IES Institute of Education Sciences

Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast & Islands

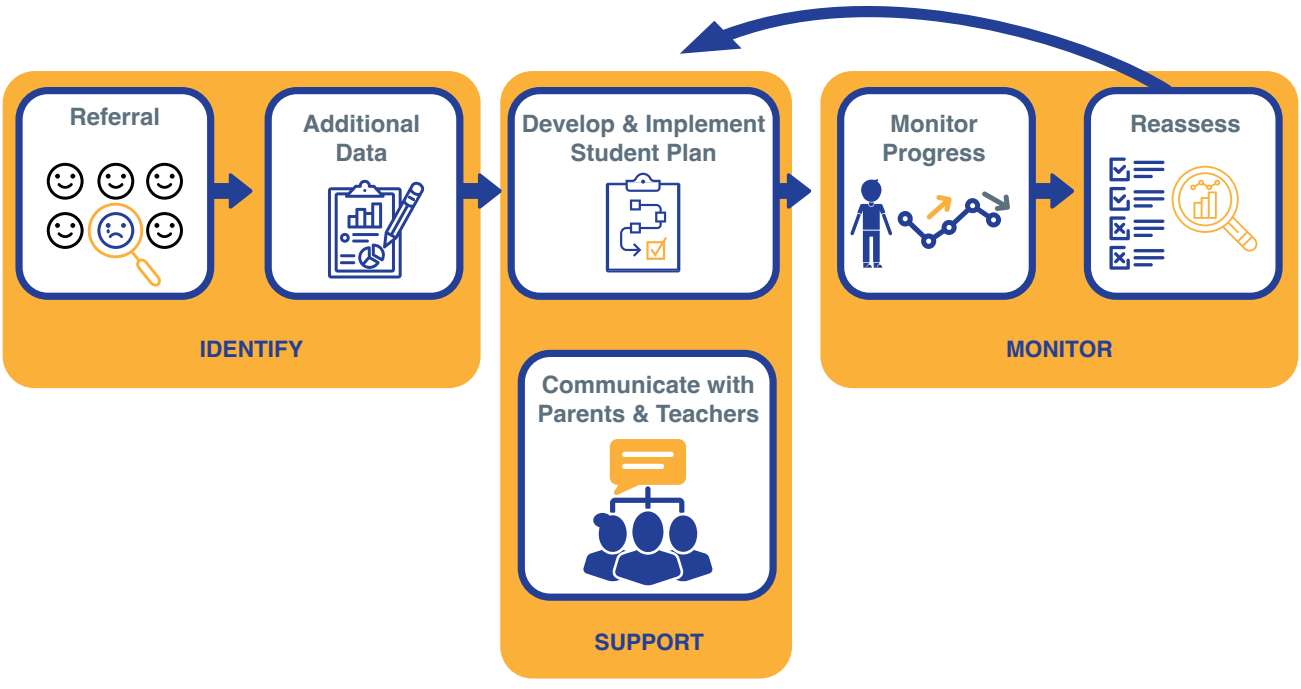
Fact Sheet

# Meeting the Social, Emotional, and Mental Health Needs of All Students

## Identifying, Supporting, and Monitoring Students with Elevated Needs

Schools and districts can support students' social, emotional, and behavioral needs through a Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) approach. MTSS is a cohesive, three-tiered framework of programs, practices, and interventions that schools and districts can use to meet the mental health and social-emotional needs of their students. In the MTSS framework, Tier 1 are universal supports offered to all students through classroom-based and school-wide programs and practices. Tier 2 and 3 supports and interventions are designed for students identified with elevated needs. Tier 2 supports and interventions are targeted to students with low to moderate needs or to supplement Tier 3 interventions; Tier 3 interventions are intensive supports provided to students with significant needs, including those with diagnosed mental health disorders.[1]

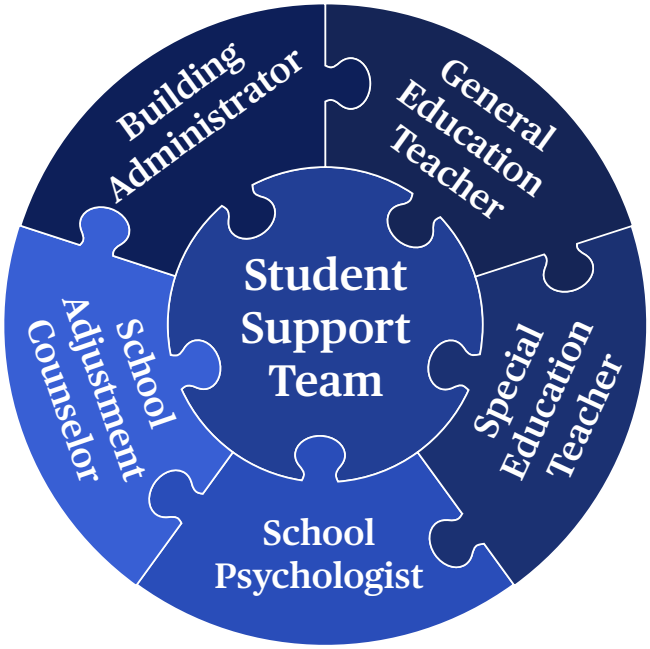
Essential components of an effective MTSS approach are **identifying** students with elevated needs, **supporting** them with the right Tier 2 and/or Tier 3 interventions, and **monitoring** their progress over time. The figure below shows the common steps in this process:




Adapted from the Massachusetts Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Academy.

## The Role of Student Support Teams

A key strategy for supporting and monitoring students with the right set of Tier 2 and 3 supports is to create a school-based multi-disciplinary team consisting of educators, counselors, special education professionals, and administrators. This team is often called a Student Support Team (SST) but may also be referred to by other names such as Child Study Team or Child Support Team. The SST uses a data-informed process to identify students who need additional supports beyond Tier 1, match them to the most appropriate Tier 2 and/or 3 interventions, and monitor student progress. In an SST, team members meet regularly to examine referrals for supports for students and develop a plan for each student. The team assesses students' progress at designated intervals to determine if supports in place are helping or if other supports are needed. While the composition of SST members varies from school to school, the figure at right shows examples of roles often included in an SST.[2]




The specific protocols and processes for monitoring may vary from school to school based on staffing, needs, case load, and other factors. Below are some key considerations for schools and districts to think about when creating or maintaining SSTs.

**Key Considerations for Creating Student Support Teams[3,4]**

| Team Structure | Communication | Documentation |
|---|---|---|
| Necessary staff routinely attend meetings | Meetings include an agenda and outcomes for team members | Decisions about students are clearly documented, along with timeline for reassessment of supports |
| Team meets consistently | Team has the information it needs to make placements | School staff are informed about SST and know who to contact if they have concerns |
| Team meets often enough that it can respond quickly to student support needs | Protocol developed and followed for communicating Tier 2 and 3 placements with teachers and caregivers and gathering feedback | Database of community referrals is created and maintained |

## Identification

There are strategies schools can take to support students who need additional mental health supports, including:

**Educator Referral.** All school staff should be able to recognize signs that a student needs mental health support and know the protocols to follow. Establish a formal and documented referral process that staff can follow when they have a concern about a student's mental health. This could be a form that staff submit to a designated counselor, who determines the appropriate actions to take and referrals to make to support the student.[5]

**Parent Referral.** Parents are an important source of information when identifying students with elevated needs. To facilitate this process, schools can make sure that parents are aware of signs of mental health distress in their children and know how to refer them for mental health supports in their school or community. For example, some schools have referral forms on the parent portal or school website.[6]

**Student Self-Referral.** Provide support for students seeking help by ensuring they know how they can ask for support. One way is promoting the "No Wrong Door" message—students can talk to any adult in the building if they need help. In addition, some schools have flyers with QR codes that lead to online referral forms, or other ways that students can connect with counseling staff if they are struggling.[7]

**Universal Mental Health Screeners (UMHS).** Schools can consider screening all students for mental health using an evidence-based screening tool. Universal screening can provide a proactive approach to identifying students experiencing mental health and/or social-emotional learning challenges, so students can receive needed supports quickly. However, because UMHS may increase the number of students identified as needing support, it is important to have Support and Monitoring systems in place to ensure that identified students receive necessary supports.[8,9]

Because each school is has a unique context, the right screener for your school or district may differ from another school's. Screeners should be free of bias and culturally relevant to your school community.[10] (See the factsheet, Using Data to Inform MTSS Efforts to Promote Student Wellbeing for more on this.) Review the Resources section of this handout for information on where to find different screeners.

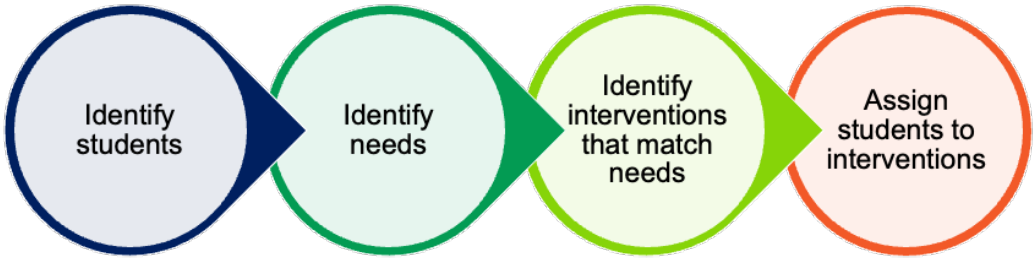
## Support

Developing a system for identifying students who are struggling is the first step. Next is to establish processes to determine how to assess and place students in the right type of Tier 2 or Tier 3 supports.

| Examples of Tier 2 and Tier 3 Supports | |
|---|---|
| **Tier 2: Targeted** | **Tier 3: Intensive** |
| • Additional social-emotional learning support in the classroom, such as Calming Corners or Check-In/ Check-Out<br>• Small-group supports outside the classroom<br>• Mentoring | • In-school mental health counseling<br>• Out-of-school mental health counseling<br>• Mental health support groups |

## Steps in the Support Process

To match each identified student with the appropriate Tier 2 and/or Tier 3 support(s), it is important to identify their specific needs, including the root causes of mental health or behavioral challenges, and then to match the need to the right intervention(s). The figure below illustrates this process. This may require a mental health professional such as a school adjustment counselor or school psychologist to collect additional data from the student, teachers, and/or family members. The SST can then match the need(s) to the right intervention(s).




Adapted from the Massachusetts Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Academy.

Creating an inventory of supports and resources that are available at the school and through outside referrals to community-based mental health supports can support quickly matching students with appropriate interventions. Specifically, SST teams should:

- Create and maintain list of Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports your school and/or district offers. Make sure that supports are culturally and linguistically appropriate and nourishing for the student.
- Build a network of community referrals and support services for students.
- Build a system for tracking and documenting student placements that is private and secure.

Lastly, as a plan for supporting each student is developed, plans should be communicated and coordinated with teachers and caregivers as appropriate. For example, if the SST matches a student to a social skills support group, it might be helpful to let the student's classroom teacher know so that they can also provide social skill scaffolding in the classroom.

## Monitoring

Once a plan is in place for a student, the SST should consistently assess the student's progress to determine if supports should continue or need adjustment. While specific processes for monitoring vary from school to school based on staffing, needs, caseloads, and other factors, SSTs should consider creating protocols that document:

- How often the SST will review student supports and student progress.
- What data sources will be used for these reviews.[11]
- The process for re-assigning students to another tier of interventions—either higher or lower—in a way that is culturally appropriate and supportive of the students' needs.[12]
- Re-assess the student plan by determining if the implemented supports are helping the student make progress. This may include continuing with current supports, changing supports, changing dosage of supports, or eliminating supports.

## Additional Resources

CASEL: Assessment Tools

REL Northeast & Islands: A review of instruments for measuring social and emotional learning skills among secondary school students

Rand Corporation: The RAND Education Assessment Finder

National Center for School Mental Health/ University of Maryland School of Medicine: School Mental Health Quality Guide: Early Intervention and Treatment Services & Supports (Tiers 2&3)

School Health Assessment and Performance Evaluation System (SHAPE): Screening and Assessment Library (requires free registration)

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