

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Simplifying MTSS

Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication.
—ANONYMOUS

Cole Middle School sits within a maze of pavement and sidewalks. With over 500 students, the hallways buzz with the steady hum of adolescence. During passing periods, teachers prepare for their next class and hope their students arrive on time. Students linger about, teasing each other playfully before rushing down the hallway. When they finally make their way into their classroom, their teacher is eager to call roll and begin. A couple of kids sit at their desks gazing at their phones, their earbuds securely in their ears. A few others in the back of the room toss a football around.

The teacher gets up and, raising their voice, says, “All right! Everyone, sit down!”

The remaining students meander to their seats; everyone gets out their assignments.

In a conference room down the hall, a few staff members review results and discuss students who need additional support. One teacher remarks, “These referrals take so long to fill out. It also takes so long to meet with the intervention team, and I can’t wait for weeks to get help.”

Another shares, “Yeah. I avoid using that team and usually just talk to the parents. Even if I go straight to the counselor, they usually can’t help unless it’s a crisis situation. So frustrating.”

Meanwhile, across town, Greyson Middle School feels like a coordinated dance sequence. Teachers stand in their doorways and greet students during every passing period, smiling and making personal connections. They have activities for students to begin as they enter class. In a meeting in the main office, a leadership team reviews student data for general trends. There are large sticky notes stuck on walls that are grouped by color to indicate students’ levels of risk. Charts and data share the school’s story this year, while motivational quotes hang around the room. The team has an administrator, a special education teacher, and a few teachers who represent each grade level. A facilitator runs the meeting, ensuring the team follows the agenda, and it’s clear each member has a role as the team works through their questions and accompa-

nying data. They look at trends within grade levels and then classrooms, identifying standards and skills that students have mastered versus ones in which they lag behind. They pinpoint a concerning issue in the seventh-grade classrooms and develop a plan to address it. The conversations stay positive and focused on what the data tell them. A fly on the wall can see there is a lot of collaboration among the team and they develop tangible next steps in a timely manner.

While the tale of Cole Middle School is all too common, the tale of Greyson Middle School is rare—it doesn't come easy to educators. Why are some sites able to implement a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS), while others struggle with false starts? (See Box 1.1 for a definition of MTSS.) As an educator, I not only experienced this frustration myself, but I continue to see it in the faces of educators I work with today. Schools are overwhelmed and increasingly asked to do more and more. They're told "implement MTSS" and then offered a laundry list of things to do, trainings to attend, and people to engage. They buy a new curriculum, learn a progress monitoring tool, and reorganize their schedule. They have team meetings and put data on the screen, and still seem to move two steps forward, one step back. After attending trainings and investing time, they find themselves barely inching along. If this sounds familiar, you're not alone. Approximately a third of schools that implement MTSS abandon implementation after just 2 years and over half abandon it within 4 years.¹

It dawns on me. We're making things too complex when we should make them simpler.

We usually go too far and make things more complicated than they should be (apologies if Avril Lavigne just popped into your head, but it's a fair question). MTSS takes several years to implement, but if most schools abandon it within a few years, how can we ensure they stay on track and continue with implementation through its ups and downs?

For educators, this means keeping things simple. Implementing MTSS is not just about sharing knowledge and information. People need to learn the science and technical aspects of MTSS, but there's a human side to change as well. And yet, districts and state departments continue to have schools implement MTSS solely by offering training after training. Surely the more time we devote to training and coaching, the more implementation will happen, right? Solid logic, but it hasn't resulted in substantial change. This is because we are over-complicating implementation and piling on too much too soon, without considering the emotional toll of change. Sites don't spend enough time building the need for change or ensuring staff are mentally ready for MTSS before they implement it. To address that divide, this book offers ways to simplify MTSS so it can be implemented efficiently and effectively.

WHAT MAKES MTSS SO TOUGH IN SCHOOLS?

You probably have a thought or two that comes to mind when reading that header. Frequent leadership change; isolated "sit and get" trainings; being asked to do more with less; initiative

Box 1.1. DEFINING MTSS

Multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) is a schoolwide prevention model that organizes data, systems, and practices into one cohesive framework. It enables educators to match students' data-based needs to a corresponding level of support. Some sources emphasize the multiple systems involved by defining MTSS as multi-tiered systems of support.

after initiative. We have known that change is needed in schools since 1983 when the National Commission on Excellence in Education called for school reform in its report, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*.² Over 40 years later, we have made progress in restructuring schools and implementing tiered systems, but more work remains.³

MTSS is a system that embodies many positive practices. Team-based leadership and planning, screening to identify students proactively in need of additional support, progress monitoring, use of fidelity measures to monitor supports, data-based decision making to drive instruction and choices about interventions, and the installment of infrastructure to build efficient and coherent structures—all are linked to positive student performance and better organizational health.⁴ Still, the implementation of MTSS remains a challenge to many sites as they navigate how and where to start. The following are a few barriers that I've seen and experienced with sites, which I view as complicating MTSS rather than making it simple and accessible for staff.

Paper Implementation

Have you ever been at work or at home and felt unmotivated, so you did something simple to feel productive? Perhaps you cleaned up files on your desktop rather than writing that summary. Or you responded to emails rather than creating a lesson plan. Maybe you made your shopping list rather than braving the weather to go to the store. These are all activities that make us *feel* productive, but probably aren't in the grand scheme of things.

This can be schools with MTSS. It is challenging to do many of the things required to implement it. For example, it takes time to vet and buy a new curriculum, let alone train staff on it. It can be daunting to adjust teams that have been in place for years. It can be overwhelming to give up a screening assessment to learn a new one. Consequently, schools may do what's easy and quick first. In my experience, teams unilaterally decide a process in their schools and then hurry off to create new forms and guidance documents. The MTSS leadership teams then outline guidance, develop forms to answer questions and input data, and create graphics or flowcharts to represent what MTSS is in their school.

Those are good things to do, but this “paper implementation” isn't actual implementation. Teams need a vision and training before they need guidebooks. Educators need support and clarity on MTSS before paper forms. In fact, we can make these forms too complex and create a burdensome system. I saw this in one of my schools where I worked as a school psychologist. We spent weeks creating forms aligned to the problem-solving process, all designed to capture the data needed to have a strong, responsive system. We shared them with teachers but even weeks later, no one was sending students to our support team. We knew students needed intensive support, but teachers weren't bringing them to our attention. So, we asked, “What's going on?”

The answer was simple: The time to fill out the forms wasn't worth it to teachers. They'd rather support a student themselves. We had safe, paper implementation that made us feel productive, but it took us a step back and into complexity.

The Change Pendulum

The original iPhone debuted in 2007. It featured a 3.5-inch screen and a storage capacity of up to 8 gigabytes. Just one year later, the iPhone 3G was released, which was twice as fast and offered four times more storage than its predecessor. It was also \$400 less than the first iPhone! From 2007 to its current model at the time of this book's publication, Apple has released a

new iPhone every year (and even two times a year in some cases).⁵ Ask yourself how often you upgrade your phone. Do you wait until the screen cracks? Do you wait until the phone runs too slow before you upgrade, usually 2 or 3 years longer than you probably should? Or do you upgrade every year? If you are someone who upgrades in 2 years or less, then you're one of about 45% of users who do. Approximately 10% of users under 54 years old upgrade annually.⁶

But is upgrading worth it? Changing from a perfectly fine phone to a new one in a year comes at a literal and figurative cost, from learning new features to paying the price of the phone, to needing to purchase new charge cords and phone cases. There is an initial learning curve, but most users probably adapt quickly and use their new phone without issue (we assume, but—hey—who hasn't helped a family member or friend set up their new phone?).

Adapting to something new often relates to what we do in schools with priorities and initiatives. Perhaps your school began implementing positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) one year to address school climate needs. Then it added trauma-informed practices to further address emerging social-emotional-behavioral (SEB) needs. Perhaps it also needed to address attendance and literacy, which brought with it new training and curricula to use. Each year, schools may have different pressures and demands from the school board or legislation that dictates their priority areas. Imagine being a staff member and learning a new focus every single year. We have made teaching and classroom demands complex by adding initiative after initiative and then changing them each year. The constant shifting in focus and learning of new skills impacts a school's ability to form a cohesive system and implement MTSS. As schools swing from one initiative to the next, they lose the ability to create a sustainable system.

Training in Isolation

When implementing MTSS, there are a lot of skills and information schools require, so naturally, we think we need to provide staff with a lot of professional learning. After all, best practice says that a team is needed for implementation and follow-up support.^{7,8} But this can overwhelm sites (not to mention—can they even be out of the building multiple days during the year?). In a previous role at a state department of education, my colleagues and I provided technical support to schools. Our goal was to train them on MTSS, particularly on Tier 2 interventions for behavior. We had just spent a day and a half training teams when a participant raised his hand:

“I'm a principal for an elementary school, and I hear everything you're saying. But I have other initiatives we're juggling . . . we have a new math curriculum, and we're addressing low attendance this year. I can't do everything that you talked about today, so what is the one thing that I can focus on to implement this intervention?”

There it was, loud and clear. A principal telling us he could only devote so much time to implementing MTSS and that he was overwhelmed with what was going on at his site. How can you make this simple for me? he was asking. I was flummoxed when my colleague gave a long-winded response about commitment, attending trainings, and “trying to make it work.” To me, the answer was to focus on something simple. Tell the principal that one spark to get momentum, that one domino to tip, such as building a team or analyzing academic and SEB data side by side to better identify students who need supports. By suggesting something that wasn't focused or simple to implement, my colleague fell into the “complexity trap.” Leadership may think adding

more information and complexity results in change. In reality, the principal was saying the exact opposite was needed. He was seeking something doable yet critical to focus on, but only complex steps and convoluted processes were offered. We can't expect sites to implement MTSS well if we offer more hours of training in isolation or if we make the trainings too inaccessible.

Frequent Leadership Change

In 2016, the Cleveland Browns hired Hue Jackson as their head coach.⁹ After starting their football season 0–14, Jackson finally got his first win with the Browns nearly 11 months later. After scoring 20 points, Hue and the Browns enjoyed a Christmas gift on December 24, 2016.¹⁰ Unfortunately, Jackson would only see his team win two more times over the next 2 years, and was fired in October 2018. The Browns hired Gregg Williams as interim coach, and he seemingly built momentum as the Browns went 5–3. But the Browns fired Williams and hired Freddie Kitchens for the 2019 season, only to see him earn a 6–10 record. After just one season, the Browns fired Kitchens and hired Kevin Stefanski in 2020.¹¹

In just over 2 years, the Browns named three different head coaches. For a team that hasn't been to the Super Bowl since the 1950s and has had only two trips to the post-season over the last decade,¹² it begs the question: What impact did the frequent change in leadership have? Sound like a school you know? A team forms, and staff spend time training, investing resources, and making small changes in their building. There are schoolwide expectations, a new screening tool, a better curriculum. Momentum is built and then? A new administration comes in with a completely different focus. All of the previous work is dismissed as the new principal implements their vision.

Much like the Browns or any professional sports team with a new coach (as a Bears fan myself, I've felt this "reset" several times!), the frequent change in leadership often pushes a school in a new direction and resets previous efforts. In fact, the average tenure of a principal is only 4 years, with a third of them staying at a school for less than 2 years.¹³ With frequent change in leadership happening so often, it's hard to build momentum to implement MTSS well.

These are just a few of the more common challenges seen with MTSS. Schools may spend time creating forms or processes but provide limited training to support their actual use (or these processes are used, but they may be too cumbersome). Schools and educators go from one initiative to the next, and have one-off trainings with limited connection to the classroom or follow-up to support teachers in their use of the trained content. And there is frequent turnover in leadership that brings in new initiatives and values with it. These realities make MTSS difficult to implement and sustain, but this book offers a few key principles to guide its successful implementation.

SIMPLIFYING MTSS

The most common question educators and leaders ask me is "Can you give us an example?" Be it schedules, team agendas, or an intervention, people are looking for clarity on what to implement. However, this is a tough question to answer because MTSS is contextual (what works in a rural school is not likely to work in an urban school). Sure, I can give you an example, but it's designed for the context and needs of another school. It likely won't be helpful because your

school's context is different. But if I listen intently, what I really hear in that first question is another one: "How am I supposed to do this? How can I implement?"

This book addresses that question by discussing five principles to simplify MTSS and make it doable. These principles are levers of change and helpful considerations for successful MTSS implementation. Further, these principles can address some of the barriers that make MTSS difficult in schools.

Principle 1: Acknowledge That Change Is Hard

Ask yourself: What are some of the most stressful events in life? Having kids, marriage, and divorce make the top 10. Would you be surprised that moving is considered the top stressor?¹⁴ Why is that? Well, because change is hard. Think of moving and how disruptive it is to your daily routine. Where do you buy groceries? What's the quickest way to commute to work? We like predictability, so when we ask staff and school leaders to change systems to implement MTSS, it can be nerve-wracking. For this principle, I discuss the human side of change and how schools can navigate the anxiety that comes with asking staff to try new things and give up old habits. I discuss speaking to people's emotions to motivate them when implementing change, as well as to their logical side to show how it will be done. In particular, I discuss what each person in a school needs to be on board with change. For example, are you a *relationship* person who wants to know *who* the change will impact? Are you a *details* person and want to know *how* the change will occur and what steps to take? Or are you a *rational* person who wants to know *why* the change is happening? This idea is connected to Lippitt's complex change model.¹⁵ Answering each of these questions eases anxiety, provides direction, and builds support for MTSS.

Principle 2: Build the Need for Change

In 2017, Heineken released a commercial in which two strangers with opposing political and social views sat down and had a beer to discuss their differences. No yelling, no name-calling, just a calm discussion in which both sides listened to each other. How did they do that? That commercial and its concept are discussed in Chapter 6, as they highlight the importance of aligning people in one direction for MTSS and change. MTSS can take anywhere from 6 to 8 years to fully implement,¹⁶ so before change begins, staff need to understand the process of change and the commitment it takes. Imagine steering a large ship. You can spin the wheel, but the shift in direction (the change) takes quite a bit of time to see. To motivate staff for change and help them understand why it is occurring, I discuss how to identify the needs of a school and build a vision for MTSS.

Principle 3: Think Systems, Not Individuals

This may be a familiar scene to you: You're driving on the highway only to hit bumper-to-bumper traffic. Cars are scrambling, weaving in and out, and brake lights are flickering on and off with fervor. Someone abruptly cuts you off. You scream something unpleasant and feel your grip tighten on the wheel. "Who taught these people how to drive?" you mutter to yourself. It's easy to blame the other drivers, but what about the system that created this situation? The

United States has a work system that largely dictates people work 9:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M., which results in an overflow of traffic in the early morning hours and again in the evening. We have stoplights to regulate traffic flow, but people can easily ignore the process. What if we considered a systems solution rather than an individual solution that managed traffic flow during peak times? I discuss systems thinking in Chapter 7 to highlight the importance of creating effective solutions for systems rather than focusing just on individuals.

Principle 4: Get a Spark Going

Some schools may take so much time implementing MTSS that it can become detrimental. They spend all their time preparing and discussing change without actually taking any action, which results in little to no movement. Should they start with Tier 1? Or is it better to start with students who have the most intensive needs? For this principle, I share the importance of starting small, feeling success, and building from that. MTSS comes with a lot of new skills that staff may need to learn, so the value of ensuring they are successful and confident in MTSS processes is discussed. You may shudder when you hear the phrase “go slow to go fast” because this approach often seems to be a way of spending too much time preparing rather than actually *doing* MTSS. Instead, it’s best to start small to have large success. By organizing implementation so that staff can apply and be successful with it, schools can light a spark that ignites a steady fire.

Principle 5: Ask the Right Questions

We have data at our fingertips feeding us information to guide our decisions. We have smartwatches telling us our steps and heart rate. We have notifications on our phone to tell us if we’re nearing the exit we need to take or if we’re close to spending down a bank account. We get input about the top 10 shows from our streaming services that help us watch popular shows. Schools have a multitude of data as well, including attendance records, state test scores, screening assessments, and input from those who work with students. But are schools data “rich” and information “poor”?¹⁷ Often, educators analyze data without a clear goal or question in mind, which leads them to go in circles. Here, the idea is that schools should start with a question first and *then* find the right data to answer it. This principle speaks to making sure that the right people look at the right information to answer the right questions.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

While the technical side and knowledge are needed for sites to implement MTSS, schools approach implementation incorrectly when they *only* offer trainings on technical information. MTSS implementation can be improved by focusing on the principles that also acknowledge the human side of change. In this book, I discuss those principles and offer ways schools can apply them. I use the term “schools” collectively throughout this book to refer to those groups or individuals who lead or implement MTSS at a school site. This can refer to specific educators, leadership teams, or other personnel who are coordinating efforts for or supporting MTSS.

This book is intended for anyone who is leading MTSS or is a part of implementation at their site. Anyone who is in a school implementing MTSS will find value in the content, as I outline foundational information on MTSS and offer practical activities to use whether you're the principal of a school or a teacher in a classroom. This book is organized in two parts. Part I is focused on the foundations of MTSS. In Chapter 2, MTSS is defined, along with its core components. In Chapter 3, the *MT* in MTSS is described, which are the tiered supports. In Chapter 4, the alignment of data and teams is shared, including how data-based decision making and teaming go hand in hand. In Part II, a chapter is provided on each of the previously described five principles to keep things simple for MTSS. Each chapter discusses an individual principle in depth using a relatable analogy, as well as activities to apply and actions to take as I provide guidance on using the respective principle at your site. This is not necessarily a linear process. Readers should not feel obligated to do each principle in order; rather, they should use the activities and actions as they see fit and in relation to their school's needs. The five key principles and their associated actions are summarized in Figure 1.1.

KEEP IT SIMPLE

MTSS is a complex system that requires coordination among an entire school staff to match students to an appropriate level of support. Several times a year, educators screen the entire student body for their risk status and match each student to a corresponding level of support. This requires gathering data, inputting it into a warehouse, analyzing it, and making timely decisions. Further, those decisions are made at the schoolwide level, the grade or classroom level, and for individual students! Teams meet, monitor progress, and make adjustments. Administration and leadership also meet to determine if implementation is occurring smoothly and to navigate barriers.¹⁸ What an overwhelming process with so many moving parts!

So let's dig in, but let's keep it simple.

Acknowledge That Change Is Hard	Build the Need for Change	Think Systems, Not Individuals	Get a Spark Going	Ask the Right Questions
Actions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss the complex change model with staff • Create individual golden circles • Assess the staff's Four Needs 	Actions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct a gallery walk • Create a vision • Identify implementation goals 	Actions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct a team audit • Do a system analysis • Outline processes for supporting students • Develop a communication plan 	Actions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify where to start • Outline an action plan • Meet on a regular basis to evaluate progress 	Actions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct an assessment audit • Ensure your data are valid and graphed • Focus on alterable variables

FIGURE 1.1. Simplifying MTSS principles and associated actions.

Notes

1. McIntosh, K., Mercer, S. H., Nese, R. N. T., & Ghemraoui, A. (2016). Identifying and predicting distinct patterns of implementation in a school-wide behavior support framework. *Prevention Science, 17*(8), 992–1001.
2. National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983, April 3). A nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED226006>
3. McIntosh, K., & Goodman, S. (2016). *Integrated multi-tiered systems of support: Blending RTI and PBIS*. Guilford Press.
4. Harlacher, J. E., Potter, J., & Collins, A. (2024). *Untangling data-based decision making: A problem-solving model to enhance MTSS*. Marzano Resources.
5. Montgomery, A., & Mingis, K. (2023, November 13). *The evolution of Apple's iPhone*. Computerworld. www.computerworld.com/article/3692531/evolution-of-apple-iphone.html
6. AppleInsider. (2023, April 19). *Younger Apple customers drive iPhone upgrade demand*. <https://forums.appleinsider.com/discussion/231710/younger-apple-customers-drive-iphone-upgrade-demand>
7. Foreman, S. G., & Crystal, C. (2015). Systems consultation for multi-tiered systems of supports (MTSS): Implementation issues. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation, 25*(2–3), 276–285.
8. McIntosh, K., Predy, L., Upreti, G., Hume, A. E., Turri, M. G., & Mathews, S. (2014). Perceptions of contextual features related to implementation and sustainability of school-wide positive behavior support. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions, 16*(1), 1–13.
9. Cleveland Browns. (2024, March 18). In *Wikipedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cleveland_Browns#History
10. Associated Press. (2016, December 24). *Christmas gift: Browns get first win, beat Chargers 20–17*. ESPN. www.espn.com/nfl/recap/_/gameId/400874528
11. Cleveland Browns. (n.d.). *All-time head coaches*. www.clevelandbrowns.com/team/history/head-coaches
12. Champs or Chumps. (n.d.). *Cleveland Browns playoff history*. <https://champsorchumps.us/team/nfl/cleveland-browns>
13. Levin, S., & Bradley, K. (2019, March 19). *Understanding and addressing principal turnover*. Learning Policy Institute. https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/NASSP_LPI_Principal_Turnover_Research_Review_REPORT.pdf
14. SWNS. (2020, September 3). Many claim this event is more stressful than having kids or divorce. *New York Post*. <https://nypost.com/2020/09/30/some-people-claim-this-is-more-stressful-than-marriage-divorce-and-even-having-kids>
15. The complex change model was developed and copyrighted by Mary Lippitt, founder and president of Enterprise Management (<https://enterprisemgt.com>), in 1987.
16. McIntosh, K., & Goodman, S. (2016). *Integrated multi-tiered systems of support: Blending RTI and PBIS*. Guilford Press.
17. National Center on Intensive Intervention. (n.d.). *Data rich, information poor? Making sense of progress monitoring data to guide intervention decisions* [Webinar]. <https://intensiveintervention.org/resource/data-rich-information-poor-making-sense-progress-monitoring-data-guide-intervention>
18. Harlacher, J. E., Potter, J., & Collins, A. (2024). *Untangling data-based decision making*. Marzano Resources.