



Addressing Learning Loss: Don't Reinvent the Wheel

MTSS is a 20-year old evidence-based approach that works.

By Melissa Sinunu

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As we end our second school year in a pandemic, there is no doubt that the impact of learning loss has exceeded all predictions. As reported by McKinsey, students are behind an average of four months in reading and five months in math. Unfortunately, the pandemic widened preexisting opportunity and achievement gaps, hitting historically disadvantaged students hardest. In math, students in majority black schools ended the year with six months of unfinished learning; students in low-income schools with seven.

Helping students to catch up and keep up is a challenge many schools are just starting to tackle now that they've navigated the logistics of teaching and learning in a waning pandemic.

Unfortunately, we are already seeing the best intentions and worst habits of problem-solving work their way into resolving student learning loss. Everyone wants to do something big and sweeping to 'fix' the issue.

The truth is schools already have well thought out processes for supporting students who are a year or even two years behind in their studies. Multi-tiered systems of support, or MTSS, have been around in education for almost 20 years.

MTSS is designed to identify students who need interventions and ensure they receive the combination of supports that will make them most successful. MTSS includes processes to continually check that the interventions are working. MTSS also includes identifying the social-emotional and behavioral needs of students while setting up the right supports. Effective MTSS considers the whole child. When implemented properly, MTSS is an amazing framework that ensures all students receive the right intervention services and supports for the best chance at college and career success.

Creating and implementing an effective MTSS framework can be challenging. It takes the right resources, professional learning, and enough time to develop effective processes to gain buy-in.

That being the case, let's not layer a new, hastily formulated initiative on overburdened teachers with the idea of a quick fix for learning loss. Let's instead center our efforts on adding sustainability to the research-based MTSS Framework that has already been proven effective.

Where do school districts begin? This may vary based on whether or not your current framework is effective. However, these three steps are essential to success. First, get input and buy-in from teachers for the framework. Second, offer on-going professional learning. Third, streamline the processes and documentation requirements for MTSS.

Teacher buy-in is important for all district and school initiatives, but it is especially important for initiatives related to learning loss and catching up for students. A well-executed framework relies on teachers actively participating and using the decided on tools and resources consistently.

Ongoing professional development goes a long way toward securing teachers' commitment and achieving desired results. Arrange for a combination of virtual and in-person training and support that covers each aspect of the MTSS process from screening and understanding data to providing social-emotional learning and behavioral supports.

Finally, create simple, streamlined processes that make sense. If teachers have to log into multiple platforms to assess, provide interventions, and document, MTSS becomes compliance and not an outcome-based initiative. MTSS is designed to consider the needs of the whole child, the programs being used should do the same. Layering another school reform initiative on top of MTSS in the name of mitigating learning loss will most certainly not lead to the results we are all trying so hard to achieve.

Ask any teacher and they will say the most difficult aspect of a tiered support system is effective and efficient progress monitoring. It can be a labor intensive process that gets boiled down to documentation instead of a valuable tool for determining what is or isn't working with a student's intervention. Seek guidance from expert organizations such as the National Center for Intensive Intervention (NCII), which publishes recommendations on valid and reliable tools. NCII's Tool Chart includes screening and progress monitoring tools that work together and automatically deliver evidence-based interventions.

Rather than adding one more thing to teachers' workloads, examine the expectations and processes already in place and work to make them sustainable and effective in the classroom. MTSS is a well-researched, evidence-based approach to learning loss that has been proven effective for over 20 years. Implementing a simple, effective MTSS framework will take us much further in our fight against learning loss than any new initiatives ever can.

About the Writer

Melissa Sinunu is President and Chief Operating Officer for Classworks. She has more than 25 years of experience in the education sector, spending the last 20 years in leadership roles. With her vision and oversight, Classworks has evolved into a comprehensive MTSS/RtI solution helping school districts to create equitable learning environments where students of all abilities have the opportunity to achieve college and career success. Over 500,000 students use Classworks daily to improve their academic and social-emotional wellbeing!

About Classworks

Since 2003, millions of students have used Classworks to close learning gaps, keep pace, and grow! Our mission is to deliver the most compelling individualized learning experience that helps teachers create an equitable learning environment for students of all abilities and ethnic and social backgrounds.



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