



ALIGNING HOUSE BILL 4545 WITH A MULTI-TIERED SYSTEM OF SUPPORTS FRAMEWORK

Supporting Student Achievement and Teacher Retention

A White Paper prepared by Branching Minds in collaboration with Texas School District Partners

Branching Minds is a mission-driven K12 education company that is currently supporting over 508,000 school-age students in Texas, across 750 schools, 27 districts, and 2 major charter networks. This report was prepared in collaboration with school leaders at several Texas districts who use Branching Minds to support their MTSS and HB 4545 work.

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Executive Summary

In 2021, the Texas Legislature passed House Bill 4545 to address learning losses due to the pandemic with the provision of accelerated learning support and tutoring. While the intentions of the legislation were widely applauded, the operationalization of the statute has been challenging for many schools. As the Texas Legislature continues its work to improve education outcomes, there are opportunities to improve the legislation to better achieve its intended goals.

Texas is in a unique position to be a model for reforming the education system in the wake of the pandemic.

This report was prepared by Branching Minds in collaboration with our partners in several of the largest school districts in Texas. It outlines the alignment of HB 4545 with the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework which is already operationalized in most Texas schools, and offers recommendations to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of HB 4545 by intentionally leveraging the MTSS framework to support accelerated instruction for struggling students.

Recommendations To Improve Operationalization of HB 4545 Requirements

Aligning HB 4545 to this evidence-based educational framework will allow schools to address the comprehensive learning needs of students in a manner that is collaborative and consistent with intervention best practices.

Recommendation 1

Streamline Data Collection To Support Decision-Making

Recommendation 2

Prioritize Evidence-Based Interventions and Supports

Recommendation 3

Provide Dedicated, Multi-Year Funding To Support Systemic Solutions

Providing districts with the necessary resources — including guidance, tools, and dedicated funding — as they implement system-level solutions to improve outcomes will positively impact student achievement and educator retention, both now and into the future.

Background

The pandemic had an unprecedented impact on our nation's education system – and the aftershocks from the disruption are far-reaching. **Early data** reveals widespread learning loss and lower academic achievement across subjects, with the steepest declines among low-income and Black and Hispanic communities, further **widening the equity gaps** in education. We are also seeing a sharp rise in **youth mental health problems**, including increased depression, anxiety, and suicidality, as well as a significant increase in **behavioral issues** in schools. And students are not the only ones struggling in the wake of the pandemic. Educators have been **leaving the profession in droves** due to burnout and stress, resulting in a nationwide shortage of teachers and administrators at a time when they are needed most.

Addressing the impact of the pandemic on schools requires policymakers to be both thoughtful and bold in their approach to improving outcomes. They must balance expectations and accountability for educators with compassion and collaboration in order to build more effective systems. **Texas is in a unique position to be a model for reforming the education system in the wake of the pandemic.** Both prior to, and following, COVID-related school disruptions, Texas had already implemented **successful reforms** that led to better and more equitable outcomes in student achievement. Most recently, House Bill 4545 was designed to **address learning losses** due to the pandemic with the provision of accelerated learning support and tutoring. However, the operationalization of the statute has been challenging for many schools. As the Texas Legislature continues its work to improve education outcomes, there are opportunities to improve the legislation to better achieve its intended goals.

This report was prepared by Branching Minds in collaboration with our partners in several of the largest school districts in Texas. It outlines the alignment of HB 4545 with the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework that is already operationalized in most Texas school districts. The report highlights some of the challenges that schools have faced as they implemented HB 4545 over the past year, and provides recommendations to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of this statute by intentionally leveraging the MTSS framework to support accelerated instruction for struggling students.

COVID-Related Academic Declines and the Need for Accelerated Instruction

In Texas, student academic proficiency is assessed annually with the [State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness \(STAAR\)](#) in core subject areas. Between 2019 and 2021, there was a [marked increase](#) in the number of students who failed to meet grade-level standards in reading and math (4% and 16% increases, respectively). The rapid rise in students who did not meet grade-level expectations in these assessments is cause for concern since, according to the [Texas Education Agency](#), they are unlikely to succeed in the next grade or course without meaningful, ongoing academic intervention.

HB 4545: Accelerated Instruction To Meet Grade Level Requirements

In order to support the [high number of students](#) who have experienced significant learning loss caused by remote learning and continued COVID-19-related instruction interruptions, the Texas legislature passed [House Bill 4545 \(HB 4545\)](#) in the summer of 2021. The new statute outlined updated requirements for school districts to provide **supplemental accelerated instruction** for all students who do not meet grade-level requirements in the state's standardized assessments.

For students who do not pass the STAAR test in grades 3-8 or the STAAR EOC assessments, school districts must provide support by either:

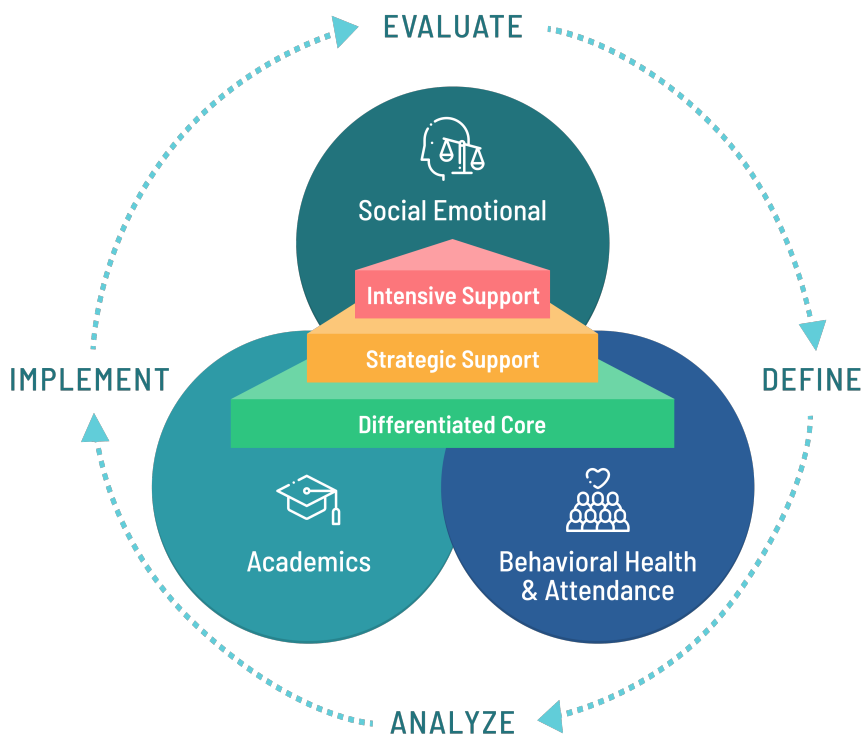
- ▶ Assigning the student to a classroom teacher who is a Teacher Incentive Allotment (TIA)-certified master, exemplary, or recognized teacher (a designation determined by the Texas Education Agency in conjunction with the teacher's school district) or
- ▶ Providing supplemental instruction before or after school or embedded in the school day, without removing the student from their grade-level required core and enrichment courses.
- ▶ In addition, for students who do not meet STAAR math or reading grade-level expectations in grades 3, 5, or 8, an Accelerated Learning Committee (ALC) must be established to develop and monitor accelerated instruction plans.

Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS): An Educational Framework for Evidence-Based Intervention

Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) is a nationally recognized, evidence-based framework for effectively integrating supports and interventions to:

- ▶ Improve student achievement
- ▶ Target learning loss recovery
- ▶ Monitor student progress
- ▶ Improve teacher effectiveness and efficiency

As a collaborative, evidence-based approach to differentiating and personalizing instruction and intervention across academics, social-emotional learning, and behavior for all students, there is robust **evidence** supporting the power of an effective MTSS practice to improve student outcomes for struggling learners, as well as data showing improved outcomes for ALL learners. **MTSS is one of the most effective ways to ensure an equitable educational experience in schools.** This framework is used across the state of Texas and nationwide to provide well-designed instruction, closely monitor all students' progress, and provide the appropriate level of instructional support to all students.



The MTSS framework also supports the identification of cohorts of students with shared needs, and opportunities to address system-level problems that would improve outcomes for all learners across the class, grade, school, or district, creating dramatic returns on investment of time and efforts for staff.

MTSS is not new. There are many academic experts and learning scientists ready to share the dos and don'ts of supporting the diversity of student learning needs. There are thousands of research-backed interventions to choose from, tons of best practices to keep in mind, and so many data points to inform our decision-making. There is robust [evidence](#) supporting the power of an effective MTSS practice to improve student outcomes for struggling learners, as well as data showing improved outcomes for ALL learners.

How HB 4545 Requirements Align With an MTSS Framework

The goals of both HB 4545 and MTSS are to help all students meet their learning potential by using assessment data to identify which students need support, and then providing differentiated instruction and targeted intervention plans for every student identified as needing additional support. Because the intervention processes outlined in HB 4545 fit within an MTSS framework, many schools and districts in Texas are managing HB 4545 requirements through their MTSS implementation, using MTSS personnel and technology solutions to do so collaboratively and efficiently.

Accelerated Instruction: Requirements of HB 4545 and Alignment With an MTSS Framework

The intention of accelerated instruction is to ensure that all students have access and opportunity to participate in grade-level work that will prepare them for academic success. In order to ensure that educators are addressing the needs of struggling students, HB 4545 requires supplemental accelerated instruction for all Texas students who did not pass the STAAR test or the STAAR EOC assessments. Districts must provide a minimum of 30 hours of individual or small group supplemental instruction in the subject area for each test the student failed to pass.

Schools and districts that have implemented an MTSS framework can also use results from formative assessments to identify and meet other academic, behavioral, or social-emotional needs that may interfere with their ability to meet grade-level expectations on the STAAR test. This more comprehensive approach enables educators to look at a broader picture of each student's learning obstacles and to be intentional with the resources provided to empower them to succeed academically.

Accelerated Learning Committees: Requirements of HB 4545 and Alignment With an MTSS Framework

Accelerated Learning Committees (ALCs) must meet for every student in grades 3, 5, and 8 who did not pass the math or reading STAAR test. ALCs must include the principal or the principal's designee, the student's parent or guardian, and the teacher of the subject of an assessment on which the student failed to perform satisfactorily. This student-specific committee is responsible for developing an accelerated instruction plan for students,

documented in writing and provided to the parent/guardian. The plan must include progress monitoring to ensure that the plan is working. [Progress monitoring](#) should be appropriately scheduled (higher frequency for students with more intense goals) and assigned to an individual trained in the progress monitoring assessment (ideally, the same teacher providing the accelerated instruction).

The intention of the ALC is to provide focused problem-solving for students who are not achieving success at critical points in their academic careers. For schools that use an MTSS framework to support struggling students, the ALC meeting structure strongly aligns with the [MTSS meeting practice](#). A multi-disciplinary team that includes the stakeholders in the student's success and considers the needs of the whole child is well-placed to develop a comprehensive support plan that is both intentional and practical.

Summary of Alignment

In response to HB 4545, many schools are building accelerated instruction plans directly into students' overarching intervention plans as part of their MTSS framework. This alignment ensures coordination and collaboration across stakeholders, reduces redundancy, and ensures that the interventions provided meet each student's needs and move them toward success on the STAAR.

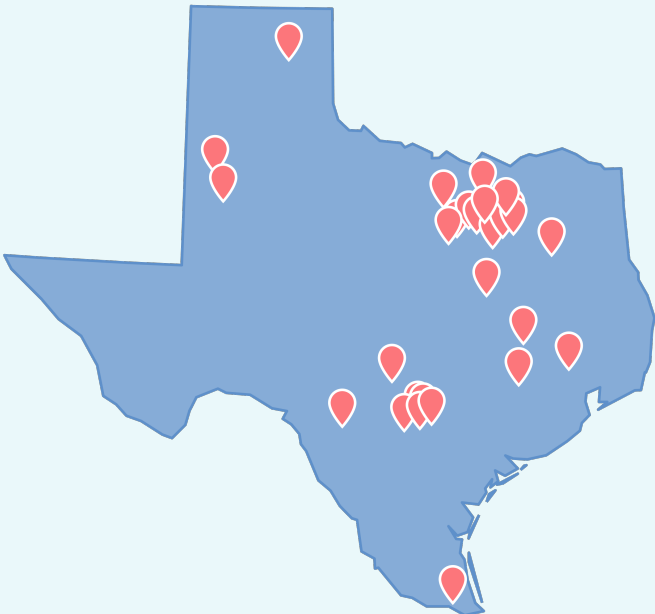
Most importantly, districts that are aligning the requirements of HB 4545 with their MTSS framework are maximizing the effectiveness of intervention. The collaborative problem-solving capability of ALCs within the MTSS framework allows for a whole-child approach to intervention planning, such that the student benefits from a comprehensive plan addressing underlying learning challenges as well as grade-level instructional requirements as measured by the STAAR test or STAAR EOCs.

Branching Minds: Supporting Schools and Districts Across Texas

Branching Minds is a system-level K-12 MTSS software platform that brings together innovative, easy-to-use technology with the latest insights from the learning sciences to help teachers more effectively, efficiently, and equitably support positive outcomes for all students. In 2022, Branching Minds served over **500,000 students in Texas**, and over 1.5M students nationally.

Using a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework, the Branching Minds platform centralizes student assessment data and collective teacher insights. By making this information accessible and actionable, Branching Minds helps ensure that students receive the evidence-based accelerated learning support needed to meet grade-level standards without overwhelming teaching staff.

Many school districts in Texas are managing their HB 4545 implementation through the MTSS framework, and are using Branching Minds to efficiently and effectively manage intervention, progress monitoring, and collaboration.



In 2022, Branching Minds supported:

- ★ 508,881 school-age students in Texas
- ★ 750 schools across the state
- ★ 27 Texas Public School Districts
- ★ 2 Major Charter School Networks in Texas

*A+ Charter Schools ★ Arlington ISD ★ Athens ISD ★ Boerne ISD ★ Brownfield ISD ★ Bryan ISD ★ Conroe ISD ★ East Central ISD ★ Ferris ISD
★ Fort Sam Houston ISD ★ Fort Worth ISD ★ Frisco ISD ★ Garland ISD ★ Granbury ISD ★ Hempstead ISD ★ KIPP Pleasant Grove ★ Levelland ISD
★ Lovejoy ISD ★ Montgomery ISD ★ Pampa ISD ★ Richardson ISD ★ San Antonio ISD ★ San Benito CISD ★ South San Antonio ISD ★ Southwest ISD
★ Springtown ISD ★ Uvalde CISD ★ Waco ISD ★ Waxahachie ISD*

Improving Student Outcomes and Teacher Effectiveness

The Branching Minds platform streamlines the work of MTSS and empowers teachers with the insights they need to personalize support for students, leaving them with more time and energy to focus on instruction and intervention. Branching Minds empowers teachers to:

- ▶ Provide evidence-based instruction to ALL students, matched to their individual learning needs;
- ▶ Communicate and collaborate effectively with other teachers, specialists, and families;
- ▶ Ensure that student support is comprehensive and coordinated;
- ▶ Ensure that no child is slipping through the cracks; and
- ▶ Focus teaching time and resources on providing high-quality instruction and nurturing relationships with students on school and district level performance.

In a survey conducted in 2022, 96% of educators using Branching Minds said that it saved them time and increased their effectiveness.

In addition to supporting teachers to more effectively address students' learning needs, Branching Minds offers a system-level solution across schools within a district. The platform provides extensive visibility for administrators to understand the current performance level and rate of growth across grade levels and campuses based on existing assessment data. This information allows administrators to easily identify which schools and/or grade levels are underperforming and not on track to meet expectations. Furthermore, the real-time data visibility on the Branching Minds platform allows district leaders to quickly identify and address emerging negative trends.

In its seven years of operation, Branching Minds has driven strong results in partner schools across the country. Our ability to improve the intervention system at the school and student level has been demonstrated in several key ways:

Improved academic outcomes in reading and math

Students supported by Branching Minds had an average increase of 5 percentile points in reading scores, and an average increase of 9.3 percentile points in math scores as compared to students not supported by BRM.

Academic gains at San Antonio ISD

Since partnering with Branching Minds, San Antonio ISD has gone from a D to a B rating from the Texas Education Agency, representing the greatest improvement in student achievement of any large district in Texas in 2019.

Reduced suspensions at Waco ISD

Waco ISD stated that as a result of supporting their MTSS framework for behavior with Branching Minds, the overall out-of-school suspension rate for the district “tumbled by 52%” in 2019, as reported in the [Houston Chronicle](#).

How Branching Minds Is Helping Our Texas Partners Implement HB 4545

- ▶ **STAAR data** is available in the BRM platform, making it easy for teachers and staff to see a student’s historical STAAR data so they can make the best data-based decisions for each individual student.
- ▶ Branching Minds flags which students need supplemental instruction and/or accelerated learning committees with custom tags, so everyone at a campus or district can quickly filter and find which students need this support, which makes it easy for teachers and staff to **easily identify students needing supplemental instruction and accelerated learning committees**.
- ▶ **ALC meeting templates** are uploaded and generated within the BRM platform; parent/guardian communications, meeting notes, and decisions can be documented efficiently for many students at once.
- ▶ **Individual and group plans** can be created and managed in Branching Minds, including a SMART goal, a progress monitor, and an intervention or support, allowing for efficient documentation and monitoring of educational plans established by the ALC.
- ▶ Teachers, staff, and external service providers like tutors, tasked with working to support an individual or a group, will receive **weekly reminders** to check off intervention minutes and input progress monitoring data.
- ▶ Branching Minds provides **reports to track intervention minutes logged** for students to ensure no students are missed or “slip through the cracks.”

District Partner Recommendations on Improving HB 4545 and Aligning With MTSS

School districts across Texas quickly responded in order to develop and implement new procedures to comply with HB 4545 in time for the 2021-2022 school year. While most districts have expressed alignment with the goals and objectives of the statute, they have also noted several challenges and unintended burdens created by the timelines and requirements as laid out in the current version of the legislation. **These challenges can potentially undermine the statute's intent by overemphasizing compliance over continual improvement, and duplication of interventions in a manner that does not support the student's learning needs.**

Texas districts that partner with Branching Minds have already implemented robust system-level supports to identify students in need of academic and behavioral support, provide evidence-based interventions to meet their needs, and monitor progress over time to ensure that support plans are effective. As such, the recommendations provided by these districts are focused on how the requirements of HB 4545 can better align with and strengthen the MTSS framework to meaningfully impact student outcomes without creating unnecessary administrative burdens for educators.

Recommendation 1: Streamline Data Collection To Support Decision-Making

The school leaders that contributed to this report universally endorsed the value of robust student assessment and progress monitoring data to guide the delivery of interventions for accelerated learning plans. However, they also noted that existing data reporting requirements under HB 4545 are often cumbersome and misaligned with their existing infrastructure. For example, the requirement to track minutes of intervention has been challenging to comply with because of the large volume of students needing accelerated instruction, and the various times and modes of delivery. Some students are receiving instruction in summer programs, where attendance factors can be inconsistent. Other students are working with external tutors who often do not have access to the same data collection tools as district staff, creating a significant barrier for accurate documentation.

All Texas district partners that contributed to this report urged that streamlining the data collection process and ensuring that it is better aligned with measurement of student achievement was necessary. Without a collaborative tool that pulls together all the interventions and supports a student is receiving, as well as state test scores in combination with skills-based screener and diagnostic assessments, Texas partners stated that it is impossible to assess whether the interventions are effectively meeting student needs and addressing skill deficits.

By integrating the reporting requirements of HB 4545 into a platform like Branching Minds, the burden of data collection is greatly reduced, and the value of the data is greatly increased because it can be combined with other key student achievement indicators so that teachers can track student improvement, and administrators can track class and school-level performance.

Texas school partners stressed the importance of ongoing funding to support the implementation of system-level solutions that streamline the collection of data and provide critical insights to inform continuous improvement. Schools and districts that do not have a system-level data platform to streamline the collection of data find the HB 4545 reporting requirements to be overly burdensome and solely for the purpose of compliance.

Recommendation 2: Prioritize Evidence-Based Interventions and Supports

Texas district partners universally endorsed the need to prioritize the quality of intervention time over the quantity. In order to improve learning outcomes for students, the educators contributing to this report stressed the importance of using evidence-based strategies and supports that are differentiated for the needs of each individual student's learning challenges.

Rather than solely requiring educators to track minutes of intervention as part of an accelerated instruction plan, requiring that schools use **evidence-based targeted intervention strategies** along with **aligned progress monitoring** would more effectively ensure that the instruction provided is, in fact, helping struggling students achieve grade-level expectations.

Empowering Texas educators with requirements, funding, and resources that **prioritize evidence-based intervention strategies and ensuring contracting with quality third-party partnerships** that make these strategies practicable will result in greater student achievement along with teachers that feel more effective and supported, reducing burnout and improving retention.

Recommendation 3: Provide Dedicated, Multi-Year Funding To Support Systemic Solutions

The need for dedicated and ongoing funding allocation for this reform is critical. Although funding is currently available to support schools and districts in addressing COVID-related learning loss, implementing the kind of robust system-level solutions that would best address the needs of schools and students is a resource-intensive and multi-year initiative. Implementing such a solution and dismantling it a year or two later because ongoing funding is unavailable would be a huge strain on a district in terms of time, effort, and staff morale.

In the process of developing this report, we spoke with several superintendents who expressed that uncertainty around whether the budget will be available in two years was the key reason for not using existing ESSER funding to implement a system-level platform.

Dedicated, multi-year funding allocations to provide resources and tools to reduce data collection complexity, ensure the quality implementation of learning acceleration supports, and ensure compliance with HB 4545 would allow Texas district leaders to make necessary and strategic investments that will support immediate and longer-term improvements in school performance.

Conclusion

As Texas policymakers continue to work with district leaders to address the critical challenges facing schools in the wake of the pandemic, they must focus on both short and long-term goals. There is an urgent need to address academic learning loss across subjects to ensure that Texas students overcome COVID-related learning loss so they can get back on track as quickly as possible. Simultaneously, both students and teachers are struggling with the impact of the past several years on mental health, leading to unprecedented behavioral and social issues among students, and sharp rises in teacher stress and burnout, contributing to high levels of turnover.

Although these challenges are daunting and complex, the collaborative efforts of policymakers, educators, and researchers to find solutions are encouraging and necessary to create the long-term systemic change that is required to improve outcomes for generations of students.

Texas is a leader in this work, and HB 4545 is a guidepost for many states across the country that are looking to create meaningful and lasting change to their K12 education systems.

The authors of this report urge Texas policymakers and education leaders to align the goals and requirements of HB 4545 with the MTSS framework. Aligning HB 4545 to this evidence-based educational framework, which is already commonly operationalized across districts, will allow schools to address the comprehensive learning needs of students in a manner that is collaborative and consistent with intervention best practices and less administratively taxing.

Providing districts with the necessary resources – including guidance, tools, and dedicated funding— as they implement system-level solutions to improve outcomes will move the requirements of HB 4545 from being viewed by schools as primarily a compliance exercise to an opportunity to positively impact student achievement, empower and retain teachers, and ensure that all Texas students have access to quality instruction in sustainable ways.



BRANCHING MINDS

A Path for Every Learner