# MTSS & SPECIAL EDUCATION

OBJECTIVES

- ★ Understand the fluid intersection between MTSS and special education
- ★ Define the need for special educators to be involved in the MTSS planning process
- ★ Highlight key structures to leverage in a strong tiered system
  - ○ Offer descriptions of inclusion and inclusive practice within the MTSS framework
  - ○ Articulate co-teaching as a model that supports the intersection of MTSS and special education
- ★ Offer extensions for staff who want to explore these concepts further

INTRODUCTION

Multi-tiered systems of support are intended to meet the needs of all learners, including students with disabilities. All students should receive Tier 1 supports. Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports are not intended to replace Tier 1 supports. At different points in their educational journey, any one student may need the supports in tiers 2 and 3 and should have equitable access to these. For example, if a student needs a service and they do not "qualify" due to predetermined constructs, we must examine whether or not our structures are effectively designed to foster student success. If students cannot access the supports they need, as soon as they need them, and instead have to fail to make progress before getting additional assistance, our system has not produced its intended results.
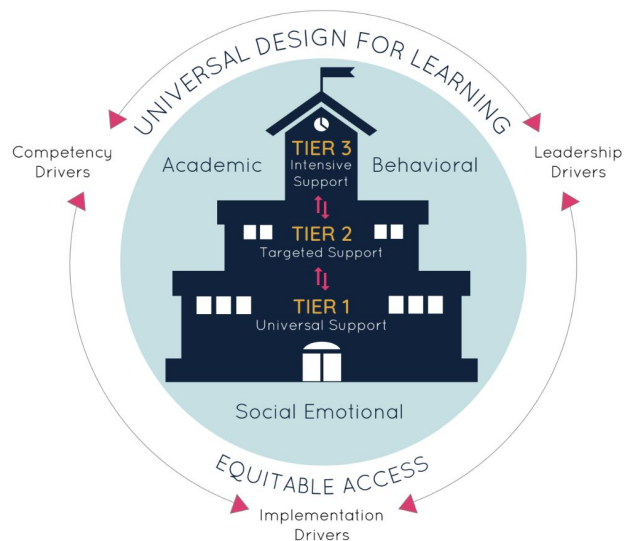
We must be conscientious about not labeling or siloing students according to their needs. Similarly, tiers are not placements or designations that follow students throughout their academic careers. As an example, a student may receive tier 1 supports in a classroom, tier 2 reading supports during an intervention block and tier 3 counseling services for social emotional support regardless of whether or not the student has an IEP, a 504, or a behavior plan. A student who receives these supports is not a "tier 2" or a "tier 3" student, but at that point in time, has access to reading support in tier 2 and social emotional support in tier 3 mitigates barriers that may prevent the student from accessing supports in tier 1. Alternatively, a student with an IEP may receive robust accommodations and support while receiving tier 1 instruction in the classroom and attend the same tier 2 reading support as

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their classmates. In a well designed MTSS system, students receive the supports they need when they need them, from the staff members who are best able to support them, regardless of whether or not they have a documented education plan.

It is important to note that tier 3 is not synonymous with special education. In fact, students with disabilities may not need tier 3 support while students not identified as having a disability may require those supports. It is also critical to understand that MTSS does not function as a step ladder. A student may need intensive tier 3 support without first accessing tier 2 supports. For example, if a student suffers a traumatic event, individual counseling daily may be needed. We do not tell her to try attending weekly group sessions to see if those work first. If the child is in crisis, we must provide her with the level of support required regardless of a defined disability or a predetermined sequence of scaled supports.

ENGAGING SPECIAL EDUCATORS IN ALL OF THE MTSS SYSTEM DRIVERS

It is essential that special education staff play a pivotal role in all aspects of the MTSS framework. While MTSS is not a special education initiative, it supports all students, including students with disabilities. Therefore special education staff should play an integral role in the design and development of the multi-tiered system of support.

To help unpack whether this is the case, reflect on the following questions to determine if special educators have shared responsibility with respect to the leadership driver, high quality professional learning within the competency driver, and robust opportunities for general educators and special educators to co-plan and co-design in the implementation driver.

★ Are special educators represented on the leadership and implementation teams? If not, consider how to recruit colleagues in special education to be representatives on the leadership team. Their voices are critical!
★ Do special educators have a seat at the table for all professional learning options and sessions (as well as those specialized to their roles)?
★ Are there structures in place for general and special educators to co-plan and co-design instruction and be at the table together to review student assessment results? The more expertise at the table, the stronger the reflection and support educators can give across all three tiers. If not, identify the barriers that prevent special educators from learning and collaborating with general education colleagues in professional learning and discuss how to eliminate those barriers.

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COMPLEMENTARY STRUCTURES AND PRACTICES THAT SUPPORT STUDENTS WITH AND WITHOUT DISABILITIES

There are a number of common structures and practices that can be leveraged to support an MTSS framework. These structures and practices, when implemented well, allow for special education service delivery and ensure all students are included in high quality tier 1 instruction. Below are some examples of structures that support students with and without disabilities.

Inclusion is when students with disabilities are placed in the same general education setting with their non-disabled peers, with appropriate accommodations and supports to allow for access to the curriculum. In inclusive settings, general and special educators work closely together to create instructional plans that are rigorous and purposeful and meet the needs of all students. The goal of this collaboration is to intentionally design, develop, and deliver instruction and supports matched to student needs, which may or may not include accessing special education services.

Inclusive practice refers to the instructional and behavioral strategies that improve academic and social-emotional outcomes for all students, with and without disabilities, in general education settings. A district curriculum accommodation plan (DCAP) identifies specific strategies that help educators build inclusive environments and engage in inclusive practices. Here is a sample DCAP that uses multi-tiered systems of support as its foundation. There are a number of examples of inclusive practice in the Department's Educator Effectiveness Guidebook for Inclusive Practice. This guidebook also aligns the evaluation rubrics with inclusive practices. For example, in the IV-B. Professional Growth standard, examples of inclusive practice include:

★ Focusing on inclusive practices when conducting self-assessments and developing professional practice goals.
★ Seeking and participating in professional development and other learning opportunities to broaden understanding of best practices for inclusion (including principles of Universal Design for Learning [UDL].
★ Applying new learning about evidence-based practices to improve the quality of inclusive practices or to build upon existing expertise and experience in order to expand or alter school-wide and individual inclusive practices.

Co-teaching is an evidence based model that exemplifies the key tenants of MTSS and particularly leverages the power of collaboration to best serve students. Friend and Cook (2013)[1] state that "co-teaching occurs when two or more professionals jointly deliver substantive instruction to a diverse, blended group of learners primarily in a single, physical space" (p. 163). When implemented well, co-teaching has been proven to improve learning

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[1] Friend, M. & Cooke, L. (2013). Interactions collaboration skills for school professionals (7th edition). Boston, MA: Pearson.

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outcomes of all students, not exclusively students on Individual Education Plans (IEPs) (Morgan, 2016)[2].

In many effective co-taught classrooms, it is hard for an outside observer to recognize who in the room is the special educator and who is the general educator. In a co-taught classroom, students with and without disabilities can access specially designed instruction and benefit from the collaboration and expertise of the co-teachers. In addition, it is often difficult to distinguish which students have IEPs and which ones do not. The delivery of instruction is fluid and seamless, even though students with IEPs are receiving the supports defined on their service grids. Since the same teachers are supporting discrete skill instruction through the IEP and standards based instruction through the tier 1 curriculum, there is a clearer tie between the two, thereby creating a more integrated experience for students. In addition, students who need accommodations get those regardless of their service plan and modifications are not provided exclusively to students on IEPs. Groupings are often mixed based on discrete skills that align with standards and are flexible depending upon which skill is being supported.

There are a number of resources that illustrate how the core components of MTSS support a co-teaching model and vice versa. For example, Elizabeth Stein's book *Elevating Co-Teaching through UDL* (2016[3]) shows the cross-section of UDL with effective co-taught strategies. For example, she describes the value of an asset-based mindset to support learner variability. She suggests the strategy of using a strength-based inventory with students as a tangible approach to removing deficit-based thinking. Another approach is the convergence of incorporating the UDL Guidelines into examples of co-teaching models. For example, when co-teachers are engaging in station teaching or parallel teaching, they can provide multiple options for how information is presented.

WANT TO EXTEND YOUR LEARNING?

★ Review the MTSS and special education intersections through a dental analogy.
  ○ Check out this video about MTSS not being about a location using the dental analogy.
★ Check out these activities to unpack the connections between the 6 guiding principles of IDEA and the MTSS framework.

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[2] (Morgan, J. (2016). *Reshaping the role of a special educator into a collaborative learning specialist.* International Journal of Whole Schooling, 12(1), 40-6 0.)

[3] Stein, E. (2016). *Elevating co-teaching through UDL.* Wakefield, MA: Cast Professional Publishing.

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