

MTSS vs RTI vs PBIS

What's the difference?

By: Lynn Ehlers

PBIS, RTI, and MTSS can be confusing, especially since those terms are sometimes used interchangeably. There's a lot of overlap, but they are different. Use this article as a cheat sheet (or refresher) so you can feel comfortable discussing them with parents, colleagues, and other stakeholders. Let's start chronologically.



What does **PBIS** stand for?

PBIS stands for Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports.

When was **PBIS** first introduced?

PBIS was first called for in the 1997 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). PBIS is initially a response to the exclusion of students with disabilities from educational opportunities due to behavior issues and disorders. PBIS has since shifted to a "school-wide" system that applies to all students—not only students with disabilities. The 1997 reauthorization also provisioned for the creation of a national Center on PBIS to develop models and provide information, training, and support around PBIS to districts.

What exactly is PBIS?

PBIS is a framework that calls for actively teaching positive behaviors and implementing evidence-based preventative/responsive interventions to support student academic achievement and well-being.

In a PBIS framework, positive behaviors and behavior expectations are taught to students, much like math, reading, and other core subjects. Key behavior expectations (e.g., respect for self, respect for others) are selected locally, and “rubrics” for what those behaviors look like are outlined for both classroom and non-classroom settings. Time is dedicated to teaching, modeling, and practicing these behaviors, and students are acknowledged and rewarded for exhibiting them.

PBIS calls for data-driven decision making, progress monitoring, and tiered evidence-based interventions when problem behaviors occur.

What are the PBIS tiers?

- **Tier 1 - Universal Supports/Practices:** The positive behavior instruction, best practices, and positive school climate provided to **all** students. This tier is focused on **preventing** the development of new problem behaviors.
- **Tier 2 - Targeted Supports:** The supports provided to students who are either not responding to Tier 1 supports and/or are at risk for serious problem behaviors. Students needing Tier 2 supports are identified based on data (e.g., number of problem behaviors). Tier 2 interventions are typically small-group setting interventions.
- **Tier 3 - Intensive Supports:** The supports provided to the small percentage of students with serious problem behaviors who do not respond to Tier 2 interventions. These supports are more individualized, targeted, and intense/focused.

What does RTI mean?

RTI stands for Response to Intervention.

What is the history of Response to Intervention?

RTI was introduced in the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). At the time, there was an increasing number of students referred to special education with a specific learning disability (SLD), and many of those instances were considered preventable if targeted, effective instructional interventions had been put in place. The 2004 IDEA amendments did not mandate an RTI process, but did adjust SLD identification requirements to now allow “a process based on the child’s response to scientific, research-based intervention”—meaning that research-based interventions could be implemented prior to referring a student to special education. The law intended that students simply in need of instructional support could be kept in general education and not automatically referred into special education.

What exactly is RTI?

There is no universally accepted definition of RTI (perhaps, due in part to the fact that the 2004 amendments to IDEA do not include grant funds for a national Center for RTI, the way a Center for PBIS was provisioned for in 1997). Broadly speaking, RTI is a framework that calls for research-based interventions to be implemented for struggling students. Most RTI models include some common attributes: universal screening assessments to proactively check for struggling students; data-driven, early identification of students needing support; implementing research-based interventions that align to student needs and are tiered in intensity and/or frequency; monitoring student progress to assess intervention effectiveness; tracking the “fidelity” with which an intervention is implemented; and involving parents and other stakeholders.

What are the Response to Intervention tiers?

- Tier 1 – Universal Instruction: The high-quality classroom instruction that all students receive. This tier ensures that students are not struggling due to poor instruction.
- Tier 2 – Targeted Interventions: The research-based supports provided to students who are identified as struggling. Tier 2 interventions are typically implemented in small group settings.
- Tier 3 – Intensive Interventions: The individualized, targeted interventions implemented for students not responding to Tier 2 supports. Tier 3 supports provide more frequent, intense, and individualized interventions. If students still do not respond, they may be referred for special education evaluation.

What does MTSS mean?

MTSS stands for Multi-Tiered System of Supports.

When was MTSS first introduced?

The Elementary and Secondary Education/Every Student Succeeds Act (ESEA/ESSA), signed into law in December 2015, calls for a “for a multi-tier system of supports for literacy services.”

What exactly is MTSS?

The definition of MTSS can vary as well, especially as states develop and define their own MTSS processes to comply with ESSA. By and large, MTSS is a framework for identifying students who need support, making data-driven decisions, implementing research-based interventions aligned to needs, monitoring student progress, and involving stakeholders. In other words, there are many overlapping elements with RTI.

Are RTI and MTSS the same thing?

MTSS is widely considered an umbrella framework to encompass “whole child” data (achievement and growth as well as attendance, behavior, and social emotion), essentially combining the previously separate PBIS and RTI processes. By 2015, many districts had already included behavior data in their RTI processes, making MTSS simply an updated term for some.

Depending on the district and state, MTSS may vary from RTI in other ways. A few examples:

- MTSS is applied to all students (not just struggling students). For example, MTSS calls for us to continue challenging high-achieving students.
- MTSS often includes language about collaborative, concurrent, and/or communicative supports. Here, there is an expectation that we are effectively working and communicating with all stakeholders to provide a unified support system (i.e., ensuring that our interventions aren’t at odds with other interventions, etc.).
- Some states and districts specify MTSS as a means to equity.

Still have some questions?

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