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Delving Into the Details: Implementing Multitiered K–3 Reading Supports in High-Priority Schools

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Abstract

Although there is widespread agreement about the practices associated with multitiered systems of support (MTSS) frameworks in beginning reading, we often underestimate the systems and infrastructure that schools need to implement and sustain these practices. The real work of developing these systems often happens in the detailed-oriented and often messy world of schedules, routines, meetings, and materials. The purpose of this article is to describe a K–3 reading initiative where school teams serving high percentages of students at risk for reading difficulties "delved into the details" to work to overcome the complexities inherent in implementing multitiered reading supports in high priority schools. © *2016 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.*

Schools are increasingly implementing multitiered systems of support (MTSS) frameworks with the goal of providing more effective beginning reading instruction to all students, especially students at risk for experiencing reading difficulties (Gersten et al., 2009; Samuels, 2011). MTSS efforts in education have been informed by prevention models in public health, and are characterized by a continuum of increasingly more intensive intervention based on students' level of risk and instructional needs with the goal of preventing or ameliorating the effects of early-reading risk (Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009; Lembke, McMaster, & Stecker, 2010).

Although there are many different versions of MTSS frameworks (often called Response to Intervention or RtI), there are common practices that are consistent across MTSS models for beginning reading (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2009; National Center on Response to Intervention, 2010). These include (a) establishing strong instructional leadership and coordinating efforts at the school level, (b) providing high-quality core classroom reading instruction to all students, (c) using data to inform instructional decisions, and (d) providing small-group interventions at increasing levels of intensity to students based on their response to core instruction and aligned with their instructional needs.

Although there is widespread agreement about these common practices associated with MTSS frameworks in beginning reading, we often underestimate the supports that schools need to build systems and infrastructure to implement and sustain these practices (Simmons, Kuykendall, King, Cornachione, & Kameenui, 2000). The real work of developing these aligned and coordinated systems often happens in the detailed-oriented and often messy world of schedules, routines, meetings, and materials (Jones, Burns, & Piri, 2010). For example, Harn, Chard, Biancarosa, and Kame'enui (2011) found that alignment and coordination of instruction across tiers were associated with meaningful increases in reading achievement. At-risk students in this study performed substantially higher when the MTSS systems were aligned, coordinated, and collaborative.

The purpose of this article is to describe a K–3 reading initiative where school teams serving high percentages of students at risk for reading difficulties worked to overcome the complexities inherent in implementing multitiered reading supports in high-priority schools. After describing the K–3 reading initiative, we provide an overview of essential MTSS practices. Then we describe the challenges associated with implementing these practices in real-world, high-priority schools. We focus on stumbling blocks—the crucial barriers that often prevent schools from fully implementing these practices. We frame these barriers through statements that capture the central challenges schools face when establishing MTSS practice. We then provide examples of how schools involved with the K–3 reading initiative delved into the details to move past barriers and build the systems and infrastructure to implement a comprehensive MTSS framework fully, with fidelity and consistency.

Figure 5.1. Essential Features of MTSS K–3 Reading Model

MTSS K–3 Reading Model

Commitment to K–3 reading as a school's top priority

School-wide reading improvement plan

School literacy leadership team

Comprehensive literacy assessment system to inform decisions about reading instruction and intervention

High-quality classroom reading instruction for all students (Tier 1)

Evidence-based supplemental intensive reading interventions for students at risk for reading difficulties (Tiers 2 and 3)

Ongoing coaching and targeted professional development to support administrator and teacher knowledge of reading research, practices, and systems

Parent engagement program

Overview of the K–3 Reading Initiative

A northeast state department of education funded a pilot K–3 reading initiative designed to implement a K–3 MTSS model in high-priority school. The overall goals of the pilot initiative were to implement and evaluate a fully specified school-wide multitiered K–3 reading school improvement model in select schools. Based on the lessons learned from the pilot and evaluation results, the model was refined and expanded to other schools and districts in the state.

Districts that served large percentages of students at risk for reading difficulties nominated schools to participate in the pilot K–3 reading initiative. Participating schools were selected based on their high need and demonstrated commitment to implement the MTSS model. Four schools from four districts participated in the multiyear implementation of the pilot initiative. These schools served an average of 427 students in each grade K–3, of which 67.2% were Hispanic, 16.7% were African-American, and 12.9% were White. On average, 83.7% of the students in the schools received free or reduced lunch, and 33.5% received English language services. Participating schools received professional development, interventionist support, and assistance from expert external coaches to implement the K–3 reading MTSS practices and systems. Essential features of the K–3 MTSS model are presented in Figure 5.1. Evaluation results of the pilot suggested that there were positive effects on student literacy achievement and that these effects increased across multiple years of implementation (Dougherty, Coyne, Oldham, & Sugai, 2016; Leonard, Coyne, Oldham, Burns, & Gage, 2016). We use the experiences of these four schools that participated in the K–3 MTSS pilot to describe how teams had to delve into the details to implement effective MTSS practice and systems fully.

Delving Into the Details

MTSS practices appear straightforward when in reality they are complex (Coyne, Kame'enui, & Simmons, 2001; Harn et al., 2011) especially in high-priority schools that often have limited resources and serve large percentages of students who are at significant risk for developing reading difficulties. In our experience, schools understand the importance of establishing the essential practices associated with MTSS frameworks. For example, there is very little disagreement about the need for high-quality classroom reading instruction, data that inform instructional decisions, and intervention options for students who require reading supports at higher levels of intensity. The challenge for schools, however, is to move from talking about these practices at a broad conceptual level to developing systems, organizational structures, and routines that are aligned, coordinated, and implemented consistently (Fixsen, Naoom, Blasé, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005; Harn et al., 2011). In order to implement this type of system change within schools, high levels of communication, engagement, and feedback are necessary in order to move beyond barriers to sustained solutions.

In many cases, schools begin developing an MTSS model but then reach a critical point, where their efforts are impeded by structural and procedural barriers that prevent them from fully establishing essential practices. This is the stumbling block, and the challenge for schools is to move beyond this point to ensure that MTSS practices are implemented completely with consistency and fidelity. To overcome barriers and move past the stumbling block, teachers need to address difficult questions and grapple with small but important details. Teachers need to delve into the details, which is an apt metaphor for the hard work that schools need to engage in to build an effective MTSS model. MTSS K–3 reading stumbling blocks and solutions are summarized in Figure 5.2. The alternative is troubling. There is growing evidence that less than full or complete implementation of MTSS practices may not result in improved student outcomes (Balu et al., 2015). Therefore, for MTSS frameworks to be effective, delving into the details appears to be necessary.

Literacy Leadership

Strong instructional leadership is essential for successful MTSS implementation. In order for schools to implement an effective beginning reading model fully, schools need to build strong leadership teams and corresponding routines to guide their work (Jones et al., 2010). Leadership teams develop a comprehensive school-wide literacy plan (Kame'enui, Simmons, & Coyne, 2000) and develop the structures and routines necessary to implement the MTSS plan. School-wide literacy plans help to guide schools in establishing goals, objectives, and activities that are aligned to critical areas of beginning reading instruction, assessment, and intervention.

Figure 5.2. MTSS K–3 Reading Stumbling Blocks and Solutions

Literacy Leadership

Stumbling block: *"We have an MTSS plan, but it doesn't guide our day-to-day reading practice."*

Solutions:

Representative and empowered leadership team committed to regular meetings, consistent routines, and clear communication.

Useful and dynamic literacy plan that includes broad multiyear goals as well as short-term objectives that build and develop over time.

Activity timeline that documents all school literacy activities and includes alignment with specific literacy-plan goals.

High-Quality Classroom Reading Instruction

Stumbling block: *"We have identified a common approach to Tier 1, but it doesn't seem like there is consistency in reading instruction across teachers and classrooms."*

Solutions:

Comprehensive published core reading program aligned with Common Core State Standards and program-specific professional development.

Teacher-developed whole-group templates outlining essential components of the core program to guide instruction, ensure consistency, and facilitate coaching.

Using Data To Inform Instruction and Intervention

"We have useful reading data from our students, but it feels like we are not able to use it to make meaningful instructional decisions for all our students."

Structured data team meetings that include a systematic process for reviewing data and documenting instructional decisions scheduled throughout the school year.

Data-grouping workbooks that compile all reading-assessment data and specific instructional decisions made for each student including instructional focus, instructional materials, grouping and scheduling decisions, and assigned interventionist.

Providing Small-Group Instruction and Intervention to all Students

"We have students who need intensive small- group intervention, but now what?"

Schoolwide block schedule prioritizing reading instruction so that each grade level has a common and consistent time allocated for whole-group classroom reading instruction, small group instruction, and small group supplemental intervention.

Small number of evidence-based interventions aligned across tiers of instruction with program-specific professional development.

Small-group templates outlining essential components of each intervention program, including grouping and dosage decisions to guide intervention, ensure fidelity, and facilitate coaching.

In MTSS models, leadership teams meet regularly to evaluate data and engage in problem solving to develop, review, and edit literacy goals and activities throughout the school year. They also create and communicate the systems and routines that serve to guide, direct, and align instructional activities to the school literacy plan. Strong instructional leadership allows schools to move beyond a conceptual level of understanding of MTSS practices to rigorous implementation with high levels of fidelity.

Delving Into the Details. Most schools have an MTSS team and a school-wide beginning reading plan. However, the extent to which these plans actually inform day-to-day reading practice in schools is often limited. One challenge we have observed in our work is the make up of MTSS teams and the manner by which school-wide literacy plans are developed. In our experience, only a few individuals are involved in MTSS leadership and engage in the planning process from inception through implementation through evaluation. Teachers are often left out of the planning process, or are minimally involved. Without distributed leadership and collaboration between grade-level teachers, specialists, administrators, and staff, a school's literacy plan does not represent a mutual blueprint for change, and investment in the plan is often minimal. In fact, many teachers may not even know that a school-wide MTSS leadership team or reading plan exists. A second critical challenge lies in how literacy plans are used in schools. In our experience, school-wide literacy plans often sit in a drawer and are typically only reviewed in the fall and the spring of each year, and thus are not used to guide ongoing instructional practice or decision making.

Although teachers may agree with the broad goals of a school's literacy plan, it isn't a living document that serves as a blueprint that guides and supports their work. Moreover, because there isn't strong, consistent, and distributed instructional leadership, teachers are often left to interpret and implement the plan on their own. This is the stumbling block. The challenge can be summarized by this statement, "We have an MTSS plan, but it doesn't guide our day-to-day reading practice." To move beyond this challenge, schools need a representative and empowered leadership team, a useful and dynamic literacy plan, and systems and routines that ensure the plan informs practice and is implemented with consistency and as intended.

K–3 Reading Initiative Example. All schools participating in the K–3 Reading Initiative established a representative school literacy leadership team, committed to regular meetings, and developed consistent routines for group meetings, communication, and collaboration. The teams included grade-level classroom teacher representatives, school administrators, district administrators, literacy coaches, special education teachers, ELL teachers, and parent representatives. At the beginning of the school year, monthly 2-hr literacy leadership team meetings were scheduled for the whole year. Typically, these meetings were held outside of the contracted school time, and teachers, staff, and parents were paid stipends for their time. Literacy coaches developed highly structured agendas, documented attendance, and

took detailed minutes. All literacy team communication and content was organized through a web-based project management application and team members were trained on how to review, upload, and share files.

The principal task of the school leadership team was to create a comprehensive school-wide literacy plan and coordinate its implementation. Each school developed an in-depth literacy plan with broad common goals as well as specific objectives. The broad goals remain constant across years of implementation, but the specific objectives are dynamic and change over time in response to school progress and priorities. Common multiyear goals focused on: (a) developing leadership routines and systems, (b) implementing coordinated multitiered systems of instruction and intervention, (c) providing professional development to build a common knowledge base informed by current reading theory and research, (d) establishing a comprehensive assessment system, and (e) instituting a school–home partnership.

School-wide literacy plans were intentionally designed with multiyear goals that remained constant across years. This is because real and enduring school change takes time. The literacy planning process guides school teams to think strategically about long-term goals and short-term objectives that build and develop over time. For example, in Year 1, an instructional objective related to the goal of building a common knowledge base was to provide teachers with initial professional development related to the basic structures and routines of the core program. In Year 2, the objective was refined to provide teachers with professional development to implement the core program with more precision and responsiveness. By developing a school-wide reading plan that included both broad goals as well as specific and evolving objectives, schools moved beyond a checklist mentality (e.g., our plan includes assessment, instruction, and intervention). Rather, teachers learned together that a MTSS system for beginning reading is built strategically over multiple years of implementation.

Once schools developed their literacy plans, they built an activity timeline that documented all literacy-related activities that took place in their school as well as how each activity was aligned with a specific goal in their literacy plan. For each activity, the timeline documented the date, time, topic, materials needed, facilitator, attendees, and most importantly, how the activity supports the literacy plan goals and objectives. Literacy team meetings, early-release days for professional development, and assessment windows were all added to the activity timeline at the beginning of the school year to schedule and protect key activities. Once these activities were agreed upon, the team continued to use the timeline to document these and other literacy activities that occur through the school year. For example, in mid-September, a school completed Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills—Next (DIBELS Next; Good et al., 2011) training for all interventionists, with DIBELS materials, data entry forms, and stopwatches. This activity aligned with Goal 4, assessment. In mid-February, the

same school held a parent engagement night focused on robust vocabulary, aligned with Goal 5—parent engagement. These are just some examples of important activities captured on this timeline. The activity timeline starts as a short document and grows every month as the team works together to implement the MTSS plan. This same school documented over 90 activities related to their literacy plan over the course of the school year, and each activity was linked directly to a goal and objective in the school-wide literacy plan.

Although the activity timeline is simple in form, its impact on practice is significant. In our work, we've observed that the activity timeline breathes life into what otherwise could become just another literacy plan buried deep in someone's desk drawer. It facilitates discussions about alignment, progress toward goals, team mission, and planning. The timeline also helps schools identify potentially competing literacy initiatives and helps to guide decisions regarding integrating these initiatives in an aligned, coordinated fashion. When schools use the activity timeline faithfully to schedule and chronicle literacy activities, they create a living fidelity checklist that documents the implementation of their literacy plan. It helps the leadership team to evaluate their work, and provides data that inform ongoing adjustments to the school-wide literacy plan.

High-Quality Classroom Reading Instruction

The foundation of all MTSS models is high-quality core classroom reading instruction for all students (Al Otaiba et al., 2011; Fien et al., 2015). Classroom reading instruction is referred to as Tier 1 instruction because it is the primary means for delivering comprehensive reading instruction to all students—similar to primary prevention in public health (Baker, Fien, & Baker, 2010). To ensure that students have the opportunity to develop all essential reading skills and strategies, Tier 1 instruction must be comprehensive; it must directly and systematically cover all areas of reading. For example, beginning readers need instruction in the areas of oral language, phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, and comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000). Similarly, a school's Tier 1 instruction must be aligned with important state and national curriculum standards such as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS).

Tier 1 classroom reading instruction should be coordinated across teachers and classrooms to ensure that all students have access to the same content and receive a consistent approach to instruction. Because reading skills and strategies develop over multiple years, a coordinated school-wide approach to classroom reading instruction also supports consistency in instructional approach and language as students move across grade levels. Many MTSS models suggest that schools establish a reading block of at least 90 min of classroom instruction per day and protect that time from any interruptions. To ensure high-quality implementation of Tier 1 reading

instruction, teachers need professional development focused on teaching reading and also ongoing coaching supports.

Delving Into the Details. It is easy to say that all students should receive protected, comprehensive Tier 1 classroom instruction that is aligned to standards and implemented consistently across classrooms. The reality is more difficult. In our experience, schools often invest significant time into developing a Tier 1 curriculum. Teams of teachers write curricular frameworks aligned with beginning reading standards and/or adopt a published core reading program after an extensive review process. Teachers are provided with a wide array of resources and pacing guides to support teaching the curriculum. There is also often initial professional development focused on helping teachers understand the new curriculum. At this point, schools can accurately say that they have developed a comprehensive and consistent approach to providing Tier 1 classroom reading instruction.

Although many schools can identify and describe their approach to Tier 1 reading support, there is often wide variability in how teachers actually deliver reading instruction in their classrooms, and the extent of this variability is often unknown. Moreover, teachers often feel like they don't have a deep understanding of the curriculum and don't feel like they have the guidance or support to implement it as intended. Teacher knowledge and understanding of the underlying principles related to reading instruction and intervention is critical to successful implementation (Fixsen et al., 2005). This is the stumbling block. The challenge can be summarized by this statement "We have identified a common approach to Tier 1, but it doesn't seem like there is consistency in reading instruction across teachers and classrooms." To meet this challenge, schools need to move beyond just identifying a Tier 1 program or approach, and develop routines and systems to support teachers' implementation of Tier 1 instruction with quality, fidelity, and confidence.

K–3 Reading Initiative Example. Schools participating in the K–3 Reading initiative adopted published core reading programs that were aligned with the CCSS. However, school leadership teams realized that their teachers would need specific guidelines and support to implement the important instructional components within the program effectively. Teachers received initial professional development from a program consultant that provided an overview of the program materials and exposed them to all aspects of the program, but deciding which components are essential can be challenging, especially if teachers are left to work on their own. Therefore, grade-level teams worked to develop whole-group templates with the support of the school literacy coach and/or reading specialist. To develop whole-group templates, each grade-level team worked together to determine what teachers should do during Tier 1 whole-group instruction and identify the critical components or the "nonnegotiables." In a sense, the whole-group templates served as a road map to guide teachers through the maze of different materials and activities typically included in published

core programs and allowed them to focus on teaching essential instructional content.

Teachers taught using the whole-group templates for a month and then met to revisit the plans. Teachers had a chance to discuss what was and wasn't working and then revise the plan. The goal is for an instructional template to always be a working document; it is revisited frequently throughout the school year and should accurately represent what teachers are teaching during Tier 1 instruction. The process of developing and using whole-group templates balances the need for consistency and fidelity of Tier 1 instruction across classrooms with the importance of including teachers as central participants in instructional decision making.

Whole-group templates can also be used to document fidelity and facilitate coaching. Literacy coaches in the K–3 reading initiative used each grade level whole-group reading plan as a fidelity checklist. The coach observed teachers implementing whole-group instruction a minimum of two times during the school year. Because these plans were designed by teachers, observations were perceived as fair and a useful learning experience. After each observation, the coach met with each teacher and provided individual feedback. The teachers appreciated that the professional feedback was tied directly to their practice; topics included implementing explicit routines with fidelity, increasing student opportunities to respond, and optimizing student engagement.

The main purpose for the whole-group templates was for teachers to work together to determine exactly what their Tier 1 instruction looked like to increase consistency, reduce redundancy, and help guide implementation of multiple programs, resources, and materials. This type of intentional planning encouraged teacher collaboration across grade levels and within tiers of instruction. The whole-group templates, observation checklists, and coaching support promoted positive peer collaboration, a collective commitment to consistent implementation of the core curriculum, and thoughtful discussions about fidelity, essential components of classroom reading instruction, and effective teaching. In addition, teachers helped develop professional development topics for the following year based on their experience developing and implementing the core curriculum guided by the whole-group templates.

Using Data to Inform Instruction and Intervention

Assessment plays a key role in MTSS frameworks and provides schools with the information necessary to align instructional supports with student needs (Kame'enui et al., 2006). In MTSS models, schools collect assessment data for a number of purposes. First, data from screening and benchmark assessments provide teachers with information about the overall success of their MTSS model, the needs of the students in their school, and the level of risk of individual students, particularly students who are performing below

grade-level expectations or are at risk for experiencing future learning difficulties (Coyne & Harn, 2006). Screening and benchmark assessments are usually brief and administered to all students at the beginning of the school year, and often also in the winter and spring.

Based on the results of screening assessments, the progress of students who are considered to be at risk for experiencing reading difficulties is monitored frequently, often weekly or monthly. Data from progress-monitoring assessments provide teachers with information about students' response to instruction and whether they are making gains consistent with learning objectives (Coyne & Harn, 2006). Because progress-monitoring assessments are given often, they are short, so that they don't take valuable time away from instruction.

Finally, in MTSS frameworks, schools coordinate data collection procedures across grades and assessment data are organized at the school level. Teachers meet regularly to interpret reading assessment data in school or grade-level data teams. Ultimately, results from different assessments inform a school's reading instruction and intervention.

Delving Into the Details. Assessment data are only useful when they answer important questions and inform instructional decision making. Therefore, the essential issue is whether schools actually make important decisions about instruction based on reading assessment data. The challenge is not that schools don't collect useful data about students' reading achievement. Often, schools have adopted comprehensive and technologically advanced commercial data systems that include valid and reliable measures for screening, diagnosis, and progress monitoring that are able to generate many different types of data reports for different purposes. Similarly, schools usually have established data teams that meet regularly to review student data.

The challenge is using the data. This includes knowing the right questions to ask about students' reading achievement, and knowing how to interpret data to answer those questions. For example, data from screening and benchmark assessments answer questions like "What are the reading instructional needs of our students?" and "Which students are at risk and require more intensive intervention to accelerate reading growth?" Data from progress-monitoring assessments answer questions like "Are individual students making sufficient progress to meet important reading goals?" and "Is our reading instruction working?" Teachers can make informed decision about instruction only when they are able to answer questions like these for *all* students, and for *each* student.

To add to this challenge, school are often overwhelmed by the amount of assessment data they have. For example, what makes commercial data systems so useful also makes them unwieldy—multiple options for collecting and reporting data. In many cases, schools can generate an almost unlimited number of different data reports, and understanding how to interpret and use these reports is challenging. In addition, schools often collect

other types of reading data. These could include state- or district-required assessments or other assessments that a school has developed or adopted. Finally, although schools have data teams, these teams often meet irregularly and lack a clear purpose and process.

In summary, even though schools are assessing students' reading growth and achievement on a regular basis, the process for organizing, interpreting, and using reading assessment data to inform instruction is complex and unclear. Teachers feel like the critical link between assessment and instruction is missing. The stumbling block can be summarized by this statement: "We have useful reading data from our students, but it feels like we are not able to use it to make meaningful instructional decisions for all our students." Schools need the supports to move beyond the common practice of "admiring data" by developing routines and processes for using data to answer important questions that lead to meaningful changes in instruction and intervention.

K–3 Reading Initiative Example. Schools participating in the K–3 reading initiative adopted DIBELS Next as a comprehensive data system that included measures for screening, benchmarking, and monitoring students' progress. Schools also collected data from various other school- and district-mandated literacy assessments. Although DIBELS Next includes an on-line data-management system, schools were having difficulty developing a process for using data to make instructional decision and were not engaging in successful and meaningful data discussions.

To facilitate the use of data and to document instructional decisions, schools were trained to use data-grouping workbooks and a structured process for analyzing and interpreting reading data. A data-grouping workbook is a spreadsheet that compiles all of a school's reading assessment data as well as the specific instructional decisions made for each student. For example, the data-grouping workbook includes cells for the following information for each student at each benchmarking period: DIBELS data, school/district assessment data, overall reading instructional focus, Tier 1 small-group schedule, materials used for Tier 1 small-group instruction, and teacher delivering Tier 1 small-group instruction. In addition, if a student needs supplemental intervention, there are cells to document intervention group and schedule, intervention program/materials, and the interventionist.

The data-grouping workbook is a tool that facilitates purposeful data-based decision making and enables a systematic and structured process for reviewing data. First, teachers review reading assessment data and determine an overall instructional focus for each student. Once an instructional focus is determined, teachers group students together based on similar areas of need and make decisions about the appropriate level for Tier 1 small-group instruction (e.g., advanced, on-level, and below level) and if needed, an intervention group. Cross-class and cross-grade-level groups are formed and teachers or interventionists are matched with different groups for

lesson delivery. Finally, data-grouping workbooks are disseminated, so teachers and interventionists can see how reading supports for each student are aligned and coordinated. Because the data-grouping workbooks have cells to document each of these decisions for every student, the tool prompts teams to complete the instructional decision-making process for everyone. We've observed meetings during which a team will refuse to leave until grouping and scheduling decisions have been made for every student and the data-grouping workbook is completed.

The data-grouping workbook is a valuable tool for grouping throughout the school year and is essential to the data-meeting process. One unique data meeting is the spring meeting. Students are assigned an instructional focus and are placed into Tier 1 small groups as well as intervention groups, if needed, for the following school year. The purpose of determining fall grouping in the spring is to ensure there is no wasted instructional time. Teachers and interventionists can begin small-group instruction within the first week of school. After fall benchmark screening is complete, students may be regrouped based on updated data.

Schools participating in the K–3 initiative established a data-meeting model that consisted of different types of data meetings scheduled throughout the school year: predata meetings, grade-level data meetings, progress-monitoring meetings, implementation meetings, and interventionist meetings. Predata meetings occurred three times during the school year to conduct initial analyses of benchmark, screening, and progress-monitoring data. This initial data analysis was conducted by a team that consisted of all specialists in the school, including the school literacy coach, reading interventionists, and ELL and special education teachers. The purpose of the predata meeting was to determine a tentative instructional focus for each student, and group the students with the most intensive needs during the intervention and small-group blocks. Grade-level data meetings also occurred three times during the school year during the same week as the predata meetings. Teachers finalized student groupings and completed the data-grouping workbook.

Progress-monitoring meetings were scheduled two times per year approximately 6–8 weeks after grade-level data meetings. The purpose was to review progress-monitoring data to decide if intervention was enabling sufficient student growth and make instructional adjustments. Finally, grade-level teams had implementation meetings monthly where they discussed student response to Tier 1 instruction and interventionists also met monthly to discuss student response to intervention.

Providing Small-Group Instruction and Intervention to All Students

In MTSS frameworks, all students receive high-quality classroom reading instruction and schools use assessment data to determine the instructional

needs of students and identify those students who are reading below grade-level expectations. At this point, schools have the information to design and deliver aligned small-group instruction and intervention. Providing differentiated small-group instruction informed by student assessment data is central to MTSS models and is the mechanism that allows schools to deliver instruction that is responsive to student needs (National Center on Intensive Intervention, 2013).

In MTSS models, all students receive small-group differentiated instruction during the Tier 1 classroom reading block. Tier 1 small-group instruction reinforces content taught in the core curriculum and during whole-group instruction. The content focus and intensity of small-group instruction differs based on the needs of students. However, small-group instruction in Tier 1 is not sufficient for meeting the needs of all students. Students at significant risk require intensive intervention that supplements classroom instruction that is aligned and coordinated with core instruction (Harn et al., 2011; Vaughn et al., 2009; Wanzek & Vaughn, 2007). In MTSS models, Tier 2 and 3 interventions are anchored to strategies and programs supported by rigorous evidence and implemented by highly trained interventionists. Interventionists evaluate student response to interventions through frequent progress monitoring and make ongoing adjustments to instructional intensity.

Delving Into the Details. Teachers embrace the concept of providing differentiated instruction to all students and know that there are students who need intensive intervention to make progress toward important reading goals. However, challenges to providing targeted small-group reading instruction to all students are considerable. The reality is that classrooms typically have one teacher and 20-plus students, which makes scheduling and managing small-group instruction during the classroom literacy block logistically challenging. Scheduling supplemental intervention outside of Tier 1 for students across classrooms and grades is also difficult, especially when there are large numbers of students who require intensive interventions. In many schools, it can seem that there are too many students who require intervention and that their needs are too great to develop a feasible and realistic school-wide intervention plan.

Schools often know which students need supplemental intervention. However, a more complex challenge involves forming groups of students that have similar instructional profiles and designing the appropriate content and instructional approach for different groups. In our experience, schools often own a range of different reading intervention materials and programs, usually in different states of completeness, often in a closet or on a shelf. Interventionists are often overwhelmed by the range of intervention options and end up picking and choosing from among different program materials or developing intervention lessons from scratch. Moreover, approaches to intervention within a school often differ based on

disciplinary boundaries. For example, special educators may deliver reading intervention that looks very different than interventions delivered by reading teachers—and neither of these approaches may be aligned or coordinated with the classroom reading instruction provided in Tier 1. Finally, students experiencing reading difficulties require instruction of the highest quality and intensity to accelerate learning, so interventions must be implemented with fidelity and consistency.

In summary, teachers know that students require targeted small-group instruction and intervention. The challenge is determining what intervention should look like given the range of student needs and the variety of available strategies, materials, and programs. Even when schools have decided on a common approach to reading intervention, planning and coordinating small-group instruction and intervention within the constraints of an inflexible school schedule is daunting. Therefore, the question becomes, "We have students who need intensive small-group intervention, but now what?" To ensure that students receive coordinated small-group reading instruction and intervention that is responsive to their needs, schools need to overcome significant planning challenges and scheduling barriers. Only then can students access instruction delivered with sufficient intensity and fidelity to accelerate reading achievement.

K–3 Reading Initiative Example. To make small-group differentiated instruction and intervention for all students feasible and realistic, schools participating in the K–3 reading initiative worked to develop a block schedule prioritizing reading supports. This type of block schedule is created so that each grade level has a common and consistent time allocated for whole-group classroom reading instruction, small-group classroom instruction, and small-group supplemental intervention. This approach to scheduling maximizes the distribution of people and resources for supporting reading instruction and intervention. In the K–3 reading initiative schools, reading interventionists were able to travel from grade to grade. In addition to reading interventionists, special education teachers, ELL teachers, paraprofessionals, and other specialists were mobilized to provide push-in and pull-out support to students during small-group classroom instruction and intervention blocks without the typical scheduling conflicts. A block schedule for reading prioritizes instruction first, planning for lunch and specials second. Although this may seem logical, in our experience schools rarely prioritize instruction when developing their schedules. Many administrators are skeptical that this type of schedule will actually work, stating that this type of schedule will not work for a part-time music teacher or that the cafeteria or gym cannot be shared. We have not found this to be the case. In fact, even hesitant administrators are amazed at how an academically focused schedule can enable targeted small-group reading instruction and intervention for all students.

Implementing a block schedule for reading support allows for efficient allocation of resources, increased instructional minutes for tiered literacy instruction and intervention, and flexibility to align reading supports with student needs. One school involved in the K–3 reading initiative was able to designate 105 min to Tier 1 instruction (45 min of whole-group instruction and 60 min of small-group instruction) with an additional 30-min intervention block. The school administration used the block schedule to ensure that students receiving additional services did so during small-group instruction. For example, if a student's IEP specified 30 min of reading instruction every day, the special education teacher would push in during the block allocated to classroom small-group instruction to provide this support. If additional students had similar needs and the same instructional focus, the special educator could include those students in the small group. Students with the most intensive learning needs received supplemental instruction during the intervention block, often with the same teacher or interventionist that pushed in during the classroom literacy block, ensuring alignment between different tiers of instruction.

The data-grouping workbook described earlier guided the development of small-group plans. During data team meetings, students with similar instructional needs were grouped together, often across classrooms, and sometimes across grades. For each small group, the team specified the content focus, the instructional materials or program, and the instructional dosage and scheduling. Teachers and specialists developed small-group templates similar to the whole-group templates to guide instruction and intervention and ensure fidelity and consistency across small groups. Similar to the whole-group plans, small-group templates were frequently revisited and adjusted based upon the student needs and response. The small-group plans also served as fidelity checklists that were used as both self-assessments and coaching tools.

Small-group and intervention plans were based on a common intervention approach closely aligned with core reading instruction. In the K–3 Literacy Initiative, schools used Enhanced Core Reading Instruction (ECRI) materials to align Tier 1 core instruction with small-group instruction and Tier 2 intervention. Researchers at the University of Oregon developed ECRI materials to enhance core reading programs with supplemental direct, explicit routines used during both whole-class and small-group instruction (Fien et al., 2015). Teachers and interventionists used ECRI materials during small-group instruction for students performing below grade level to preteach foundational skills prior to their introduction in core reading instruction as well as to review and reinforce those skills. When students did not respond sufficiently to classroom instruction and supplemental ECRI instruction, intervention teams adjusted pacing, group size, and instructional dosage. For students who required an alternate intervention, interventionists implemented other evidence-based programs, including P-EIR (Proactive Early Intervention in Reading) and RAVE-O (Reading

Automaticity Vocabulary Engagement—Orthography). Because schools committed to implementing a small number of evidence-based interventions across grades and tiers of intervention, resources could be leveraged to provide intensive and consistent training to interventionists and specialists.

Conclusions and Future Directions

MTSS models offer a promising approach for aligning reading instruction and intervention to the needs of students within a preventative data-based framework. However, implementing and coordinating the curriculum, instruction, intervention, and assessment practices associated with MTSS models at a school-wide level is complex and challenging. Many schools underestimate the systems, structures, and routines that are necessary to ensure that MTSS reading practices are implemented with integrity, quality, and consistency. In our experience, we've found that teachers need to delve into the details—to attend to a level of specificity unusual in typical school-reform efforts.

High-priority schools involved in a state-level K–3 literacy initiative worked to overcome challenges and move beyond a surface-level conception of MTSS practices to embrace a deeper and more complete implementation. In these schools, literacy leadership was supported by representative school literacy leadership teams, a dynamic school literacy plan, and activity timelines that documented progress toward school reading goals. High-quality classroom reading instruction was supported by a comprehensive core reading program and whole-group templates that guided instruction and facilitated coaching. Data-based decision making was supported by structured data team meetings and data-grouping workbooks that provided a systematic process for reviewing data and documenting instructional decisions. Small-group instruction and intervention were supported by block schedules that prioritized reading instruction and aligned evidence-based interventions and small-group reading plans.

Given the scope of the K–3 pilot, we were unable to conduct an experimental study of the impact of the initiative. However, evaluation data from four schools from four different districts involved in the K–3 literacy initiative suggest that implementation of MTSS practices and systems was associated with accelerated student literacy outcomes that continued to improve over multiple years of implementation. We believe that many schools implementing MTSS in reading may encounter the same types of challenges as these four pilot schools. Therefore, researchers supporting MTSS projects, and practitioners engaged in implementing MTSS practices, should focus on building the systems, structures, and routines to move beyond surface-level implementation. We believe that for schools who are working to increase K–3 reading achievement in schools serving large numbers of students at risk for learning difficulties, delving into the details may be necessary to realize the full promise of MTTS in reading.

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