

## Bringing an Equity Lens to Student Well-being through the MTSS Framework: Guiding Questions for Implementation

Research demonstrates that inequities, implicit bias, stigma, racism, and other forms of discrimination and neglect may negatively impact students' mental health<sup>1,2,3</sup> as well as access to mental health services.<sup>4,5</sup> Multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) can be used to advance social and emotional learning (SEL) and mental health in schools. However, to implement an MTSS framework effectively, it is essential to center your efforts on equity.<sup>6</sup> Below, we present questions to consider when planning and implementing an MTSS approach to SEL and mental health with an equity lens.

### Guiding Questions



**Do you consider linguistic proficiency among students when using screeners?**

To ensure that data collected through mental health screeners is accurate, they should be administered in students' native languages. Ensure that the translations are of high quality and have been tested for fidelity.



**Do your data collection protocols address implicit bias?** When analyzing student data, question any underlying assumptions to reduce implicit bias. In a district where students are facing economic challenges, for instance, language should focus on students' strengths rather than just on their struggles. To avoid reaching premature conclusions, staff should determine if additional information is required for a complete understanding of the students' experiences.<sup>7,8</sup>



**Do you disaggregate data to better understand the experiences and challenges of subgroups of students, whenever possible?** Disaggregated data—data that has been separated into demographic sub-categories—can help schools and districts identify potential inequities in their school climate for underrepresented populations. For example, the results of a mental health screener could show that 25% of students at a high school were experiencing depressive symptoms. Staff may then consider referring these students for Tier 2 and/or Tier 3 supports. However, disaggregation of the data might show that 50% of students who identify as LGBTQ+ experienced these symptoms, compared to 20% of their non-LGBTQ+ peers. These results may indicate that, in addition to Tier 2 and/or Tier 3 supports for some students, all students may need Tier 1 programs, practices, and policies to promote a greater sense of belonging for all students, including LGBTQ+ students.<sup>9,10</sup>



**Are you engaging multiple voices and perspectives in data interpretation?** Interpreting data and making data-driven decisions can also be influenced by cultural biases. Including educators from a variety of cultural perspectives when developing guidelines for data interpretations, as well as engaging students and parents, can help ensure that the way data is interpreted reflects cultural values represented in your community.<sup>11</sup>

### Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)

is a three-tiered framework for helping schools implement evidence-based interventions that promote the development of social and emotional competencies.

See this [MTSS fact sheet](#) to learn more.

“MTSS may be a vehicle for advancing equity; however, MTSS alone is not enough if it does not explicitly and consistently center equity as the primary goal.”

– Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center

## Identification, Matching, and Monitoring

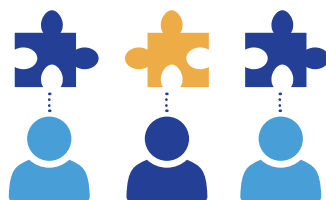
As your school team identifies students for additional supports, matches them to tiered interventions, and monitors their progress, consistently reevaluate any assumptions or biases about these students. This practice is important in ensuring that marginalized students are neither unfairly referred for disciplinary actions or inappropriate supports, or overlooked for needed supports.<sup>12</sup>

Consider the following questions throughout the MTSS process to help you recognize potential biases and assumptions:



### IDENTIFICATION

- Are educators trained in implicit bias to reduce the negative impact of bias on referral?<sup>13</sup>
- Have screening tools used to identify students been reviewed for cultural appropriateness?<sup>14</sup>



### MATCHING

- Are students matched to interventions that are culturally and linguistically affirming?<sup>15</sup>
- Is data used to ensure that marginalized disciplinary actions are not disproportionately applied to marginalized students rather than mental and behavioral health supports?<sup>16</sup>



### MONITORING

- Are data sources used to monitor student progress reviewed for cultural appropriateness?
- Does monitoring student progress include reflecting on the cultural relevance of assigned interventions?<sup>17,18</sup>

## Tiered Supports

No one SEL and mental health intervention will be right for every student.<sup>19</sup> Consider selecting MTSS interventions that have been tested and found to be effective in communities with similar social identities, cultural practices, and values as those found in your community.<sup>20,21</sup> Proposed interventions and tiered supports should be reviewed for exclusionary practices or implicit bias,<sup>22</sup> such as interventions that focus on teaching students to adopt behaviors that are considered inappropriate in their cultural communities. For example, in some cultures it is considered rude for children to make eye contact with adults, whereas in the U.S., children are often expected to make eye contact with educators.

**Guiding questions for selecting and implementing culturally responsive interventions:**<sup>23,24,25</sup>



Do interventions help students feel a sense of belonging and physical and psychological safety to express their identity, and do they provide an unobstructed path toward achieving their academic and life goals?



Do decisions about SEL and mental health programs and practices incorporate perspectives of various groups in the school community (such as racial, ethnic, and cultural groups; LGBTQ+ students; and students with disabilities)?



Are SEL programs and practices at your school culturally responsive and affirming for students of all backgrounds?



Are there specific populations whose needs do not match the current supports in place?

## Additional Considerations

Leadership, staff competency, and culturally responsive implementation are factors that are often hypothesized to be associated with an effective approach to SEL and mental health within the MTSS framework. Consider the following from an equity perspective:



### LEADERSHIP

- Do school/district leaders explicitly articulate a clear vision for equitable social, emotional, and behavioral supports, set clear equity goals, and establish mechanisms to measure progress towards those goals?<sup>26</sup>



### STAFF COMPETENCY

- Do educators involved in students' social, emotional, and mental health programs and supports receive evidence-based professional development on culturally responsive practices and equity?<sup>27,28,29</sup>



### IMPLEMENTATION

- Are educators implementing programs and interventions examining these supports to ensure they are culturally responsive?<sup>30,31</sup>

## Additional Resources



[Evidence-Based and Culturally Relevant Behavioral Health Interventions in Practice: Strategies and Lessons Learned from NNEDEarn \(2011-2020\).](#)



[National Equity Project: Social Emotional Learning and Equity.](#)



[Equity by Design: Foundations of Equity-Centered MTSS.](#)



[Centering Equity within the PBIS Framework: Overview and Evidence of Effectiveness.](#)

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