Four Key Actions for State Education Agency Teams to Support Implementation of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

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Introduction

As states and districts adopt policies that address the "whole child," many look to multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) that attend to academic and social-emotional-behavioral needs of students. Key features of MTSS include a continuum of supports with increasing intensity matched to student need, the use of research-informed practices, and data for decision making. School-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) is an example of an effective MTSS for behavior (Horner, Sugai, & Anderson, 2010).

The State Education Agency (SEA) plays a critical role in the implementation fidelity, sustainability, and scale-up of MTSS. Typically, the SEA supports implementation by setting policy, providing visibility, coordinating resource allocation, and aligning efforts from the Department of Education down to the classroom [https://www.pbis.org/resource/training-and-professional-development-blueprint-for-pbis].

Many statewide initiatives fail due to the lack of developing local implementation capacity that is aligned, coordinated, and supported at the state level. Limited personnel and resources from the state level necessitate the need to leverage regional and district structures. Investment in local capacity also helps to address unique contextual features of local settings. The figure below illustrates SEA supports for districts and schools.

SEA Supports for Districts and Schools
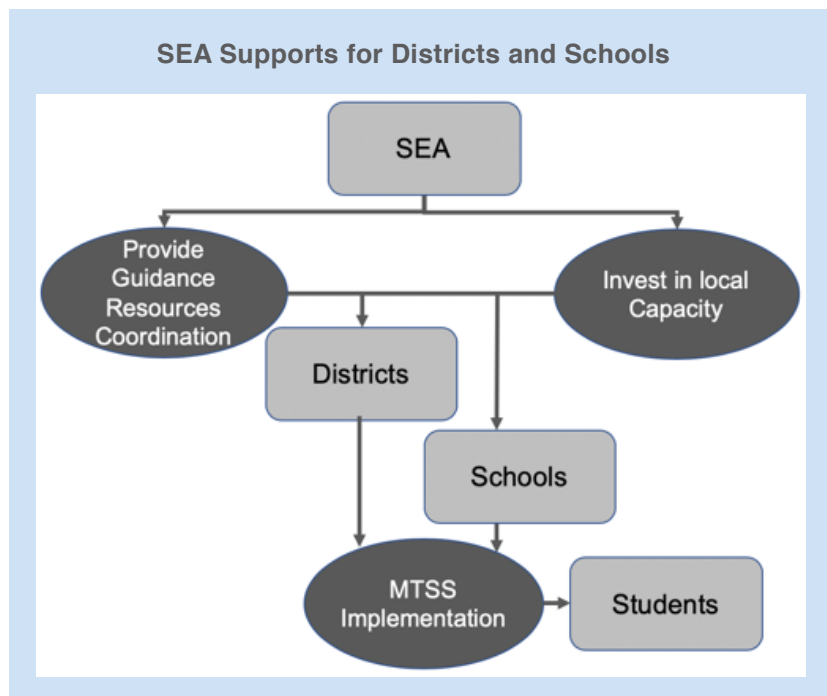
A variation of this illustration would be the addition of intermediate or regional educational units that support local districts and schools.

State agencies provide for MTSS initiatives with the purpose of producing meaningful outcomes. The impact of MTSS is dependent upon the ability of educators to implement the practices correctly and consistently. A lack of implementation fidelity can result in a practice or program being less effective, less efficient, or producing less-predictable responses (Sanetti Collier-Meek, Long, Kim, & Kratochwill, 2014; Wang et al., 2015). A focus on supporting fidelity of implementation increases the likelihood of student success. This document brief highlights four key actions SEA teams can take to help support implementation of MTSS with fidelity.

Key Actions for SEA Teams

1 / Provide Guidance

The SEA provides guidance for MTSS through information, direction, policy, and procedures that advise the implementation of MTSS within districts and schools. It is beneficial when the SEA clearly defines MTSS. Educators are more effective in implementing MTSS when they understand what it is and why it is important.

The SEA can also align state education policies that promote effective MTSS implementation accurately and consistently as defined. Through these various efforts, the SEA can provide support and guidance for the standardization of MTSS implementation. It is important that MTSS critical features are adapted at the Local Education Agency (LEA) and school level to fit local values, needs, and resources.

SEAs also support monitoring and evaluation by providing guidance on how different types of data can be used to guide improvements to implementation and answer key questions regarding initiative effectiveness. By supporting the use of data within a continuous improvement process, the SEA can help to ensure that the implementation efforts are occurring consistently and as intended.

2 / Standardize Resources and Materials

The SEA assists implementation through the development and dissemination of tools, materials, and funding that make it easier to implement MTSS. It is also helpful for the SEA to provide resources such as training materials, implementation guides, worked examples of action plans, and products (McIntosh, Mercer, Nese, Strickland-Cohen, & Hoselton, 2016). Typically, these materials are made available for download directly from the SEA website or through links on the website to other technical assistance centers (e.g., OSEP Technical Assistance Center on PBIS [PBIS.org] or State Implementation and Scaling-up of Evidence-based Practices Center [https://sisep.fpg.unc.edu]).

Additionally, the SEA may provide resources in the form of professional development activities such as training events. Professional development is often necessary to ensure that educators at the district level have the skills and knowledge to lead, coordinate, and implement MTSS with fidelity. The State may either directly provide professional development or ensure access to effective learning opportunities by working with organizations to provide training (e.g., universities, professional organizations). Many states utilize on-site training events or virtual learning (e.g., through the use of online learning modules for PBIS). In addition to professional development, the SEA can provide guidance on the importance of follow up support in the form of coaching or other technical assistance.

## 3 / Coordinate and Align Policies and Services

Coordination by the SEA involves making connections between policy and MTSS practice. Coordination helps to ensure that communication and expectations are leveraged and aligned between the state agency, districts, and schools. Aligned systems are more likely to be implemented correctly and sustained over time when implementers can see clear connections between MTSS and other mandates and requirements. Alignment builds on initiatives by leveraging funding, training, and evaluation in ways to improve MTSS implementation. It also supports efficient, effective, and sustainable practices. Finally, it can support consistent and effective communication messaging throughout implementation. Often it is challenging for educators at the local level to understand how to align initiatives with MTSS due to complexities with policy and funding from the state level (see the PBIS Center Technical guide for alignment of initiatives, programs, practices in school districts [https://www.pbis.org/resource/technical-guide-for-alignment-of-initiatives-programs-and-practices-in-school-districts]).

The SEA helps to coordinate the use of data to leverage local resources. Data are used for evaluating effects of MTSS, such as the impact of fidelity of implementation on student outcomes. Data collected for these purposes should be easy to collect, practical for use by implementers, and aligned with state data collection efforts. Data are then used to inform program adjustments to better support implementation for MTSS.

4 / Invest in Local Implementation Capacity

Investing in local capacity involves the purposeful development of regional and district-level structures and supports for MTSS implementation with fidelity. SEAs can build systems that help ensure educators have the necessary resources and structures, including a) leadership and management, b) educator competency development, and c) effective educational environments that encourage and support the use of effective practices (Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005). SEAs rarely have agency programs that directly support students. Investing in local capacity includes assisting districts or regions with development of teams to manage implementation. The SEA may also develop local trainers and coaches to allow professional development to take place closer to implementers, while being more responsive to contextual and scheduling needs. The SEA can also assist in local evaluation efforts for continuous improvement.

It is helpful for the SEA to leverage existing State structures. The LEA is a structure that the State supports so that schools can benefit from implementation efforts. To scale up statewide technical assistance with limited resources, the State needs to utilize existing local educational structures and systems to support implementation of MTSS. Thus, it may be helpful to think of the school as the level of implementation, the district as the unit of implementation (providing technical assistance) and the state agency as the level of coordination (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). Local implementation capacity is dependent on the interconnected system of intermediate/regional systems, local school districts, and schools in supporting MTSS. Investing in local capacity means that there are local functions for training, coaching, technical expertise, leadership for guiding implementation efforts, and use of evaluation for continuous improvement.
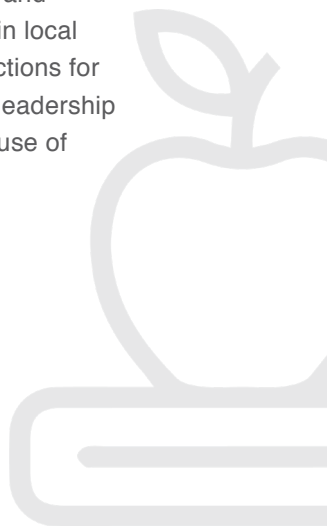
The SEA, because of limited resources and distance from the classroom, may seem to have little influence over practices with students. However, with careful planning, the SEA can play a lead role in influencing practice and improving student outcomes. Placing a focus on measuring and improving fidelity of implementation, ensuring effective resources and materials, and empowering local capacity are all ways that SEAs can improve outcomes for students through effective MTSS frameworks like PBIS.

Your questions, comments, ideas and resources are invited. Please direct all correspondence to sisep@unc.edu.

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