Multi-Tiered Systems of Support for Teaching All Children to Read

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Data-Based Problem Solving and Decision Making

All the data educators collect matters little if the data is not used in a productive manner. An effective system of support includes both time for teachers to analyze the data and problem solving protocols for teachers to use on a consistent basis (Mercier-Smith, Fien, Basaraba, & Travers, 2009). For example, a regular expectation for data conversations should be that teachers bring to the meeting current data and questions or concerns they have about a particular student they will be discussing. The problem solving protocol should include questions that must be answered using the data to guide the conversation. This expectation helps ensure that teachers stay focused on the task and time is not wasted discussing other matters and/or elements that are out of their control. Teachers must use the data to make instructional decisions based on what the data tells them about what students have actually learned. Additionally, when teachers use data effectively, they monitor the quality of instruction (universal, supplemental, and intensive interventions), and they make decisions about the most productive ways to use available resources, including personnel and materials. The problem solving protocol should include action steps that will be accomplished based on the outcome of the discussion. Essentially, the data drives the decisions rather than using information that is subjective in nature, such as teachers’ feelings and beliefs about student performance.

When analyzing your school’s process for data-based problem solving and decision making, consider these questions:

1. Does your school dedicate sufficient time (e.g., 45 minutes each week) for teams to work together reviewing the data that has been collected?
2. Is a data analysis protocol used regularly? Are the results used to inform instructional changes and/or adjustments when the data demonstrates changes are necessary at the student, classroom, grade, and/or school level?
3. Do teams analyze the data by trends, sub-groups, and/or individual students?
4. Do teams discuss instructional strategies based on an analysis of the data and commit to action steps?
5. Do administrators demonstrate an understanding of the importance of the data meetings, always attend at least a portion of each meeting, and regularly participate while in attendance?

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Every year the release of national test scores for literacy achievement, such as the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), demonstrates too many children are not learning to read in the elementary grades. Statistics show approximately 66 to 70 percent of fourth grade students failed to score at the proficient level on the NAEP over the last five years (www.nationsreportcard.org). These statistics are even more staggering when considering the fact that research over the last 40 years has demonstrated that children will become proficient readers in the early grades when taught using instruction that combines phoneme awareness, phonics, oral reading fluency development, vocabulary development, and reading comprehension strategies. There simply is no excuse for the grim statistics given what we know about effective instruction and systems that support all students in reaching reading proficiency.

For the vast majority of students, the instruction they are provided matters greatly, and for particular groups of students, effective instruction plays a critical role. These students include struggling readers and learners from all social groups; economically disadvantaged children; English language learners; students with dyslexia; and students with specific learning disabilities and specific language impairment (or SEEDS students). A Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) is designed to improve outcomes for all students through a data-driven, prevention-based framework, and this approach, when implemented well, is especially helpful for teaching SEEDS students to read. In this paper, the six components of MTSS are briefly described and recommendations are provided for evaluating current practices related to these components in schools. The six components include data-based problem solving and decision making; a layered continuum of supports; research-based instruction, intervention, and assessment practices; universal screening and progress monitoring; shared leadership; and family, school, and community partnering.
Layered Continuum of Supports

A Multi-Tiered System of Supports for teaching all children to read includes instruction at three levels which increase in intensity (Moore & Whitfield, 2009). The first tier, or universal instruction, is for all students and includes grade-level concepts and skills. Universal instruction should meet the needs of almost all students (80-90%) and may be delivered in both whole group and small group settings. When universal instruction is most effective, reading difficulties are prevented and few students need additional support through supplemental and intensive interventions. The second tier, supplemental instruction, may be necessary for some students (5-15%) and should provide an opportunity for students to receive additional support in small groups of students with similar needs so that they may develop grade level concepts and skills taught in universal instruction. Some students may also need additional instructional support provided through the third tier of instruction, intensive interventions. At this level, every effort must be made to increase intensity by reducing group size and allowing for more practice and repetition of concepts and skills.

When universal and supplemental instruction is most effective, only about one to five percent of students will need support at this level of intensity.

Use the following questions to evaluate your school’s universal instruction:

1. Do all students receive at least 90 minutes of grade level instruction on a daily basis?
2. Does instruction include both the skills (phonological awareness, decoding, sight-word recognition) and the knowledge (background information, vocabulary, verbal reasoning, language structures, text structure, and genre) necessary for proficient reading? Hollis Scarborough (2001) uses the term word recognition to define the skills and language comprehension to define the knowledge-based procedures. Although the relative influence of the skills and the knowledge-based procedures for reading changes over time, all are important for fluent reading and comprehension.
3. Are the five components of literacy taught in an explicit and systematic manner, using a research-based scope and sequence? Many core programs include a scope and sequence for teaching reading, which provides teachers with a better understanding of the order in which skills should be taught from simple to complex. For teachers who do not have access to a core program, the book, Common Core Curriculum Maps, includes a chapter with a pacing guide for the reading foundational standards of the Common Core. The Center on Instruction also provides a progression of the foundational skills in Building the Foundation: A Suggested Progression of Sub-skills to Achieve the Reading Standards: Foundational Skills in the Common Core State Standards. It is important that the foundational skills are not ignored and that the skills are taught in a systematic way.
4. Do teachers use high-quality, research-based materials, and are teachers prepared to use the materials on a daily basis? Research-based materials are those found to be reliable, trustworthy, and valid based on scientific evidence which demonstrates a positive correlation with student learning and achievement.
5. Do instructional conversations routinely take place among literacy coaches, administrators, interventionists, and teachers to ensure universal instruction is meeting the needs of most students?

Use the following questions to evaluate your school’s supplemental instruction and intensive interventions:

1. Do students receive an additional 20-40 minutes a day of instruction based on needs determined through data?
2. Is instruction focused, targeted to particular skills and concepts, and delivered with a level of intensity necessary to move students to grade level proficiency? Have you considered group size, engaged instructional time, opportunities to practice, explicitness of instruction, and other methods of intensifying instruction when necessary?
3. Does the focus of intervention change as new data is collected and analyzed?
4. Are intervention materials readily available to teachers, and are the materials appropriate, purposeful, targeted to students’ needs, and aligned with universal instruction? Are the materials aligned to what the research on early literacy development supports as the most effective methods for teaching children to read?
5. Is a plan in place for monitoring the progress of students receiving instruction through supplemental and intensive interventions?
Research-Based Instruction, Intervention, and Assessment Practices

The instructional decisions teachers make on a daily basis are the most important influence on whether or not a student will learn to read. A Multi-Tiered System of Supports creates an environment in which teachers use research-based practices for teaching and assessments that provide valid and reliable data for making instructional decisions. If children are not learning to read, it may be a direct reflection on the day-to-day literacy instruction they are receiving. The most effective instruction for all students, and most importantly the SEEDS students, is explicit in nature, and skills and concepts are taught systematically. Explicit instruction includes a direct explanation in which concepts are explained and skills are modeled, without vagueness or ambiguity. A systematic approach to teaching reading means a carefully planned scope and sequence is followed based on research, ensuring that when students are taught a new skill or concept, they already possess the appropriate knowledge to acquire the new information.

In order to teach most effectively, teachers must have access to valid and reliable data that is collected on an ongoing basis (Catts, Nielsen, Bridges, Liu, & Bontempo, 2013). If the data does not support teachers in understanding the skills and concepts they should be teaching students, teachers are not using the most appropriate assessments. Teachers must use a variety of assessments including screening, progress monitoring, diagnostic, and summative assessments rather than simply relying on end-of-year state summative assessments alone.

Consider the answers to these questions to evaluate your school’s research-based instruction, intervention, and assessment practices:

1. Do teachers receive on-going, job-embedded professional development on the instructional materials that are used for all three tiers of instruction?
2. Do teachers receive regular feedback on instruction based on observations in classrooms?
3. Do teachers use instructional materials that include explicit and systematic instruction for teaching all children to read?
4. Are teachers using assessments that have been proven to provide valid and reliable data? Do the assessments provide teachers with the necessary information to make instructional decisions?
5. When teachers need more information than the screening assessments provide, do they use assessments designed to provide more specific information about students’ specific reading skill deficiencies? Assessments such as DIBELS Deep can be used by classroom teachers to gain additional, in-depth information to guide instruction for students who are identified as at risk for reading difficulties through initial screening assessments.

Universal Screening and Progress Monitoring

A Multi-Tiered System of Supports includes universal screening which occurs at least 3 times per year for all students (Jenkins, Hudson, & Johnson, 2007). Teachers should use efficient screening measures which require very little time yet provide the data necessary to determine the effectiveness of universal, supplemental, and intensive supports provided to students. Additionally, a Multi-Tiered System of Supports includes the use of a progress monitoring tool (typically the same as the screening instrument) to regularly gauge the progress of all students throughout the school year at least 2 to 3 times per year. For those students who are determined to be at risk for reading difficulties, progress should be monitored more often. Progress monitoring assessments are sensitive to change in a short amount of time and may be used as often as weekly, allowing teachers to make instructional adjustments in a timely manner. Both screening and progress monitoring assessments provide valuable information for a school to evaluate its systems of support at the student, classroom, grade, and school level.

When analyzing your school’s universal and progress monitoring assessments and the use of the assessments, consider these questions:

1. Is a school-wide assessment calendar in place and adhered to consistently, including both screening and progress monitoring testing dates?
2. Are all students screened for reading difficulties in a timely manner upon the start of the school year (e.g. within the first 30 days of school)?
3. Are students identified as needing supplemental instruction and/or intensive intervention monitored more often (e.g. weekly progress monitoring)?
4. Do teachers receive on-going, job-embedded professional development related to assessment administration to ensure data is valid and reliable, and is fidelity of assessment administration verified on a regular basis?
5. Is there evidence that the data collected through screening and progress monitoring is being used regularly to make instructional decisions?
Shared Leadership

In order to manage an effective Multi-Tiered System of Supports, school leadership must include more than the administrator(s). It is important that schools develop a system of shared leadership for making decisions related to training/professional development, job-embedded coaching, use of resources, and evaluation of the overall system of support. The school leadership team should include representatives of the district and school administration, classroom teachers, interventionists and/or reading specialists, and members of the community, including parents. This team must share the collective responsibility of evaluating the school’s efforts to improve literacy achievement schoolwide through reflective dialogues about the current state of the school in meeting the goal of teaching all children to read.

Consider these questions as you evaluate your school’s shared leadership:

1. Is the dialogue of team meetings focused on literacy instruction, and is the conversation specific, results oriented, and focused on attainable results?
2. Is the team’s focus proactive and concentrated on data and planning? Is little time spent on reacting to a current school crisis or needs that do not relate to the goal?
3. Is school data a regular focus of the meetings? Are results of progress monitoring assessments at the grade and school level discussed at least 3-4 times per year?
4. Does the team analyze data at the sub-group level to determine which groups of students are not making expected progress? Are action statements developed when a need is identified?
5. Does the team regularly review the school’s professional development plan and make adjustments based on a review of current data?

Family, School, and Community Partnering

Successful partnerships to improve systems of support for teaching all children to read are dependent on collaboration among students, families, schools, businesses, and community agencies. There is a sense of shared responsibility and ownership of student performance in schools that are most effective. It is important that administrators regularly communicate with all stakeholders to establish shared goals and create partnerships to support meeting those goals. Additionally, stakeholders must be kept up-to-date on the progress of meeting the established goals. A Multi-Tiered System of Supports includes opportunities for parents to be engaged in activities within the school through both culturally and linguistically relevant opportunities. Family, school, and community partnering also ensures that community resources are made available to families to support literacy achievement.

Use the questions below to evaluate your school’s implementation of family, school, and community partnering:

1. Are the school’s literacy goals effectively communicated to parents and other stakeholders in the community in a manner that they are able to comprehend?
2. Are parents regularly informed of literacy expectations and updated on students’ progress toward meeting those goals?
3. Are families and community partners welcomed within the school as partners to maximize student learning?
4. Are local resources that support literacy activities recognized and encouraged?
5. Are parents and community members engaged as partners in ways that are both culturally and linguistically responsive?

Summary

A Multi-Tiered System of Supports provides the framework for schools to ensure all students are successful at attaining literacy skills and becoming proficient readers. The six components of effective school systems include data-based problem solving and decision making; a layered continuum of supports; research-based instruction, intervention, and assessment practices; universal screening and progress monitoring; shared leadership; and family, school, and community partnering. For SEEDS students in particular, a Multi-Tiered System of Supports provides an environment in which literacy achievement is most attainable.
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Resources to learn more about a Multi-Tiered System of Supports

State websites:
http://www.cde.state.co.us/mtss
http://www.florida-rti.org/floridamtss/index.htm
http://www.doe.mass.edu/mtss/
http://opi.mt.gov/Programs/SchoolPrograms/RTI/
http://www.kansasmtss.org/

For a list of research and abstracts, visit the Literate Nation webpage at:
http://literateation.org/in-publications/research-that-resonates/

http://www.centeroninstruction.org/index.cfm


