department, May 2019.

Because MTSS staff indicated that their trainings were intended to be utilized as a train-the-trainer model – so that more staff on campuses could be trained following these initial sessions, a survey question asked whether respondents trained others on their home campus. Half (51%) of respondents indicated that they did. These 51 percent were then asked how prepared they felt to train others in MTSS concepts and procedures. In all, 70 percent reported feeling "fairly" (51%) or "very" (19%) well-equipped to provide training on the MTSS tiered framework. Among the three pillars, staff reported feeling more confident about providing training on interventions pertaining to academics (67% reported feeling "fairly" or "very" well-equipped), but slightly less so on interventions for language and engagement issues (62% on each). Regarding MTSS procedures, one-half to two-thirds indicated that they felt "fairly" or "very" well-equipped to train others to access the PowerSchool MTSS Interventions Module (67%), create an intervention plan (63%), progress monitor for

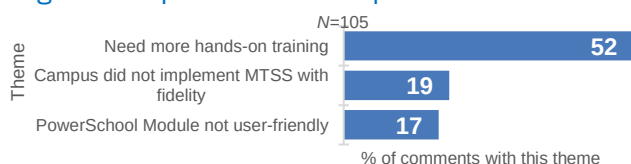
an intervention plan (56%), and finalize an MTSS intervention plan (49%).

A final survey item for these campus trainers asked them to estimate the total percentage of their campus staff trained on MTSS (as of the time of the survey), whether by MTSS staff or by them. Sixty-two percent estimated that between 75 to 100 percent of their campus was trained in MTSS concepts and procedures (27% estimated that less than 75% of their campus staff was trained).

In light of MTSS staff observations in the PowerSchool Interventions Module showing fewer intervention plans than expected, as well as prior informal feedback from trainees indicating intervention plans were not yet being documented consistently in the PowerSchool Module, respondents were asked to indicate reasons for not documenting interventions with consistency. The most common reason selected was, “I did not understand how to document progress monitoring in the MTSS PowerSchool Module” (27%). One in four (25%) indicated they did not understand how to finalize an intervention plan in the MTSS PowerSchool Module; 20 percent indicated they did not understand how to create a plan in the Module; 15 percent indicated they did not have time to enter the information into the PowerSchool Module, and 12 percent indicated that their campus used a different method for documenting MTSS interventions for students.

The final item for all respondents was open ended, soliciting general comments, concerns, or recommendations regarding the implementation of MTSS. Analysis of the 105 comments provided revealed the themes (top three) shown in Figure 2. The theme referenced most often was a need for more hands-on training.

Figure 2: Top Themes from Open-Ended Comments



Source: 2018-19 MTSS Survey, Dallas ISD Evaluation and Assessment department, May 2019

Recommendations

Recommendations for the program included the following:

- **Consider creating training videos for campus staff, with a focus on research-based**

⁶ Outside research has indicated that excessive and cumbersome documentation requirements are a leading contributor to professional burnout among education professionals because of how much time such documentation takes away from other substantive professional activities necessary for the effective practice of education. See

intervention options, and step-by-step instruction in intervention plan documentation in the MTSS PowerSchool Intervention Module.

By far, the most common theme emerging from MTSS training survey findings was that campus staff wanted more extensive, hands-on, small group training (more than half [52%] of all open-ended comments cited this theme). Since the initial training by MTSS staff was intended to be used as a train-the-trainer model, and since many trainees-turned-trainers felt inadequately prepared to provide campus training, and given the limited human resources available in the MTSS department to provide intensive hands-on in-person training to each or most campuses, training videos made available to all campus staff would help ensure consistency in needed continued training of campus staff who still feel uncertain about their level of understanding of MTSS concepts and procedures.

- **Ensure that the process for documenting MTSS interventions is as easy as possible for teachers and other campus staff.** The PowerSchool MTSS Interventions Module is currently not user-friendly, as indicated in feedback throughout the MTSS training survey (including as a top theme among open-ended comments), and to the evaluator informally by campus staff during MTSS training sessions.⁶ It will be important to continue to find ways to simplify and streamline the documentation process and to clearly articulate to campus staff the benefits of consistently and accurately documenting interventions.

References

- Peterson, A., Bailey, T., Jackson, D., Gandhi, A., Fuchs, L. (2017). Hot Topics in MTSS [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved from: <https://rti4success.org/sites/default/files/MTSS%20Hot%20Topics.pdf>
- Zins, J., Bloodworth, M., Weissberg, R., & Walberg, H. (2007) The Scientific Base Linking Social and Emotional Learning to School Success, *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, 17:2-3, 191-210, DOI: [10.1080/10474410701413145](https://doi.org/10.1080/10474410701413145)

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