

NCEO Tool 15

Multi-Tiered
Systems of
Support (MTSS)
for Students
with the Most
Significant
Cognitive
Disabilities

1% Toolkit

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) for Students with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities

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The states participating in the 1% Cap CoP are listed here: Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia, Wisconsin, Wyoming.

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) for Students with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities

Making decisions about the participation of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities in the alternate assessment based on alternate academic achievement standards (AA-AAAS) necessarily involves consideration of their instruction. A useful framework for considering the inclusion of these students in instruction is Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS).

MTSS is recognized in the 2015 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), also known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), as an approach for increasing student achievement and teacher effectiveness. ESEA defines MTSS 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 decisionmaking. (Sec 81001(33))

In Section 2013, ESEA specifically indicates that programs and activities like MTSS should include children with significant cognitive disabilities (Sec 2103(b)(3)(F)).

The 2015 reauthorization of ESEA includes a 1.0% cap on state-level student participation rates in the AA-AAAS. This has encouraged states to support improved AA-AAAS participation decision making as they work to meet this cap as well as ensure that students with the most significant cognitive disabilities access the grade level, general education standards.

The National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) and TIES Center developed information on including students with the most significant cognitive disabilities in MTSS for educators (see [*MTSS for All: Including Students with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities*](#)). Similar information is needed for parents.

Purpose of This Parent Resource

It is important for parents to understand the MTSS framework so that they can communicate with educators about it. With information designed for them, they can advocate for MTSS in their school and for the inclusion of their child with significant cognitive disabilities in their school's MTSS.

The purpose of this tool is to provide information on MTSS for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities for parents in the form of (a) a fact sheet, and (b) a set of frequently asked questions (FAQs) that provide additional details about MTSS. These parent resources are available for states to adapt to share with districts, parent organizations, and parents. States may want to have available a glossary of terms defined by the state (e.g., specially designed instruction, evidence-based practices).

Fact Sheet for Parents

MTSS for Your Child with Significant Cognitive Disabilities?

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) is a school-wide approach to preventing academic and behavioral concerns and supporting the academic and behavior needs of *all* students. With MTSS, a school can identify academic or behavioral concerns quickly and respond to them with appropriate interventions. The goal of MTSS is to intervene early.

The purpose of this fact sheet is to highlight how MTSS can apply to students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. We also identify strategies that parents can use to ensure that their child benefits from MTSS. More information about MTSS for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities is available in the section, *MTSS Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)*.

What is MTSS?

MTSS is a way of organizing teaching and learning that provides access to core instruction in both academics and positive behavior. MTSS is a way to provide additional academic and behavior interventions to meet students' individual needs. In other words,

MTSS = Core Instruction + Interventions.

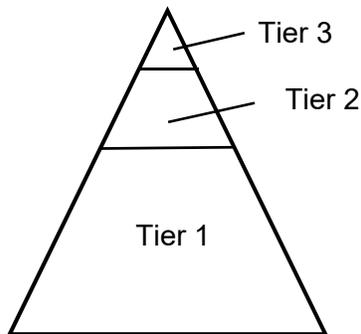
What content does Tier 1 apply to?

Tier 1: Core instruction for academics is the grade level curriculum taught to all students. Core instruction for positive behavior is the school-wide and grade level positive behavior skills taught to **all** students throughout the school day and across all school environments.

MTSS literature often provides a graphic depiction showing three tiers of instruction and interventions in the shape of a triangle. Each tier is smaller than the next tier (see Figure 1):

- Tier 1 is the bottom tier. It is the instruction and behavioral support provided to all students. Often this is described as instruction in the core grade-level curriculum or the school-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) model and social-emotional learning (SEL) routines and strategies.
- Tier 2 is the middle tier. It is provided to some students for whom targeted interventions are needed. Tier 2 strategies reinforce the core content. This may be by pre-teaching or re-teaching content.
- Tier 3 is the third tier. It is provided to a small number of students who need individualized interventions, such as specific instruction to fill gaps in learning or individual behavior plans.

Figure 1. MTSS Triangle Showing Three Tiers



MTSS is an additive model. This means Tier 2 interventions are added to Tier 1 instruction and Tier 3 interventions are added to Tiers 1 and 2.

Data are used to identify which students would benefit from or no longer need additional tiers of support beyond Tier 1. Often this involves school-wide screening data that look at baseline foundational skills or simple behavioral checklists. It also includes classroom data for teachers to understand which students need additional support to learn the content. When a student has an individualized education program (IEP), data collected for some goals may inform what interventions are needed or not needed, or can be thoughtfully faded.

Why Should Your Child Be Involved in MTSS?

Your child is a general education student who also receives special education services. When done well, MTSS can identify the need for increasingly intensive interventions. The need is identified through progress monitoring and the use of evidence-based instructional supports and interventions. Your child deserves the same consistent progress monitoring and increasingly intensive interventions, if they are needed, as other students who may not have a most significant cognitive disability.

When Should Your Child Start Participating in MTSS?

Not all teaching and learning in districts or schools is organized to use MTSS. If it is available, your child should be part of MTSS whenever your child starts educational services. The use of MTSS is not dependent on a student's age or grade.

How Should MTSS Work for Your Child?

MTSS should work for your child in the same way as it works for other students. It should involve screening to identify needs, instruction and interventions to address learning, and progress monitoring to make sure instruction and interventions are working.

Strategies for Parents

There are several things that you can do to make sure that your child is included in MTSS.

1. Ask whether your child’s school implements MTSS.

Talk to your child’s teacher or principal about whether MTSS is used in the school. If it is being used, they will know. If it is not being used, you may want to ask why or suggest that it should be considered. See the next step for ideas on how to support your suggestion that MTSS should be considered.

2. Suggest that your child should be included in MTSS if that is not already being done.

First, establish whether your child is being included in the school’s MTSS. If not, ask why not. Suggest that your child should have access to all of the tiers that are needed to meet their individual needs. Some students with the most significant cognitive disabilities may need only Tiers 1 and 2. In fact, a few may need only Tier 1. For example, a student with significant cognitive disabilities may need extra pre-teaching and re-teaching (Tier 2) beyond what their peers without disabilities require to learn the school-wide positive behavior routines. However, if after the period of additional support they can follow the routines, then Tier 2 supports could be faded. With MTSS being an additive model, students who benefit from Tier 3 interventions should also be receiving Tier 1 and Tier 2 instruction and interventions.

3. Provide your child’s school with information on including students with the most significant cognitive disabilities in MTSS.

The NCEO/TIES brief, [*MTSS for All: Including Students with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities*](#), may be helpful if including your child has not been considered possible. Additional resources are available for your school at [TIESCenter.org](https://tiefcenter.org), including how students with the most significant cognitive disabilities can be effectively included in PBIS. Remember that if your child is struggling to learn within the MTSS framework, it is likely that the “what and how” of the instruction and interventions that are being implemented within the framework should be checked and revised rather than saying the framework is not working.

4. Frequently check to make sure that your child continues to be included in MTSS.

Even if your child is included in your school’s MTSS, you should often check to make sure that your child is included throughout the school year. Ask how the data from each of the tiers are informing your child’s instruction and interventions.

Resources

Center on Multi-Tiered System of Support. <https://mtss4success.org>

Center on PBIS. <https://www.pbis.org>

Rosen, P. (n.d.). *What is MTSS?* Understood. <https://www.understood.org/en/articles/mtss-what-you-need-to-know>

Thurlow, M. L., Ghere, G., Lazarus, S. S., & Liu, K. K. (2020). *MTSS for all: Including*

students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. National Center on Educational Outcomes/TIES Center. <https://nceo.umn.edu/docs/OnlinePubs/NCEOBriefMTSS.pdf>

TIES Center. *Positive Behavior Supports.* <https://tiescenter.org/topics/positive-behavior-support/overview>

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) About Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)

1. Isn't MTSS just for students without disabilities?

No. MTSS applies to **all** students, including those already receiving special education services. This means that it should apply to students with the most significant cognitive disabilities just as it does for all other students in a school.

There are several myths and misconceptions about MTSS that continue to persist. For example, in the past MTSS was sometimes presented only as a way to identify students who need special education services. That is not how it should be. Rather, MTSS is a way that a whole school organizes to provide instruction and interventions to each and every student. Another misconception is that MTSS does not apply to students with disabilities because they already receive extra support and interventions. Federal law makes it clear that students with disabilities are included in MTSS (See Question #2). Neither of these myths is correct and continue to cause confusion about what MTSS is and is not.

2. Does MTSS appear in federal law?

Yes. MTSS is defined in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) 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. (Sec 8101(33)).

ESEA confirms that all children should be included in this type of program. The law specifically mentions students with significant cognitive disabilities.

3. Is Tier 3 the tier in MTSS that is most appropriate for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities?

All students should have access to all tiers if needed. Some systems incorrectly identify special education services as Tier 3. Special education services should be integrated in all three tiers of instruction and intervention. This means that students with the most significant cognitive disabilities should have access to and could benefit from all of the supports and interventions in Tiers 1, 2, and 3, if needed.

4. How should the three tiers of MTSS work with each other?

MTSS is an additive model made up of instruction and interventions. This means Tier 2 interventions are added to Tier 1 instruction and Tier 3 interventions are added to Tiers 1 and 2. Consider three ice cream cones (see Figure 1). One child orders a single scoop of vanilla ice cream (Tier 1). Another child orders a double scoop cone (Tiers 1 and 2) and gets both the vanilla and chocolate scoops. The last child orders a triple scoop cone

(Tiers 1, 2, and 3) and gets a third strawberry scoop in addition to the vanilla and chocolate scoops. For each order, the ice cream scoops are added to the previous scoops. The ice cream cone represents the typical non-academic parts of a school in which all students should participate. These include routines like being greeted by the principal at the front door in the morning, going to lunch with grade-level peers, and participating in school assemblies or events.

Figure 1. Ice Cream Cones and the Additive Nature of MTSS



Figure reprinted with permission from TIES Center (Ghere, 2021)¹

Using an MTSS model means that Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions (e.g., the chocolate and strawberry scoops) are built on the Tier 1 instruction (e.g., the vanilla scoop). No child should only get the strawberry scoop (Tier 3 interventions). However, this often happens in instruction for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. They may only receive Tier 3 interventions rather than the robust educational program (with access to all tiers) that they should be receiving. In fact, sometimes they do not even participate in the regular routines in their school (the cone). For example, they may not eat lunch in the cafeteria with their peers, but instead remain in their segregated classroom for lunch. Or, the bus may drop them off at a separate door away from where all of their peers without disabilities enter the school and are greeted by the principal. In these instances, the student only receives the strawberry scoop of ice cream.

¹Adapted from Ghere, G. (July, 2021). *MTSS inclusive of students with significant cognitive disabilities*. OSEP Project Director Meeting, Re-envisioning Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS) in Post COVID-19 Educational Environment. Washington D.C.

5. What are the major features of MTSS?

For **all** students, MTSS should involve:²

- **Screening.** Typical tools used for screening may need to be adapted for some students with disabilities. If typical screening measures do not work, consider using systematic observations and checklists. Be sure that the child’s communication skills are considered and supported in the screening process.
- **Instruction and interventions.** Both general education services and special education services should be incorporated into all tiers.
 - Universally designed and differentiated general education and specially designed special education instruction can work together to provide an inclusive MTSS approach.
 - Collaboration of special educators and general educators is critical. Together they can identify instructional approaches that can work in general education classrooms for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities.
- **Progress monitoring.** Ongoing checks on whether students are responding to instructional supports and interventions provide timely information on the extent that the student is learning and if changes are needed in the approach to resolve academic or behavioral concerns. Progress monitoring should focus on the specific academic or behavioral skills on which the student is working.

None of these steps involves moving the student to a more restrictive placement.

6. How does MTSS interact with a student’s special education services indicated in the student’s Individualized Education Program (IEP)?

A student’s IEP is not the student’s entire educational plan. Special education services and goals should be integrated with all the tiers in which the student is participating.

7. How does the IEP fit into MTSS?

The IEP is the student’s individual educational program that identifies the student’s annual goals as well as the accommodations and modifications that will be provided. The IEP and MTSS can work seamlessly together in all three tiers. To achieve this, teams determine which goals, accommodations, and modifications will be prioritized and how they will be implemented for each tier. For example, if a student has a goal to learn the essential academic vocabulary in each class, then consistent strategies for achieving this (such as graphic organizers and visuals) should be embedded in all tiers of instruction. Whether a general education teacher is providing Tier 1 instruction; a paraprofessional is helping with pre-teaching or re-teaching in Tier 2; or a speech language pathologist is

²See NCEO/TIES Center brief, *MTSS for All: Including Students with the Most Significant Cognitive Disabilities* (<https://nceo.umn.edu/docs/OnlinePubs/NCEOBriefMTSS.pdf>) for more information about MTSS approaches for students with significant cognitive disabilities.

providing intensive individualized Tier 3 instruction, the instruction and interventions should all include the strategies outlined in the IEP.

8 How is MTSS implemented in segregated settings?

MTSS is designed to be a school-wide process that is inclusive of **all** students and is well aligned with inclusive education models. However, if students are in a segregated, special education setting, then the special education teacher should provide grade-level standards-based academic Tier 1 instruction to the whole class and implement Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports as needed by individual students.

Similarly, students with the most significant cognitive disabilities in a segregated classroom should be included in the school's Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS).³ By participating in school-wide PBIS, they benefit from the evidence-based practices that are a part of PBIS. Participating in school-wide PBIS also provides a bridge to successfully access inclusive settings because the students are familiar with the school routines that all students follow.

9. What should a parent of a student with the most significant cognitive disabilities do if Tier 1 is not offered?

Parents can advocate for their child to have access to the grade-level general education curriculum. They also can request that the child be taught the Tier 1 curriculum, consistent with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). To support their advocacy, they can share resources⁴ that show the benefits of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities learning the general education curriculum in inclusive classrooms and participating in school-wide positive behavior interventions and supports.

³See the TIES Center resources on [Positive Behavior Supports](#) for more information.

⁴See, resources available on the TIES Center website (tiescenter.org).

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