The MTSS Guide to Core Instruction

An Equity-Based Approach for Tier 1

BRANCHING MINDS

Table of Contents

As an educator, I always wanted to be at the top of my game. This meant learning about specific teaching processes, strategies, and tools that would have the most impact on student learning. I gained this knowledge from research, and by studying the most effective teachers in my building to understand what secret practices they were using to aid their students. It turned out not to be so secretive. My research revealed that the largest impact on student learning happened at the foundational level. It happened in the classroom. It happened with educators delivering strong, differentiated core instruction every day to their students. But it is easy to say "deliver a strong core instruction;" it's much different to actually do it.

Teaching is a profession dependent upon collaboration. It's impossible to be an island, and we need the expertise of our fellow educators in order to survive and thrive in an ever-changing educational environment. This is a guide created by educators for educators. Written from the perspective of those who've been there and can solidly say, "we get it." In this guide, you'll learn what core instruction is, what strategies make it most effective, and how we can use core instruction to maximize student success.

Mollie Breese,
Content Marketing Manager
at Branching Minds

1 What Is MTSS?

The Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) is a collaborative, evidence-based, approach to differentiating and personalizing instruction and intervention—across academics, social-emotional learning, and behavior for all students—so that every student can achieve academic and life success.

MTSS is one of the most effective ways to provide an equitable educational experience. It leverages collective knowledge and expertise to help teachers understand their learners' needs and make informed and strategic decisions that best support them.
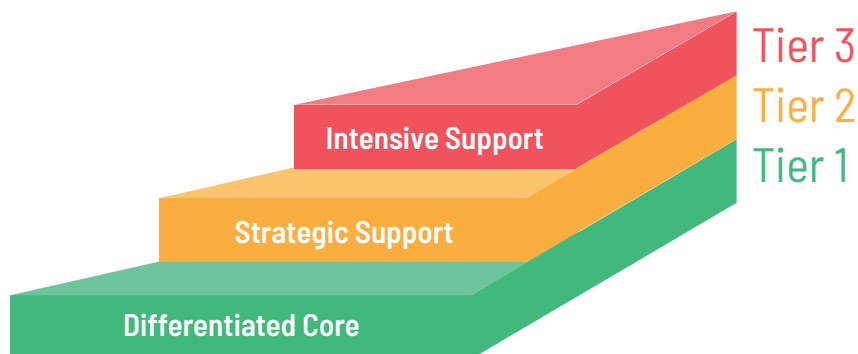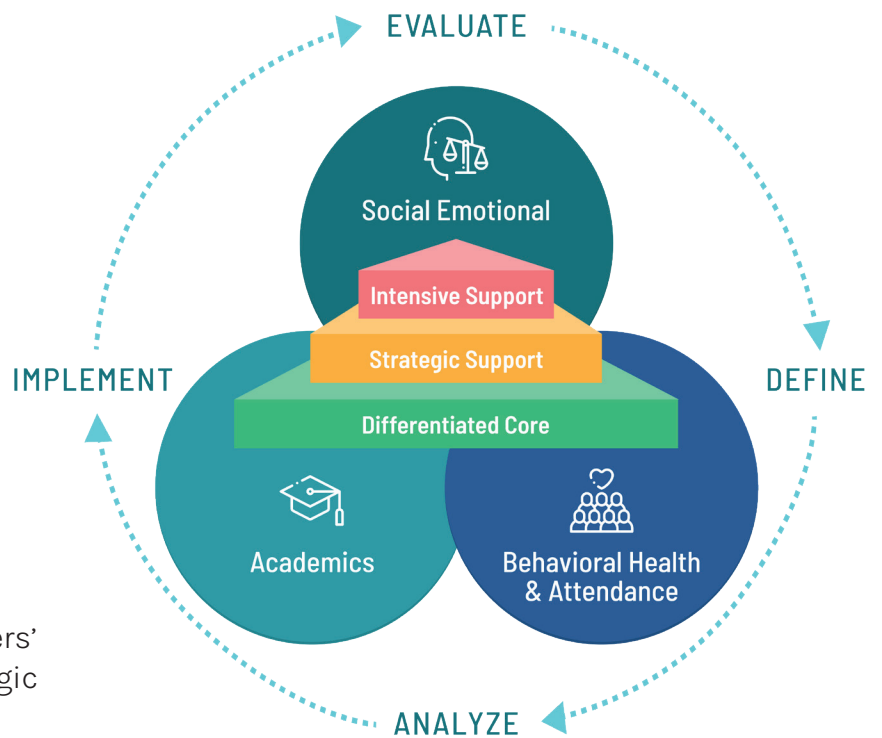
MTSS utilizes a three-tiered structure to provide resources and support for all students to succeed academically, social-emotionally, and behaviorally. The foundation of this tiered structure is Tier 1. All students have access to core instruction with grade-level content at the Tier 1 level, and they are provided access to this content through strong, differentiated core instruction. MTSS is an equity-based approach to education in which all students are provided the opportunity to succeed. This includes access to core instruction that is differentiated to their individual needs.

With MTSS as a foundation, this guide discusses the components of core instruction (Tier 1), gives evidence and examples of its application and effectiveness in the classroom, and provides educators with resources on how to implement core instructional practices in their classrooms.

2 What Is Core Instruction?

Core instruction is the instructional strategy used routinely with all students in a general education setting, and is the Tier 1 in MTSS. This is the foundation of learning that all students receive every year. Core instruction uses scientific, research-based strategies implemented with integrity to emphasize grade-level standards. It incorporates academic, behavior, and social-emotional learning supports that are accessible to 100% of students.

High-quality core instruction includes:

Classroom Behavior Strategies

Proactively and explicitly teaching the expected behaviors and routines, frequent use of reinforcement and praise (4:1 positive to negative feedback loop, or in other words, for each piece of negative feedback given, there should be at least four positive comments provided), quick and efficient transition times, and consistent instructional response to behaviors.

Active Student Engagement

Ensuring all students are actively involved during instruction and are not passive recipients of instruction. This can be accomplished with high rates of opportunities to respond, ample time to practice skills, and prompt corrective feedback.

Flexible Grouping

A combination of whole group, small group, and individual instruction allows teachers to create fluid groups that meet the needs of all students.

High-quality Core Instruction

1. Standards-Based Curriculum
2. Systematic Explicit Instruction
3. Differentiated Instruction
4. Flexible Grouping
5. Active Student Engagement
6. Classroom Behavior Strategies

Standards-Based Curriculum

A curriculum based on state/district standards

Systematic Explicit Instruction

Skills are taught from less to more complex using direct, clear, and concise instructional language.

Differentiated Instruction

Students have different levels of background knowledge and school readiness; differentiated instruction engages each student in active learning according to the individual's needs. The process of differentiating instruction includes analyzing the content of the lesson to be taught, the process and delivery of instruction, the product for students to demonstrate their learning, and selecting the most appropriate environment for learning.
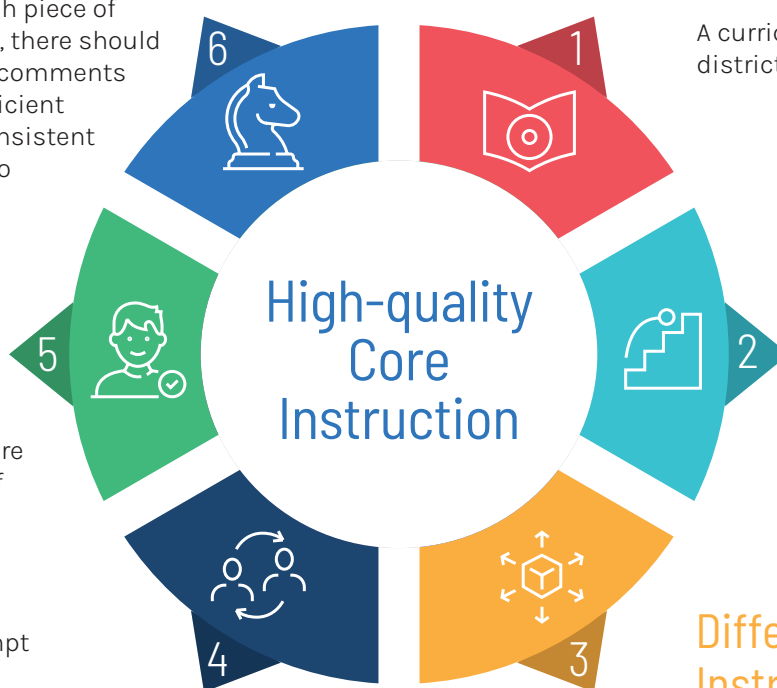
Download our Core (Instruction) Workout Worksheet

It's designed to help school leaders determine the state of their core instruction and it provides reflective questions to walkthrough with their teams to enact targeted positive change.

Beyond these components, it's important to remember that core instruction impacts every other aspect of a student's education experience.

A strong delivery of core instruction/Tier 1 in MTSS can be used as a preventive action educators take to ensure that they adequately support our students, and fewer students will need intervention. Educators deliver this strong core instruction through a systematic data review approach and strategies covered in later parts of this guide. By infusing core instruction with evidence-based resources and ensuring that educators are accounting for the current needs of students, fewer students will need intervention[1]

---

[1] Miller, A. (2020). *Leading Equity-Based Mtss For All Students.* Sage Publications Inc.

3 Core Instruction as a Pathway to Equity-Based MTSS

> **Equity in education demands each and every student in a community be invited, welcomed, and given a sense of belonging in a system of teaching and learning that is fluid, responsive, and dynamic, and that uses all available resources matched to each student's need."** .
>
> - Amy McCart and Dawn Miller, Leading Equity-Based MTSS for All Students

MTSS processes fundamentally create a learning environment that is equitable for all students. This begins with Tier 1 (core instruction) and the strategies regularly utilized for all students. All students receive differentiated instruction at this tier appropriate for their grade level. Tier 1 instruction is differentiated in delivery to meet students' needs, build on their strengths, and is scaffolded, as well as accelerated, to meet the needs of all learners. In addition, Tier 1 must include non-academic resources, such as social-emotional learning and positive behavior supports.

The robust curriculum in Tier 1 is designed to support students in reaching the next grade level and achieving career success. McCart and Miller refer to Tier 1 as the "Universal Tier," meaning the content at this level is accessible by 100% of students, as differentiated core instruction is not created or delivered to meet the needs of only a fraction of students. Instead, MTSS practice ensures that all students are equitably included in Tier 1 instruction. Students who may need additional support in reaching grade-level expectations receive evidence-based support and interventions at Tier 2 and Tier 3 levels, *in addition to core instruction received at Tier 1.*

Watch the video

The MTSS Updated Pyramid - Equity Through MTSS

Read more on

How to Reframe MTSS to Help Close the Education Achievement Gap

4 Understanding the Needs and Strengths of our Students With Universal Screening Assessment Data

A solid Tier 1 instruction should be delivered to meet the current needs of **100%** of all students. Educators can measure the fidelity of their instruction by looking at universal screening assessment data.

When educators first begin identifying students for MTSS tiered support, approximately **80%** of students should meet or exceed grade-level expectations from the instruction received at Tier 1. This metric is a fidelity check for core instruction. While Tier 1 instruction needs to be accessible for 100% of all students, 80% of students should be on grade level with Tier 1 support alone.

If Tier 1 instruction is not successfully supporting *at least* 80% of the school's population to reach grade-level expectations (as based on universal screening data), then the school team should evaluate the quality of core instruction and its delivery.

Beyond being used to reflect on core instruction fidelity, universal screening assessment data can be used to drive core instruction. This data can provide educators with the insights they need to understand skill deficits that will need to be scaffolded during core instruction. In MTSS, schools use universal screening assessment data to identify students who need intervention in addition to core instruction in order to meet grade-level standards.

However, educators can start that intervention at Tier 1 with all students. Universal screening data can ensure that core instruction is *preventive*, not just responsive. It provides a timely understanding of where students are *right now*, not where educators think they are, or where they should be.[2]

Learn more about this subject from Dr. Eva Dundas, BRM's Chief Learning Officer, in this on-demand webinar:

"Best Practices of MTSS Tiering to Facilitate Equity in Education"

---

[1] Miller, A. (2020). *Leading Equity-Based Mtss For All Students.* Sage Publications Inc.

5 What's the Deal with Differentiation in Core Instruction? And How Do Educators Use It?

Effective core instruction <u>uses differentiation to meet the needs of the wide range of skills that exist within a classroom</u>. Curriculum tells educators *what* to teach. Differentiation tells educators *how*. In a true system of MTSS, differentiated, core instruction accessible to all students is essential.

Differentiation allows instruction to be tailored to the needs of all students, based on varying readiness levels, interests, strengths, and learning preferences to provide equitable access to core instruction and curriculum. It is important to understand that the expectations or standards do NOT change when using differentiation. It is a refinement, ***not a substitute***, for high-quality curriculum and instruction.

a. What Is Differentiation?

Differentiation includes tailoring instruction for ALL students' readiness levels, interests, strengths, and learning preferences <u>based on current assessment data</u>.

At its heart, differentiation is considering multiple approaches to instruction and learning. No single instructional approach can address all students' vast and diverse goals and needs. The content, process, product, and environment may change, but it still meets the **same** objectives.

It is impossible to expect that all students will be taught the curriculum in the same way, at the same time, and have them all respond the same. All students deserve access to rigorous instruction. With this in mind, educators can ask a couple of questions to begin planning for core instruction to meet the needs of ALL students:

▶ What does the student need to learn to master this grade level?

▶ How can this student access this learning in a way that meets their unique learning needs?

Educators can answer these questions by planning to utilize differentiation when planning each lesson to support the individual learning needs of all students and encourage student success.

b. How Do We Differentiate Core Instruction/Tier 1?

Differentiation occurs at each level of MTSS, beginning with core content instruction delivered to all students (Tier 1). The process of differentiating instruction includes analyzing the lesson's content, the process and delivery of instruction, the product for students to demonstrate their learning, and their learning environment.[3]

Content of Instruction (what is to be learned)	• Ensuring content presented is based upon appropriate "*power standards*" ("*power standards*" are the standards most necessary for a student to master at their current grade-level) • Student interests and learning preferences are considered • Varied resources/texts/content are utilized throughout the lesson • Lessons are planned to build on student's areas of strength, bolstering areas of need as based upon data
The Process and Delivery of Instruction	• Utilizing accelerated learning strategies (more information about accelerated learning below) • Scaffolding lessons (learn more about scaffolding below) • Flexible grouping to provide learning opportunities for students based upon their readiness and learning styles • A variety of learning tools are utilized to tap into student's preferred learning styles • Drawing out student thinking using a variety of of strategic questions and tasks
The Product for Students to Demonstrate their Learning	• Authentic and engaging activities are planned and implemented • Ensuring there are a variety of ways for students to demonstrate their understanding (writing, speaking, creating, moving, etc.) • Informally assessing students to determine next instructional steps
The Learning Environment	• Flexible grouping and flexible room arrangement to accommodate whole group, small group, and individual instruction • Students have ownership in determining their next instructional steps

While differentiation means taking in the skill-level of students into account when delivering core instruction, it also means accounting for the engagement/interest level of students. This guide will discuss engagement strategies in a later section, but here is an example of a differentiated scenario that accounts for the various needs of learners.

---

[3] Westman, L. (2021, December 3). Yes, differentiation is hard. so, let's get it right. (opinion). Education Week. Retrieved June 13, 2022, from https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/opinion-yes-differentiation-is-hard-so-lets-get-it-right/2016/08

Real-Life Scenario

A fourth-grade teacher is reading a novel in class, but many of his students are on varying reading levels. He wants every student to access the content in the novel, but he needs to vary the delivery style of the reading to meet the needs of his students.

This teacher takes the following actions:

1 He introduces upcoming concepts, themes, and vocabulary of the daily reading before the students start reading. He uses a mix of short videos, word walls, interactive vocab practices, and class discussions to engage his young readers before they pick up the book.

2 He creates designated "quiet areas" in his room, where higher-level readers can sit to read independently.

3 He assigns reading buddies of similar skill levels, so students that may struggle with the content on their own have another student to discuss the reading with and work together on assignments.

4 He provides an audio tape for readers who cannot read on their own or with a buddy, to provide auditory assistance.

5 He creates small groups, and meets with them throughout the lesson to discuss the reading and measure each group's progress and understanding.

6 He creates clear guidelines and expectations for reading times, so students remain engaged while he works with the small groups.

7 He incorporates short assessment tools to continuously monitor student understanding and adapt instruction to account for current student needs.

8 He provides enrichment opportunities for readers who may read faster than their peers, such as a self-selected research project on a theme of the novel.

9 He coordinates with intervention staff to ensure that students receiving reading interventions can apply these skills to the current content area.[4]

These are just some of the many strategies this teacher could have planned to meet the needs of his classroom. By accounting for the various reading levels of his students, he has created a learning environment that makes the grade-level content accessible to all students, providing an equitable Tier 1 foundation in MTSS.

[4] *What is differentiated instruction?* Reading Rockets. Retrieved May 20, 2022, from
    https://www.readingrockets.org/article/what-differentiated-instruction

6 How and Why Accelerated Instruction Can Benefit Students

Accelerated instruction is not new to the education world; however, the way educators have begun to discuss this term may be new to some. Prior to COVID-19, accelerated learning was mistakenly thought by many to be only an enrichment instructional approach for gifted students. But accelerated instruction is much more. Accelerated instruction **prioritizes** curriculum standards based on the learning needs of all students in response to a gap in instruction (or due to a need identified by universal screening assessment data).

Accelerated instruction doesn't necessarily mean rushing through content; it simply means using data to determine where students are and meeting them where they are to further assist them in continuing grade-level work. It also doesn't mean lowering the grade level of content delivered to students to "meet them where they are." *That is remediation.*

a. What Is the Difference Between Acceleration and Remediation?

| What Is the Difference Between Acceleration and Remediation?	
Accelerated Instruction	**Remediated Instruction**
• **Acceleration** is instruction in which curriculum standards are **prioritized** based on universal screening data and the learning needs of all students. • **Instruction** focuses on grade-level content and uses support to fill in "gaps" in knowledge.	• **Remediation** is the process of reteaching content to students who have not yet mastered it. This approach requires instruction to pause while students catch up with baseline skills.

b. Some Benefits of Accelerated Instruction[5]

Increased coverage of grade-level content

• Accelerating instruction increases time spent teaching new content.

Remedial Instructional Calendar

| AUG | SEP | OCT | NOV | DEC | JAN | FEB | MAR | APR | MAY |

Accelerated Instructional Calendar

| AUG | SEP | OCT | NOV | DEC | JAN | FEB | MAR | APR | MAY |

Data-driven differentiated core instruction is designed to meet 100% of learners' needs
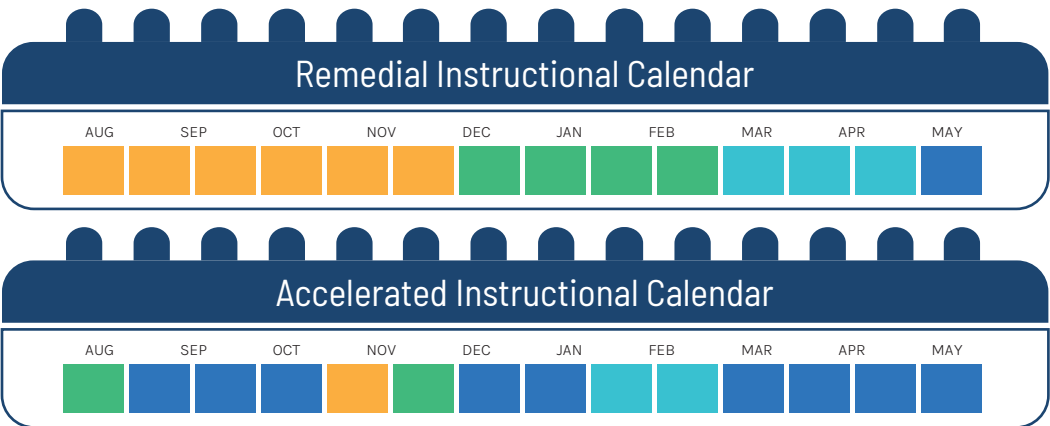
- ■ Previous Grade Normed-Learning Expectations
- ■ Beginning Grade Normed-Learning Expectations
- ■ Mid-year Grade Normed-Learning Expectations
- ■ End of Year Grade Normed-Learning Expectations

• Teachers focus more on instructing new content and less on repeating old content.

Deeper conceptual understanding

• Students are able to demonstrate stronger recall, make new connections, and engage with content that is new and rigorous.

c. Accelerated Instruction Is an Effective Core Instruction Strategy for Supporting All Students in MTSS

Data Spotlight

In May 2021, The New Teacher Project partnered with Zearn, a nonprofit math organization, to study the impact of accelerated instruction. The study consisted of over 100,000 elementary math students across the United States. This study had the following conclusions:

1. Students who received accelerated math instruction learned more than peers who started at the same level but only received remediated instruction.

2. Students of minority groups or low-income backgrounds are more likely to receive remediation than white peers of a wealthier background. This was documented even when the students had shown success with grade-level content[6]

---

[5] Ross, Erin. "What Is Accelerated Learning and What Are the Benefits?" *Big Ideas Learning,* https://blog.bigideaslearning.com/what-is-accelerated-learning-and-what-are-the-benefits.

[6] "Accelerate, Don't Remediate." *TNTP,* May 2021, https://tntp.org/publications/view/teacher-training-and-classroom-practice/accelerate-dont-remediate.

d. How To Implement Accelerated Instruction

While a single educator can look at their student data to determine how to guide core instruction to meet the needs of their students, implementing a robust accelerated instructional framework within MTSS requires a system-level approach. This implementation needs all stakeholders to have a clear vision of their goals and a clear pathway to how they will meet these goals.

As with any initiative, the following questions should be considered by collaborative teams to determine how accelerated instruction can fit into each classroom's repertoire:

1 How can we use our universal screening, informal assessment, and observational data to understand our school and identify ALL student's areas of need and areas of strength?

2 How can we create a plan to target accelerated instruction based on this data?

3 How can we facilitate and lead collaboration with grade-level/department teams to identify "*power standards*" (as mentioned above, "*power standards*" are the standards most necessary for a student to master at their current grade level)?

4 How can we incorporate "*power strategies*" (educators' instructional approaches to quickly and dramatically increase students' academic achievement) within core instruction?

5 How can we identify evidence-based resources and support implementing them?

6 Have we included support for the whole child, including social-emotional learning, behavior, attendance, and academic support?

At the grade/department level, teams can consider which standards, strategies, and learning supports they will utilize to meet the needs of all students through accelerated instruction.

1. Determine what "*power standards*" will be prioritized. Consider the following when deciding if a standard is a "*power standard*":

    a. **Learning Endurance:** Ask, is this standard essential beyond this unit, and can it be applied later in life?

    b. **Learning Leverage:** Ask, is this standard relevant across other disciplines?

    c. **Learning Readiness:** Ask, does this standard provide students with the tools and skills they need for the next unit, course of study, or grade level?

2. Identify "*power strategies*," including (but not limited to):

    a. Ongoing use of progress monitoring assessment tools to guide instruction;

    b. Incorporating tapping the prior knowledge base and vocabulary activators, such as pictures, photographs, infographics, music, and videos.

    c. Incorporating and communicating student agency by including students in setting individual goals and sharing progress data.

    d. Explicitly teaching executive functioning skills to the whole class, such as flexible thinking, working memory, and self-control.

3. Accelerated instruction provides continuous scaffolded support for students to master grade-level content. As with any supportive strategies provided, scaffolded supports should be:

    a. Targeted, research-based, and chosen based on alignment with core instruction.

    b. Used in conjunction with SMART goals (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Result-oriented, and Time-bound) and progress monitoring tools.

    c. Utilize SEL learning supports and interventions to provide additional support beyond academic resources for students.

As educators work through the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic for years to come, it is critical now more than ever for all students to access grade-level content, and accelerated instruction can support this effort despite students experiencing any instructional gaps during the past few years.

Learn more about the importance of accelerated core instruction within an MTSS framework from Karen Castle, BRM's Executive Director of Professional Learning, in this on-demand webinar:

"Recharging Core Instruction and MTSS"

7 Top Scaffolding Strategies To Support All Students in Core Instruction

Scaffolding is the process through which teachers break up content for students so it can be learned more easily and then connect it to a new concept or skill. Scaffolding allows for new topics to be taught, builds content with increasing difficulty, and connects the prior concepts to new ones. Scaffolding is commonly used within a differentiated repertoire of instructional strategies.

Lev Vygotsky coined the term **"zone of proximal development (ZPD)."** ZPD refers to "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers."

What I can't do

What I can do with help

What I can do

Zone of Proximal Development - ZPD. What need to be done to take the learner where he needs to be.

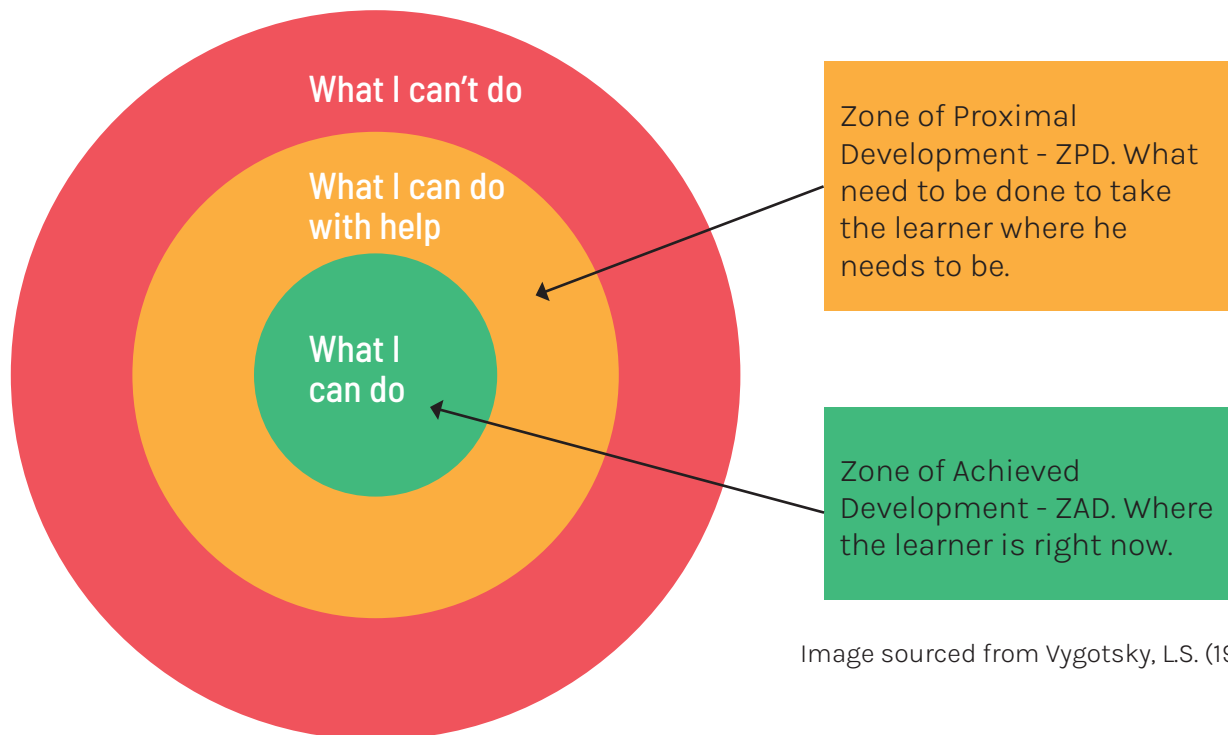Zone of Achieved Development - ZAD. Where the learner is right now.

Image sourced from Vygotsky, L.S. (1978)

There is a lot of complicated jargon in that definition, but this reflects the students' learning process and how scaffolding can assist in this process. Children learn by interacting with others around them. Through their social interactions with adults, teachers, and peers, they are able to continue to learn new things and further develop their cognitive skills. This is the basis for scaffolding core instruction. During instruction, teachers act as mentors to students and scaffold necessary skills to create independent learners.

a. How To Scaffold Core Instruction

There are many scaffolding strategies and resources available to teachers to help students. Some top scaffolding strategies include:

▶ Providing examples such as [worked examples](#) to model all of the steps required to solve a problem (i.e., solved math problems).

▶ Tools such as [graphic organizers](#) to help students clarify and organize their thoughts/content.

▶ **Sentence frames** that allow for filling in the blank in order to help students get started/activate their prior knowledge base.

▶ **Questioning techniques** such as designing questions to sequence, challenge, and engage students and allow them to show their thinking.

▶ Presenting concepts in **multiple modalities** (kinesthetic, spatial, musical, visual, auditory) based upon students' preferred learning styles.

▶ **Tapping the prior knowledge base** before each lesson so students can activate their learning.

▶ Creating **checklists/rubrics** for students to use as a guide for completing thorough work and clearly understanding expectations.

▶ Providing **discussion protocols** (i.e., fishbowls, turn and talk) so students can comfortably and safely discuss their learning. These protocols allow students to understand the expectations for their contributions before they begin.

[(See examples of the above strategies in the resource section.)](#)

These are great strategies and tools to incorporate throughout instruction; however, **repeated practice is the most important aspect of scaffolding.** The more opportunities students have to use scaffolding strategies to help them learn new information and complete new tasks, the more the scaffolds can fade out.

Just as things take time to set, scaffolds need to support the structure of student learning before they can be removed.

b. Scaffolding for Executive Functioning Skills

It's important to provide scaffolds for all skills, including executive functioning skills. These skills can sometimes be overlooked, because they are not purely academic skills, but rather, life skills. Through routine and modeling, teachers can aid students in building these skills and becoming stronger and more independent learners. Examples of scaffold executive functioning strategies include support with:

▶ **Planning:** Providing modeling for writing due dates in a planner or scheduling time to complete work.

▶ **Organization:** Provide students with binders to organize classwork.

▶ **Time management:** Collaboratively discuss setting alarms in the morning to get to school on time, without skipping breakfast or other necessary morning tasks.

▶ **Self-monitoring:** Support students to have a dialogue and/or make adjustments to their routines if they experience disruption or change.

▶ **Self-control:** Work to create a plan with students to successfully and quietly transition between activities or ideas.

▶ **Flexible/adaptive thinking**: Support students by creating action plans. For example, a student may have forgotten a library book at home during library day. The student creates a plan to reserve the new books at the desk, so they return the overdue book the next day and still keep their intended path.

c. Additional tips for scaffolding:

1. Have students practice real-life scenarios to bolster academic and executive functioning skills.

2. Engage students in self-directed goal setting for academics, behavior, social-emotional goals, and/or attendance.

3. Create a learning environment that guides students to learn from their mistakes and models problem-solving and decision-making, also known as a *"restorative learning environment."*

4. Utilize a Positive Behavior Support System (PBIS) that emphasizes research-based prevention strategies supporting academic, behavior, and social-emotional goals.

5. Include scaffolds for English Language Learners to make grade-level content accessible.

Learn more about the how MTSS can help ELL students from ELL & MTSS expert, Dr. Claudia Rinaldi, in this on-demand webinar:

"Supporting English Learners Within MTSS"

8 Enrichment and Core Instruction

> **Traditionally, the pattern of education is to teach a concept or skill and allow students to practice (and practice again) that same skill or concept until mastery is demonstrated. Enrichment is any activity that occurs beyond the standards framework.**
>
> - Laura Porter-Jones[7]

a. Using Core Instruction to Identify Strengths & Areas of Need

It goes without saying, every classroom is different. The make-up of a class list is complex and goes far beyond above-level, on-level, and below-level students. Each student is equipped with various strengths and areas that need additional support to improve. Educators are tasked to identify these strengths and areas of need to provide students with the necessary skill sets to support and grow these areas.

The MTSS framework provides the right support for identifying students in need of enrichment, while also ensuring they receive the right enriched activities within core instruction to support their needs. Enrichment activities provide students with advanced opportunities to grow and develop academically, socially/emotionally, as well as in art, music, etc.

b. How To Provide Enrichment Opportunities at the Tier 1 Level

So, what does it look like to provide enrichment for students within core instruction? The truth is, enrichment can *and should* look different for each student and each skill. These activities typically involve a more abstract application level, deepen one's understanding/comprehension, and require critical thinking/problem-solving skills.

What enrichment **is**:	What enrichment is **not**:
• For all students • Specific to each student and each individual's strengths and interests • Student choice • Independent, group work, or direct instruction • Specific and deliberate	• Only for gifted students • Extra work to fill time • Activities disconnected from the learning content • Free time • Additional homework[8]

---

[7] Porter-Jones, Laura. "An Introduction to Enrichment and Supportive Classroom Strategies." *Edmentum Blog*, 20 Mar. 2018, https://blog.edmentum.com/introduction-enrichment-and-supportive-classroom-strategies.

[8] "Enrichment." *SEVA Council of Gifted Administrators*, Hampton Schools , https://www.hampton.k12.va.us/departments/gifted/gifted.html.

c. Using Schoolwish Enrichment Models (SEM) to Provide Enrichment in Tier 1

While teachers can provide enrichment opportunities within the classroom, schools can also adopt enrichment models which implement enrichment systematically, allowing for all students to have equitable access to enrichment learning. These models are known as **Schoolwish Enrichment Models (SEM)**.

SEM focus on three goals:

1 Developing talents in all children

2 Providing a broad range of advanced-level enrichment experiences for all students

3 Providing advanced follow-up opportunities for young people based on their strengths and interests.[9]

> ## Study Highlight
>
> A study conducted by the University of Connecticut into the effectiveness of SEM determined, "From the earliest publications on the SEM, the focus has been on the use of strengths and interests to increase student achievement, engagement, and enthusiasm in school. The model to identify students within a SEM dismisses the premise that students are either gifted or not. Giftedness is fluid and can apply to students of all abilities. Research suggests that there are increased educational outcomes when aligning enrichment opportunities with students' strengths and interests."[10]

[9] Vahidi, Siamak. "Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM): Renzulli Center for Creativity, Gifted Education, and Talent Development." *Renzulli Center for Creativity Gifted Education and Talent Development,* 22 Sept. 2014, https://gifted.uconn.edu/schoolwide-enrichment-model/.

[10] Reis, Sally M, and Pamela M Peters. "Research on the Schoolwide Enrichment Model: Four Decades of Insights, Innovation, and Evolution." *Gifted Education International,* vol. 37, no. 2, 2020, pp. 109–141., https://doi.org/10.1177/0261429420963987.

d. Examples of Providing Enrichment Opportunities at Tier 1

The outline below shows how an educator could create an enrichment opportunity for a student based on the current core content. While this is just an example (and many other strategies could be used), this outline provides a real-life example of how enrichment can *enrich* a student's learning. This example also shows the benefit of periodically conducting interest surveys within the classroom to identify moments where enrichment can occur naturally within a student's already established interests and provide differentiation within core instruction/Tier 1.

Content Area/Topic: Core Instruction Activity	Possible Student's Interests or Strengths	Enrichment Activities
Science/forces in motion: students design a scaled model of a parachute that maximizes air resistance to help an action figure fall the slowest from a designated height	NASCAR, drawing/sketching, building, creative, reading informational texts/"How To" books, observed playing with legos and other tinker toys during downtime	The students design a scale model of a race car that minimizes air resistance and moves with the greatest speed down a ramp.
Math/addition: adding double-digit numbers with regrouping	Planning parties, decorating, designing, coordinating class activities, often provides creative ideas, attends many school events	The student is given a monetary budget and an online catalog. The student must plan to order items for the next classroom theme day (i.e., pajama day) using a given budget. The student keeps track of quantities, pricing, and totals.

e. How To Think BIG with Enrichment

While every school system is different, developing and utilizing an approach to identify students for enrichment activities is important in every classroom. Ensuring that core content incorporates enrichment opportunities for all students is essential. Without enrichment, students may disengage during core instruction/Tier 1 if opportunities are not provided for them to engage in independent learning and investigation.

To support quality enrichment opportunities…think **BIG**:

Branch Out	**I**dentify interests and abilities	**G**ather enriching resources and programs
• What skills and critical thinking related to the content do students need to support them beyond the classroom? • What career fields may interest students, and how can educators support their preparedness? • What technological skills and/or programs may benefit the students in relation to this content area/field?	• Administer surveys and questionnaires to find interests • Analyze a variety of assessment data to determine abilities • Challenge students to try new things to help them find their passions	• See what resources are already provided through curricular programs • Check out additional programs in the school or community • Use higher grade-level standards and skills to extend learning

Graphic cited from Reis and Peters (2021)
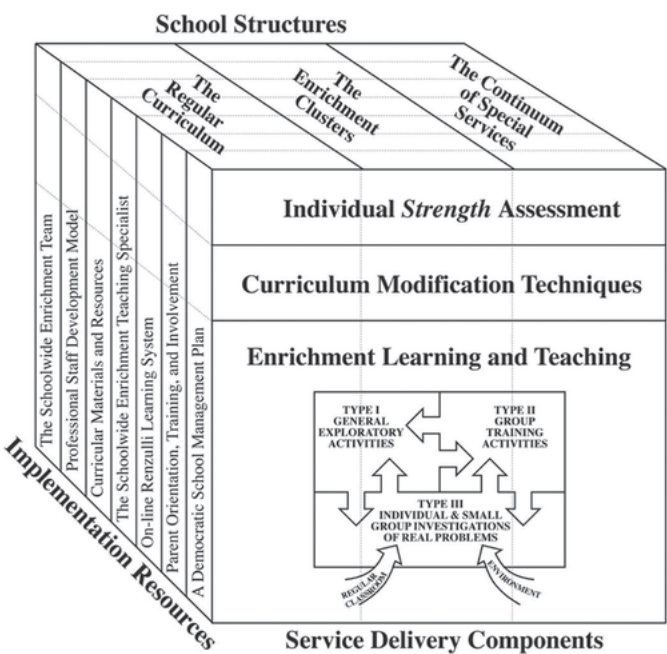
Enrichment is one component of a well-run MTSS process, and it is a valued aspect that successfully promotes educational outcomes for all students. In MTSS, every decision or implementation is focused on *enhancing students' strengths and giving them the tools they need to grow beyond their time in a classroom.* So think **BIG** and remember to **enrich** the experience of all students every day.

9 Creating Engaging Core Instruction

Student engagement occurs in a myriad of ways, and as some like to say, "You know it when you see it!" Engagement is not one-dimensional and often requires multiple strategies to ensure all students actively participate in a lesson.

a. What Is Engagement?

Behavioral Engagement	Linked directly to participation	Demonstrated through actions or outcomes like completing tasks, attendance
Cognitive Engagement	Linked to investment or interest	Demonstrated through intellectual conversations, enjoying deep thinking, and reading to find deeper meaning
Social Engagement	Linked to emotions and commitment	Demonstrated through enthusiasm, optimism, and confidence in school and related activities

A lack of student engagement can happen due to issues at home, poor quality sleep, chronic absences, among many other reasons can lead to a student being disengaged in their learning. Teachers do not have control over the multitude of variables outside of their classroom that may impact a student's engagement level. However, they do have control over the variables within their classroom.

> It's easy to point to factors outside of our control as the culprits to disengagement—such as community/home issues, lack of sleep, too many activities, or perceived student characteristics. While outside factors can play a part in how we differentiate to meet our student's needs, this avenue of thinking to address disengagement rarely helps improve student outcomes. These outside factors may cause distractions, but students that face these scenarios have the ability to be engaged when the environment poses an opportunity for engagement that arouses their attention.
>
> - Brittany Shurley, BRM Instructional Design Manager

b. Engagement Strategies for All Instruction

1 **Provide essential questions with each lesson:** There is always one essential question per lesson that students should be able to answer. Be sure to engage students in that question before, during, and after instruction.

2 **Create activating strategies:** Engage learners to connect actively to the information learned. Whether it's new or old, they should always be making connections.

3 **Scaffold relevant vocabulary:** Keep vocabulary limited to what students can handle and ensure that it's actively used in context throughout the lesson.

4 **Limit "lectures" to short periods of time (or remove them altogether):** Consider using a "flipped model" approach to prioritize active learning and allow students to watch lectures or presentations at home (or during study periods). If you decide to lecture, remember to keep it short and immediately engage students with a relevant activity (even if it's for a few minutes), this helps students make connections.

5 **Utilize graphic organizers:** Students need to be able to conceptualize whatever information is given. The graphic organizer is student-friendly.

6 **Incorporate multisensory instruction:** Multi-modal instruction helps with muscle memory and engages learners. Observations, student profiles, and checklists provide data to teachers to determine their student's preferences.

7 **Create higher-order thinking questions:** Presenting students with at least three higher-order-thinking ("HOT") questions during the lesson demonstrates a higher level of engagement and mastery.

8 **Plan rigorous lessons:** Activities should be developmentally appropriate and challenging. Create aligned extension activities to minimize opportunities for students to move on when they finish their work early.

9 **Robustly close each lesson:** Through summarization and exit tickets, educators can informally assess their students' abilities to answer the essential question effectively, and determine their next instructional steps.

10 **Create student-centered lessons:** The ways that educators instruct their students must demonstrate that students are the focus, and what educators do is centered on their students' success.

Learn more about what causes disengagement in core instruction and daily engagement practices you can employ in this classroom in this blog:

Top 10 Student Engagement Practices For Tier 1 in MTSS

10 Incorporating Social-Emotional Learning and Behavior Support in Core Instruction

MTSS supports the whole child in academic, social-emotional learning, and behavior. Core instruction aligned with MTSS should include the same supports embedded throughout Tier 1 instruction. This guide has focused heavily on providing academic support at Tier 1. Still, teachers also need to account for their students' social-emotional (SEL) and behavioral needs during core instruction.

## a. What Is SEL in MTSS?
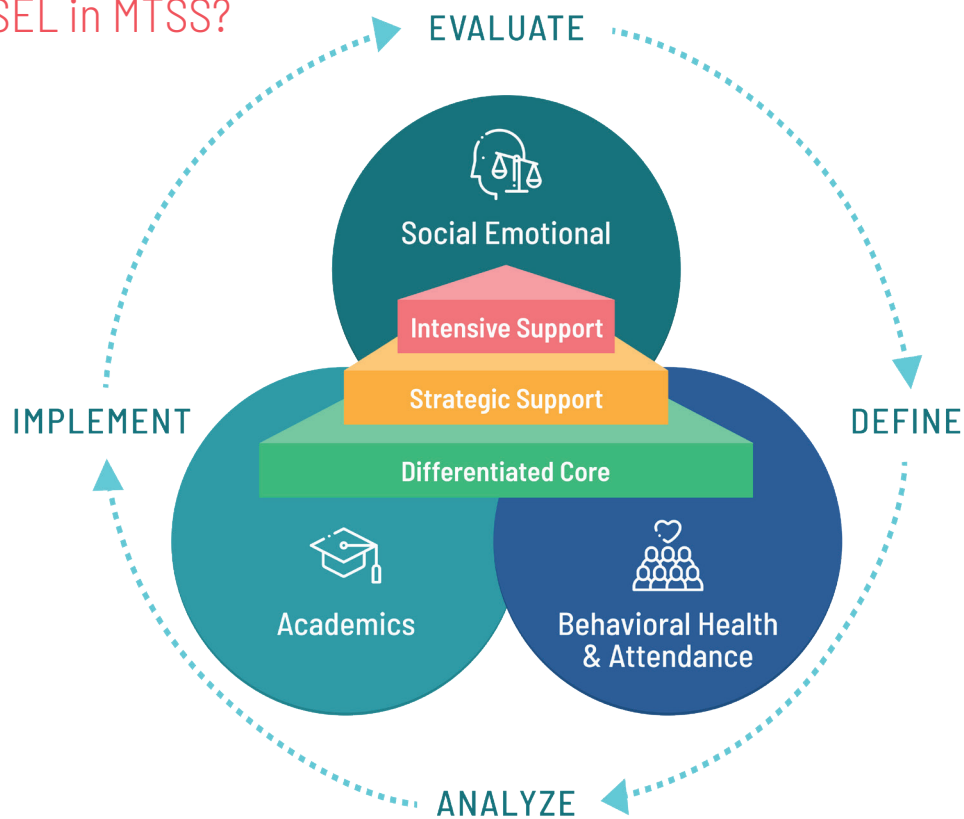
Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

SEL is the curriculum and/or strategies specifically designed to develop the skill set for understanding and managing emotions, building resilience, problem-solving, and developing healthy relationships. Students learn from explicit instruction as well as from the actions and behaviors they are observing from others.

Learn more about SEL within MTSS in our Social-Emotional Learning Guide.

b. Aligning SEL to CASEL

Schools can implement district/school-wide SEL programs to promote social-emotional competency and well-being for all students. SEL should be incorporated into content within the classroom to allow students to practice skills continuously. SEL strategies and content should align with CASEL's core competencies (seen in the graphic below). CASEL stands for the Collaborative for Academic and Social-Emotional Learning, and it's a trusted source for high-quality, evidence-based SEL resources and professional development.
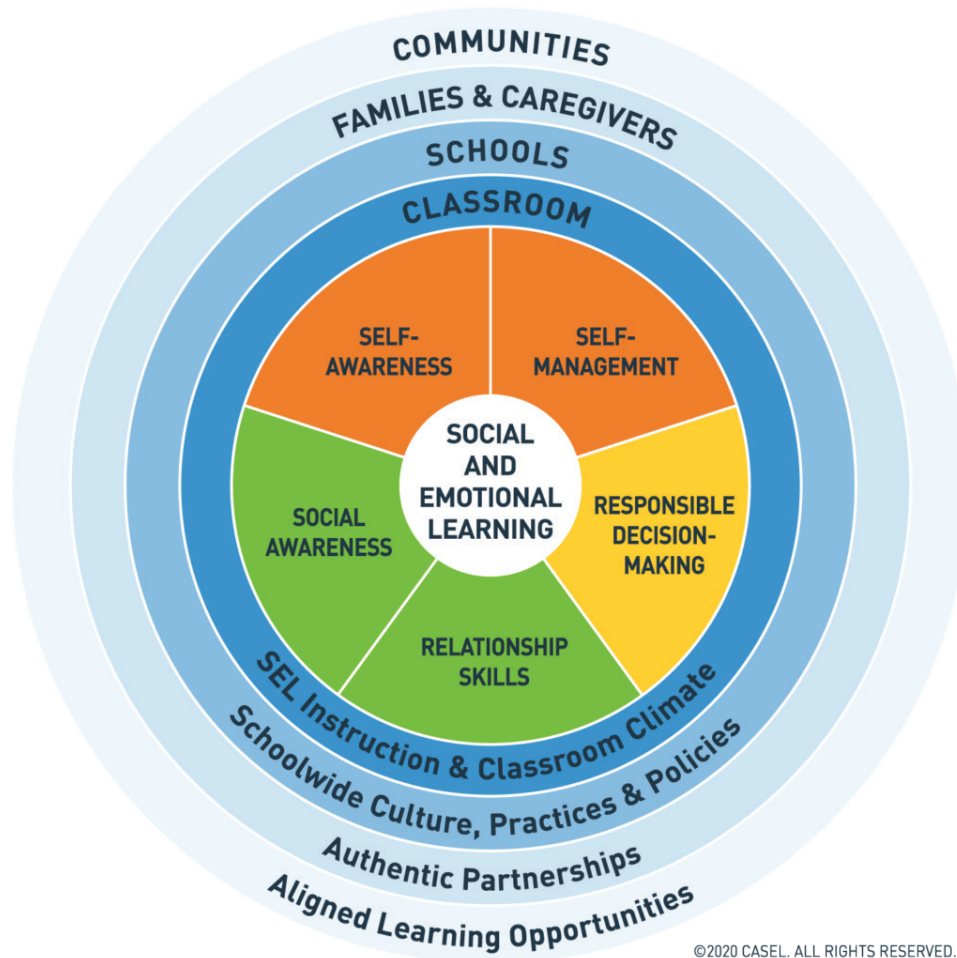
These five areas have been identified as the critical components to support student development and long-term success. Each competency has a unique definition; the skills relate to each other. The focus of SEL is to promote student self-management, not to create an environment that seeks to control or discipline.

c. Assessing SEL

Similar to academic needs, educators will need to utilize data to understand the SEL needs of their individual students and at the school level. Some common approaches to measuring SEL include:

1. **SEL Surveys:** questionnaires completed by students, teachers, and staff on feelings, attitudes, and experiences related to SEL skills

2. **SEL Assessments:** an assessment that measures the SEL competencies of an individual and group of students

3. **Teacher-Reported SEL Assessments:** a report completed by a classroom teacher on the SEL skills of a student

4. **Parent-Reported SEL Assessments:** an SEL assessment on a student completed by parents or guardians

5. **Student-Reported SEL Assessments:** an SEL report completed by a student on their own competencies and sense of well-being

6. **Direct SEL Assessments:** students complete a set of tasks or engage with an interactive game/program that can measure SEL skills without answering direct SEL questions

7. **SEL Screeners:** a type of assessment that can be used to identify students who need additional support (Important note: Screeners differ from assessments as they prove a deeper look into a student's skills by using research-based cut-points)

Want to learn more about how to best utilize SEL data within MTSS?

Branching Minds Director of Learning Science, Dr. Essie Sutton breaks this subject down in this on-demand webinar:

"Best Practices for Using SEL Data in MTSS"

d. SEL Instruction at Tier 1 in MTSS

Social-Emotional Learning can be integrated into everyday lessons across content areas. Universal, Tier 1 SEL programs can be used to explicitly teach students about expectations around behaviors and how to treat others with respect. Programs that include hands-on lessons and activities provide a great opportunity for students to practice these skills and better understand shared norms and values.

Incorporating SEL into MTSS has been proven to lead to:

▶ Improved academic performance

▶ Improved social skills and sense of belonging

▶ Reduction of behavior interruptions and negative behavior incidents

▶ Positive school culture

Learn more about how to *effectively communicate SEL initiatives and programs* with stakeholders in your community in this expert SEL panel:

"Communicating SEL Initiatives and Programs with Communities"

e. Supporting Positive Behavior at Tier 1 in MTSS

Behavior is a major component of a successful core instruction plan. Similar to SEL skills, behavior support and strategies must be embedded into core instruction to provide a safe and productive environment for learning.

Many behavior programs and resources exist to help educators promote positive behavior in the classroom and address negative behavior. **Successful behavior programs are systematically implemented at the school or district level to provide a collaborative environment to promote and encourage positive behaviors.**

PBIS (Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports) is an example of such a program. PBIS is a preventative framework for supporting the development of positive and prosocial behaviors in schools and classrooms. PBIS includes practices, tools, and strategies that work to reward or reinforce positive behaviors.

PBIS in the classroom

At the Tier 1, core instructional level, PBIS includes a set of classroom management practices that are consistently implemented to proactively prevent problem behaviors and promote behaviors that best serve the classroom as a whole. It involves:

▶ Evidence-based interventions and practices

▶ Tiered levels of support

▶ Ongoing data collection and analysis

When matched with a strong, differentiated, core instruction that engages students, PBIS can help create a productive and safe learning environment for all students.

You can learn more about utilizing behavioral strategies within MTSS in this webinar:

"Using Proactive and Preventive Behavioral Strategies in MTSS"

11 Resources

Downloadables and Templates

Guides and Blogs

Webinars and Virtual Events

Scaffolding

▶ Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development and Scaffolding

Differentiation

▶ Reading Rockets: What Is Differentiated Instruction?

▶ Best Practices of Data Analysis and Differentiation for Tier 1 in MTSS

▶ The Differentiation Deal: Making a Case for Differentiation in the Classroom

Enrichment Within Core Instruction

▶ An Introduction to Enrichment and Supportive Classroom Strategies

▶ Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM): Renzulli Center for Creativity, Gifted Education, and Talent Development

▶ Research on the Schoolwide Enrichment Model: Four Decades of Insights, Innovation, and Evolution

Accelerated Core Instruction

▶ How to Create an Equitable Tier 1 in MTSS Through Accelerated Core Instruction

▶ Recharging Core Instruction and MTSS
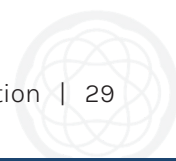
Scaffolding Core Instruction Strategy Examples

▶ Sentence Frames

▶ Questioning Techniques

▶ Tapping the Prior Knowledge Base

▶ Creating Checklists/Rubrics

▶ Providing Discussion Protocols

Tier 1 Best Practices

▶ How To Use Learning Supports for Tier 1 Core Instruction in MTSS

▶ Best Practices at Tier 1 For the Secondary Level

SEL Within Core Instruction

▶ Social-Emotional Learning Guide

Want to go back to basics? Check out these MTSS resources:

▶ The Ultimate Guide to MTSS

▶ MTSS Glossary of Key Terms

For more resources, visit:

www.BranchingMinds.com/Learning-Center

About the Branching Minds solution:

Branching Minds is an MTSS/RTI system-level education platform that brings together innovative, easy to use technology with the latest insights from the learning sciences to help drive student and school success, while making teachers and administrators work easier and more effective. Branching Minds connects data, systems, interventions, and stakeholders so that educators, administrators, and families can work better together to support students' holistic needs.

> "
> With the Branching Minds partnership,
> we are gaining both a thought partner who will
> help us enhance all of our MTSS practices, structures
> and approach, and a platform that will help make the
> work easier and more efficient for all of our educators
> at CMS - from classroom teachers and support staff
> to school and district administrators.
> "
>
> — Dr. Frank Barnes
> Chief Accountability Officer at Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools

Branching Minds Helps Educators

Understand school health and wellness across the district

Target approach to strengthen Behavior/SEL intervention practice

Avoid overidentification or underreferral of student subgroups

INFO@BRANCHINGMINDS.COM   (646) 450-5174   BRANCHINGMINDS.COM