

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

Implementation Tools for Speech-Language Pathologists in Education

Second Edition

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Preface

This is a book about reframing what it means to be a school-based speech-language pathologist (SLP). SLPs are trained to help students with disabilities. However, the spirit of the multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) framework is to think about the educational system as a whole. In an MTSS framework, SLPs move away from the concept of differentiating “our” students from other students. Instead, SLPs think about how to leverage our unique skillset to drive positive outcomes for *all* students.

Having worked in public schools as an SLP myself for years, I know firsthand about the busy daily lives of school-based SLPs. I know that the time spent conducting assessments, implementing individualized education plans (IEPs), and applying evidence-based practice hardly leaves school-based SLPs with a sense that they have any extra time. In fact, meeting the needs of students with identified speech-language disabilities can feel like *more* than a full-time job. The difficulty of reaching beyond the caseload to consider the needs of all students is real. However, I am convinced that SLPs can make a meaningful difference by embracing the MTSS framework. In doing so, they have the potential to better serve the needs of students with and without identified disabilities, and to do so more proactively.

My intention in writing this book was to provide SLPs with a useful resource rather than an extended theoretical explanation that leaves practitioners to fill in the specifics. With this goal in mind, during the

summer and fall of 2019, when I worked on preparing the first edition of this book, I reached out to SLPs working in public schools all over the country to learn about their experiences with MTSS. In 2019, I spoke with both new and experienced SLPs from 19 different school districts. Similarly, when preparing to write the second edition of this book in 2025, I talked with 32 SLPs who showed incredible generosity in sharing their challenges, experiences, questions, and successes related to MTSS with me. My conversations included SLPs in big cities, suburbs, small towns, and rural areas, as well as those working in public schools, charter schools, and specialized schools. I spoke with SLPs providing both face-to-face and teletherapy services. All of these conversations with SLPs motivated, grounded, and challenged me.

Practical Realities

A major takeaway from my conversations is that SLPs have challenging jobs. So many SLPs described their huge caseloads (I spoke with several SLPs who provide direct services to nearly 100 students), the minimal space they were given to work in (some SLPs worked in closets and others just had rolling carts), the lack of budget to buy resources, and the challenges they faced navigating both virtual spaces and digital tools

as a regular part of their work. I identified with these SLPs. As a former school-based SLP myself, I faced many of these same obstacles.

One complaint I often heard was that involvement in MTSS just seems unrealistic given the existing workload. I knew that framing MTSS as just “one more thing” really wouldn’t cut it for SLPs, given their already highly demanding workload and the logistical difficulties of their jobs. This book’s goal is to offer practical research-based tools and insights for SLPs striving to balance the demands of working within the special education framework with supporting general education students and to highlight tools SLPs can use to reflect on and communicate about their role in MTSS. The idea of the book is to support SLPs taking a creative, entrepreneurial, and ultimately sustainable approach to implementation of the framework.

Collectively, We Have Questions!

So many SLPs struggled with how to get involved with MTSS and questioned if they were doing things the “right” way. In my conversations, many SLPs expressed curiosity about how other SLPs were making sense of MTSS. So many questions came up about MTSS in general: how to address roadblocks, what kind of data to collect, how to collaborate with other educators, how to define the SLP role, and what instructional approaches to take for students. Based on these pressing questions that weigh on our minds collectively, I have decided to organize my book largely as a series of questions and answers. This book tackles questions about the policy implications of the MTSS framework, the applicability of the frame-

work to SLPs’ roles in schools, and how SLPs can implement MTSS in their practice.

Ideas From Research and the Field

There is extensive research relevant to MTSS, but it can be challenging for practitioners to synthesize multiple studies and translate the ideas into their practice. On the other hand, many SLPs in the field have developed practical methods for techniques that are supported by research, but their methods aren’t widely known. This book is an effort to bring the worlds of research and practice together. One thing I’ve heard many times is that all SLPs need a few “tricks up their sleeves” or “tools in their toolbox.” Jumping off this metaphor, I have designed the largest section of this book as an SLP MTSS Implementation Toolkit. The toolkit features ideas for how SLPs can support the Common Core State Standards, address speech-specific issues such as articulation, and implement augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) support within an MTSS framework. These tools come from the collective wisdom of the community of both practitioners and researchers in the field. Some of the tools, rubrics, and templates come directly from practicing SLPs, as noted throughout the book. Additionally, I have highlighted 43 real-world snapshots of MTSS in action based on the experiences of SLPs in the field. Throughout, I explain the research that underpins my ideas for tools and approaches that SLPs can use within MTSS. In this second edition, I’ve also included a “toolkit” for SLPs to reflect on their own practice, communicate with key stakeholders, and also deepen their motivation to engage with MTSS. These tools in these chapters include questions, self-reflection

tools, letters to parents and teachers, and other tools to help SLPs translate research into practice and be successful with implementing MTSS.

Final Thoughts

In closing this preface, I want to emphasize why MTSS remains not just relevant but essential for education and particularly for SLPs and reflect on how unexpected disruptions to school services only amplify the need for this framework. When the first edition of this book was published in 2020, schools worldwide faced an unprecedented crisis as COVID-19 forced the sudden shift to virtual learning and SLPs scrambled to find new ways to support students. As the pandemic's disproportionate impact on at-risk populations became increasingly clear, it underscored the critical importance of prevention-oriented approaches, which have been widely heralded as impactful in the postpandemic era. Now, as I move toward publishing the second edition of this text in 2026, education faces new uncertainties and potential disruptors: Shifting educational policies, looming budget constraints, and the rapid emergence of artificial intelligence all present new challenges. Yet it remains clear to me that the role of SLPs in ensuring universal access to education and supporting all students, regardless of disability status, has never been more vital. In times of uncertainty and unpredictability, MTSS provides a framework for SLPs to adapt, respond, and thrive to support all students. By actively engaging with students through an MTSS framework, SLPs can play a crucial role in ensuring academic success for all students and demonstrate their commitment to being part of the collective effort in public education to support the needs of

all students, regardless of their background, circumstances, or the challenges they face. It is my hope that this book provides SLPs with the necessary tools, ideas, and inspiration to do so.

Notes About the Second Edition

While the entire book has been updated and revised, certain core features of the second edition are new to this edition. First, based on reader feedback and my own reflections on the core focus of SLPs within the MTSS framework, I have removed the chapter on addressing social-emotional skills in an MTSS framework. Second, responding to emerging evidence and growing adoption in clinical practice, I have added a chapter dedicated to integrating augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) within MTSS frameworks.

Most significantly, I have added Part III, titled “How Can SLPs Translate Knowledge About MTSS Into Meaningful Action? Toolkit for SLPs to Reflect, Communicate, and Become Motivated.” Implementation science examines how to effectively integrate research evidence into routine clinical practice, providing systematic methods to address the persistent gap between what we know works and what actually happens in real-world settings (e.g., Olswang & Prelock, 2015). To support practitioners in adopting and sustaining MTSS practices in real-world settings, this toolkit moves beyond presenting evidence-based practices to focus on concrete implementation strategies, including communication templates, self-reflection tools, and case studies that illustrate leadership and advocacy related to MTSS in action. This addition reflects the field's growing recognition that knowledge

alone is insufficient; successful implementation requires stakeholder engagement, systematic planning, and advocacy efforts for practice change (Douglas & Burshnic, 2019). To further support readers in navigating the

research-practice gap, references have been updated throughout the book to reflect current evidence, and 28 new “real-world” snapshots illustrate implementation in diverse practice contexts.

1 What Do SLPs Need to Know and Explain About Their Role in MTSS? A Q&A Overview

Purpose of Chapter 1

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the MTSS framework and SLPs' role in MTSS implementation. This section will define essential MTSS terminology, explore its connections to other educational frameworks, detail the tiered levels of support, and examine the unique contributions of SLPs within this framework. In order to help clarify questions and allow readers to find the information most relevant to their needs, this section is written in a question-and-answer (Q&A) format. This Q&A is meant both to provide information and to model how SLPs might respond to questions from other educators.

The Q&A is divided into three different categories:

1. **Basic Concepts of MTSS:** Definition, historical perspective, the relationship with other educational frameworks
2. **All Things Tiers:** Understanding the tiers, applying the concept of

- tiers to students and interventions, relevancy of the tiers to all settings
3. **MTSS and the SLP:** Roles, challenges, balancing competing responsibilities, collaboration, technology

Part 1: Basic Concepts of MTSS

What Is MTSS?

Multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) is a comprehensive educational framework that systematically uses research-based instructional approaches and targeted interventions while leveraging data analysis to enhance students' academic, social, emotional, and behavioral performance (e.g., Burns et al., 2015; Castillo et al., 2022, 2024). This framework is used within the educational system in an effort to meet the educational and behavioral needs of all students. The underlying philosophy of MTSS is that all students can succeed academically, but the intensity and focus of instruction must be adjusted

to provide interventions and help to students as necessary to support them in making adequate academic progress. There are several key elements of MTSS:

- MTSS is a **tiered system** that involves multiple levels of instruction and support aimed at meeting students' needs and preventing academic failure.
- MTSS emphasizes **collaboration and problem-solving** within the school system and at each tier.
- MTSS involves **data-based decision-making** related to instructional choices, movement within the multilevel system, and disability identification.
- MTSS involves the **use of evidence-based practices** to support student progress.

In summary, MTSS can be defined as a prevention-based framework that offers a continuum of support to promote positive outcomes for students. It is a tiered education system, involving collaboration within teams of educators, to make data-driven decisions and implement evidence-based practice to ensure students make adequate academic progress.

Why Should SLPs Be Involved in MTSS?

There is a general consensus that SLPs should play a key role in the education of K–12 students due to their high level of expertise in language and communication (e.g., Ehren et al., 2012; Power-deFur, 2016; Rudebusch, 2012). SLPs' in-

volvement in MTSS can serve four related purposes:

- **Purpose 1:** To collaborate with other educators (i.e., classroom teachers, special education teachers, school psychologists, counselors, and others) to improve the quality of instructional practices related to language and literacy, ideally preventing some students from requiring more specialized services moving forward.
- **Purpose 2:** To proactively support students who are at risk for failure and meet their needs in an impactful manner without relying solely on special education services.
- **Purpose 3:** To meet the needs of students with disabilities in a more efficient and inclusive manner by integrating speech-language services into general education and collaborating with educators to meet student needs.
- **Purpose 4:** To provide relevant data to inform decision-making, to facilitate the accurate identification of students with disabilities, and to make appropriate eligibility decisions.

What Is the History of the MTSS Framework in Education?

The MTSS framework evolved out of a need for new and improved practices for schoolwide instruction of all students and the identification of students who are struggling academically or behavior-

ally. The original impetus behind a tiered model of support for students was the need for a more valid process of identifying students as having disabilities beyond the IQ-achievement discrepancy model. The idea of a tiered model originated from a 1982 National Research Council Report that offered revised criteria for special education eligibility with a greater focus on the quality of general education instruction and the effectiveness of assessment (Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003). Another key player in the history of MTSS is Dr. Hill Walker, who is well known for reframing the medical approach in the field of community health from a focus on remediation to a focus on prevention (Knowles & Murray, 2025).

The driving principle of MTSS is to enable all students who are struggling academically or behaviorally to receive the necessary instruction and support, regardless of whether they are identified as having a disability. The relevance and importance of the MTSS framework became increasingly clear in 2020 and the following school years as the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on academic, social, and behavioral outcomes became increasingly evident, particularly for students from low-income families (e.g., Education Recovery Scorecard, 2024). Following the pandemic, the MTSS framework has been widely heralded as an approach that proactively addresses urgent academic challenges (Jackson, 2021), and implementation of MTSS is viewed as an important way for schools to intentionally create an educational system that eliminates barriers and produces positive outcomes for these students (Sullivan et al., 2020).

What Is the Discrepancy Model of Disability Identification, and Why Is It No Longer Considered a Valid Way to Identify Disabilities?

All states, at some point, relied on an IQ-achievement discrepancy model to identify students with disabilities. Under this model, students were tested for their intelligence or cognitive capacity (i.e., IQ scores), which was then compared to their achievement in varying academic areas (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007). The difference between a student's capacity and achievement was used to identify disabilities. The reasoning was that if a student's achievement matched their cognitive capacity, they were simply performing at a level matching their capabilities and did not have a disability. The major flaw of this approach was that it failed to serve the needs of students who had academic difficulties but did not demonstrate the required discrepancy. This model also did not address the needs of "slow learners" caught between general education and special education. Oftentimes, this lack of intervention and support would eventually result in students falling even further behind in school until the gap between their capacity and achievement eventually became significant enough for them to be identified for support. Given this, the discrepancy model was often dubbed the "wait-to-fail" model.

With the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the federal policy governing special education, Congress agreed that "there is no evidence that the IQ-achievement

discrepancy formula can be applied in a consistent and educationally meaningful (i.e., reliable and valid) manner” (United States Congressional Serial Set, 2004, p. 26). Given this, schools were encouraged to use an alternative process to determine disabilities. Specifically, they were encouraged to determine students’ responses to research-validated interventions as part of the evaluation process. This model, initially referred to as Response to Intervention (RTI), was de-

signed as a way to provide immediate and focused interventions for struggling students, and it used data to inform ongoing decisions regarding eligibility for special education services. Box 1–1 highlights the story of an SLP in a small district whose state moved away from cognitive referencing in 2019 and the immediate positive impact she observed from collecting data from interventions to inform special education decisions. This shift eventually influenced the district to move toward a

Box 1–1.**Real-World Snapshot: Implementing Tiered Interventions to Inform Eligibility as a Result of Changing State Policy Led to Deepened Engagement with MTSS**

In 2019, Erica Smith was the only SLP in a small district in Missouri, and the state had recently changed the eligibility rules that qualified a student as speech-language impaired (SLI) under IDEA. As a result, there was a new statewide requirement that SLPs conduct informal interventions prior to evaluation and document a student’s lack of progress with evidence-based interventions that are designed to support the general curriculum. This new requirement replaced the older eligibility determination process, which relied on cognitive referencing. When this new requirement came into play, she began having conversations with the district’s special education director and school principals to figure out how she could make a valuable contribution within a tiered model and use data from interventions with students to inform the eligibility determination process. In 2025, Erica continues to work in the same district but now has an additional SLP to collaborate with. While there have been multiple leadership changes at the district level, there is still a strong focus on using data from tiered interventions to inform eligibility, and the special education director largely trusts the district SLPs to determine how this process unfolds.

Erica feels that they have made a lot of progress since they began to consider the SLP’s role in tiered interventions and the eligibility determination process. As a district, they now provide tiered support for any student with a suspected disability or for those who do not pass the universal screenings set in place. Universal screenings are conducted every year for all preschoolers and kindergarteners, as well as for first- and second-grade students who are new to the district. Preschoolers and kindergarteners are screened using the DIAL (a more general development screener administered by parents as part of a formalized program called “Parents as Teach-

ers”). The PLS-5 and the Fluharty screeners are used at this level. First and second graders are screened using a variety of criterion-based (nonnormed screeners). Erica identified on shared resources sites such as Teachers Pay Teachers. Regardless of which screener is used, students who are flagged by screeners or by parent/teacher referrals are provided tiered support. The support for articulation deficits is fairly well defined and provided directly by SLPs. Erica notes that language support is more challenging, but they have been collaborating and consulting with teachers more to provide tiered support for language in the classroom and occasionally pull some students for short-term support outside the classroom.

While it was an adjustment to view pre-IEP interventions and regular screening as a necessary component of eligibility, Erica feels confident that through hard work, collaboration, and an interactive process, speech-language services in her district will continue to grow. As a district, they aim to increase support for teachers and general education (Tier 1) in order to decrease referrals over time.

systematic approach to universal screening for language deficits and an associated tiered model of intervention.

So Are RTI and MTSS Essentially the Same Thing?

Although RTI and MTSS are often used as synonyms, they are actually related yet distinct concepts. The RTI framework was developed before the MTSS framework as a way to identify disabilities in a valid manner and proactively support student needs. The focus in RTI is on providing interventions and seeing how students respond. The idea is to raise the achievement of the lowest-performing students through research-based interventions to prevent academic failure and provide useful data to inform special education decision-making. In contrast, MTSS is a newer, systemwide framework to education that focuses on improving core instruction as a means to prevent academic

difficulties from occurring. MTSS is considered a larger framework that encompasses (but is not limited to) RTI. Figure 1–1 illustrates the relationship between RTI and MTSS.

Is MTSS Supported by Research?

Yes, extensive research demonstrates that MTSS produces significant positive outcomes for students. Substantial evidence shows improved student achievement associated with the MTSS framework across multiple domains (e.g., Bradshaw et al., 2021; Cabell et al., 2008; Castillo et al., 2022; Spencer et al., 2015). There are four critical areas where MTSS demonstrates a clear impact:

- **MTSS Serves as a Powerful Prevention Framework**

Multiple studies highlight MTSS’s value in providing short-term

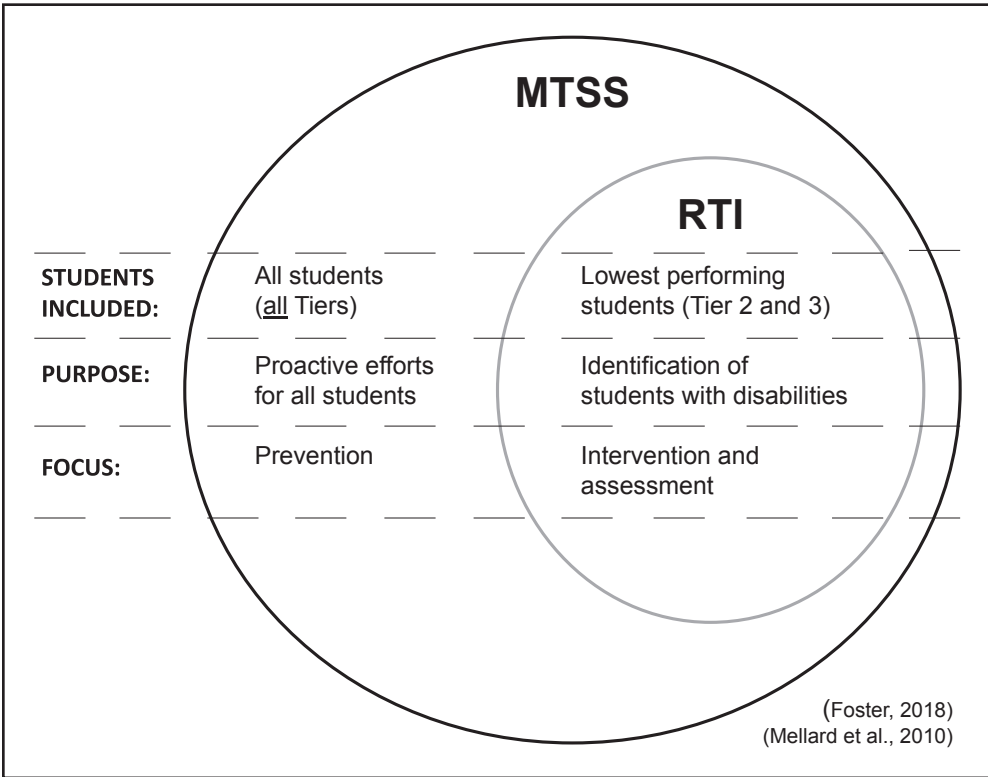


Figure 1–1. The relationship between RTI and MTSS.

supplementary support that prevents the need for more intensive academic interventions. In terms of reading instruction, approximately 18% of students experience early reading difficulties (Hehir, 2005), yet most do not require intensive long-term support such as special education services to achieve success. Research consistently demonstrates that most students respond positively to short-term reading interventions delivered within MTSS frameworks (e.g., Mathes et al., 2005; McMaster et al., 2005; Torgesen, 2000). Similarly, behavioral and social-emotional interventions show strong preventive effects. Bradshaw et al. (2021)

demonstrated that implementing multi-tiered behavioral supports in high schools resulted in significant improvements in schoolwide behavior systems and meaningful reductions in teachers’ reactive classroom management practices. Scott et al. (2019) found that schools implementing MTSS with high fidelity achieved increased academic outcomes while experiencing fewer exclusionary disciplinary actions compared to schools without tiered frameworks.

■ **MTSS Benefits All Students, Including Those With and Without Disabilities**

Given that most students with disabilities receive at least part of their