

In this brief, we consider, “What’s in a name?” Specifically, we discuss how (a) educators have described tiered prevention frameworks and (b) their language has evolved in behavioral, academic, and integrated domains.

**A Triangle by Any Other Name**

When most K-12 educators see a green, yellow, and red triangle (▲), they recognize it as a three-tier prevention framework. Many leaders in policy, research, and practice now refer to the framework as a **Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS)**. Depending on *when, where, and how* educators learned about the triangle, however, they may describe it as one (or more) specific prevention frameworks. Consider the following examples.

- In the past, educators may have been more likely to call the triangle Response to Intervention (**RtI**), Effective Behavior Support (**EBS**), or Schoolwide Positive Behavior Support (**SWPBS**).
- There have also been many variations across states. In the past, Michigan educators would have described the triangle as Michigan’s Behavior and Learning Support Initiative (MIBLSI), and Connecticut educators would have said it illustrated Scientifically Research-Based Interventions (SRBI). Some minor differences persist today. For example, Virginia educators implement VTSS (Virginia Tiered System of Support), Colorado educators depict their triangle as a mountain, and Vermont describes layers of support within their VTmtss framework.
- Further, educators trained in supporting students’ social, emotional, and behavioral needs may refer to the triangle as MTSS for behavior or positive behavioral interventions and supports (**PBIS**); educators focused primarily on academic support may refer to the triangle as MTSS for academics; and educators trained to integrate academic and behavior support may refer to the triangle as an Integrated MTSS (**I-MTSS**) framework.

So, who is correct? They all are! Language has evolved over time and, regardless of name, these frameworks share defining features of I-MTSS (see [I-MTSS Research Network, 2023](#)).

**Evolution of Language**

In the 1990s, scholars (a) recognized the opportunity to prioritize prevention in school settings by adopting a three-tier framework (e.g., Walker et al., 1996) and (b) described “a continuum of effective academic and social behavior support” (Sugai et al., 1998). Since then, language evolved in behavioral (e.g., social, emotional, behavioral), academic (e.g., reading, math), and integrated domains (illustrated in Figure 1 and described below).

**Behavioral Language.** The 1997 amendments to the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)* required educators to consider “positive behavioral interventions, strategies, and supports” when designing individualized programs for students with behavioral needs. As a critical foundation for individualized support, scholars called for schoolwide implementation of effective behavior support (**EBS**; Lewis & Sugai, 1999) or positive behavior support (**PBS**; Sugai & Horner, 2002). The language of PBS reflected shifts in behavioral science toward positive approaches (e.g., Carr et al., 2002) and federal legislation; and schoolwide PBS (**SWPBS**) gained traction (e.g., Sugai & Horner, 2009). The *Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA 2004)* included similar language of “positive behavioral interventions and supports” (PBIS). To (a) align with language in IDEA 2004 and (b) avoid confusion with broader applications of PBS (e.g., home, community, adult) and a U.S. television channel (Public Broadcasting System), educators focused on the behavioral domain describe the triangle as **PBIS** (e.g., Horner & Sugai, 2015).

**Academic Language.** In the academic domain, the *2006 Regulations* of IDEA 2004 required educators to consider “the child’s response to scientific, research-based intervention” when identifying students with a specific learning disability. The focus on responsiveness to intervention (e.g., Fuchs et al., 2003), response to instruction (e.g., Kame’enui & Simmons, 1998), or response to intervention (e.g., Denton et al., 2003) called for an emphasis on high quality instruction within a tiered prevention framework, and **RtI** became a defining label for this framework in academics. To address confusion between the use of RtI to describe both a method of identifying students with learning disabilities and a tiered prevention framework, educators now typically describe the triangle as a **MTSS** framework (Greenwood et al., 2008).

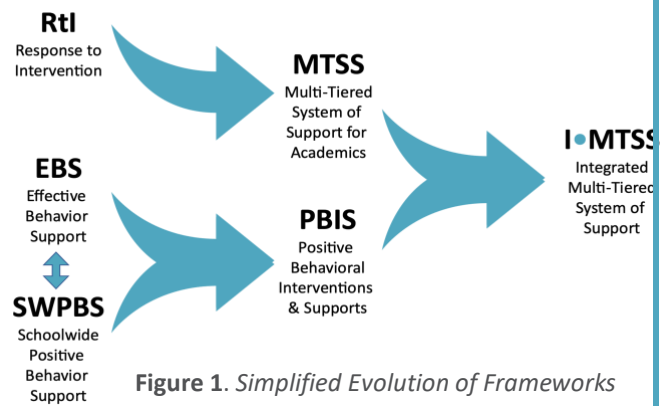


Figure 1. Simplified Evolution of Frameworks

**Integrated Language.** As language evolved in behavioral and academic domains and as multidisciplinary approaches became more prevalent (Charlton et al., 2018), educators described, implemented, and evaluated integrated frameworks, including Comprehensive Integrated Three-Tier models (Ci3T; e.g., Lane et al. 2009), MTSS (e.g., Greenwood et al., 2008), Interconnected Systems Framework (ISF; e.g., Eber et al., 2020), and Integrated MTSS (e.g., McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). Although some states and scholars consider MTSS to be an integrated framework, the I-MTSS Research Network (2023) intentionally refers to Integrated MTSS, or **I-MTSS**, to describe “a comprehensive and equitable prevention framework for improving the outcomes of all students, including students with or at-risk for disabilities, through integrated academic and behavioral support.”

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