
From the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA

Moving Beyond MTSS to Transform Student/Learning Supports

Student supports are essential in responding in the aftermath of a school shooting and other crisis events.

But, of course, the nature and scope of student/learning supports go well beyond crisis responding.

In the 2015 *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA), a multi-tiered support system (MTSS) was defined as "a comprehensive continuum of evidence-based, systemic practices to support a rapid response to students' needs, with regular observation to facilitate data based instructional decision making." The term MTSS had been coined earlier as part of efforts to place Response to Intervention (RtI) and Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) into a continuum of intervention. Recent research has stressed the concept of integrated MTSS (I-MTSS) – an approach that combines academic and behavioral supports (UConn I-MTSS Research Team, 2024).

Many SEAs and LEAs and schools are using the term MTSS. In 2023, Zhang and colleagues reported that, all 50 states had adopted some form of a tiered support system, and that "different levels of adaption were observed as a result of diverse considerations from state education agencies." The investments in some states have been in the millions. For example, by 2025, California has allocated over 200 million to establish its version of MTSS statewide.

The adaptations and expansions have produced a variety of definitions and operationalizations. *At the same time, it appears that the term has become somewhat of a buzzword that schools adopt without changing practices in substantive ways.*

Over the last five years, a variety of concerns have arisen across the country about how well MTSS is meeting teachers' needs for student/learning supports. Some concerns have zeroed in on the problems related to implementing the system changes.

Our concerns have stressed major limitations of MTSS, and we have noted that the approach is not doing much to end the fragmentation and marginalization that has long characterized the ways that schools address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage disconnected students (<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/BuildMTSS.pdf>).

We suggest that it is essential to realize that more is involved in building a truly comprehensive system "to support a rapid response to students' needs" involves more than a continuum of interventions. That is, while a full continuum is essential, it is just one facet of a comprehensive intervention system. Given this, we view the extensive focus on MTSS as diverting attention from the need for a fundamental transformation of how schools play their role in addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

We recognize that work done in relation to MTSS contributes to efforts to improve student and learning supports. However, as widely conceived, the MTSS framework is much too limited a perspective for ending the marginalization of student/learning supports in school improvement policy. Given the investment in MTSS, we suggest that the way forward is to evolve MTSS initiatives into an intervention framework and agenda that guides development of student/learning supports into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system. See, **JUST RELEASED for 2025-2026**

An Agenda for Improving Student/Learning Supports:

A Month by Month Guide for Systemic Change with Existing Resources

<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/agendapaper.pdf>

Best wishes and be well,

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