



BRANCHING
MINDS



Implementing MTSS at a Sustainable Pace:

A Guide for School and
District Administrators

Remember the beginning of the school year, when you were brimming with enthusiasm? You had a clear vision for implementing a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) in your school or district. The goal was ambitious, yet attainable: by May, your MTSS would be a well-oiled machine, making a tangible difference in the lives of students. Fast forward to May...and you may find yourself frustrated and confused. Despite your best intentions and tireless efforts, progress has been slow. The dynamic system you envisioned seems just as distant at the end as it was at the start of the school year.

Sound all too familiar?

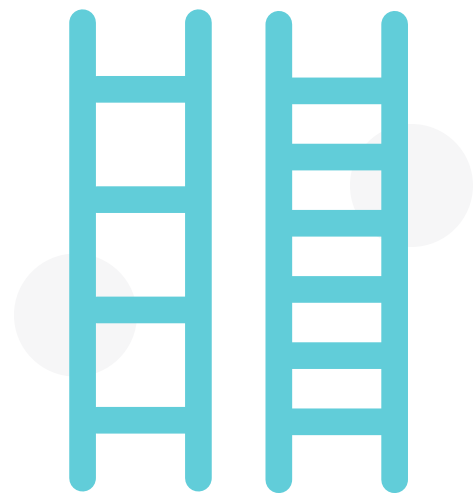
In this moment of introspection, you might wonder: What could I do differently? You're not alone in this journey. Many educators and administrators share this experience, facing similar challenges in implementing complex systems like MTSS. **But here's the silver lining: you are not at the end of the road, but rather on an important learning curve.**

In this guide, we delve into the heart of this all-too-common scenario. We'll discuss:

- The challenges of translating good intentions and well-laid plans into concrete progress.
- How the conventional wisdom of “going slow to go fast” might not be the most effective approach.
- Lessons from implementation science, and how they apply to school leadership.

And, we'll introduce you to a different strategy – **adding rungs to the ladder**. This approach is about being proactive, adding small but necessary steps along the way, and adapting quickly to changes. Let's climb together!

Effective MTSS implementation is urgent and important. “Go Slow to Go Fast” may be the wrong approach...instead, try adding rungs to the ladder!



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Section 1:

The Role of Implementation Science in MTSS

In theory, MTSS is a simple framework that uses data to answer four questions:

- 1) Which students need more help to be successful?
- 2) How will we help them?
- 3) Is the help working?
- 4) What adjustments should we make?

In practice, implementing a Multi-Tiered System of Supports in the complex, real-world conditions educators face every day is challenging!



Learn more about MTSS [here](#)

([National Implementation Research Network](#)). In the context of MTSS, it's about embedding the following practices into the everyday workings of a school or district:

- **EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACH:**
Implementation science relies heavily on evidence-based methods and interventions (Blase & Fixsen, 2013). It involves identifying, assessing, and integrating the best available research evidence to guide implementation processes.
 - ▶ **Following this approach provides a systematic way to select and tailor evidence-based practices that are most likely to be effective within the specific context of a school or district.**
- **CONTEXTUAL ADAPTATION:**
Recognizing that each setting is unique, implementation science emphasizes the importance of adapting strategies to fit specific organizational cultures and contexts (Meyers, Durlak, & Wandersman, 2012).
 - ▶ **By understanding the unique context of each educational setting, implementation science can help in customizing strategies that address specific barriers and facilitators to MTSS roll-out.**

We know that MTSS works, but how do we bridge the gap between research and practice?

Implementation science exists for this very purpose.

○ **STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT:**

Engaging a broad range of stakeholders, including practitioners, policymakers, and consumers, in the implementation process ensures that interventions are relevant and feasible (Fixsen et al., 2013).

- ▶ **By involving educators, parents, and students in the planning and implementation process, we can ensure buy-in and relevance.**

○ **ITERATIVE PROCESS:**

Implementation is viewed as an iterative process that involves continuous improvement based on ongoing evaluation and feedback (Bertram, Blase, & Fixsen, 2015).

- ▶ **An analytical and flexible mindset helps practitioners address challenges as they emerge.**

○ **SUSTAINABILITY AND SCALING-UP:**

The focus is not just on the initial implementation but also on how to sustain and scale up interventions over time (Aarons, Hurlburt, & Horwitz, 2011).

- ▶ **Through its emphasis on long-term sustainability, implementation science can guide schools in developing strategies to maintain and scale up MTSS practices, ensuring a lasting impact on student outcomes.**

Educators can maximize the impact of their interventions by applying a systematic, evidence-based approach to the roll-out of MTSS, ensuring that every student receives the support they need to succeed (Fixsen et al., 2005).



Section 2:

Adding Rungs to the Ladder: A Dynamic Approach

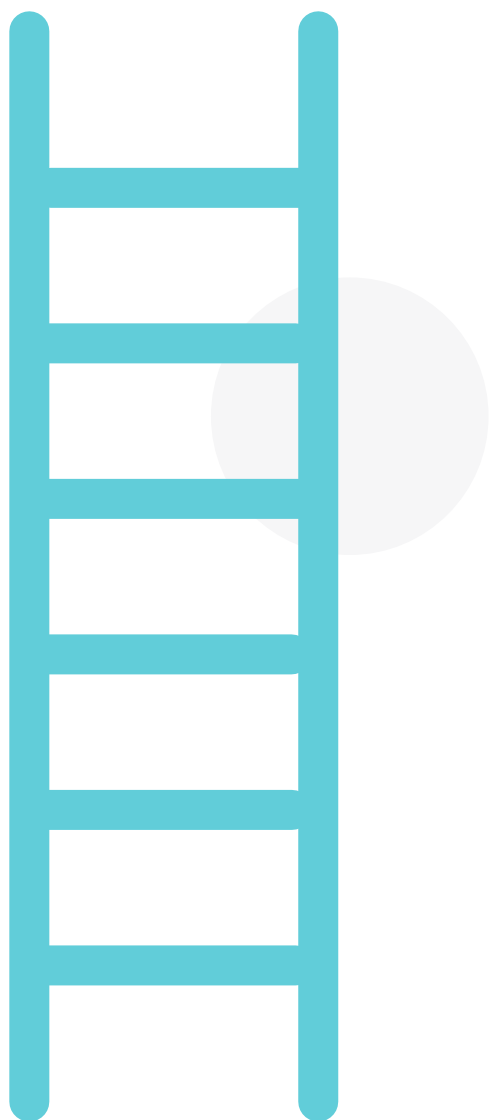
Begin with a universal foundation of basic MTSS elements, then steadily add more specialized interventions and supports.

When it comes to implementing MTSS, the approach of “adding rungs to the ladder” stands as a compelling strategy within the framework of implementation science. This concept emphasizes the idea of progressively building complexity and capacity, rather than the often-cited principle of “going slow to go fast” (Center on Multi-Tiered Systems of Support, n.d.).

Understanding the “Adding Rungs” Methodology

Starting with a manageable foundation and gradually introducing more complex elements of the MTSS framework acknowledges the challenges and resource constraints that schools face. **Breaking down the implementation into smaller, more achievable steps allows for continuous progress without overwhelming the system or the individuals involved.**

In the context of MTSS, which involves layers of academic and behavioral support, this means beginning with the basic elements and steadily adding more specialized interventions and supports. For instance, a school might start by establishing universal screening processes and a reasonable set of Tier 1 interventions, then integrate more intensive Tier 2 and 3 strategies as their capacity develops.



Why “Adding Rungs” Is Effective in MTSS Implementation

○ **SUSTAINABLE PROGRESS:**

Gradually adding components allows for sustainable growth. This method ensures that each new element is properly integrated and supported before moving on to the next, leading to more robust and sustainable implementation.

○ **CAPACITY BUILDING:**

This approach aligns with the reality of capacity building in educational settings. It allows for the development of skills and knowledge at a pace that educators can manage, ensuring that they are fully prepared to implement each new aspect of MTSS effectively.

○ **STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT:**

Incremental implementation facilitates better stakeholder engagement. By not overwhelming teachers, students, and parents with too many changes at once, there is more opportunity for meaningful involvement and feedback.

○ **DATA-DRIVEN ADJUSTMENTS:**

The “rungs” methodology aligns well with the data-driven nature of MTSS. Each step can be evaluated for effectiveness before proceeding, allowing for adjustments based on real-world feedback and outcomes.

○ **FLEXIBILITY AND ADAPTATION:**

This approach offers flexibility, allowing schools to adapt their implementation strategy to their unique contexts and needs. It acknowledges that there is no one-size-fits-all method for MTSS implementation.

Addressing the Misconception of Going Slow

While the principle of “going slow to go fast” highlights the importance of thorough planning and preparation, it can sometimes be misinterpreted as an endorsement of unnecessary delays. In contrast, the “adding rungs to the ladder” approach is about making consistent, deliberate progress. It’s not about speed but about the momentum of continuous improvement.

By focusing on incremental progress, schools can develop a robust MTSS framework that is deeply integrated into their culture and practices, leading to lasting benefits for all students.

Section 3:

Strategies for Sustainable Implementation

Sustainable implementation of MTSS requires a thoughtful, customized approach that takes into account your district's unique context and needs. The following strategies and resources help districts implement MTSS at a pace that aligns with their capacity, emphasizing stakeholder involvement and buy-in.

❑ **ASSESSING DISTRICT READINESS:**

Analyze current resources, identify gaps, and understand the unique challenges and strengths of the district. Districts should consider their existing support systems, teacher training levels, and technological infrastructure. A readiness assessment helps tailor the MTSS model to fit the district's specific context.



Editable Resource: [District-Level Self-Assessment of MTSS Implementation](#)

❑ **IDENTIFYING A STRATEGIC ENTRY POINT:**

For effective MTSS implementation, pinpoint a strategic entry point that aligns with your district's current strengths. This could be an existing successful program or an area with significant staff engagement. Starting here allows for more organic growth of MTSS, building on familiar ground. For example, you may already have a strong reading intervention practice – so start there by aligning the existing practice with the MTSS framework and then adding the same approach for math. Identifying a strategic entry point will allow districts and schools to better understand which rung to add to their ladder.



Related Resource: [MTSS Implementation: How to Identify Your Priorities with an “Impact-Effort Map”](#)

❑ **TAILORING TO DISTRICT NEEDS:**

No two districts are the same, and the MTSS model should be adapted to address the unique needs of each district. This might mean focusing more on certain tiers of support or integrating specific cultural or community aspects into the model. Customization ensures that the program is relevant and effective in meeting the district's specific challenges.

❑ **PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING:**

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Related Resource: [Click here to learn more about the MTSS Professional Learning Series offered by Branching Minds](#)

❑ **STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT AND BUY-IN:**

Engaging all stakeholders – including teachers, staff, students, parents, and the community – is essential for the success of MTSS. Stakeholders should be involved in the planning and implementation process, providing feedback and ideas. This involvement ensures buy-in, which is critical for the sustainability and effectiveness of the program. Regular communication about the goals, progress, and successes of the MTSS implementation will help maintain stakeholder engagement.



Related Resource: [How to Communicate a Vision of MTSS with All Stakeholders to Improve Your MTSS Implementation \(On-Demand Webinar\)](#)

❑ **DATA-DRIVEN DECISION MAKING:**

Implementing MTSS requires a strong commitment to using data to inform decisions. Regularly collect and analyze data on student performance, intervention effectiveness, and program implementation. This data-driven approach ensures that the MTSS model is responsive to the needs of students and is continuously improved based on actual performance and outcomes.



Related Resource: [Best Practices on Interpreting Assessment Data \(On-Demand Webinar\)](#)

❑ **FLEXIBLE SYSTEMS:**

Flexibility is key in MTSS implementation. The district should be prepared to adjust strategies, interventions, and resources in response to student needs and feedback from stakeholders. A responsive system can better address the changing dynamics in education and student demographics.

An example of “Going Slow to Go Fast” vs. “Adding Rungs to the Ladder”

DISTRICT A: “GOING SLOW TO GO FAST”

District A has a careful, extended planning phase, in-depth training sessions, and a gradual rollout.

Year 1: Extensive Planning

District A invests significant time in understanding MTSS, conducting numerous workshops, and holding meetings to discuss potential implementation strategies.

Year 2: Pilot Implementation

A pilot program is launched in a select few schools. The focus is on testing the waters and learning from these limited implementations.

Year 3: Partial Implementation, Review and Adjustment:

Based on the pilot, the district reviews outcomes and makes adjustments. Full implementation is still not in effect.

Year 4: Gradual Rollout:

It's only in the fourth year that a broader rollout begins, slowly expanding to more schools.

PROS:

- Thorough understanding of MTSS among stakeholders.
- Time to adjust and plan based on pilot feedback.

CONS:

- Delay in benefits to students who need immediate support.
- Potential loss of momentum and stakeholder interest.
- Risk of the initiative seeming less relevant or urgent over time.

DISTRICT B: “ADDING RUNGS TO THE LADDER”

District B builds a solid foundation with training and implementation of basic MTSS practices, and then progressively adds components.

Year 1: Foundation and Quick Start

The first few months are spent in foundational training and immediate implementation of core MTSS components in all schools.

End of Year 1: Review and Additions

Early evaluations are conducted, and additional components of MTSS are introduced based on initial learnings.

Year 2: Consolidation and Expansion

Current components are expanded to include more nuanced aspects of MTSS, like advanced data analysis and customized interventions.

Year 3: Full Implementation with Ongoing Refinement

By the third year, the district is in full implementation mode, with continuous refinement based on ongoing evaluations and feedback.

PROS:

- Quicker benefits to students needing support.
- Maintains momentum and stakeholder engagement.
- Allows for responsive adjustments based on real-time feedback.

CONS:

- Potential initial overwhelm for staff adjusting to new systems.
- Risk of gaps in understanding if initial training is not comprehensive.

District A's "going slow to go fast" approach ensures thorough understanding and careful planning but risks losing momentum and delaying student support. District B's "adding rungs to the ladder" strategy accelerates the benefits to students and maintains engagement.

With careful management to avoid overwhelm, clear goals, and adequate staff development, District B stands to reach full implementation in a tighter timeline impacting more students from day one.

The road to achieving a fully functioning and sustainable MTSS might be longer and more winding than expected, but every challenge along the way is rich with lessons and opportunities for growth. The progress you've made, regardless of its pace, is a stepping stone towards a better education for your students.

Take a moment to appreciate your dedication and resilience. Reflect on the experiences of the school year so far, the hurdles you've overcome, and the knowledge you've gained. These are the building blocks for future success. Transformation in education is a marathon, not a sprint; it demands patience, consistent effort, and the courage to adapt to new challenges.

Remember, you are part of a community of educators striving for the same goal. Here's to a future where every student thrives under a system that truly supports their unique needs and potential. Keep moving forward, one step (or rung!) at a time.

Additional Resources to Support Your Implementation Success:

- **GUIDE:** [Administrator's Guide to Supporting Teachers with MTSS Implementation](#)
- **REFERENCE GUIDE:** [MTSS Implementation Fidelity Reference Guide](#)
- **GUIDE:** [A Guide to Self-Assessment of MTSS Implementation](#)
- **BLOG:** [How to Effectively Plan For MTSS Implementation](#)
- **PODCAST EPISODE:** [How to Build Your MTSS Structure with Christine Downing \(Spotify, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Soundcloud\)](#)

About the Author



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Stephanie Bryan has a decade of experience in education, and 8 years of specialty experience working in MTSS and literacy. She graduated from the University of Florida in 2011 with a bachelor's degree in psychology. As a Dean of Intervention, she coached educators on MTSS best practices, intervention implementation and data analysis. Her foundation in MTSS work was laid during her time working at the Florida Center for Reading and Research. Since then, she has aided in the creation of MTSS systems and services at a first year turnaround school, selected and served as a mentor teacher for a fellow of the Xavier University Norman C. Francis Teacher Residency Program, and was twice nominated for the New Orleans Excellence in Teaching Award. Stephanie subscribes to the philosophy that all students are capable of making progress and succeeding in the general education environment under the provision of targeted, individualized and evidence-based instruction.

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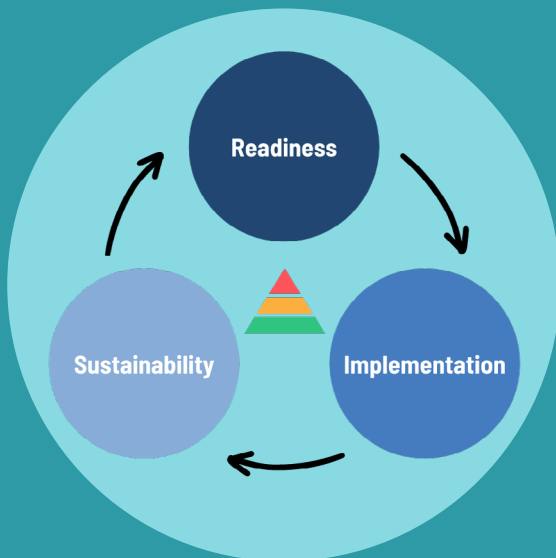
About Branching Minds



Branching Minds already takes what we were doing but makes it more functional and more streamlined. As we've slowly integrated our old process into the Branching Minds process, it's the same thing. It just looks slightly different, and it's much more efficient.

- Sarah Cannon, Intervention Data Specialist, Lake Norman Charter (NC)

No more second-guessing or wasted time in providing support for your students. Get the visibility and insights you need to make well-informed decisions, confidently.



The Branching Minds MTSS solution helps you create a sustainable infrastructure:

- Professional development that deepens understanding and practice
- An award-winning MTSS software platform that organizes and streamlines the entire MTSS process
- Responsive customer service and support, every step of the way

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