

# Is It The Fish Or Is It The Water?

By Dr. Susan Leach

Early in my career as a school psychologist, I worked in a very large school district in another state. The school psychologists there practiced in a “test and place” model, meaning a good chunk of my time was spent conducting psychoeducational evaluations to determine eligibility for special education services. Part of my role involved participating in multidisciplinary meetings to listen to concerns about students and discern whether the team should move forward with testing.

The district office scheduled each school’s meeting day and, on that day, appointments were booked every 45 minutes through the course of the day. For each meeting, the parent(s), teachers, and any other number of professionals with direct knowledge of the student would come in to provide input about the child’s progress, strengths, weaknesses and developmental history. The team reviewed records, asked questions and gathered any information necessary to make a decision about whether to proceed with testing. After the decision was made, the meeting concluded and the individuals were shuttled out, only to be replaced by the next set of parents, teachers and professionals. This would repeat itself several times throughout the course of the day.

On one such day, the lion’s share of meetings had a similar theme. Several of the referrals were for new third graders who were being referred for a learning disability in reading. At the end of the last meeting, I asked whether anyone found this odd. There was a special education teacher in the room who quickly responded, “Come on! Everyone knows Ms. Jones cannot teach reading!” Ms. Jones (not her real name) was the second grade teacher and it was clear by the nods of agreement around the table that the general consensus among her peers was that Ms. Jones’ ability to teach reading was lackluster at best.

Later in my career, when I began learning about multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), I was reminded of that day when several students from the same class were referred for special education. MTSS is a way of work for schools and school districts that analyzes the many factors that come together to form a child’s educational experience. Data drives decision making and allows the school to provide interventions matched to students’ needs. Multiple data points – not restricted solely to student output – are analyzed when determining the etiology of a problem. When a student is not performing at the level expected, the team first examines the myriad of factors external to the student to see whether they might be implicated in the learning problem. In one of my early professional development sessions on this topic, the trainer described this process as asking, “Is it the fish or is it the water?”

Under normal circumstances, we expect that about 80 to 85 percent of students in a given class should be benefitting from instruction. If that is not happening, our first order of business is to check the water. Water can mean a number of things. In my example above, the water was the quality of instruction students were receiving. But it can be many other things. The physical environment of the classroom can negatively or positively impact a student’s performance. The teacher’s ability to manage behavior, the way the physical space is arranged, the structural and even emotional climate of the classroom can affect a student’s ability to learn. Curriculum is another factor that can influence learning.

Within an MTSS structure, all students are recipients of the core curriculum. This is considered Tier 1 or “universal support.” We would expect that up to 15 percent of students may need an additional layer of support, referred to as Tier 2 or “secondary support,” and five percent of the class may need a third layer of targeted intervention, or Tier 3 — “tertiary

support.” These layers are cumulative, meaning that each of these layers of support happens in addition to the previous layers, not in place of.

The beauty of MTSS is that it is a prevention-based framework that provides a mechanism for early intervention for struggling students. It is an antidote to the wait-to-fail model so many students and their parents have suffered through for years. At the first sign of trouble, the school can intervene. It is rooted firmly in the belief that family-school partnerships strengthen student outcomes. And its reliance on data-informed practices helps promote equitable outcomes for disadvantaged students who may have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.

In Jeffco, we are working this year to standardize MTSS work across the district. As we continue to welcome students back after a disruptive year of in-person and remote schooling, it is more important than ever that we examine the water – or our core curriculum and its delivery – to ensure that our students have a solid foundation to recoup any losses that occurred during the pandemic. To be sure, it will be necessary to strengthen and expand pre-pandemic supports across academic, behavioral and social-emotional domains of learning to address the broad array of needs our students will have. Communication between schools and families will be more important than at any time I can recall in my educational career.

MTSS is a data driven way of work for schools that matches academic and behavioral intervention to student need. This preventative framework allows schools to intervene at the first sign of trouble, as opposed to the “wait to fail” model that has frustrated schools and families for years. Grounded in principles of equity, deep data analysis, parent involvement and problem-solving, a multi-tiered system of supports provides a foundation to support the academic and behavioral success of all students.

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