



District  
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CASE STUDY

# Strengthening Special Education and Multi-Tiered Support Systems

*North Shore School District 112 (IL) Takes Action*

*by Joseph Costello, Maggie Gallagher, and Aldo Sesia*

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# Strengthening Special Education and Multi-Tiered Support Systems

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**S**upporting students with the greatest academic and social-emotional learning gaps is one of the most urgent tasks facing public schools today. The needs of students are becoming increasingly complex, especially given the circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic. Burdens of support have only grown at the school and district levels. Consequently, districts and systems across the country are being forced to re-evaluate how they organize and administer their services to ensure that their efforts are truly making a difference in their students' lives.



North Shore School District 112 classroom in action

Delivering a broad array of support for students is inherently challenging. It requires coordination across many district departments and investment in district-level supports, such as adequate budgets, efficient schedules, and diverse staff skillsets. While systems and structures in departments such as special education or multilingual education may be robust, they are often disconnected from each other and from general education services. This disconnectedness frequently results in a convoluted and costly web of services in which services may compete against one another for time and resources. To address an ever-growing variety of student needs, districts and schools must enact consistent and coherent structures for assessing those needs and managing interventions.

At District Management Group (DMGroup), we firmly believe that through the application of best management practices, districts can create strong and lasting systems to better support all students and simultaneously improve student outcomes, operational efficiency, and resource allocation. The following case study explores how one district used a comprehensive review of its special education and student support services as a starting point to evaluate and refine a broader approach to supporting all students.

### FAST FACTS



### Serves pre-K through grade 8

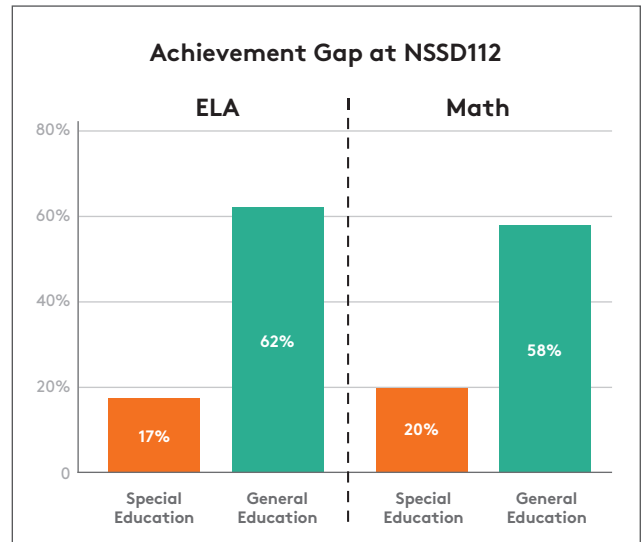
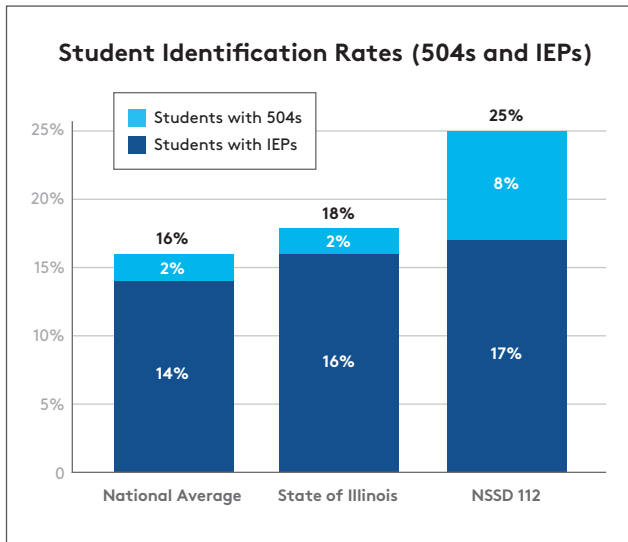
Serves the communities of Highland Park and Highwood (IL), and military housing at the former Fort Sheridan (IL)

**3,681** students\*

- **64.7%** White
- **26.4%** Hispanic
- **3.2%** Asian
- **1.6%** Black
- **4.1%** other
- **15%** IEP
- **16.1%** EL
- **21.7%** low income

\*(SY2021)

**Exhibit 1 NSSD112 STUDENT IDENTIFICATION RATES AND ACHIEVEMENT GAP**



Source: North Shore School District 112 Data, IL Report Card Data (2019), Civil Rights Data Collection (2014).

## Embarking on a Special Education Opportunities Review at NSSD112

North Shore School District 112 (NSSD112) is an elementary district (pre-K–8) headquartered in the suburban city of Highland Park, Illinois, just 25 miles north of downtown Chicago, off the beautiful shores of Lake Michigan. A well-resourced, high-functioning district, NSSD112 had been working diligently to strengthen its support for students in special education. Despite its efforts, gaps in standardized test outcomes persisted, as they do in so many other districts across the country. A longtime member of the District Management Council, NSSD112 district leadership was aware of DMGroup’s expertise in best-practice supports for students in special education; so, in the fall of 2020, NSSD112 invited DMGroup to conduct a Special Education Opportunity Review. The findings of this review then led NSSD112 to explore how to strengthen its Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework for all students in the district.

## A Detailed Review of Quantitative and Qualitative Data

The Special Education Opportunity Review is a holistic study of a district’s special education supports that begins with a detailed examination of both quantitative and qualitative data.

### Analyzing Quantitative Data

Working in partnership with the district, the DMGroup team examined available data. To quickly glean preliminary insights, the team zoomed in on the rates of special education identification, student standardized test data, and social-emotional and behavioral data such as referrals and suspensions. Specifically, the team examined student achievement data and identified any gaps or disproportionality that existed between student groups. To look for abnormalities that would indicate gaps in student supports and subsequent referrals, the team also examined special education referral rates across different age groups.

Total Schools:

**10**

Operating expenditures (Funds 10, 20 & 40):

**\$74,950,690**

Operating expense per pupil (SY2020):

**\$18,793\***

Student to Teacher Ratio:

**14:1**

Total Teacher FTE:

**325**

\*Source: Illinois State Board of Education, <https://www.isbe.net/Pages/Operating-Expense-Per-Pupil.aspx>

Analysis revealed that NSSD112 had a high percentage of students with 504s and IEPs—higher than the state and national averages, and students without disabilities were outperforming their peers with disabilities by 45 percentage points in ELA and 38 percentage points in math (*Exhibit 1*). These findings validated the district’s sense of urgency to examine its practices so that it could more effectively address the needs of students with IEPs and all students.

**Gathering Qualitative Data**

To better understand the on-the-ground realities of staff working with students with disabilities and to learn more about the strengths and challenges of the district’s special education programming, the DMGroup team conducted a series of focus groups and interviews with district and school leadership, special education teachers, general education teachers, school psychologists, social workers, speech and language pathologists, paraprofessionals, parents, and students. Questions asked included:

- How are student learning gaps identified?
  - What data is used in making this determination?
- Are students pulled out of core classes to receive support?

- Who are the adults supporting students in core and intervention settings?
  - What are the backgrounds and areas of expertise of staff?
  - How are staff assigned?
- Is there a consistent intervention plan across the district or does the plan vary by school?

The qualitative information helped paint a more detailed and nuanced picture of the different tiers of intervention embedded in each school and in the daily practices of teachers.

**Capturing Detailed Information about Service Delivery**

An important part of the data analysis involves gathering detailed information about service delivery. DMGroup gains deep insights by collecting information about a typical week’s schedule from all staff who support students receiving special education services. Utilizing DMGroup’s easy-to-use, proprietary schedule-sharing software, DMGroup asked 132 NSSD112 staff across 10 roles (including psychologists, social workers, paraprofessionals, and therapists) to log their activities and responsibilities in 30-minute increments for one full week. This detailed information about staff schedules and responsibilities provided insightful data about how students were being served and how time was being spent (*Exhibit 2*).

*Exhibit 2* DMGROUP’S SCHEDULE-SHARING SOFTWARE CAPTURES DETAILED SERVICE DELIVERY INFORMATION

The screenshot displays the DMGroup software interface for North Shore School District 112. At the top, there is a navigation bar with 'Log Out' and a 'Need Help?' link. Below this is a progress bar with three steps: '1 Enter your typical weekly schedule', '2 Tell us more', and '3 Save & Log out'. The main form area includes dropdown menus for 'School' (Red Oak Elementary School), 'Day' (Monday), 'Activity start' (8:00 am), 'Activity end' (8:30 am), and 'Activity repeats on...' (checked for Monday). There are also dropdowns for 'Primary activity' (Student academic instruction), 'Setting' (Push-in: General education classroom), and 'Topic' (Reading). A 'Number of students' dropdown is set to 2. A 'Save Activity' button is located below the form. At the bottom, a weekly schedule table is shown with tabs for each day. The table lists activities for Sherwood Elementary School, including 'Planning/materials preparation' (8:00-8:30 AM), 'Student transition/escort' (8:30-9:00 AM), and 'Student academic instruction' (9:00-9:30 AM). The last activity is split across 'Special education self-' and 'Social Studies'. Each activity row has 'Edit' and 'Delete' icons.

Source: DMGroup.

Questions asked included:

- What is the primary activity (student instruction, attending a meeting, IEP compliance monitoring, paperwork, assigned school duties such as bus duty or lunch duty, etc.)?
- Which student/students are you meeting with?
- What is the group size? One-on-one? If not, how many students are being seen at one time?

With this data, DMGroup’s schedule-sharing technology quickly generated analyses that provided answers to the following questions:

- What percentage of special education services was push-in versus pull-out or co-teaching?
- How much time was devoted to supporting students directly?
- What topics or content areas were being supported?
- How many students were being supported at a time?

## Findings and Recommendations

Having gathered a robust set of data and information, DMGroup then analyzed and synthesized this information and compared findings to national benchmarks as well as to best-practice research. The team then distilled the findings and shared with the district its key recommendations to help drive improvements. What follows is a selection of highlights from those recommendations.

### Intervention Time

**Findings:** For many students, including students with disabilities, intervention blocks play a critical role in closing learning gaps and remediating content in both math and reading. While NSSD112 had allotted specific time in the daily schedule for intervention, the DMGroup analyses revealed challenges for students to receive the supports that they needed.

- Often, students with disabilities were pulled from intervention to meet their legally required service minutes, which resulted in students missing key reading interventions from content-strong staff.
- The criteria for determining which students received intervention were sometimes ambiguous, resulting in spotty support for students with the greatest need.

- There was a lack of alignment between intervention blocks and interventionist availability. Interventionists were often unable to provide instruction during the allotted time, and therefore students often ended up receiving intervention support from a staff member who was less knowledgeable in the content area and intervention strategy. For example, schedule-sharing data showed that paraprofessionals spent an average of 63% of their time supporting students in academics (*Exhibit 3*). Feedback from focus groups and interviews echoed this finding: “Students with IEPs are pulled by their case managers to work with them during success block, so they don’t see the reading specialist during intervention,” and “I question whether the student is gaining the benefit of the general education curriculum if they are spending one-on-one time with a paraprofessional.”

**Exhibit 3** PERCENTAGE OF TIME PARAPROFESSIONALS SPEND SUPPORTING STUDENTS IN ACADEMICS

Academic topic	% of time with students
Math	23%
Reading	21%
Writing	9%
Science	6%
Social Studies	4%
<b>Total on academic support</b>	<b>63%</b>

**Source:** North Shore School District 112 Staff (Schedule Sharing Data).

These and many other findings revealed details about how interventions were being provided, which elucidated why the district was experiencing inconsistent results for students receiving special education interventions.

**Recommendations:** To remedy these gaps in intervention practices, DMGroup recommended developing a model intervention plan for both elementary and middle schools that

- Clarifies who provides intervention
- Establishes appropriate staffing ratios for interventions
- Manages the time and occurrence of interventions to guarantee appropriate access
- Monitors the size and composition of student groups
- Indicates the entrance and exit criteria for assigning students to interventions

Additionally, DMGroup recommended steps to increase access to reading specialists, including the following:

- Increasing the amount of time that interventionists spend with students by reducing time spent in non-essential meetings or on paperwork
- Increasing student group sizes, when appropriate, to expand interventionists’ reach

### Expanding Social-Emotional Supports

**Findings:** As is the case in many districts, social-emotional and behavioral supports were connected with special education supports. While the review in NSSD112 centered on supports for students with disabilities, it was crucial to understand the connection to broader supports for all students regardless of ability status.

The opportunity review analysis showed that the district had a culture of being reactive to students’ social-emotional needs—that is, district staff responded to student needs as they arose. The district lacked a strong foundation of Tier 1 social-emotional supports that would act as a preventative approach (*Exhibit 4*). Additionally, when students did receive social-emotional interventions, it was unclear if interventions were specifically targeted toward student needs or if interventions and student needs were sometimes mismatched. These challenges meant that all students, not just students with disabilities, were not receiving the most effective Tier 1 and Tier 2 social-emotional supports.

**Recommendations:** For NSSD112 to bolster their Tier 1 and Tier 2 social-emotional supports, DMGroup recommended that the district do further research on the key areas of need and identify the right curriculum, processes, and protocols for addressing these needs. This process should include building a district-wide toolbox of common resources and strategies. Additionally, DMGroup identified a need to build classroom teacher capacity by using strong classroom Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) practitioners to serve as model teachers and leaders.

### Staff Mental Health Expertise

**Findings:** Few staff had sufficient mental health expertise to meet the rising social-emotional needs of students, whether with or without disabilities, to provide the needed Tier 1 and Tier 2 social-emotional supports. The school psychologists and social workers who did have mental health expertise had limited time to provide support to students. A quantitative analysis of the weekly schedules of these staff revealed that they were spending the bulk of their time on paperwork and other district duties that limited their ability to work directly with students. In fact, school psychologists were spending 47% of their time on paperwork, such as IEP writing, but only 7% of their time directly supporting students (*Exhibit 5*).

Moreover, staff and school leaders were unsure how to best utilize part-time or shared social, emotional, and behavioral staff. The district’s current distribution of social, emotional, and behavioral staff did not clearly reflect the enrollment or student needs at each school.

*Exhibit 4* STAFF FEEDBACK FROM FOCUS GROUPS



Source: DMGroup and NSSD112.

### Exhibit 5 ACTIVITY BREAKDOWN BY TIME

Activity	Social Workers	School Psychologists
Student Support	44%	7%
IEP meetings, paperwork, and evaluations	12%	47%
Teacher / district support	7%	13%
Other*	37%	33%

\* Other includes parent communication, travel, lunch, assigned school duties, etc.

Source: North Shore School District 112 Staff (Schedule Sharing Data).

These operational challenges to meeting student social-emotional needs created a barrier for both students with disabilities and students in general education.

**Recommendations:** DMGroup recommended that the district consider refining its staffing model to ensure that student enrollment and needs were included in the conversations that would drive mental health staffing. It also encouraged enabling each principal to have a voice in creating coherent approaches to providing services within schools. By process-mapping non-student-related responsibilities, school psychologists and social workers could identify opportunities for streamlining meetings and paperwork, including the evaluation process. This would allow for these critical staff to spend more time supporting the direct needs of students.

#### Clarity on Roles and Responsibilities

**Findings:** DMGroup found a significant need for clarity on the roles and responsibilities that were to be managed by the schools versus those to be managed by central office staff. NSSD112 staff expressed that central office staff with special education expertise were stretched thin trying to support the special education programming of all schools and that there was a lack of special education expertise among leaders in the district.

**Recommendations:** To improve role clarity, DMGroup recommended that each school identify an appropriate special education point person, develop an escalation protocol for raising concerns about special education topics, and map the IEP process to codify best practices across the district and align on common processes, protocols, and evaluation criteria.

#### Supporting English Language Learners

**Findings:** Services, including programs and supports, for English-language (EL) students differed depending on the

student's program placement. While NSSD112 offered dual language programs at four of its schools, access to full-time ESL staff varied from school to school outside of this program. The fact that EL learners were the district's lowest-performing subgroup on state tests in ELA and math made addressing these supports that much more urgent.

**Recommendations:** DMGroup proposed that the district first develop a common system with research-based criteria for special education evaluation decisions for students for whom English is not their first language. DMGroup also recommended increasing coaching for teachers instructing EL learners and reviewing EL staffing levels across schools to ensure equity.

## The Pivot to Multi-Tiered Systems of Support for All

As NSSD112 internalized the findings and recommendations of the opportunity review, it became clear to leadership that many of the recommendations to improve support for students with disabilities or EL learners could improve supports for all students. For instance, providing more consistent instruction during intervention or stronger Tier 1 and Tier 2 social-emotional supports would benefit all students. Moreover, by not coordinating specialized supports with general education supports and interventions, the district was limiting the impact of its efforts. Creating stronger and more coordinated school-wide services that leverage the strengths of general education while providing targeted supports for students with more specialized needs would result in increased outcomes not just for students with disabilities but for all students.

While this insight was exciting, implementing these recommendations would require systemic shifts from how the district traditionally served students. True implementation would push the district to move beyond just "differentiating" for students with differing needs and abilities and toward a universal design for learning, undergirded by system-wide changes for leadership, resource allocation, and staff development. The district needed to leverage the Response to Intervention (RTI) supports it currently had in place and evolve to a new, more coordinated, and more encompassing system: Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS).

# Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)

## *A Primer*

Public schools across the country have long struggled to support students with diverse backgrounds or needs. For many years, it was common for students to be denied access, either directly or indirectly, to a public education because of their gender, their race or ethnicity, their socioeconomic status, their citizenship status, or their ability status. In fact, many schools clearly stated that their services were not for all children.

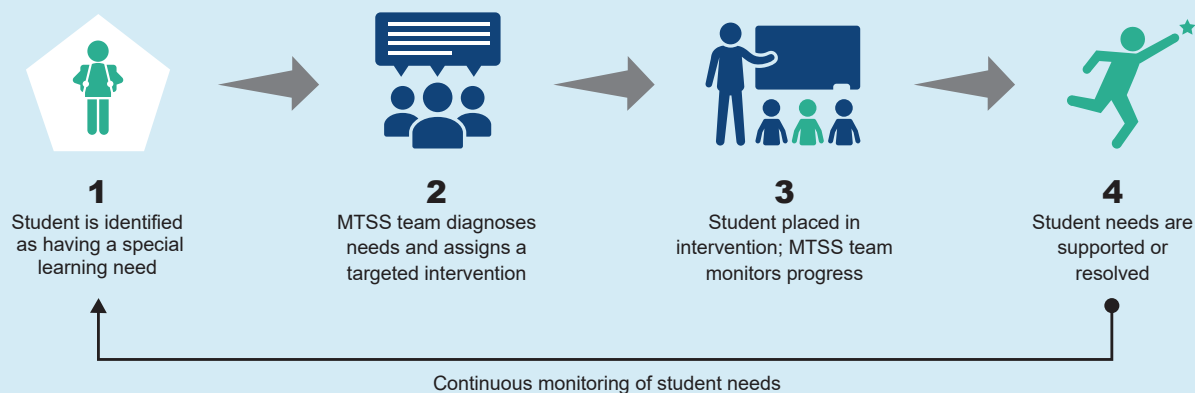
As a nation, we have made great strides toward ensuring that all children, regardless of their background or status, can have access to a free and appropriate public education. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), originally passed in 1975, unlocked opportunities for children with disabilities and was a particularly monumental step in the movement toward educational equity.

With the passage of IDEA, schools were mandated to provide a free and appropriate public education to all students, regardless of ability status. Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) became the mechanism of choice to ensure that students with disabilities received appropriate services. Educators leaned in to supporting all students, regardless of need type, focusing on understanding and addressing each student's unique needs.

Over time, the initial structures created under IDEA no longer met the needs of all students. In some schools, special education programs evolved into a sort of separate but unequal facsimile of general education programs. Worse still, situations emerged where low-performing students, or students deemed low-performing, were inappropriately identified as having a disability, thereby relegating them to lower expectations and potentially substandard services. Schools needed a safeguard process that would prevent misidentification and reduce bias and ensure that students were placed in an appropriate setting.

Response to Intervention (RTI) was that process. RTI established a multi-tiered (typically, three-tiered) approach to supporting students with learning and behavior needs. Based on the student's responses to various interventions, each student moves through the tiers of support, which increase in intensity. RTI allowed educators to be more prescriptive and proactive. With districts and systems across the country implementing this model, many variations of RTI have developed, and many extol the virtues of the RTI that they have implemented.

While RTI has been a useful tool to ensure that students are placed in appropriate academic settings, some would argue that it falls short as a framework for supporting students based on a broader set of needs. Special education services are still a vital arm of the public education model, but more nuance is needed in a framework that will meet the needs of all students, regardless of their ability status.





## The Emergence of MTSS

Over time, the Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) framework has emerged as the solution for serving students across a variety of needs. MTSS offers a more holistic approach to supporting students who struggle by emphasizing improved general education instruction. It creates a universal design for learning as well as a multiplicity of coordinated interventions based on a broad set of student needs that go beyond academics. Additionally, it requires systems-level investments in factors such as adequate budgets, efficient schedules, and refined staff skillsets that ultimately allow the full framework to be implemented successfully.

At its core, MTSS is about providing services or interventions that meet each student's unique needs. The central MTSS process has four primary steps:

- 1. Identifying students with the greatest learning gaps**, based on a combination of benchmark assessments and additional contextual data points
  - **Example:** A middle school student is identified as being behind in math based on his standardized test scores, corroborated by his summative assessments in his specific math class. This student is also behind grade level in literacy.
- 2. Determining specific student needs** and assigning appropriate interventions
  - **Example:** Upon review of this student's needs, it becomes apparent that the root of his challenges (low test scores) in math class stem from his literacy needs, as it is primarily word problems that cause difficulty. The interdisciplinary MTSS team therefore recommends that this student be placed in a literacy intervention.
- 3. Administering interventions** over an appropriate time frame
  - **Example:** The student is placed in the school's literacy intervention for an eight-week cycle to receive targeted support.
- 4. Monitoring student progress** in interventions and making adjustments to services when appropriate
  - **Example:** Over the course of the eight-week cycle, the interventionist tracks the student's progress based on the services provided. At the end of the cycle, the MTSS team reconvenes to determine how this student should continue to be supported.

On paper, MTSS appears fairly straightforward: it incorporates a whole-child approach to supporting students and involves coordinating various existing departments and services. But in practice, it is more complicated. Successful implementation requires intense coordination between often siloed district and school departments as well as a wholesale shift in how students are served. Districts and schools need structures and procedures in place that allow for this process to happen. Strong assessments administered on a clear timeline are needed to determine student need. A robust suite of interventions connected to the anticipated needs of students and led by staff with content expertise must be in place and accessible within the school schedule. And structures and procedures for reviewing student data and making decisions for intervention placement must be created to allow for this process to happen. Without this coordination, the MTSS process will fall short.

When implementing MTSS, many districts become preoccupied with the sundry factors that appear to fall under the MTSS umbrella. Without focus, MTSS implementation can quickly grow in size and complexity, absorbing any and all initiatives and efforts related to supporting students with learning gaps. Maintaining focus on the process for supporting students, which is at the center of the MTSS framework, can streamline implementation. Then, as momentum builds and schools enhance their supports for students, district leaders can address in more depth the various systemic factors that will allow for sustained and successful implementation.

## Building an MTSS Framework at NSSD112

More often than not, districts have many of the practices and “puzzle pieces” in place to build and implement a multi-tiered system of support. The challenge is to organize and coordinate all of these pieces to create a clear, tiered approach with the proper supports and conditions so that all of the pieces can be leveraged effectively. This coordination requires that school and district staff have a shared understanding of the goals and processes of MTSS; that a wide range of staff—classroom teachers, interventionists, mental health professionals, and countless others—have the required data analysis skills and access to data systems; and that staff members have time to analyze data together, identify students who may need intervention support, align student needs to intervention, and monitor progress. Combined, these logistical challenges can feel daunting from an organizational standpoint as well as for the individuals involved.

The Special Education Opportunity Review indicated gaps in intervention programs and areas for improvement in NSSD112, but the strong existing intervention programming, robust data sources, and ongoing leadership investment provided the groundwork for iteration and continued building of multi-tiered systems of support. As the district considered how it would move forward, leadership ultimately reengaged DMGroup to understand more clearly what parts of their existing student support systems were aligned with MTSS and which systems of MTSS might need greater development. DMGroup also would help provide NSSD112 with best-practice guidance and a process for building and implementing the MTSS framework (*Exhibit 6*), which would guide the work over the subsequent three years.

## Leadership Investment and Knowledge

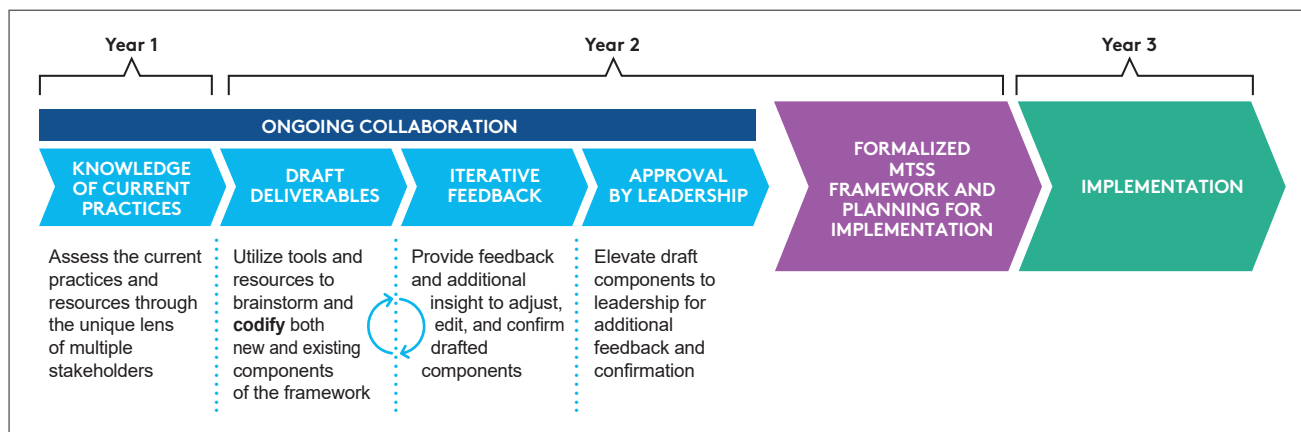
For MTSS to be successful in any district, it must start with the commitment from district and school leaders to build their own knowledge, skills, and mindsets around MTSS and recognize that this is an ongoing process for all leaders involved. DMGroup engaged NSSD112 leadership in a series of conversations about the goals and vision for implementing MTSS, accompanied by an arc of professional development sessions. Anchored by these initial conversations, the district established a team of leaders who would be able to maintain an ongoing commitment to the MTSS building process. This initial investment preceded all future investments in human capital, budgets, and staff development to implement MTSS.

## Framework Building

Strategic planning and codification of the desired outcomes, systems, and protocols are critical to successfully executing a strong MTSS framework. While no written plan is on its own enough to ensure fidelity of implementation, being able to have a document that staff and stakeholders can turn for information on the district’s approach is fundamental to the success of those systems.

Putting pen to paper on the various MTSS components and then planning for and thinking through those components is no easy task. From the high-level vision all the way to detailing the types of meetings and the data collection required, building out a framework requires deep and detailed knowledge of current practices, high levels of collective staff voice, and creative problem-solving.

*Exhibit 6* MTSS FRAMEWORK-BUILDING OVERVIEW



Source: DMGroup.



*More often than not, districts have many of the practices and “puzzle pieces” in place to build and implement a multi-tiered system of support.*

### **Year One: Inventorying Practices and Building Knowledge**

NSSD112 began their MTSS refinement process during the 2020-2021 school year by forming a guiding coalition of roughly 18 staff members from different campuses, in different roles, and with different perspectives on the district’s student supports. This diverse group of stakeholders would help champion the MTSS work while also providing key insight into the district’s current student support practices. DMGroup provided foundational professional development to this guiding coalition to build their understanding of MTSS frameworks and to internalize what systems and supports were needed to implement MTSS, specifically at the school level.

This guiding coalition was then split into four working groups, each with its own focus:

1. Data Systems
2. Identification Processes
3. Student Supports
4. Progress Monitoring

Working groups were tasked with assessing the current state of practices around MTSS and proposing potential solutions to close the gaps that the district had in supporting students. DMGroup helped by providing adaptive and technical questions and guiding the working groups through dialogues on each issue.

Examples of key questions posed to the working groups included:

#### • Data Systems:

- What are the current systems of data storage and access? Are they effective? Do staff know where to go when they need to make data-informed decisions?
- What skills and knowledge do staff need to develop in order to make strong data-informed decisions?
- How do you ensure equity in data analysis across schools in the district?

#### • Identification Processes:

- What are the limitations of the universal screener data? What does it not help us to know about a student?
- What additional data is needed to produce a picture of the whole child?
- How are decisions made about which students receive which interventions?
- How do you uncover the root cause of a student's learning gap?
- Which stakeholders and voices should be included in the conversation about student identification?

#### • Student Supports:

- What interventions exist for each content area?
- Are current interventions evidence-based? How do you know?
- What social-emotional interventions exist, and what are they used for?
- What learning gaps are students experiencing that are going unaddressed by the lack of intervention? How might the district address these learning gaps?
- How are interventions in the same content area connected to one another?

#### • Progress Monitoring:

- How will you measure the “success” of an intervention? What data or other information will you need about student progress?
- How do you continue to use data as a student progresses through an intervention?
- How do you communicate to key stakeholders which students are receiving which interventions?



North Shore School District 112 students

After working groups formulated a detailed picture of current practices, they explored and brainstormed new practices to fill the gaps they found in their current approach. This reflective and generative process created a robust picture of current practices while illuminating many opportunities for improvement and decision points for discussion.

#### **Year Two: Documenting NSSD112's Approach to MTSS**

During the 2021-2022 school year, it became clear that the work would need high-level district coordination and decision making in order to move the process forward. The working groups had generated many pages of suggestions and ideas about interventions that would need to be combed through, discussed, and ultimately codified at the district level. A small group of district leaders, including central office staff and principals, used the working groups' findings and ideas and worked to specify the desired practices for MTSS and create a plan for their district-wide approach. The guiding coalition acted as an advisory committee to provide feedback, insight, and key perspectives throughout the process.

The documentation they worked to develop included:

- **Vision:** The guiding mission and goal of the MTSS-building process
- **Critical Components:** The necessary factors needed to execute on a strong MTSS vision

- **Definitions of Tiers:** Explicit language defining what constitutes Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 of an MTSS intervention system
- **Data Requirements:** The universal screeners and additional data needed for each content area and grade level in order to assess student needs
- **School-Level Process:** The high-level and detailed description of the protocols for identifying student needs, aligning interventions, and progress monitoring
- **Staff Role and Responsibilities:** The duties and entry points to the process for all involved staff members

To build out this framework, DMGroup first provided district leadership with discussion questions, exemplar frameworks from other districts, examples of each of the components required, and templates to use while documenting. Some of the documentation occurred during collaborative sessions with the DMGroup team and a small team of district and school leaders. For the more complex sections, such as the school-level process, district and school leaders held mini "retreats" to discuss and draft specifics. After these drafting sessions, the DMGroup team reviewed the drafts and gave feedback prior to review and feedback from the full guiding coalition. This iterative drafting process allowed for collaborative, collective decision-making,

and ultimately, a final product that would be shared with all staff and stakeholders involved in the MTSS process. NSSD112 Superintendent Mike Lubelfeld commented, “Assistant Superintendent [Holly] Colin and teams of teachers and administrators have been spending quality thinking and planning time to frame and plan and implement systems of support throughout our system. What’s exciting is the energy around support for children’s needs across the grade levels and ability spectrums.”

## Implementation

Implementing MTSS requires districts to think intentionally about creating the conditions for success. Implementation may take a number of years of repeated trial and error in order to perfect the systems that support teachers and students. Three key components of planning for implementation are (1) assessing the current state of readiness for implementation and creating priorities for the first year of implementation; (2) ensuring time and resources are allocated to staff development around MTSS; and (3) putting systems in place to monitor the progress and fidelity of systems through the district’s reflection on their practices.

NSSD112 is planning to embark on implementation of MTSS through the spring and early summer of 2022. In partnership with DMGroup, the district will construct an implementation roadmap that will allow them to begin rolling out improved systems for student support during the 2022-2023 school year. Planning for implementation will also include constructing and perfecting systems of accountability that will allow the district to take a step back at critical moments throughout the school year to assess where success is being experienced and to problem-solve around areas where systems still need improvement.

## Conclusion

By undergoing a Special Education Opportunity Review with DMGroup, NSSD112 validated a host of ways in which it was already providing students with appropriate interventions, while also identifying opportunities to adjust the district’s systems and structures to better meet the

needs of students with disabilities and students for whom English is not a first language.

Many of the recommendations that DMGroup presented to the district—such as strengthening SEL supports, providing greater clarity and consistency in student interventions, and supporting students with the greatest learning gaps—pointed to a need for broader systems that would better support not only students with disabilities but all students. Upon seeing that need, NSSD112 sought to build out its Multi-Tiered Systems of Support. With the partnership of DMGroup, NSSD112’s dedicated district leadership and staff successfully assessed the current state of their MTSS operations across schools and built a strong, documented framework to drive the implementation of a more robust MTSS approach. Documented framework in hand, the district is now embarking on a path to implementation.

“*MTSS systems are essential to support diverse and divergent student learning needs. It is our hope that a strong MTSS system complements a strong and viable Tier 1 program of studies in support of each child learning, growing, and thriving in our care.*”

– Mike Lubelfeld

Superintendent, North Shore School District 112 (IL)

Ultimately, implementing MTSS that allows for data-informed decision making, coordinated student supports, and continuous progress-monitoring will enable the district to intervene and support students more proactively and to close student academic and social-emotional learning gaps as quickly as possible. Aligning and coordinating resources in complex organizations is challenging and time-consuming work, but NSSD112 is well-positioned and energized to start implementing its MTSS plans to better support all of the students in the district. “MTSS systems are essential to support diverse and divergent student learning needs. It is our hope that a strong MTSS system complements a strong and viable Tier 1 program of studies in support of each child learning, growing, and thriving in our care,” said Superintendent Lubelfeld. ♦

(Tess Nicholson Powers contributed to this article.)