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Sample MTSS & SEL School Programs Review

Findings and Recommendations
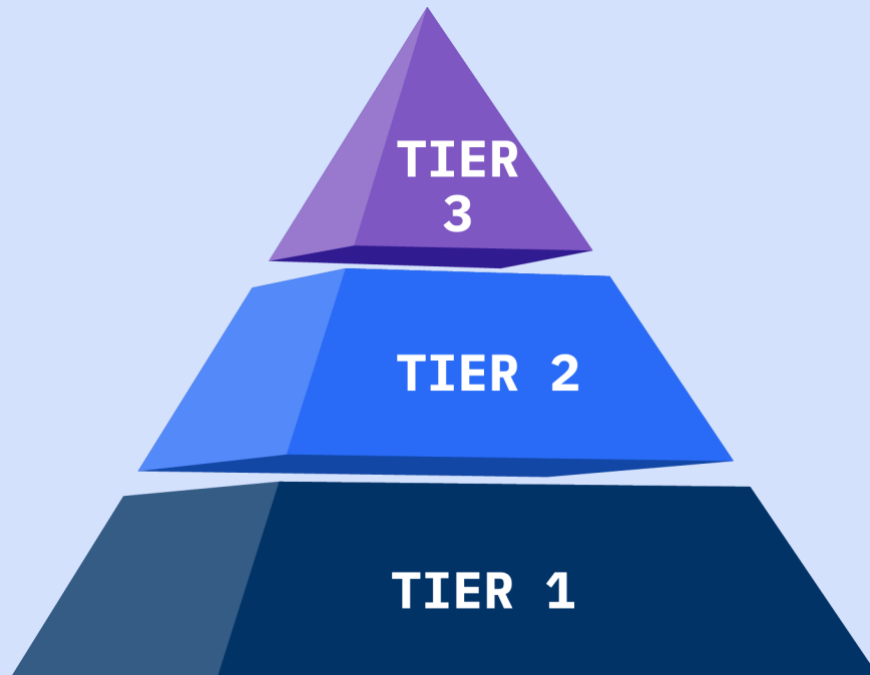
MARCH 3, 2025

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SEL/MTSS School Programs Review

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Executive Summary

Education Development Center (EDC) partnered with an urban school district in Massachusetts to develop this final report with reviews of 4 high school tiered support programs and recommendations aimed at strengthening the district's Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) for Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and Mental Health.

As part of this process, the EDC team conducted 5 focus groups with program, central office, and high school staff. The EDC team also reviewed documents in google folders provided by program staff.

Observations

We observed several bright spots through the focus groups and document review, in the following areas:

- Tier 1 supports: Personalized support and attention
- Tier 1 supports: Examples of building community and a sense of belonging
- Tier 1 supports: Communication and engagement with families
- Data collection

We also observed common areas in need of improvement across programs, in the following areas:

- Alignment between goals and strategies
- Data use
- Identification, matching, and monitoring
- Coordination

Recommendations

Based on our review, we recommend the following:
1. Strengthen alignment between goals and strategies
2. Build data use capacity
3. Clarify referral criteria and processes
4. Strengthen coordination between the central office, high school, and programs

Background

EDC partnered with a Massachusetts urban school district to assess four high school tiered support programs and provide recommendations to strengthen the district's MTSS for SEL and mental health. The report is based on a stakeholder-informed assessment process that examined the following:

- The goals of these programs, specifically regarding SEL and mental health
- What strategies and activities are meant to lead to these goals
- What evidence of effectiveness the programs have
- What systems and structures, including for staff collaboration, are in place
- What staff are in place and in what roles
- What systems and structures for continuous improvement exist in the programs
- How effective the programs are at building a sense of belonging and supporting a positive school culture and climate
- To what extent these programs align with the MTSS model (described further below) and overall district goals

Review Process

As part of this process, the EDC team conducted 5 focus groups over one week in the fall of 2024. Each focus group was approximately 45 minutes long and included 3-5 people. The 5 focus groups consisted of teams from the central office, school staff, and program staff.

Focus group participants responded to questions about program goals and strategies, team structure, strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities. The review process also included a review of google folders with documents about the programs populated by program staff.

See [Appendix B](#) for a sample index of documents.

The findings and recommendations in this report are based upon the documentation provided by program staff and their self-reported claims in focus groups. While we didn't have access to sufficient data to investigate the claims on our own, this is what we were able to observe.

Framework

MULTI-TIERED SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT

The Multi-tiered System of Support (MTSS) framework is designed to meet the needs of all students by ensuring that schools optimize **data-driven decision making, progress monitoring,** and **evidence-based supports and strategies with increasing intensity** to sustain student growth. By using the MTSS framework, schools can help all students build important SEL skills, while addressing the unique needs of those students who need additional supports.

Goals

Central office staff reported that being more data-focused and monitoring how well interventions and supports are working are some of the goals of their MTSS work, as well as reducing the number of students needing tier 3 supports.

Tiered Supports

Tier 1 or universal supports are available to all students. These interventions are designed to foster competencies such as emotional management, goal-setting, and responsible decision-making among all students. Through both explicit teaching and implicit integration, all staff, within all contexts of the school environment, support the social, emotional, and behavioral development of students in ways that **can be clearly articulated and/or identified by staff, students, and families. These supports should be guided by a framework or vision.**

MTSS Framework

TIER 3
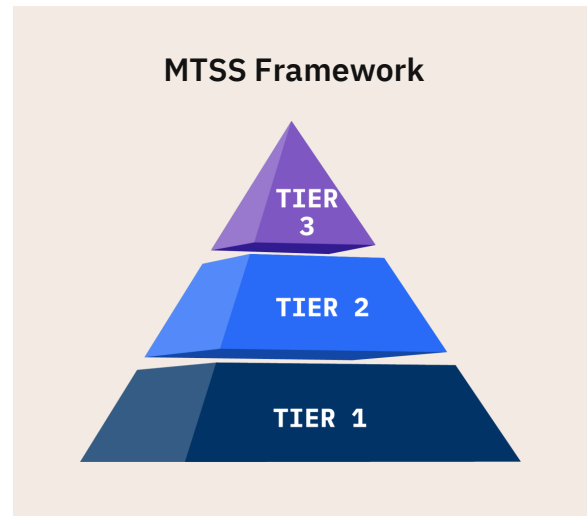
TIER 2

TIER 1

Tier 2 or targeted supports occur in addition to the supports that are provided in Tier 1 settings. These supports are often provided in small groups and include additional opportunities to practice core skills or explore strategies for enrichment. These small-group interventions are for a subset of students who at a given time might benefit from additional social and emotional support.

Tier 3 provides more intensive support in the form of explicit, focused interventions that occur individually or in very small groups. It is important to note that tier 3 is not synonymous with special education. Students with disabilities may not need tier 3 support and students not identified with a disability may in fact need tier 3 supports. Students may receive in-school services or referral to outside mental health services. **Both tier 2 and 3 supports are clearly documented and understood, delivered by trained staff, and properly monitored and managed.**

Identification, Matching, & Monitoring

Another key aspect of a functioning MTSS is having in place clear processes to identify students who can benefit from additional social and emotional support at a given time, place those students with appropriate supports across Tier 2 and Tier 3, monitor progress, and adjust or discontinue these supports as indicated. **Staff, students, and families understand what supports are available and how to refer students or request support.**

Coordination

MTSS is not just about providing individual supports at each of three tiers. It is also about how all the systems and supports in a school or district fit together to ensure quality education for all students. To this end, a comprehensive MTSS approach also requires **planned coordination and collaboration** and the active participation of administrators, faculty, and staff working throughout the school community.

Adapted from https://sebacademy.edc.org/needs-assessment-and-planning-process. For more information about Massachusetts' MTSS Framework, visit [MA Tools for Schools](https://sebacademy.edc.org/needs-assessment-and-planning-process).

" "The tiered framework gave us a clearer structure to identify and respond to student needs. It helped our staff feel more confident knowing there was a consistent process in place for SEL and mental health support."

— Focus group participant

Findings

This section presents findings of the tiered support programs. It starts with program elements displayed in several tables, followed by bright spots and areas for improvement. The bright spots are selected areas of strength which can be leveraged to improve the areas identified in need of improvement, as related to the district's MTSS.

Program Overviews

Here we provide snapshot overviews of the programs as tables, organized by specific topics, which are listed below. These overviews were informed by information provided by program staff in focus groups as well as the documents provided by program staff in google folders.

TABLES

1. **Student profiles**: Number of students served by each program and a description of the students the program is intended to serve
2. **Program goals and strategies**: Stated goals of each program and a description of strategies and tiered supports meant to achieve those goals
3. **Data collected and used by each program**: Lists what data programs reported collecting and using or reviewing, as well as any additional data collected based on documents in the google folders
4. **Staffing**: List of roles included among program staff
5. **Collaboration structures**: Structures and frequency of collaboration amongst staff within the program and with staff in the high school and/or central office
6. **Referral criteria and processes**: Any required criteria for a student to be referred to the program, the process for referring a student to the program, and information required to be submitted to refer a student to the program

Table 1: Sample Student Profiles			
Program 1	**Program 2**	**Program 3**	**Program 4**
# of students served	# of students served	# of students served	# of students served
Description of the program	Description of the program	Description of the program	Description of the program

This table is based on program descriptions found in Google Folders.

Table 2: Program Goals & Strategies		
Program	**Goals**	**Strategies**
Program 1	Description of program goal based on available documentation and focus groups	Description of strategies meant to achieve the goals, based on available documentation and focus groups
Program 2		
Program 3		
Program 4		

This table is based on focus group reports from program staff and documentation available in Google Folders.

Table 3: Data Collected & Used by Each Program					
Program	**Attendance**	**Academic**	**Behavior**	**Referrals to program**	**Other**
Program 1		**X**		X	Description of any other data collected and used by program
Program 2	X	**X**		X*	
Program 3	X*	**X**		X*	
Program 4	**X**	**X**		X*	

This table is based on focus group reports from program staff and documentation available in Google Folders.

* Was not reported by staff as data collected or used but was documented in folder.

Bold *= program staff reported looking at this data.*

Table 4: Staffing				
Program	**Leader**	**Teachers (including special educators)**	**Social worker, counselor, or psychologist**	**Support staff**
Program 1 (total # of FTE)				
Program 2 (total # of FTE)				
Program 3 (total # of FTE)				
Program 4 (total # of FTE)				

This table is based on what program staff shared in focus groups.

Table 5: Collaboration Structures		
Program	**Internal Collaboration**	**Collaboration with high school or central office**
Program 1		
Program 2		
Program 3		
Program 4		

This table is based on what program staff shared in focus groups.

Table 6: Referral Criteria & Processes	
Program	**Referral criteria and process**
Program 1	
Program 2	
Program 3	
Program 4	

> " "Taking time to reflect in this focus group helped me see how MTSS really works across all levels."
>
> — Focus group participant

Bright Spots

We observed several bright spots through the focus groups and document review. These bright spots are promising areas to build upon to make improvements to the programs and strengthen alignment to MTSS. *This is discussed further in* **[Recommendations](#)**.

Tier 1 Supports: Personalized Support and Attention

- Programs provide small communities to students who may be overwhelmed in the traditional high school setting
- Program staff report offering individual support to students and being relationship-based
- Individualized attention for students in programs and staff/student relationships

Tier 1 Supports: Building Community and a Sense of Belonging

- Program staff report that students who have not traditionally liked attending school show up more in these programs

Data

- Programs are collecting more data than they think they are
- Programs are monitoring the progress of individual students' goals
- There are examples of programs looking at data together in teams

Other

- Focus group participants noted that few high-risk students seem to slip through the cracks

Areas for Improvement

We also observed common areas in need of improvement across programs. These are the areas in which, if you make improvements, have the potential to make the most significant impact on strengthening your MTSS, while laying the foundation for future improvements.

Alignment of Goals and Strategies

- Details related to the area for improvement

Data Use

- Details related to the area for improvement

Identification, Matching, and Monitoring

- Details related to the area for improvement

Coordination

- Details related to the area for improvement

Recommendations

Here we provide recommendations for how to strengthen the district's MTSS by leveraging bright spots to improve areas in need of improvement.

These recommendations optimize effort required, because they are meant to build on program strengths, and impact the district's MTSS because they have the potential to address some of the most significant needs.

The first recommendation should be addressed first, as it is foundational. Other recommendations may be addressed concurrently or in any order.

1. Strengthen alignment between goals and strategies.
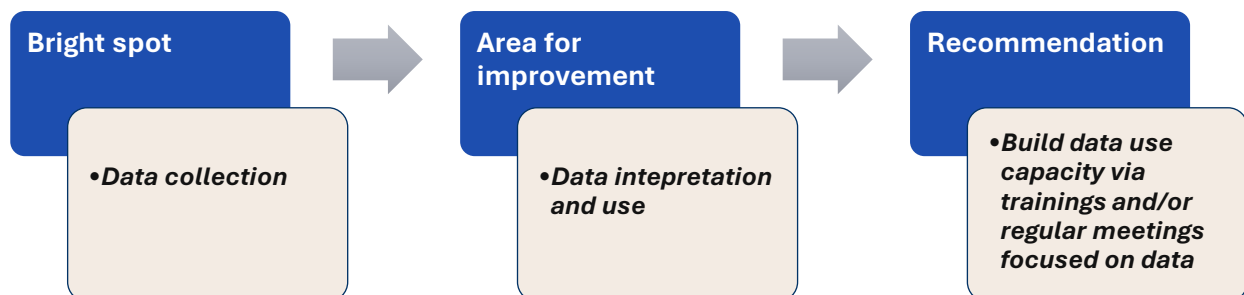
Details about the recommendation

This figure illustrates how this Recommendation addresses an area for improvement and can build upon existing bright spots.

Bright spot	Area for improvement	Recommendation
•*Tier 1 supports*	•*Shared understanding of strategies and goals*	•*Strengthen alignment between goals and strategies*
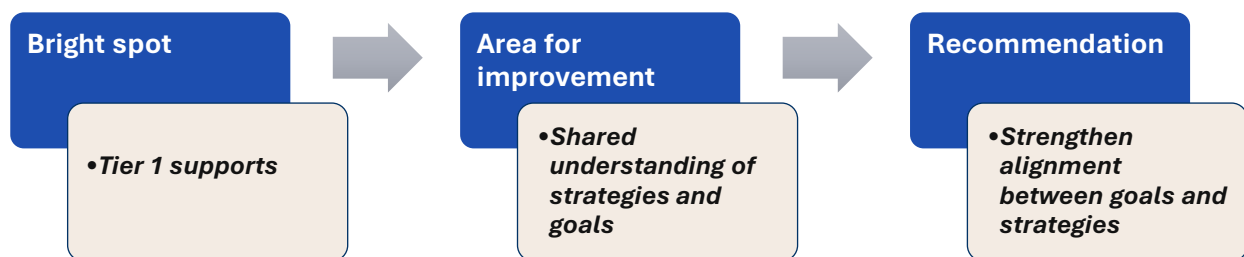
2. Build data use capacity

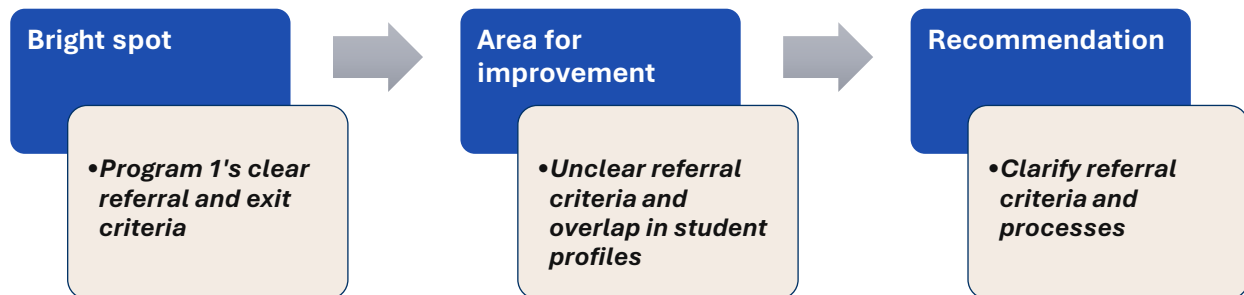*Details about the recommendation*

This recommendation should address the area for improvement related to data use and can build upon bright spots related to data collection and examples of data use.

Bright spot	Area for improvement	Recommendation
•*Data collection*	•*Data intepretation and use*	•*Build data use capacity via trainings and/or regular meetings focused on data*

3. Clarify referral criteria and processes

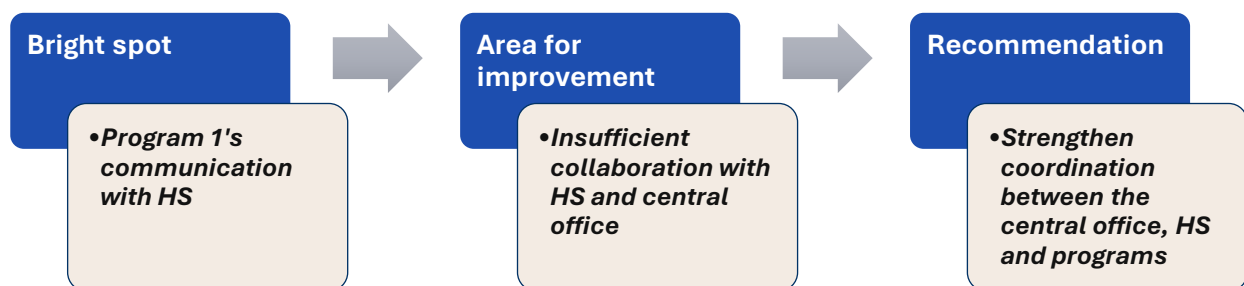*Details about the recommendation*

This recommendation can build upon Program 1's clear referral and exit criteria as an example of what works and should address the area of improvement of unclear referral criteria and an overlap in student profiles.

Bright spot		Area for improvement		Recommendation
•*Program 1's clear referral and exit criteria*	→	•*Unclear referral criteria and overlap in student profiles*	→	•*Clarify referral criteria and processes*

4. Strengthen coordination between the central office, high school, and programs

Details about the recommendation

This recommendation can build upon Program 1's clear and consistent communication with the high school as an example of what works and should address the area for improvement of insufficient collaboration between programs and the high school and central office.

Bright spot		Area for improvement		Recommendation
•*Program 1's communication with HS*	→	•*Insufficient collaboration with HS and central office*	→	•*Strengthen coordination between the central office, HS and programs*

Recommended Next Steps		
When	**What**	**Who**
April – June		
Summer		
SY 25-26		

Conclusion

Details about the conclusion.

References

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Weiss, Michael J., Bloom, Howard S., & Brock, Thomas (2013). A Conceptual Framework for Studying the Sources of Variation in Program Effects. MDRC Working Papers on Research Methodology, https://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/a-conceptual_framework_for_studying_the_sources.pdf.

Appendices

Appendix A. Focus Group Protocol and Participants

Sample Focus Group Protocol

Thank you for participating in this focus group. This is part of an effort to gather data about tiered support programs supporting student social and emotional learning (SEL) and mental health. I am from Education Development Center (EDC), an external partner hired to help gather data about SEL and mental health programming in District X. We are working with District X leadership to understand better what has been working here, and how we might improve resources, content, and processes. I want to be very clear this is NOT an evaluation – we're trying to understand better how these programs work!

The data gathered will be used to support overall planning for SEL and mental health supports for students in the district. I will record the zoom focus groups and take notes but will not attribute anything to individuals. The data gathered today will remain anonymous. Is everyone ok being recorded?

Thank you for sharing your experiences, observations, and opinions of programs.

Program Goals and Activities

- What are the intended outcomes of the program? (specifically regarding SEL or mental health)? (i.e., if this program is successful, what does it look like for you?)
  - Is there anything related to building a sense of belonging or supporting a positive school culture and climate?
- What strategies and activities are meant to lead to these outcomes?
- How effective is the program at meeting the intended outcomes?
  - How do you know?
  - What data does the program gather re: the intended outcomes?
    - Who reviews the data? How often?
    - How is the data used?
  - Are staff trained in how to interpret and apply data? If so, when/how?
  - What data is collected re: implementation fidelity?
    - Who reviews the data? How often?
    - How is the data used?
  - **IF NO DATA IS COLLECTED AND THESE QUESTIONS ARE NOT APPLICABLE: If you were able to put in place a way to monitor progress/success of this program, what would it look like? What are some of the challenges?
    - Are there other structures or systems in place for continuous improvement?

Team Structure

- Who is part of the program staff? What are their roles? (No need to mention names, more about role, experience, etc. Are these parents? Assistants? Are these full-time roles?)
- Who is the leadership team or staff supporting student mental health and SEL? Do they meet regularly, and if so, what do they do together?
- Do the staff/team engage in collaboration w/colleagues to provide supports? What does that look like (frequency, structure, etc.)?
- Do the staff implementing social, emotional, and behavioral supports understand the rationale behind the supports they are providing?

Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities

- What are the greatest areas of strengths for this program? (for the High school related to students' social, emotional, behavioral wellness and development?)
- What areas in the program show the most significant gaps?
- Where are there the most opportunities for improvement?

Identification, Placement, and Progress Monitoring

- What are the ways you identify a student may be in need of services at Tiers 2 and 3 at a given time? (or in need of this program?)
- Who are the stakeholders involved in the identification process?
- What data informs the identification process?
- What is the process for matching the student with the intervention that can benefit them at a given time?
- What is the process for monitoring how students are responding to supports they are receiving?
- How is it decided whether adjustments need to be made to the supports, or if a different support is needed?

Tiered Supports

- What universal social, emotional, and behavioral supports are provided for students?
  - Are staff aware of these supports? How do you know?
  - What kind of training is provided to staff related to these supports? What progress monitoring is in place for these supports?
- What targeted and/or small groups supports are provided for specific students at a particular time, whether inside or outside the classroom setting? (ie, check-in/check-out, small support groups, etc.)
- What kind of training is provided to the staffing leading those supports? What progress monitoring is in place for these supports?

- What intensive social, emotional, and/or behavioral supports are available for students? Referrals to outside mental health providers?
- What progress monitoring is in place for these supports?

Other

- Do you have any additional comments you would like to make?

Program	Focus group participants
Program 1	
Program 2	
Program 3	
Program 4	
Central office	

Appendix B. Document Index

Program 1

- Specific documents reviewed

Program 2

- Specific documents reviewed

Program 3

- Specific documents reviewed

Program 4

- Specific documents reviewed

Other

- Specific documents reviewed

Appendix C. Resources

These are a selection of resources that may be helpful in carrying out the recommendations.

- Logic models for program design, implementation, and evaluation: Workshop Toolkit
  https://ies.ed.gov/sites/default/files/migrated/rel/regions/northeast/pdf/rel_2015057.pdf

- Data Use
  - Continuous Improvement in Education: A Toolkit for Schools and Districts
    https://ies.ed.gov/sites/default/files/migrated/rel/regions/northeast/pdf/REL_2021014.pdf (Continuous Improvement in Education)
  - Toolkit for a Workshop on Building a Culture of Data Use
    https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED555739.pdf
  - Practitioner Data Use in Schools: Workshop Toolkit
    https://ies.ed.gov/sites/default/files/migrated/rel/regions/northeast/pdf/REL_2015043.pdf
  - National School Reform Faculty Data Use Protocols
    - Data Driven Dialogue https://www.nsrfharmony.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/data_driven_dialogue_0.pdf
    - ATLAS Looking at Data https://www.nsrfharmony.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/atlas_looking_data_0.pdf

- What Works Clearinghouse Practice Guide: Preventing Dropout in Secondary Schools
  https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/WWC/practiceguide/24

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