Better Together

## Using MTSS as a Structure for Building School–Family Partnerships

Zachary Weingarten, American Institutes for Research iD,
Rebecca Zumeta Edmonds, American Institutes for Research, and
Sarah Arden, American Institutes for Research

For the past 2 years, Silver Lake Elementary has been implementing a multitiered system of support (MTSS) to enhance the academic and behavior outcomes of all students. It is late June and the MTSS leadership team is reflecting on the past year and planning professional development activities for the upcoming year. When the topic of family engagement comes up, the team members agree that this is an area that needs attention. Team members note that the school has few strategies in place to intentionally build partnerships with families and that the voices of families are largely missing from the discussion about how to best support students. In addition, the team members feel that there are limited opportunities for families to engage in activities related to improving students' learning and behavior.

Members of the MTSS team know that collaborating with families is important for students' success, but they are unsure of how to effectively partner with families, and they feel overwhelmed at the thought of how much work these partnerships could take. They wonder how school staff can collaborate with families in a way that is meaningful and sustainable. After reviewing several resources on family–school collaboration, the team decides to focus on integrating and aligning family engagement with MTSS. The team plans to develop guidance for staff to help them implement family partnership strategies within MTSS and begins planning a professional development workshop on this topic. Following the professional development workshop in late August, teachers at Silver Lake Elementary begin implementing the strategies to increase families' engagement in MTSS.

A large body of research suggests that families' engagement in their children's education is a crucial factor in promoting school success for children and youth (e.g., Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Family engagement in school is associated with improved academic achievement (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2012) and reductions in social and behavioral problems (El Nokali et al., 2010; Sheridan et al., 2012). Research also suggests that collaboration between schools and families is an important support for students with learning and behavioral challenges, including students with disabilities (Sheridan et al., 2017).

The importance of engaging families in their children's schooling is recognized in both general education and special

Figure 1 **Tiered service delivery model**
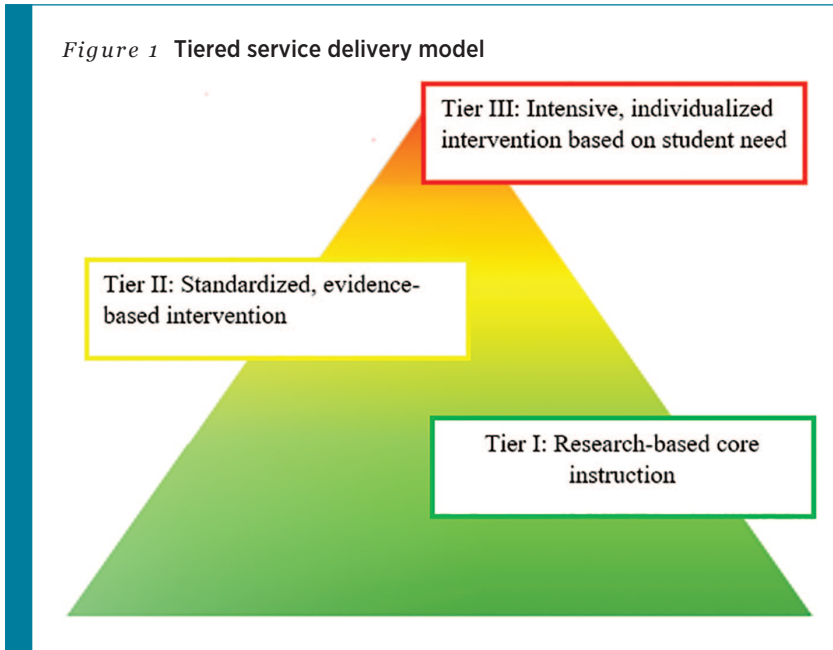
education laws and policy initiatives. Title 1 of the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) requires schools to build staff capacity related to family engagement and to have a plan for collaborating with families. Family engagement also is central to the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), which mandates that families are equal members of the individualized education program (IEP) team and must participate in decisions about students' evaluation, placement, and services. In addition, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) has included partnerships with families as a core feature of its Results Driven Accountability initiative, which seeks to shift the focus of accountability from compliance only to include improved student outcomes (Delisle & Yudin, 2014). Collaboration with families, moreover, was recently identified as a high-leverage practice for special educators by the Council for Exceptional Children and the Collaboration for Effective Educator Development Accountability and Reform Center (McLeskey et al., 2017). Furthermore, the Center on Response to Intervention and the National Center on Intensive Intervention (NCII) include family engagement as a component of their respective school-level fidelity of implementation rubrics, underscoring its essential role in the implementation of MTSS and intensive intervention in schools

(Center on Response to Intervention, 2014; NCII, 2015).

What Is MTSS?

Schools in every state in the country are implementing some version of MTSS to improve outcomes for all students, including those with or at risk for disabilities. Throughout this article, we use "MTSS" as an umbrella term that incorporates academic and behavioral multitiered frameworks, including response to intervention (RTI) and positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS). Although in the past many schools implemented RTI for academics and PBIS for behavior, increasingly, schools are integrating both academic and behavior supports within the MTSS framework (Bailey, 2019).

Figure 1 represents the typical MTSS tiered instruction and intervention structure. Within MTSS, educators use screening and progress-monitoring data to inform decisions about students' need for and responsiveness to core instruction and evidence-based interventions of varying intensity. Most MTSS frameworks include three levels, or tiers, of instruction and intervention.

At the Tier 1 level, students should participate in a research-based core curriculum that includes differentiated academic instruction and schoolwide

behavioral supports. At Tier 2, students who are identified as being at risk for academic or behavioral problems receive standardized, evidence-based interventions delivered with fidelity (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2010). At the Tier 3 level, a small number of students with severe, persistent learning and behavioral needs receive intensive and individualized supports that may include special education services.[1] Ideally, MTSS should operate in concert with special education so that students with the most significant needs have access to the most intensive services regardless of their disability status.

Data-based decision making and collaborative problem solving are defining features of MTSS. Teams can use data to make instructional decisions for groups of students or for individual students. For example, data from universal screening can be used to answer questions about the overall effectiveness of the core curriculum and to determine which students may benefit from intervention. Similarly, progress-monitoring data may be used to determine whether groups or individuals are on track to meet short- and long-term performance goals and to determine if an intervention is effective for most students who receive it. These decisions should be guided by clear routines and procedures, including decision rules for determining which students are at risk and what constitutes adequate progress. Most schools have one or more MTSS data teams to review data and make decisions.

What Is the Role of School-to-Family Partnerships in MTSS?

Implementing MTSS provides an opportunity for schools to collaborate with families in a problem-solving process focused on improving students' academic and behavioral performance. Within MTSS, educators may partner with families to make a range of data-based decisions, including selecting evidence-based practices and interventions, planning adaptations to intensify and individualize a student's intervention, reviewing data to determine if the student is responding adequately to intervention, or making decisions about referral or

> **Implementing MTSS provides an opportunity for schools to collaborate with families in a problem-solving process focused on improving students' academic and behavioral performance.**

placement in special education (Cook et al., 2012; Garbacz et al., 2016). When families contribute to these decisions, educators may be more successful in planning and delivering productive intervention supports. Furthermore, involving families in data-based decision making allows them to take a more active role in supporting their children's learning and behavior at home. Families can reinforce school routines, expectations, and language at home, thereby creating alignment between home and school that may, in turn, contribute to improved student outcomes (Garbacz et al., 2016).

MTSS may also provide a useful structure to help school teams organize their efforts to engage with families (Fix et al., 2017; Lewis et al., 2017; Reschly & Christenson, 2009). Considering family engagement within the tiers of MTSS may assist schools in planning proactive, manageable collaboration with families while also providing a rationale for when and how to increase the level of collaboration for students and families that need it. At the Tier 1 level, educators develop positive relationships with families; engage in ongoing, multidirectional communication with families; and ensure that families are aware of the school's MTSS framework, including schoolwide behavioral expectations, academic curricula, and the process for identifying and responding to students who are at risk for poor learning or behavioral outcomes. At Tier 2, educators communicate with families about the student's need for intervention, his or her goals, and provide regular progress updates. In addition, schools share strategies that families may use to support students' learning and behavior at home.

As the frequency of data collection and intervention intensity increases, collaboration with families should be more frequent and in depth. At the most
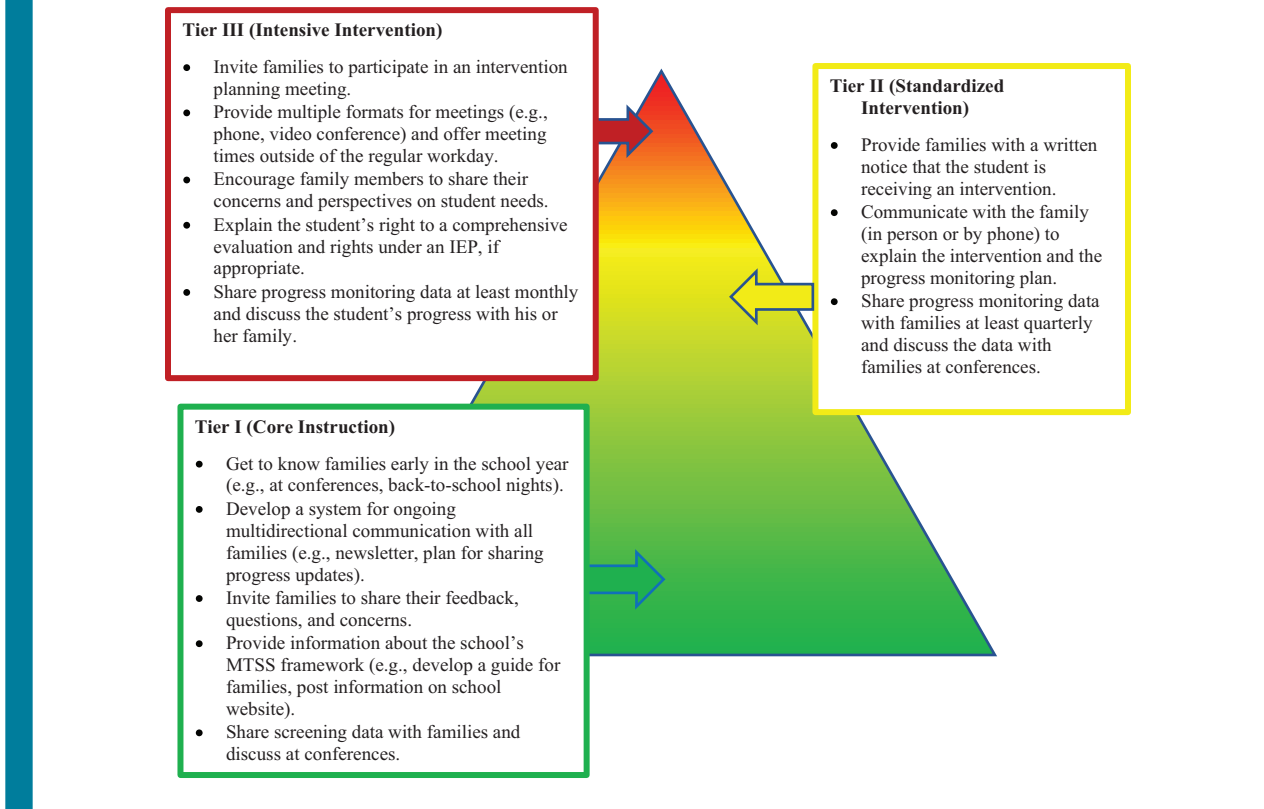
intensive (i.e., Tier 3) level, educators and families engage in a problem-solving process to individualize the student's program and improve academic and behavioral performance. Families may collaborate with educators to develop the student's intervention plan and review progress-monitoring data more frequently. *Figure 2* provides an overview of practices that support school-to-family partnerships across the tiers of MTSS.

In the remainder of the article, we offer recommendations for educators to support family–school partnerships within the context of MTSS. These recommendations are based on family engagement research and our experiences supporting schools throughout the country in implementing MTSS and intensive intervention through national technical assistance centers, and other federal, state, and local projects focused on implementation of tiered systems. The recommendations are intended to help educators partner with families to support students' learning and behavior and sustain these partnerships by aligning and embedding family engagement across the tiers of MTSS. *Table 1* lists the recommendations detailed in the remainder of the article.

Recommendation 1: Build Awareness of MTSS and Its Relationship to Special Education

One barrier to families' involvement in their child's education is a lack of knowledge about education systems and lack of accessible information about these school systems (Christenson, 2004). Many families may be confused about what MTSS is, its purpose, and the terminology associated with it. Families also may need clarification about the relationship

Figure 2 **Practices to support school-to-family partnerships across the tiers of multitiered systems of support**

Tier III (Intensive Intervention)
- Invite families to participate in an intervention planning meeting.
- Provide multiple formats for meetings (e.g., phone, video conference) and offer meeting times outside of the regular workday.
- Encourage family members to share their concerns and perspectives on student needs.
- Explain the student's right to a comprehensive evaluation and rights under an IEP, if appropriate.
- Share progress monitoring data at least monthly and discuss the student's progress with his or her family.

Tier II (Standardized Intervention)
- Provide families with a written notice that the student is receiving an intervention.
- Communicate with the family (in person or by phone) to explain the intervention and the progress monitoring plan.
- Share progress monitoring data with families at least quarterly and discuss the data with families at conferences.

Tier I (Core Instruction)
- Get to know families early in the school year (e.g., at conferences, back-to-school nights).
- Develop a system for ongoing multidirectional communication with all families (e.g., newsletter, plan for sharing progress updates).
- Invite families to share their feedback, questions, and concerns.
- Provide information about the school's MTSS framework (e.g., develop a guide for families, post information on school website).
- Share screening data with families and discuss at conferences.

between the various tiers of MTSS and special education. When interviewing families in Texas, OSEP recently found that many families lacked a clear understanding of the distinctions between MTSS and special education and lacked information about how to request an initial evaluation under IDEA (Ryder, 2018).

One way to address these barriers is to build families' knowledge of MTSS. Providing all families with information about the school's core curriculum, behavior expectations, universal screening process, and interventions and supports will help them understand the school's plan for preventing learning and

behavioral problems and may help to increase their capacity to partner effectively with educators. When sharing this information, educators should include opportunities for families to offer their perspective, provide feedback, and ask questions.

Schoolwide events, such as literacy and mathematics nights, open houses, and conferences, provide opportunities to communicate with families about MTSS. For example, educators might explain the universal screening process and its purpose when meeting with families during the first weeks of school and then discuss the results of screenings at fall conferences. Helping families

understand the purpose of screening and progress monitoring will support their ability to participate in MTSS problem-solving discussions about their children. Educators also can use school events to introduce intervention teachers and describe progress-monitoring procedures.

Another strategy for supporting families' awareness and understanding of MTSS is to develop and share a brief guide for families that provides key definitions, explains each tier of the MTSS framework, and provides an overview of the problem-solving process (Smolkowski et al., 2017). Some schools may consider offering a webinar on MTSS or providing access to an online MTSS module. Family MTSS guides also can include information about what to expect with MTSS, tips for how families can support their child's learning and behavior at home, and questions families can ask to learn more about MTSS. Educators should avoid jargon when communicating with families about MTSS and should provide information in multiple languages when appropriate. *Table 2* presents several

Table 1 **Recommendations for Engaging Families in Multitiered Systems of Support (MTSS)**

1. Build awareness of MTSS and its relationship to special education
2. Ensure that communication is multidirectional
3. Share and interpret data with families
4. Partner with families in the problem-solving process

Table 2 **Resources to Support Family-to-School Partnerships Within Multitiered Systems of Support**

Title of Resource	Organization	Link
The ABCs of RTI in Elementary School: A Guide for Families	Center on Response to Intervention	https://rti4success.org/sites/default/files/The ABCs of RTI in Elementary School.pdf
Intensive Intervention: An Overview for Parents and Families	National Center on Intensive Intervention (NCII)	https://intensiveintervention.org/resource/intensive-intervention-overview-parents-and-families
Intensive Intervention: Questions Parents and Families can Ask	NCII	https://intensiveintervention.org/resource/intensive-intervention-questions-parents-and-families-can-ask
How Can You Support Intensive Intervention? Tips for Families	NCII	https://intensiveintervention.org/sites/default/files/17-3324_NCII-Family-Tips-508.pdf
Parent Notification Checklists and Sample Letters	Meadows Center for Preventing Educational Risk	https://buildingrti.utexas.org/resource-pages/parent-notification-checklists-and-sample-letters
RTI and Parent Involvement	Meadows Center for Preventing Educational Risk	https://buildingrti.utexas.org/modules/rti-and-parent-involvement
MTSS: What You Need to Know	Understood.org	https://www.understood.org/en/learning-attention-issues/treatments-approaches/educational-strategies/mtss-what-you-need-to-know
Supporting Families With PBIS at Home	Center on Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports, Center for Parent Information and Resources	https://www.pbis.org/resource/supporting-families-with-pbis-at-home

resources for families and educators that may be used to build families' awareness of MTSS and to support collaboration between educators and families.

At back-to-school night, Ms. Gomez, a third-grade teacher, speaks to the parents about the subjects the students will be studying this year, classroom expectations, and communication and homework policies. In addition, Ms. Gomez shares information about how she and other teachers will be using MTSS to ensure that all students in the class receive the academic instruction and behavioral supports that they need. Ms. Gomez explains that over the next few weeks, all students will be assessed in reading, math, and behavior to identify those who are at risk for not meeting grade-level expectations. She tells the families that students who are identified as being at risk will receive additional instruction or behavior support beyond what is provided to all students and that students will receive this extra support during the daily intervention block. She explains that teachers will use data from brief, frequent assessments

to determine if students are making appropriate progress toward their goals and, if not, to identify possible adjustments to the students' program. Finally, she provides the families with a copy of the school's guide to MTSS for families and shows them where to find more information on the school's website. Ms. Gomez takes time to respond to parents' questions and encourages them to contact her with any questions or concerns that they may have.

Recommendation 2: Ensure That Communication Is Multidirectional

Multidirectional communication is one of the key characteristics of successful relationships between educators and families and is an important component of collaborative problem solving (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Garbacz et al., 2016; Sheridan et al., 2014). Multidirectional communication means that information flows back and forth between families and school personnel and that all participants

can initiate communication. Ongoing, multidirectional communication with families throughout the school year can help educators build positive relationships with families and support problem-solving efforts.

Educators typically use a variety of methods to communicate with families, including phone calls, email, newsletters, text messages, and in-person meetings and events. When sharing information through these methods, educators should ensure that families are able to respond, ask questions, and share their concerns. One strategy for promoting multi-directional communication is for educators to send families a letter at the beginning of the school year, introducing themselves, describing their hopes for the coming year, and requesting information about the student. This letter may include a form for families to provide information about their child and their goals for the year (Garbacz et al., 2016). Another strategy for encouraging multidirectional communication is to develop a method for

families to comment and provide feedback through a weekly class newsletter (Garbacz et al., 2016). Using technology, such as videoconferencing, may make family participation more feasible in some cases. The resource "Technology Tools to Enhance School-Home Communication" (https://ksdetasn.org/resources/2166) from the Kansas Parent Information Resource Center provides several tools that educators can use to encourage multidirectional communication with families.

In-person meetings and conferences early in the school year provide opportunities to get to know families and learn about students' homes and cultures. Demonstrating cultural competence and asking questions about students' home life, interests, and communication preferences will help educators and families establish productive working relationships and encourage families to share information about their child. In addition, consistently communicating that family involvement is valued and ensuring that teachers and administrators are accessible to families are two useful strategies for promoting multidirectional communication with families (Haines et al., 2015; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997).

For students with behavioral challenges, direct behavior ratings (DBRs) can provide a mechanism to facilitate multidirectional communication (Chafouleas et al., 2009). DBRs track students' performance on a set of target behaviors across the school day and allow for communication between multiple school staff and the students' parents. DBRs can be shared with families on a daily or weekly basis and can be used to coordinate an incentive system between the students' home and school. When using DBR to support communication with families, educators should include a space on the DBR form for families to provide feedback, ask questions, and provide updates on the students' home life.

Ms. Robinson, a fourth-grade teacher at Silver Lake Elementary, wants to focus on developing effective communication systems with families. Before the school year begins, she sends home a letter to the parents of all her students, introducing herself and providing information about her classroom routines and curricula. She also includes a brief document with questions about each family's communication preferences and hopes for the year. Because she has several English learners in her class, Ms. Robinson ensures that the letter is in the home language of the family receiving it. During the first few weeks of school, Ms. Robinson also contacts all the families to share student success stories and to ask for the parents' perspective on how things are going. In addition, Ms. Robinson uses a weekly newsletter to share information with families and to ask for their input. In each newsletter, she includes a space for families to provide feedback and ask questions via email.

For students receiving Tier 2 intervention, Ms. Robinson works with the interventionist to schedule quarterly phone meetings with families. At these meetings, she and the interventionist provide progress updates and ask families about their perceptions of how their child is performing. For her students receiving Tier 3 interventions, Ms. Robinson arranges the most individualized and intensive communication. First, she works with the interventionists to schedule monthly meetings with families, considering families' work schedules and availability. In addition, when appropriate, she and the interventionist develop a daily behavior report card that tracks students' behavior and includes a section for daily feedback from the students' family.

## Recommendation 3: Share and Interpret Data With Families

Collecting and analyzing data on student performance is a key part of implementing MTSS and can support partnerships between educators and families (Curry et al., 2016). Evidence from the school mental health literature suggests that sharing assessment data with families and providing families with regular updates about their students' progress is an effective strategy for increasing family engagement (Becker et al., 2015). Sharing screening data will help all families understand how their students are performing against grade-level benchmarks for determining whether a student is at risk for academic or behavioral difficulty. Valid and reliable progress-monitoring data can also help families understand whether their child is on track to meet academic and behavioral goals. Although sending the data home to families may serve as an important first step, a valuable practice is to spend time interpreting and discussing the data with families (McLeskey et al., 2017).

If universal screening identifies a student as being at risk for poor learning or behavioral outcomes, the educator should explain the screening results to the student's family and communicate next steps for supporting the student. This communication may include an explanation the student's quantifiable goal for the intervention and an explanation of the method for assessing progress toward the goal (Becker et al., 2015). For students receiving Tier 2 intervention, we recommend that progress-monitoring data should be shared with families at least once per quarter, whereas at the Tier 3 level, the data should be shared at least monthly. When communicating with families about the data, educators should review the student's baseline data, year-end goal, and the rate of progress needed to meet the goal. Progress-monitoring data can be used to prompt discussions between families and educators about the effectiveness of the intervention and any changes that may need to be made.

Educators should ensure that graphed data are presented to families as clearly as possible, using colors and symbols to clarify the data. Graphs should contain labels for all relevant information, including the x- and y-axes, the student's data, the end-of-year goal, and the goal and trend lines. *Figure 3* shows an example of an academic progress-monitoring graph. In this example, the

Figure 3 **Sample progress-monitoring graph**
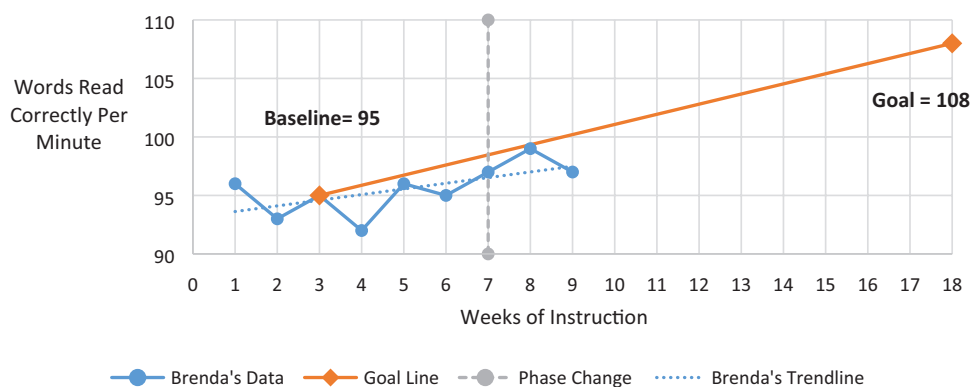
student's baseline score and goal are clearly labeled, and the legend at the base of the graph helps communicate the other important features of the graph, including the student's data, the goal line, and the trend line. In addition, this graph plots a phase change line that shows when a change was made to the student's intervention. Familiarizing families with these elements of progress-monitoring graphs will help build their understanding of their student's progress and how it is measured.

When sharing progress-monitoring data, it is important that educators explain not only how the student is progressing in intervention but also how the student is progressing in the core program compared with their peers. If academic progress monitoring occurs below the student's chronological grade level, families should be helped to understand how and why that level was chosen and how progress in the intervention relates to progress toward grade-level expectations.

Mr. Simpson, a reading specialist at Silver Lake Elementary, knows that it is important to engage families to support reading at home. After reviewing fall screening data for James, a third-grade student with reading difficulties, Mr. Simpson decides to contact James's parents to learn more about James, gather input from his parents, and describe his plan for supporting James's reading progress. He sets a positive tone during this communication by sharing concern for James's progress and describing the school's plan of action. At the fall parent–teacher conference, Mr. Simpson guides James's parents in understanding

James's most recent reading assessment results and how these scores compare with typical third-grade readers. Mr. Simpson shows James's parents how to read the progress-monitoring graph that he will use to track James's progress and explains the key features of the graph, including the baseline score, year-end goal, and the goal line.

Once Mr. Simpson begins collecting progress-monitoring data, he makes sure to provide regular updates to James's parents and checks in with them regularly regarding how things are going at home. Mr. Simpson also provides resources and guidance to James's parents that they can use to support his reading at home. When James shows improvement in his reading skills, Mr. Simpson uses the progress-monitoring data to acknowledge James's hard work and that of his parents. Later in the year, when James is no longer making adequate progress, Mr. Simpson uses the graph as a starting point to discuss what might be causing James to have difficulty and to get his parents' feedback about possible changes to his intervention.

Recommendation 4: Partner With Families in the Problem-Solving Process

Research suggests that the parent–teacher relationship is an important feature of effective family–school partnership interventions. For example, studies examining conjoint behavior consultation, a family–school problem-solving intervention, found that the quality of the parent–teacher relationship was at least partly responsible for the positive effect of the intervention on students' behavioral and academic outcomes (Sheridan et al.,

2012, 2017). In these studies, collaboration and ongoing communication between parents and school personnel were key to the success of the intervention. Without this communication and collaboration between parents and school personnel, students made fewer gains that were less long-lasting. In addition, building rapport with families and teaching families about the intervention their child is receiving are key strategies for increasing family engagement in school-based mental health interventions (Becker et al., 2015).

When a student is identified as needing intervention, the student's family should be involved in reviewing the student's data, discussing the student's needs, and developing an intervention plan. Family members should be encouraged to share their perceptions about the student's strengths and their areas of concern, which may support intervention planning. To support families' engagement in decision making, it can be beneficial to provide them with questions that they might consider asking during the process. The NCII infographic titled "Intensive Intervention: Questions Parents and Families Can Ask," offers sample questions families may ask to better understand intensive intervention (NCII, n.d.; see *Table 1*).

Educators also may consider inviting family members to one or more data review meetings. Although it may not be necessary to invite family members every time the team meets, data meetings offer opportunities for families to provide input and share their concerns about student progress. During data meetings, families can be involved in discussing trends in the progress-monitoring data to determine if

their children are responding adequately to intervention. If a student is not making adequate progress in an intervention, their family members can help to develop hypotheses explaining why progress has been less than satisfactory. Data meetings also provide opportunities to discuss how families can support their children at home by encouraging additional practice in areas of difficulty. It is important to note that if this meeting is part of the IEP process, family participation is a legal requirement.

A structured process for seeking family input will help promote family participation during meetings. One way to promote a collaborative meeting is to provide family members with an agenda in advance of the meeting and then to ask if there are topics in addition to those listed on the agenda they would like to discuss (Rossetti et al., 2017). During the meeting, teachers should ask questions, avoid jargon, and seek family input when making decisions. This will motivate family members to contribute to the discussion.

When planning meetings with families, it is important to accommodate family members' schedules to the extent possible (Becker et al., 2015). Offering multiple meeting times will increase the likelihood that families can attend planning meetings in person. If they are unable to attend in person, family members may be able to participate in meetings by phone or video conference. For families that are unable to participate in data team meetings, a representative from the data team should be designated to meet separately with the family to discuss intervention planning or necessary adaptations to the intervention plan. In addition, educators will need to ensure that interpreters are available for families that need them and that all written materials are translated into families' preferred languages. Finally, although intervention is focused on remediating academic and behavioral challenges, educators should avoid communicating a deficit-based view of students and should be sure to celebrate progress that is made.

The MTSS team at Silver Lake Elementary is reviewing data for Piero, a fifth-grade student who is struggling with both math and behavior. Because Piero is making inadequate progress in his math intervention, and data from his daily behavior report cards demonstrate that he is not responding to the behavior intervention, the team decides to contact his parents to discuss making changes to the intervention plan. Due to their busy work schedules, Piero's parents are unable to attend an in-person meeting, so the team arranges a videoconference at a time that works for his parents and sets up an interpreter to assist with communication.

During the meeting, team members set a collaborative tone by explaining that they would like to work together to help improve Piero's academics and behavior. The team seeks input from Piero's parents about how he is doing at home and encourages them to share any information that they think may be affecting his performance at school. They also discuss Piero's strengths and review the goals that they have for Piero. When Piero's family shares some of the challenges that they have been having at home, team members use active listening and ask follow-up questions to learn more. The team shares several strategies that his parents can use at home to help him with his math and behavior. They also share resources, including websites of parent centers, that may be helpful to the family to support Piero's learning and behavior at home. Finally, the team discusses the possibility of a referral to special education and ensures that the parents understand how to request an evaluation.

Conclusion

Families' engagement in their children's education is an important factor in the academic and behavioral success of students throughout the school years. When educators collaborate with families to support students' learning and behavior, students are more likely to experience positive outcomes. Implementing MTSS provides an opportunity for educators to collaborate with families in a problem-solving process focused on improving students' academic performance and behavior. In addition, embedding family engagement within the tiered structure of MTSS may help schools plan and implement sustainable and meaningful partnerships with all families.

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ORCID ID

Zachary Weingarten iD https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4976-5429

Zachary Weingarten, EdD, Researcher, **Rebecca Zumeta Edmonds,** PhD, Managing Researcher, and **Sarah Arden,** PhD, Senior Researcher, American Institutes for Research, 1000 Thomas Jefferson St., Washington, DC.

Address correspondence concerning this article to Zachary Weingarten, EdD, American Institutes for Research, Washington, DC 20007 (e-mail: zweingarten@air.org).

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