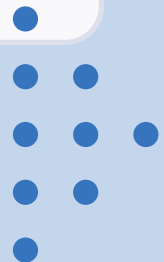




Implementing MTSS in Secondary Schools:

A Practical Guide to Supporting All Students



BRANCHING MINDS

Introduction

Strong MTSS at the secondary level doesn't come from trying to do everything at once. It comes from building a strong foundation, bringing the right people to the table, and responding to student needs with clarity, consistency, and care. It's not always easy—our students face complex challenges, our schedules are packed, and staff are stretched thin. But it's the kind of work that changes lives and builds better futures.

One of my most meaningful experiences with this work came before we even called it MTSS. In 2004, I was asked to design a class for incoming ninth graders with several flags that they might struggle in high school. Armed with data, research, and a whole lot of heart, I proposed a class that would meet students where they were—supporting foundational skill development while keeping them engaged with grade-level standards. We created an early warning system without knowing it, built trust through relationships, and wove tiered supports into daily practice. We were doing MTSS before we had the vocabulary.

And it worked! Students grew on every data point we used to place them. Attendance was higher than average. Many went on to take AP or honors classes. Most importantly, they told us they felt more confident. That experience has stayed with me because it proved what's possible when we **design with intention, let the data guide our decisions, and believe in the potential of our students.**

This guide is about bringing that same spirit to your secondary MTSS journey.



Teresa Bunner

Former Teacher and Administrator
Branching Minds Consultant

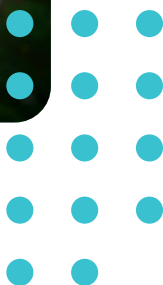




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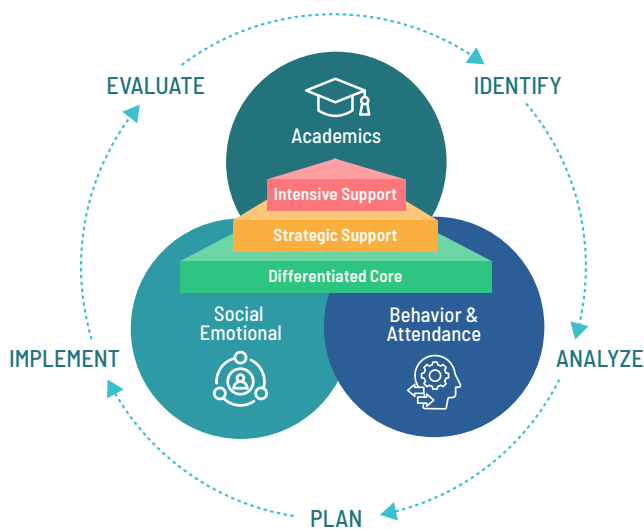
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Understanding MTSS at the Secondary Level

No matter what level of education you are at - from preschool to high school - you have the same questions:

- ➔ Are most students getting what they need to meet expectations in academics, behavior, and social-emotional learning?
- ➔ Which students need additional support to be successful?
- ➔ How will we help?
- ➔ Is the support we are providing actually working?

The MTSS Model



MTSS was designed to answer these questions. It incorporates a **problem-solving model** that uses data to inform instruction and intervention, along with a **tiered framework** that organizes available resources (time, staff, space, curriculum) to best meet the needs of all students.

A strong MTSS structure in secondary schools meets the increasingly complex needs of adolescents while keeping them on track toward graduation and postsecondary success.

Here's why MTSS matters for secondary schools:

- **Collaborative Culture:** MTSS fosters shared responsibility and collective efficacy across the campus.
- **Early Identification:** Timely interventions keep students from falling behind when graduation is just around the corner.
- **Whole-Child Focus:** MTSS integrates academics, behavior, and social skills.
- **Fair Access:** Every student receives the support they need, regardless of background or ability.
- **College, Career & Military Readiness (CCMR):** MTSS helps build the skills and engagement students need for life after high school.
- **Efficient Resource Use:** Aligning supports through MTSS helps schools use staff time and programs effectively.



New to MTSS? Check out our [Ultimate Guide to MTSS](#) for a deeper dive.

What Makes Secondary MTSS Different?

Much of the research and materials you will find on MTSS concentrate on elementary settings, but secondary schools encounter unique challenges: departmentalized instruction, complex scheduling, and diverse student needs.

Key considerations for planning MTSS in secondary schools include:

- ▶ **Teaming and Problem-Solving**—Cross-department collaboration and student-level teams are vital for effective implementation.
- ▶ **Standards-based Core Instruction** - This is the foundation of everything we do. All students should be given access to solid grade-level instruction and skill development in academics, behavior, and social skills.
- ▶ **Scheduling**—Departmental schedules and master planning require flexible, creative strategies to ensure strong Tier 1 instruction and adequate time for Tier 2 and 3 interventions.
- ▶ **Intervention Delivery**—Since students move between classes, interventions must be coordinated across content areas and periods.
- ▶ **Support Focus**—Interventions may target specific skills, course content, CCMR, executive functioning, or SEL.
- ▶ **Data and Monitoring**—With multiple teachers and course structures, consistent and collaborative data use is essential.
- ▶ **Student Voice and Ownership**—Secondary students should actively participate in goal setting, decision-making, and engaging in advisory, mentoring, or self-monitoring activities.

We often think of MTSS in terms of tiers, but really, it's about making sure every student gets what they need, when they need it. And in secondary schools, that support has to fit within the unique structure of the day and the complex needs of adolescents.

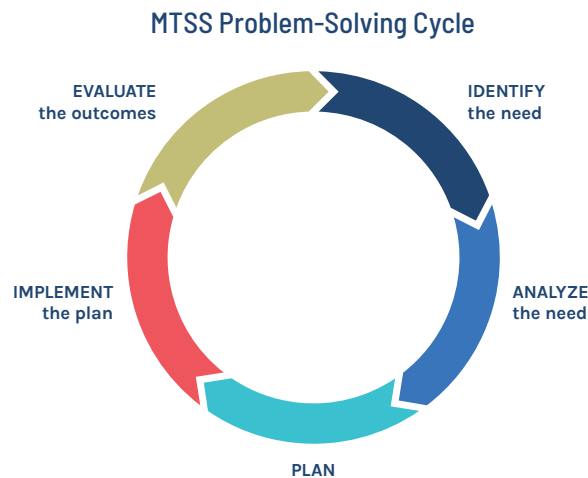
Is MTSS at the secondary level challenging work? Yes. Is it possible? Absolutely!

TIP: Credit Where It's Due

Participation in MTSS planning and implementation can take significant time. Many campuses count service on MTSS teams toward extra-duty responsibilities—acknowledging the time and expertise teachers and staff members contribute to student success.

MTSS Collaboration and Problem-Solving

When you have a consistent, collaborative data practice and a clear process for problem-solving, all the rest becomes possible. You can prioritize and build out your MTSS step by step. And at the heart of that work? Your MTSS teams. They're the ones connecting the dots between data and action, making sure supports are aligned, effective, and responsive to student needs.



MTSS Teaming Structures

A linked teaming structure is essential for secondary schools. Depending on the size of your school, you may need several teams with standing and rotating members, along with clear guidelines and communication.

Teams	Purpose	Responsibilities
Campus MTSS Leadership Teams for Academics and Behavior Purpose	Steers implementation and aligns MTSS work to school priorities.	Monitor system health; share data; plan professional learning; coordinate/communicate with other teams.
Departmental Teams/PLCs	Monitors Tier 1 instruction and behavior, flags students needing support.	Review progress and formative data monthly; surface Tier 2 and 3 needs; communicate with campus leadership and Tier 2 and 3 intervention teams.
Tier 2 & 3 Intervention Teams	Logistical support for targeted and intensive intervention programs.	Meet biweekly; track fidelity and outcomes; ensure staffing/scheduling; escalate students as needed.
Individual Student Support Teams	Respond to highest-need students with customized Tier 3 planning.	Meet weekly/biweekly; analyze data; create and adjust student plans.



Check out the [MTSS Meetings Guide and Toolkit](#) for resources such as sample agendas and meeting tips.

Academic Instruction and Interventions

When I taught that ninth-grade class, I didn't know exactly where my students would end up, but I knew they needed a set of skills to ensure they could go anywhere they chose. Whether you emphasize college, career, or military pathways, the goal remains the same: ensure every student leaves high school equipped to pursue the future they choose. MTSS plays a critical role in making that vision possible.

Tier 1: Differentiated Core Instruction

Strong MTSS begins with Tier 1—high-quality, standards-aligned instruction that's relevant, responsive, and rooted in strong classroom relationships. At the secondary level, this looks like:

- **Standards-aligned and real-world relevant:** Instruction should challenge students, connect to future outcomes, and align with both state standards and CCMR goals.
- **Differentiation is essential:** Differentiation isn't a nice-to-have—it's non-negotiable. This means adjusting how we teach, what students do, or how they show their learning. It includes both support and enrichment.
- **Formative assessment every day:** Daily check-ins help teachers understand what students know and what they need next—beyond just benchmark data.
- **Behavior supports and SEL embedded in instruction:** Academic success depends on a learning environment where students feel safe, respected, and supported.

TIP: Teachers Need More Than a “How-To”

If your school has adopted instructional materials, teachers need more than implementation training—they need time and support to deepen their understanding of the standards and content. Professional learning should include ongoing opportunities for reflection on the what, the how, and the why.

When Tier 1 is strong and aligned to real-world expectations, students are more likely to stay on track for graduation—and more confident in taking their next step, whatever that may be.



Want to dig deeper? Check out [MTSS Core Instruction Guide](#)
Resource: [Appendix A Tier 1 Differentiation Checklist](#)
Resource: [How MTSS Supports College and Career Readiness](#)

Tier 2: Targeted Interventions and Supports

Tier 2 is for students who need a little more—more time, more focus, or more explicit instruction on a skill they haven't yet mastered. This is not about reteaching a whole lesson. Tier 2 is about closing a specific skill gap before it becomes a bigger one.

Intervention at this level should target specific skill gaps—not serve as general support. It delivers focused, time-bound, data-informed interventions in small groups without replacing Tier 1 instruction:

- Small group instruction
- Research-based interventions aligned to their identified needs
- 2–3 sessions per week, ideally 20–30 minutes
- Clear, measurable goals based on data

Tier 1 Differentiation versus Tier 2 Support/Intervention

A common question is what makes Tier 2 instruction different from differentiation.

Tier 1 Instruction & Differentiation

- ➔ Standards-driving, at grade level
- ➔ Designed for ALL students
- ➔ Provided by classroom teacher

Tier 2 Intervention

- ➔ Targeted skills-driven
- ➔ Designed for a group of students with the same skill deficit
- ➔ Provided by classroom teacher or another trained educator, in or out of the classroom
- ➔ Occurs in addition to Tier 1 instruction
- ➔ Linked to a Tier 2 support plan with SMART goals, progress monitoring tools, and dosage guidelines

Small Group Intervention

Pulling small groups is a common practice in elementary settings, but in secondary schools, it often becomes a pullout strategy used only by specialists. That doesn't have to be the case. With a mindset shift, small group instruction can be embedded directly into secondary classrooms as part of core instruction. When pull out is necessary, how to make time without pulling students from core instruction?



EXAMPLE:

That ninth-grade class I taught? I used student data to form flexible, dynamic small groups that changed as needed. One week, I might work on multisyllabic word reading; the next, it might be comprehension strategies or synthesizing multiple sources of information. The key was letting student needs—revealed through data—drive the instruction.

Strategies for Scheduling Tier 2 Without Sacrificing Core Learning

- ➔ **Built-in intervention/enrichment blocks** within the master schedule
- ➔ **Embedded co-teaching or push-in support** during core classes
- ➔ **In-class intervention blocks** during lessons (ideally 20–30 minutes, but can vary)

TIP: Using Data to Drive Small Group Design

While universal screener data provides an initial indicator of student need, formative assessment and progress monitoring are your key tools for designing and adjusting small group instruction.

Steps to Make Data-Driven Grouping Work:

■ Group Students Intentionally

Use formative assessment data to form flexible groups.

■ Differentiate Within Groups

Use formative data to tailor the level of support.

Example: Provide scaffolding or one-on-one help for students still developing foundational skills; push advanced students further with challenge tasks.

■ Continue Formative Assessment During Intervention

Monitor learning in real time using:

- ▶ Observations
- ▶ Questioning
- ▶ Quick checks (e.g., whiteboards, think-alouds)

■ Adjust Mid-Intervention as Needed

If a student isn't progressing, use the data to shift your strategy. You might reteach using a different method, provide visual aids, or adjust the pace of instruction.



EXAMPLE:

In a high school biology class, data shows some students are struggling with the vocabulary needed for the cell unit. An interventionist or teacher could pull those students 2–3 times a week to explicitly teach terms, with progress monitoring determining when they're ready to rejoin independent work.



Want to explore this topic more? Here are some additional resources:

[Progress Monitoring for MTSS at the Secondary Level](#)

[What are MTSS Assessments in High School and Why Are They Important?](#)

Tier 3: Intensive Support

Determining Tier 2 and Tier 3 Placement

A student moves to **Tier 2** when differentiated core instruction (Tier 1) is not enough to meet their needs. A student moves to **Tier 3** only when sufficient progress is not made at Tier 2 and they demonstrate a clear need for more intensive support.

What SHOULD Tier 3 Look Like?

Tier 3 is not just “more Tier 2.” It’s **targeted, individualized, and intentional**. Students at this level need:

- **1:1 or very small group instruction** (no more than 3 students)
- **4–5 sessions per week**, ideally 30+ minutes per session
- **Clear, individualized goals**, based on specific data
- **Standard intervention protocols**, where possible
- **Personalized plans** that include:
 - ▶ Specific goals
 - ▶ Behavior Support Plans
 - ▶ Support from specialists (e.g., counselor, interventionist)
 - ▶ Wraparound services and community support if indicated

TIP: Keeping Students Engaged

For many struggling students, specials classes and extracurricular activities are where they find joy in school. Our goal is to provide intensive support while keeping students engaged and on track for graduation.

Scheduling Tier 3 Without Sacrificing Core Learning

Let’s be honest—secondary schedules are packed. Finding time for Tier 3 can feel impossible, but it is possible with intentional design and collaboration. Here are options to explore:

- ➔ Built-in **intervention/enrichment blocks** in the master schedule
- ➔ **Embedded co-teaching or push-in support** during targeted classes
- ➔ **Rotating pull-outs** so students don’t miss the same content repeatedly
- ➔ **Tier 3 rotation days** within flex periods, supported by collaborative planning
- ➔ (As a last resort) Pull from electives (e.g., advisory, study skills, or low-stakes elective periods)

Avoid These Common Tier 3 Pitfalls

- ✗ Pulling students from core academic instruction
- ✗ Stacking Tier 3 on top of Tier 1 without coordination
- ✗ Using Tier 3 time for unstructured reteaching or general homework help

Screening and Progress Monitoring: The Foundation for Tiered Support

Data—not instinct—is the foundation of effective Tier 3 support. We must be hyper-focused on identifying what students specifically need and tracking whether they're getting it.

Key data questions to guide your Tier 2/Tier 3 process:

- What does the **Tier 2 screening + diagnostic data** reveal about this student's learning gaps?
- What **progress monitoring tools** will we use? (Must be weekly, skill-specific, and actionable.)

TIP: Tier 3 Should Feel Different—for Students Too

When done well, Tier 3 intervention feels purposeful. Student self-perception about their placement can impact the efficacy of the intervention. We need to help students understand that intervention is not a punishment, or a place students go when they've "failed." It's a personalized boost—tied to their data, progress monitored closely, and celebrated when they graduate from it.

Branching Minds All Students Page

The screenshot displays the Branching Minds platform interface. At the top, it says "Showing 4697 Students" with filters for "3950 Missing plans" and "43 Overdue To-dos". A search bar and a "Filter" button are visible. The main table lists students with columns for Student Name, ID, Grade, School, and various academic and behavioral metrics. A student profile for Maya Johnson is highlighted, showing her grade (11) and scores in Reading (1), Math (3), and Behavior (2).

Student Name	ID	Grade	School	A	B	C	Reading	Math	Behavior	Writing	Speech	Science
Tremayne Aaron	26138	7	Oak Middle School	L	M	H	A 3	A 1	A 2	A 1	—	A 3
Cason Abel	39437	5	Willow Elementary	L	H	L	A 1	A 1	A 3	A 1	—	A 1
Alayah Abell	41430	12	Hickory High Scho...	L	L	L	A 2	A 2	A 1	A 1	A 1	A 3
Gage Abernathy	39369	4	Elm Elementary	L	L	L	A 1	A 1	A 1	A 1	A 1	—
Jaelyn Abner	26992	7	Oak Middle School	L	L	L	A 1	A 1	A 1	A 1	A 1	A 1
Magdalena Abney	40237	10	Hickory High Scho...	L	L	L	—	A 1	A 1	—	A 1	A 1
Cristobal Abraham	26205	7	Oak Middle School	L	L	L	A 3	A 1	A 1	A 2	A 1	A 1
Buddy Abrams	24453	9	Hickory High Scho...	L	L	M	A 2	A 1	A 1	A 3	—	A 1
Lissie Abreu	23426	10	Hickory High Scho...	L	L	L	A 1	A 1	A 1	A 1	A 1	A 1
Soloman Acevedo	26014	7	Oak Middle School	L	L	L	A 1	A 1	A 2	A 1	A 1	A 1
Harriett Acker	39558	4	Birch Elementary	L	M	H	A 3	A 1	A 1	A 1	A 1	—
Gonzalo Ackerman	29503	4	Maple Elementary	L	L	H	A 3	A 1	A 1	A 1	A 1	—
Lester Acres	43901	K	Maple Elementary	L	H	M	A 3	A 3	A 3	A 1	A 1	—
Brandy Acuna	42821	PK	Pine Elementary	L	L	H	A 1	A 1	A 2	A 1	—	—

The [Branching Minds platform](#) is specifically designed to help secondary staff see student needs at a glance, create intervention plans, and easily document progress.

Behavior Support and Social Emotional Learning

Supporting student behavioral and social development in secondary schools starts with a strong Tier 1 foundation—one in which students have an active role. While it's tempting to jump to Tier 2 or 3 when challenges arise, meaningful behavior support begins by **co-creating expectations with students and staff**, using reinforcement systems that feel age-appropriate, and integrating clear expectations, skills instruction, and practice.

Universal Behavior Supports

- ❑ **Clear Expectations:** Defined schoolwide and posted in common areas and classrooms. The language of the expectations is embedded in the daily rhythm of the school.
- ❑ **Consistent Routines:** Taught and practiced—not just assumed. This includes hallway behavior, group transitions, tech use, and more.
- ❑ **Positive Reinforcement:** A culture that recognizes and celebrates students doing the right thing.
- ❑ **Restorative Practices:** Relationship-based approaches to repair harm and rebuild trust.
- ❑ **Shared Language:** Everyone—from teachers to office staff—uses the same terms and systems.

These don't replace consequences. But they help reduce the need for them by preventing issues before they escalate.

Connecting Behavior Support to Instruction and Culture

Behavior isn't just a discipline issue—it's part of the learning environment. When students feel respected, seen, and supported, they're more likely to engage. And when teachers have consistent structures and backup, they can focus on instruction, not just management.

That's why Tier 1 behavior supports must be tied to your overall MTSS approach, not soloed into discipline or administration-only systems.



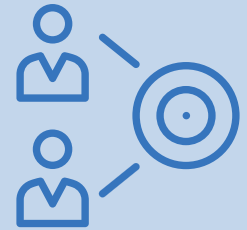
Want to learn more? Check out the [Tier Behavior and School Climate Guide for School Leaders](#)

Screening for Behavior and SEL Needs

Identifying students in need of additional behavioral or social-emotional support requires more than isolated incidents or gut feelings. The most effective secondary schools use **universal screening tools** paired with additional **data sources** to form a clearer, more holistic understanding of student needs.

Universal screeners for behavior and SEL should be:

- ➔ **Validated and age-appropriate**
- ➔ **Administered consistently** (e.g., 2–3 times per year)
- ➔ **Reviewed by a trained, cross-functional team**
- ➔ **Consistent cut points** that indicate a need for support
- ➔ **Used with a clear response plan** that ensures timely intervention



Universal screening helps surface early indicators—like difficulty with self-regulation, peer relationships, or engagement—before those challenges escalate. Other data sources that should trigger a conversation about additional supports include:

- Office discipline referrals
- Attendance patterns and chronic absenteeism
- Family feedback, student self-report

This data allows MTSS teams to identify students who may benefit from Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions—and to match those students with the right support, whether that’s targeted SEL instruction, behavior coaching, or a mental health referral.

Using Discipline Data to Inform System-Level Decision

Instead of simply tracking infractions, ask:

- ➔ Are certain students or groups referred more often?
- ➔ Are there patterns by class period, teacher, or time of day?
- ➔ What behavior supports were provided before the referral?
- ➔ How do we ensure consequences are fair, restorative, and effective?

Behavioral data can highlight patterns and systemic issues (e.g., unclear expectations, bias, gaps in Tier 1 instruction) and help teams refine both prevention and intervention efforts.



For more information, explore our [Guide to Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Screening](#)

Targeted Behavior Support

Students who may not have severe behavior issues but whose actions—like disorganization, impulsivity, or withdrawal—impact their learning can benefit greatly from targeted support. They may feel disconnected from school or have unnoticed academic gaps contributing to frustration or avoidance. These students don't need punishment; they need support that's timely, meaningful, and age-appropriate.

Tier 2 behavior supports in secondary might include:

- **Check-In/Check-Out (CICO)** with a trusted adult, with additional structure and feedback throughout the day
- **Mentor programs** with staff, coaches, or student leaders
- **Social skills groups** during advisory or lunch
- **Behavior contracts** co-created with the student

These supports should be monitored just like academic interventions. If a student isn't making progress, it's time to revisit the support plan—and possibly consider Tier 3 support.

Intensive Behavior Support

When student behavior escalates to the level where it is dangerous and disruptive, it's easy to lean on exclusionary practices—ISS, OSS, or alternative placements. But those approaches often lead to missed learning, disengagement, and a cycle that's hard to break. These students need **individualized support and wraparound services** to coordinate between school, home, and community supports.

Tier 3 behavior supports may include:

- **Function-based intervention plan** that includes time for skill development, practice, and reinforcement.
- **A campus-based coordinator and mentor**
- **Restorative conferencing** or reentry meetings
- **Wraparound support** involving counselors, families, and external agencies

TIP: Tiered Behavior Interventions Should Feel Supportive, Not Punitive

There is a place for consequences - especially natural consequences that reflect an understanding of the function of the student's behavior. But tiered intervention should be intentionally positive and supportive, with increased skills instruction, practice, positive reinforcement, and relationship-building. When behavior support is positive, consistent, and aligned, students are more likely to stay engaged.



For additional support and ideas, check out the Branching Minds collection of [Behavior Intervention Resources for School Leaders](#)

Social-Emotional Learning for Secondary Students

Middle and high school students face rising academic demands, peer and social pressures, identity development, and the stress of preparing for life beyond graduation. Many also carry challenges that impact their ability to learn.

SEL supports help students build essential skills for school and life:

- Self-awareness and emotional regulation
- Responsible decision-making
- Relationship-building and communication
- Goal setting and persistence

These skills don't just benefit students—they improve classroom culture, reduce disruptions, and support a more productive learning environment.

What Tier 1 SEL Looks Like

Strong Tier 1 SEL is proactive and built into the daily rhythms of your school:

- ➔ Explicit teaching of SEL competencies through advisory, classroom routines, or dedicated time
- ➔ Integrated SEL language across content areas (reflection prompts, group norms, check-ins)
- ➔ Modeling by adults—in both instruction and relationships
- ➔ Opportunities for leadership, collaboration, and self-advocacy

Tier 2 & Tier 3 SEL Supports

Just like with academics and behavior, some students need more intensive SEL support. Tier 2 may include small group sessions on coping or communication, peer groups or mindfulness during advisory or lunch, check-ins with a trusted adult, or short-term counseling tied to specific needs. Tier 3 may involve individualized counseling, intensive plans coordinated with academic and behavior supports, or referrals to external services. All interventions should be data-driven, progress-monitored, and integrated into the student's overall MTSS plan.

TIP: Student Ownership is Essential

One of the most powerful ways to build buy-in and relevance is to **include students in shaping your SEL and behavior work**. Create a student team to provide feedback and insight as part of your MTSS framework. It's a small investment that pays off in stronger culture, trust, and shared ownership.

Scheduling and Staffing Interventions

Secondary schools operate with unique demands, and successful MTSS implementation must align with your schedule, staffing, and instructional reality. There's no one-size-fits-all solution—intentional design is key.

Start With the Right Questions

As you evaluate or create your master schedule, ask:

- What are our school's priorities, and does our schedule reflect them?
- Are we meeting state/district requirements for instructional minutes and core content?
- Is there **dedicated time for intervention and enrichment** that meets all student needs?
- Does our schedule allow students to **move fluidly in and out of Tier 2 and 3 supports**, based on data?
- When and how do teachers have time to **collaborate and plan** for tiered instruction?

Scheduling Models That Support MTSS

Here are common scheduling approaches that allow for targeted support and enrichment at the secondary level:

- ➔ **WIN (What I Need) Period:** A schoolwide daily block for intervention, enrichment, study hall, or clubs. Some days are pre-assigned; others allow students to self-select supports or enrichment activities.
- ➔ **Floating Period:** Extra time rotates between class periods across the week, allowing for small-group or differentiated instruction.
- ➔ **Intervention Classes:** Scheduled based on data, these courses offer targeted support but may reduce elective flexibility.
- ➔ **Block Scheduling:** Longer periods provide natural space for integrated small-group or intervention time within the class itself.
- ➔ **Custom Schedules:** Many schools blend elements to create a structure tailored to their students, staff, and goals.

TIP: Involve the People Actually Doing the Work

Include representatives from all stakeholder groups—classroom teachers, special educators, Title I, and ELL specialists—in planning intervention/enrichment blocks. They will bring real-world insight, potential barriers, and creativity to the process, and will help increase buy-in for changes.

Staffing Your MTSS

Time and people are often cited as two of the biggest challenges in fully implementing MTSS at the secondary level. Make sure your staffing and schedule reflect your priorities—for students and the adults. Build in:

- Clear roles for staff delivering interventions
- Collaboration blocks for planning and reflection
- Opportunities to refine scheduling based on outcomes

When staffing for Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions, there are the two key considerations:

1 Ensuring Staff Expertise

Content knowledge matters. When hiring interventionists for secondary students, prioritize deep expertise in the relevant subject area—whether that’s math, reading, behavior, or SEL. Effective support depends on targeted, high-quality instruction.

2 Utilizing Existing Staff

Especially for Tier 2 supports, consider how to build on the strengths of your current general education staff.

- ▶ Co-teaching models can enable differentiation within content classes.
- ▶ Instructional coaches can strengthen practices schoolwide.
- ▶ Instructional aides can help facilitate small group instruction by supervising students working independently on Tier 1 tasks, freeing teachers to focus on targeted Tier 2 support.

Strategic staffing isn’t just about adding roles—it’s about using your people wisely to extend impact without overwhelming your team.

TIP: Build the Base Before You Layer

It can’t be stressed enough: when Tier 1 academic instruction is strong—and embeds behavior and SEL—we should be meeting the needs of most students. If our data indicates otherwise, the first step should be supporting staff in strengthening Tier 1 before layering on additional interventions.



Appendix B: [Scheduling and Interventions Planning Checklist](#)

Staff, Student, and Family Voice: A Partnership

Too often, systems are built without input from the people most affected by them. A strong MTSS framework relies on **collaborative planning, feedback, and shared ownership**. When staff, students, and families are invited into the process—from design to reflection—MTSS becomes more responsive and impactful.

Staff Voice: The Front Line of MTSS

Your staff are the ones doing the daily work. To keep MTSS effective and consistent, they need **clear communication, access to data, and opportunities to give input**:

➔ Clarify Roles and Flow of Information

Define who's doing what across MTSS teams, when meetings happen, and how insights are shared with all staff.

➔ Ensure Data Transparency

Give staff easy access to relevant data, and consistently share updates.

➔ Create Feedback Loops That Work

Use digital polls, surveys, or exit tickets at staff meetings to gather input. And, Find ways for staff to share concerns that are truly anonymous. Share summaries of what you hear—and how it will (or won't) shape next steps. Being transparent builds trust.

Including Student and Family Voices

When students and families are **engaged as active partners**, MTSS becomes a system built with them, not just for them:

- **Build Formal Feedback Structures:** Create student and family advisory groups. Use surveys throughout the year and incorporate results into MTSS planning.
- **Make MTSS accessible:** Provide translation, offer digital and in-person options, and schedule across varied times.
- **Include Them in MTSS Teams:** Invite students and family members to join school-level or district-level MTSS committees as appropriate. In individual student support level meetings, ensure supports are co-designed with students and families—not just prescribed to them.



Students and families aren't passive recipients of support—they're essential partners. When we **listen with intention and respond with humility**, we build a system that reflects the full strength of our school community.

Special Topics in MTSS

Early Warning Systems

An Early Warning System is a tool (or set of tools) that helps schools identify students at risk of disengagement, failure, or dropout. It consolidates multiple data points to indicate where students may require additional support.

Early Warning Indicators include:

- ➔ **Attendance:** Frequent absences or tardies
- ➔ **Behavior:** Office referrals, suspensions, or concerning patterns
- ➔ **Course Performance:** Failing grades or drops in academic engagement
- ➔ **Credits:** Being off-track for graduation

How to Use Early Warning Data Effectively

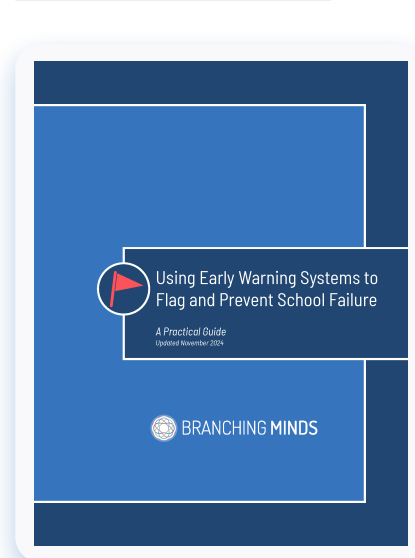
Data is only helpful if it's acted on. That means building regular data review into your MTSS structures.

Strong data practices include:

- **Weekly or biweekly student support team meetings** for reviewing Tier 2/Tier 3 needs
- **Dashboard tools or trackers** to visualize trends and flag students
- **Protocols** for how to respond when students meet certain thresholds (e.g., 3 unexcused absences in 10 days triggers a team check-in)
- **Looking beyond the numbers:** Attendance dips, for example, may reflect a health issue, a transportation gap, or a social disconnect

Don't forget to include **student voice** in these processes. Before we assume what's wrong, we need to ask students what they're experiencing and what would help.

Learn how to set up your own EWS here:
[Using Early Warning Systems to Flag and Prevent School Failure](#)



TIP: Early Warning Systems Must Be Tied to Intervention

Early warning systems don't just help us identify students—they help us respond in time. When paired with thoughtful team structures and consistent action, data becomes a tool for fairness, not just accountability.

Threat Assessment and Suicide Risk Response

Suicide or threat assessments are essential safety responses—but they don’t replace intervention! These tools should be integrated into the overall MTSS, not a separate structure or afterthought.

Just as with all of the other components of our Multi-Tiered System of Support, we need to have a structured approach.

Considerations for Creating a Behavioral and Suicide Risk Response:

- ➔ **Understand the legal considerations** - Laws like FERPA and state laws should guide the approach
- ➔ **Create a School Safety Team**
 - ▶ The team should include personnel such as an administrator, school mental health professionals, the school resource officer, school health personnel, and other trained staff.
 - ▶ The team should meet regularly to stay up to date and connected
 - ▶ There should be overlap with school MTSS teams to coordinate ongoing supports.
- ➔ **Use evidence-based protocols** and tools like the Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines (CSTAG) and the Columbia Suicide Severity Rating Scale (CSSRS.)
- ➔ **Use purpose-built technology tools** to track data and support implementation to ensure nothing falls through the cracks.



Want more information about threat assessment? Download our free guide: [Integrating Threat Assessment and Suicide Risk Screening into MTSS](#)

Safety Insights with Canopy Case Management

Date Created	Student ID	Student Name	School	Grade	Last Modified	Last Modified By	Risk Classification	Status
03-10-2025 09:00AM	891237	Liam Johnson	Maple Leaf High School	10	03-12-2025 09:00AM	Max Anderson	Pending	Active
03-08-2025 09:00AM	891237	Emma Smith	Maple Leaf High School	9	03-11-2025 09:00AM	Max Anderson	High Risk	Active
03-07-2025 09:00AM	891237	Noah Brown	Maple Leaf High School	11	03-10-2025 09:00AM	Sophia Lee	Moderate Risk	Active
03-05-2025 10:00AM	891237	Olivia Davis	Maple Leaf High School	10	03-07-2025 09:00AM	Sophia Lee	Low Risk	Active
03-05-2025 09:00AM	891237	Ethan Wilson	Maple Leaf High School	10	03-07-2025 09:00AM	Sophia Lee	Moderate Risk	Active

We know how important safety is to your MTSS. That’s why Branching Minds built [Canopy Case Management](#)—to help you proactively respond when a threat arises. Reach out today to request a demo.

AB

Aiden Brooks

Case Resolved

ET

Elijah Thompson

Active Safety Plan

GC

Gabriel Cox

Pending Classification

Credit Recovery and Re-engagement

Credit recovery and student re-engagement aren't just about reteaching content—they're about creating space, time, and support structures for students to reclaim their path toward graduation.

Tip: Prevention is the Best Intervention

A strong MTSS framework, paired with a reliable early warning system, can reduce the number of students who require intensive recovery or re-engagement. But for those who do, your system of support should be personal, persistent, and rooted in belief that every student can find their way back.

Flexible Scheduling for Recovery

Credit recovery works best when it's accessible. Ideally, it should be embedded in the school day, but we also have to be realistic about available instructional minutes, graduation requirements, and the lives of students that may include working and parenting. Consider:

- ➔ **Before- or after-school support**
- ➔ **Saturday academies or intersession programs**
- ➔ **Summer learning opportunities**
- ➔ **Online credit recovery platforms** that allow students to demonstrate mastery only in areas where they haven't yet shown proficiency—saving time.

Supporting the Whole Student

To reengage students meaningfully, we need more than just a new schedule—we need **wraparound supports** that address why they disconnected in the first place. Successful models share common threads: community collaboration, adult mentorship, and a holistic approach to student well-being.

- **Mentoring** helps students set goals, create action plans, keep track of progress, and manage personal barriers.
- **Relationship-building** is key—students feel seen, supported, and valued.
- **Practical support** like transportation, child-care, a food pantry, and other community resources.

[Boston Public Schools' Re-Engagement Center](#) starts with home visits, connects students with community resources, and provides consistent case management.



Check out: [MTSS in Alternative Learning Settings: Building Long-Term Engagement With Short-Term Victories](#)

Tune in to our [podcast to hear about the Synergy Program in Minneola](#)

Conclusion

Just like that 9th-grade class where I first stumbled into this work, MTSS in secondary schools isn't about having all the answers—it's about showing up for the questions that matter most:

What do our students need? How can we meet them there, with the right supports, delivered in the right way?

Whether you're refining Tier 1 instruction, building small-group interventions, or rethinking how to reach students who've disengaged, the real work of MTSS lives in thoughtful design and consistent delivery. With collaborative teams and a clear problem-solving process, each step you take—each schedule adjustment, planning block, or student support plan—adds up to real change.

Start where you are. Lean into the work. And know that every decision brings us closer to the schools our students deserve.

Teresa Bunner

About the Author

Teresa Bunner is an Educational Consultant with Branching Minds. She served for over 30 years in education as a classroom practitioner, coach, and leader. This includes 20 years as a classroom teacher teaching almost every grade from 1st- 12th. At the school level and district level, Teresa held roles as a literacy coach, instructional coach, program academic specialist, district coordinating teacher for secondary literacy and the Director for Student Engagement in the Office of Equity Affairs in the largest school district in North Carolina.

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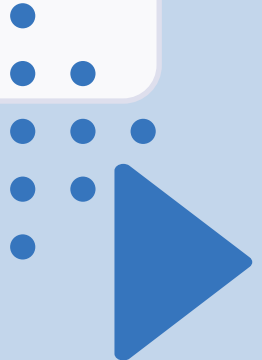
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Appendices



Appendix A: Differentiated Instruction Walk-Through

Use this tool for walk-throughs, coaching, or planning conversations.

Focus Area	✓	Look Fors	Notes
Content Access		Tasks are at grade level and aligned to standards	
		Scaffolds (visuals, sentence stems, anchor charts) are used to support and enrich learning	
		Differentiation strategies can be seen- content, process, product, environment. Groupings change based on student needs, data, or interest	
Engagement & Participation		Students are actively engaged in the learning	
		Students utilize the academic language of the discipline	
Formative Assessment		Teachers use exit tickets, checks for understanding, or student self-assessments	
Support for MLLs		Differentiation strategies are utilized to engage and support- (e.g., pre-teach vocabulary, visual supports, chunking, models, sentence frames)	
Support for Students with IEPs		Accommodations are incorporated into the classroom. Appropriate scaffolds are provided to ensure access to grade level learning (e.g., , visual supports, chunking, models, sentence frames)	
Positive Learning Environment		Clear expectations, relationship-building, responsive teaching	

Examples of Tier 1 Differentiation in Secondary Content Areas

Content Area	Strategy	Example
ELA	Choice in product or text	Students choose between writing an editorial, speech, or short story to demonstrate theme
Math	Scaffolded tasks	Multi-step problems are broken into phases; challenge problems offered for extension
Science	Tiered inquiry	Lab options vary in independence (guided vs. open-ended)
Social Studies	Interest-based grouping	Students choose a region/time period to explore and present
CTE/Arts	Real-world applications	Students apply skills to career scenarios or community projects
All Subjects	Learning stations	Stations focus on re-teaching, practice, extension, or application

Reflection & Planning Questions for Leaders and Teams

Use these to guide PLCs, department meetings, or instructional coaching:

- ➔ Are our Tier 1 materials and tasks accessible to a wide range of learners?
- ➔ Do we regularly use formative data to adapt instruction in real time?
- ➔ How do we differentiate between students who need support and those ready for enrichment?
- ➔ Are teachers equipped with tools and time to plan for differentiation?
- ➔ How are SEL and behavior support embedded in core instruction?
- ➔ Are we providing common planning time to support team-based differentiation?

Appendix B: Secondary MTSS Planning Checklist

Supporting a Strong MTSS Framework in Secondary Schools

1 Dedicated Time for Intervention

- ☐ Build dedicated intervention blocks or flex periods into the master schedule.
- ☐ Schedule intervention opportunities multiple times per week (2–4x/week).
- ☐ Protect intervention time from assemblies, testing, and coverage needs.
- ☐ Offer before/after-school or Saturday intervention options for targeted student groups.

2 Strategic Staff Assignment

- ☐ Match intervention staff to their subject expertise (e.g., reading, math, SEL).
- ☐ Integrate special education, multilingual learner (MLL), and behavior staff into intervention planning.
- ☐ Leverage instructional aides, paraprofessionals, and co-teachers effectively in intervention delivery.
- ☐ Designate an MTSS/intervention coordinator or lead for oversight and support.

3 Student Access

- ☐ Ensure all students—including those with IEPs, 504s, or MLL status—have access to interventions.
- ☐ Use data sources to group students by skill need.
- ☐ Provide Tier 2 supports in addition to and not in place of core instruction.
- ☐ Identify and address barriers (transportation, scheduling conflicts, etc.) that prevent participation.

4 Data-Driven Grouping & Progress Monitoring

- ☐ Update student intervention groups every 4–6 weeks based on current data.
- ☐ Implement a progress monitoring system that clearly defines who, what, and when.
- ☐ Document all interventions—detailing what was delivered, by whom, and when.
- ☐ Hold regular data meetings to evaluate progress and adjust support strategies.

5 Collaboration & Communication

- ☐ Ensure general education teachers are aware of student intervention plans.
- ☐ Schedule regular collaboration time for the intervention team (weekly or bi-weekly).
- ☐ Share student progress and goal updates with families and students regularly.
- ☐ Maintain cross-departmental communication (counselors, content areas, SEL leads).

Optional Add-ons

- ☐ Create and maintain a student needs map or intervention matrix to align staffing resources.
- ☐ Create a standard treatment protocol of high-leverage intervention programs to be used consistently across the school/district.

Secondary MTSS Shouldn't Be So Hard

About Branching Minds

The Branching Minds MTSS software platform pulls together the data and intervention planning tools you need to improve academic and behavioral outcomes in your school or district:

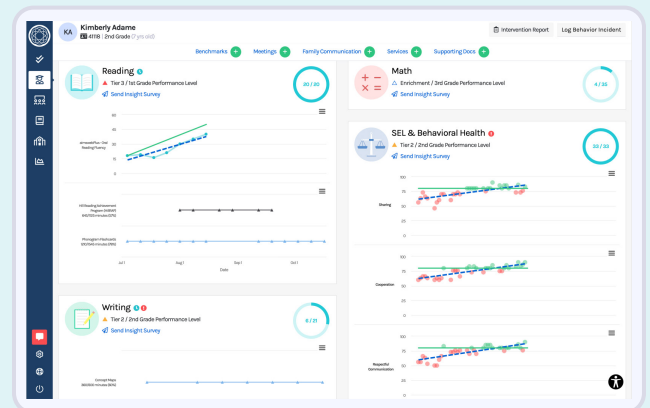
- ➔ Understand risk and needs across student, classroom, grade and school levels, including Early Warning Indicators
- ➔ Create and monitor academic and behavioral intervention plans using evidence-based strategies from the Branching Minds Support Library
- ➔ Administer SEL and behavioral screeners
- ➔ Determine where a system-level response is needed (staffing, resources, programming)



We're working with Branching Minds to pull in from our existing e-school system the behavior data, attendance data, and specific grades that we tag. Branching Minds spits a report out for us that tells us who we should be looking at — maybe those children weren't on our radar and now they are!

— Jennifer Maichin, High School Administrator
Mineola UFSD, NY

Branching Minds Student Overview Page



[Request a demo today!](#)



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