

In this brief, we discuss the current state of integrated multi-tiered systems of support (I-MTSS) implementation, as defined by the I-MTSS Research Network (2023), in the United States (U.S.). Because not all states focus on *integrated* implementation, we begin by summarizing states’ MTSS implementation based on (a) published reviews of state policy and (b) states’ plans to use federal funding (e.g., State Systemic Improvement Plans, State Personal Development Grants) to support MTSS. Then, we discuss the extent to which states integrate academic and behavioral supports within an I-MTSS framework, and we consider next steps for implementation to address the current “practice-to-research” gap.

What is the current state of multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) implementation in the U.S.?

The U.S. Department of Education (2022) strategic plan includes an objective to “[s]upport the development and implementation of multitiered systems of supports to increase students’ engagement; social, emotional, and mental health; well-being; and academic success” (see the 2022-2026 Strategic Plan, p. 44).

Consistent with this objective, all U.S. states have invested in MTSS, and the majority (>90%) of states use an MTSS framework¹ to organize supports in both academic (A) and behavioral (B) domains (see Figure 1; Zhang et al., 2023). Most (86%) states’ State Systemic Improvement Plans (SSIP) describe MTSS, and 11 states explicitly include both an MTSS and positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) framework to support students’ academic and behavioral needs, respectively (K. Ruedel at the National Center for Systemic Improvement, personal communication, February 21, 2023). In addition, some (36%) states’ State Professional Development Grants (SPDG) include MTSS, and 5 states include MTSS for both academic and behavior support (J. Coffey at the Office of Special Education Programs, personal communication, March 17, 2023).

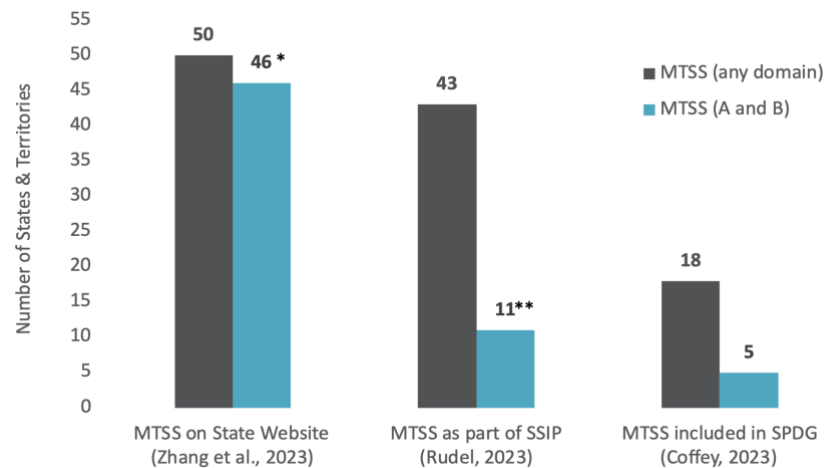


Figure 1. State(s) of MTSS

* 46 states explicitly describe applying MTSS to academic and behavioral domains
 ** 11 states explicitly list MTSS and PBIS in their SSIP (other states may use MTSS A and B)

To what extent are MTSS A and B integrated within an I-MTSS Framework?

Although most states currently organize both academic and behavioral support within an MTSS framework (Figure 1), current reviews have not examined whether their implementation is siloed, aligned, or fully integrated. Within an I-MTSS framework, states, districts, and schools fully integrate data systems, teaming, professional development, and practices to cohesively support students’ academic and behavioral needs (I-MTSS Research Network, 2023). By integrating academic and behavioral support within an I-MTSS framework, educators may improve the efficiency and effectiveness with which they support students’ inter-related academic and behavior needs. Thus, some states explicitly emphasize integration of academic and behavioral supports within their I-MTSS framework. See, for example, descriptions of an I-MTSS approach in California, Delaware, Kansas, Michigan, and Rhode Island.

¹ See Integrated Multi-Tiered System of Support: What’s in a name? (I-MTSS Research Network, 2023) for a discussion of how MTSS framework names have evolved, including how states may use, for example, (a) Response to Intervention (RtI) or MTSS for Academics (MTSS-A) to describe a tiered prevention framework for academic support and (b) MTSS for Behavior (MTSS-B) or Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) to describe a tiered prevention framework for social, emotional, and behavioral support.

Next Steps for Implementation: Closing the Practice-to-Research Gap

In many facets of education, leaders describe a research-to-practice gap—where research-based approaches are slow to be adopted and effectively implemented in practice (c.f., Joyce & Cartwright, 2020). In contrast to this typical pattern, widespread adoption and implementation of I-MTSS may have outpaced emerging, yet promising, I-MTSS research.

MTSS has gained traction through national and state educational policy and practice, and I-MTSS approaches—emphasizing integration of academic and behavioral support—are becoming more prevalent. Although initial evidence supporting I-MTSS is promising, more information is needed to document efficacy of I-MTSS in both controlled and typical conditions (I-MTSS Research Network, 2024). Further, it is essential to (a) learn more about which specific elements of I-MTSS are associated with improved student outcomes and (b) examine the effectiveness of methods used to scale-up these practices across the nation. Given this “practice-to-research gap,” further research on I-MTSS is critical.

As we continue to amass research to inform I-MTSS practice, we recommend that state and district leaders collect and use local data to guide decisions about implementation approaches that improve meaningful student outcomes. Additionally, the current state of implementation of MTSS suggests the need for collaboration among national and state leaders, researchers (e.g., members of the [I-MTSS Research Network](#)), and national technical assistance centers (e.g., [Center on PBIS](#), [National Center for Improving Literacy](#), [National Center on Intensive Implementation](#)) to inform and improve integrated implementation of evidence-based practices, data systems, and professional development approaches within an I-MTSS framework. These collaborations may include, for example, funded research, researcher-practitioner partnerships, model demonstration, and technical assistance and dissemination efforts that enable continuous improvement of I-MTSS implementation to improve student outcomes.

Acknowledgements & Disclaimers

Mark Buckman, Steve Goodman, Blair Payne, Brandi Simonsen, & Heather Smith led this brief, with input from the broader I-MTSS Research Network. For an in-depth discussion of the concepts presented in this brief, please return to www.mtss.org in the future to access *Past, Present, and Future of Integrated Multi-Tiered Systems of Support Frameworks* (I-MTSS Research Network, in preparation). The Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, supports the I-MTSS Research network through Grant R324N180020 to the University of Connecticut. The opinions expressed are the authors’ and do not represent views of the Institute or the U.S. Department of Education.

Recommended Citation

I-MTSS Research Network. (2024). *What is the current state of I-MTSS implementation?* Integrated Multi-Tiered Systems of Support Research Network, University of Connecticut. <http://www.mtss.org>.

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