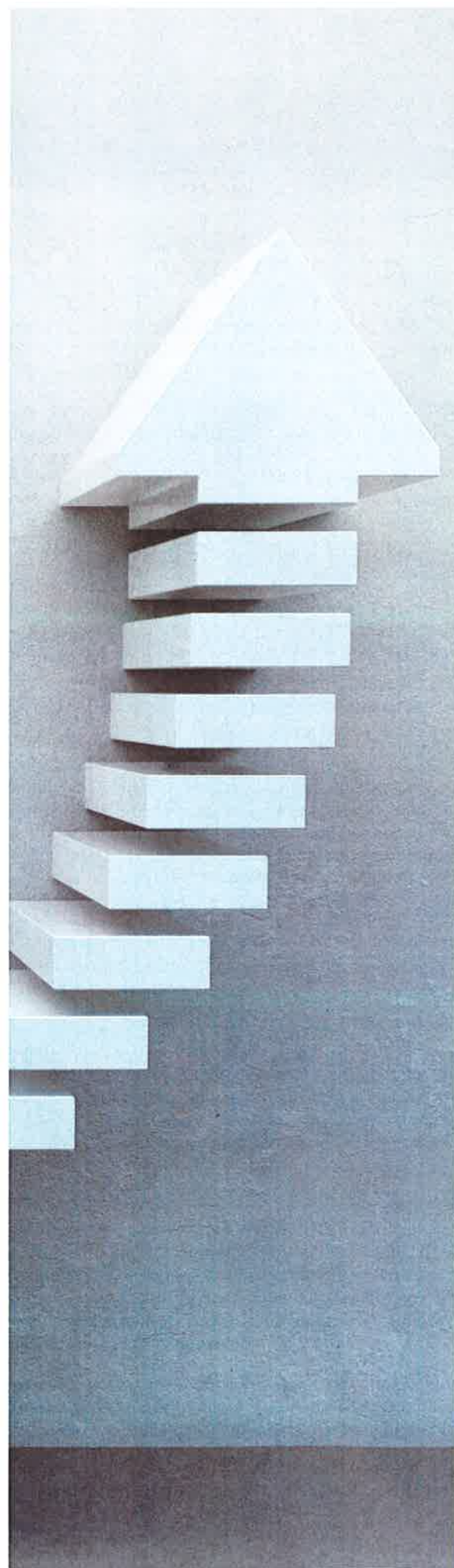


STEPPING UP THEIR GAME

How MTSS is Helping Districts
Improve Student Achievement

By John Tramontana



We've all felt like we were behind at some point. Whether it's competing in an athletic event, watching many of your friends get married before you or simply being overwhelmed at work; the feeling can be stressful and exhausting. "How will I catch up?" is a question many of us have asked ourselves at some point. While most of these examples are simply part of "adulting" and are insignificant in the big picture, imagine what it feels like as a child to be behind in school—watching students surpass you each day and feeling like you're falling further and further behind.

It may be due to a learning disability, behavioral issues or a myriad of other reasons. For students who experience that anxiety in the classroom, it might be easy to just give up and think, "maybe school isn't for me." But for educators, administrators, parents, board members and more, giving up on students isn't an option.

One of the most effective tools districts are using is a Multi-Tiered System of Support—an integrated, comprehensive framework that focuses on core instruction and improving the academic and behavioral needs of all students. It is broken down into three tiers. The first is where everyone begins, Tier 1. Once educators detect a student may require some intervention, a plan is made to move them to Tier 2, Targeted Interventions. If a student still needs more help, s/he would be moved into Tier 3, Intensive Interventions.

"As educators, it's our responsibility to ensure every student is given a fair and equitable chance to succeed," said Roberta Perconti, Director of Student Instructional Services at Ingham Intermediate School District. "MTSS is not a program, but a way of working that creates a needed systematic change through intentional design and redesign of services and supports that quickly identify and match the needs of all students."

The key components of working within a MTSS framework require the use of research-based curriculum and instruction, ongoing collection and analysis of student academic and behavioral data, use of a problem-solving process and family involvement. Central to the work is collecting data on an ongoing basis to assist with identifying those students with academic and/or behavioral needs. Educators then use that data to determine how best to proceed with each student. It could mean finding a way to shrink the achievement gap or even helping a student receive advanced studies.

Since 2009, all local districts in the Ingham ISD service area have been using MTSS. The key to success and improvements, Perconti said, is getting buy-in from everyone involved.

"Students, including their families, are aware of their needs and progress and can assist in goal setting for improvement," she said. "Teachers have opportunities to understand the needs of their students and respond with supplemental or intensive supports. Teachers are also able to improve curriculum and instruction based on careful review of student data. Administrators are able to analyze the health of the overall system at the student, classroom, grade, building and district levels and target continuous improvement efforts."

So far, MTSS has paid dividends for districts in the Ingham ISD service area. Over a five year period from the 2008-2009 to the 2013-2014 school year, the state average for third grade reading proficiency increased from 59 to 61%.¹ During the same time, Ingham districts outpaced the state average, increasing from 64% proficiency to 74%. The districts have also seen a 16.7% decline in students needing special education.²

"The process works," Perconti said. "But it takes a collaborative effort and adjustments along the way. There isn't really a one-size-fits-all approach. It has to be geared toward the individual needs of each student."

Outside of Ingham ISD's area, DeWitt Public Schools in Clinton County is also experiencing success with MTSS.

“We have been pleased with the results we have seen in DeWitt,” said Lori Webb, Ed.D., Director of Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment. “In particular, in reading at the elementary level, we have seen students make significant progress while providing a MTSS within the literacy block. Working together as a team of educators, alongside parents, collecting and analyzing a number of data points to make our decisions and using this information to build a concrete plan has allowed us to effectively serve many students in need of Tier II and/or Tier III supports.”

The collaboration between parents, teachers, administrators and support staff allows for a more accurate placement in the system. Teachers then focus on providing additional instruction to small groups of students or even one-on-one.

“Without this framework, teachers and support staff may be left to their own personal knowledge, background, experiences and informal conversations, and won’t have a way to monitor progress,” Webb noted. “It also helps to add supports as necessary or phase a student out to a lower tier once s/he is able to close a gap that has been identified.”

What makes MTSS so successful, is the ability to adjust to a student’s needs at any time. It’s not uncommon for students to shift between tiers throughout the process. DeWitt developed a District Implementation Team that meets regularly to assess progress. If something isn’t working, they try to fix it. They’ve even expanded MTSS from the elementary level.

MULTI-TIERED SYSTEM OF SUPPORTS³

MEETING THE ACADEMIC AND BEHAVIORAL HEALTH NEEDS OF ALL STUDENTS

ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS

INSTRUCTION AND INTERVENTION

- Effective instruction for all children
- Early Intervention
- Multi-tiered model of instruction and intervention

PROBLEM SOLVING

- Collaborative problem solving model

DATA/ASSESSMENT

- Monitor progress
- Data based decision making
- Use assessments for three purposes

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

- Engage parents and community

IMPLEMENTATION OF

EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICES

- Research based core curriculum
- Research based, valid interventions and instruction
- Implement with fidelity



"Flexibility is key," Webb said. "We were able to adjust the process at the junior high to create a system more readily usable for secondary teachers and students. In addition, through continued district-level conversation, we were able to make adjustments to the forms and process used at the elementary levels to provide more direct support for both the building teams and the staff putting the plans into place."

For those districts that don't have a current system in place, there are resources available to help you get started. One of the best and easiest ways is to look to surrounding districts that may have implemented MTSS with success.

"A district interested in building a MTSS framework could start by reviewing current systems of support in place not only for providing solid Tier I instruction, but also for supporting struggling students not responding to this Tier I instruction; identifying what has been successful as well as what has fallen short of increasing student achievement," Webb advised. "Next, district leaders, along with building leaders (principals, leadership teams, etc.), could create a system to support all students. Buildings would put this system into action, and regular review would be necessary to adjust the system as you learn more about individual and district-level needs."

Webb also recommends ensuring all staff, parents and students have a clear understanding of the system—why it's in place and how it's used.

"If staff do not understand or agree with the importance and reason of having a MTSS framework, it likely won't be able to be effectively put into place."

As for districts in the Ingham-ISD service area, Perconti believes they'll continue to see increased success the longer the system is in place.

"The collection and analysis of student data provides opportunities for problemsolving at all levels," she said. "A focus on utilizing research-based curriculum and instruction with fidelity ensures stronger outcomes for students. Problemsolving at all levels of the educational system ensures continuous improvement and involving families in their student's educational experience increases success."

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¹ Michigan Department of Education. MI School Data website. Accessed on July 14, 2016. www.mischooldata.org/.

² Ingham Intermediate School District. Ingham ISD Data System and Analysis Team Document. (2015) Mason, MI.

³ Michigan Department of Education. Multi-Tiered System of Supports Chart. Accessed on July 14, 2016. www.michigan.gov/mde/0,4615,7-140-28753_65803-322534--,00.html.



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