

Supporting student wellbeing and engagement in MTSS

May 2024

The Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) recommends the use of a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) to better assist Years 7 to 9 students struggling with foundational literacy and numeracy skills. If you're unfamiliar with the MTSS framework, we recommend you start with AERO's [Introduction to a Multi-Tiered System of Supports](#) explainer.

This practice resource is designed for secondary school leaders and teachers looking to better support the wellbeing and engagement of Years 7 to 9 students in an MTSS framework.

Students who require additional literacy and numeracy support are more likely to experience feelings of low self-esteem in school. By the time they reach secondary school, these students are likely to have had repeated experiences of struggling to achieve academic milestones. These experiences can increase their risk of developing low self-concept, high anxiety, poor attention and disengagement. School-based decisions regarding implementation of interventions and supports need to be made with students' wellbeing in mind.

This practice resource summarises 4 approaches schools can take to support students' wellbeing while implementing MTSS, informed by the [experiences of 7 Australian schools](#).



Four approaches for supporting student wellbeing and engagement

1. Have open, honest conversations with students about the purpose and value of intervention

‘In talking to students about intervention, we take that approach of being really open and honest about what it is we’re doing, and the reasons why. We tend to say that everybody needs some help at different times within their school career, and at this point, this is what we feel you need.’

–Prue Dawson, Diversity Coordinator, Parramatta Marist High School (NSW)

When students are identified as needing support, staff should explain what interventions mean and why they’re important for learning.

In having these conversations with students, staff should:

- openly and honestly explain why intervention is required
- note that everyone needs help at some point in their lives, and that participating in this program doesn’t imply students are ‘not smart’
- explain the content and nature of interventions
- where appropriate, let students know this is temporary
- explain the direct benefits to their life in and out of school (e.g., literacy skills can help them be a more effective class member across different subjects, and in other ways beyond schooling such as in sitting for a driving licence written test)
- encourage students through ‘success stories’ – stories of progress made through intervention (while being sensitive to the importance of confidentiality)
- adopt a strengths-based perspective, recognising what the student is currently good at and the strategy they’ve taken to achieve this.

AERO visited schools where students were invited by staff to participate in intervention, but if students declined, this decision was respected. If students agreed to participate, the school would work to optimise timetabling to support ongoing attendance and engagement – for example, ensuring students participating in intervention classes weren’t disadvantaged when it came to accessing their favourite subject(s). Schools with intervention classes embedded in their timetable were mindful of the classes that ran alongside them. Schools who withdrew students from other timetabled classes for interventions were also mindful of avoiding students’ favourite subjects.

2. Engage with parents and carers when possible

Directly and intentionally engaging with students and their parents or carers is a key part of implementing MTSS well. Support from parents and carers can help students thrive in intervention programs.

Conversations with parents or carers about a student's need for intervention can be difficult and confronting. However, this engagement is important as parents and carers can provide a support system at home, reiterate the value of intervention, and encourage students to remain engaged. Schools may also require parental or caregiver consent for students to engage with allied health professionals or to administer certain clinical assessments. Additionally, as experts in the lives of young people in their care, parents and carers can often provide critical information for improving the effectiveness of interventions and shaping specific goals or targets. Parental or caregiver support and understanding is also important because regular changes to a student's timetable or program of learning may require students to catch up on missed work.

In having these conversations with parents or carers, staff can:

- recognise and support the learning that already occurs at home
- openly and honestly explain why intervention is necessary
- explain the content and nature of interventions and provide space for collaborative planning
- where appropriate, let them know interventions are temporary
- explain the direct benefits to the student's life in and out of school (e.g., literacy skills can help them be a more effective class member across different subjects, and in other ways beyond schooling such as in sitting for a driving license written test)
- provide opportunities to check that they understand interventions and provide further information where needed
- facilitate open, two-way communication about the student's progress and provide opportunities for collaborative problem-solving where needed
- seek their input and knowledge about the student.

Having a broader school culture of trust and communication with parents and carers can make these conversations easier.

3. Build a culture of giving and receiving support, sharing and celebrating successes

Teachers and leaders can encourage a culture of support-seeking by communicating and demonstrating that reaching out for help is an everyday occurrence and celebrating when students reach out.

'There are always students entering and exiting the classroom to work with different staff. Throughout the week every student will be taken out at least once. This helps students see intervention as a normal part of learning.'

‘Also, we’re very clear with students about the fact that it is needs-based – that you need this skill in this classroom or intervention now and when the need changes, so will the tasks. The stigma is removed because students are seeing their peers do the same thing. They talk about it in the schoolyard and have similar experiences of getting help with different skills.’

–Belinda Melvin, Literacy Learning Specialist, Mount Rowan Secondary College (VIC)

Care in naming conventions of intervention classes and groupings can support a more inclusive approach – for example, Reece High School titles their intervention support program ‘What I Need Next’ (WINN), as this language focuses on growth rather than deficits.

‘When we first started intervention, students tried to label themselves into a group of where they saw themselves academically overall. You could see them trying to work out where they may fit in terms of their learning. And we had lots of students saying, “Am I in a smart group? What sort of group am I in?”

‘We had to challenge their perceptions to reshape and change their language. We told them: “It’s not about what group you are in. Rather, it’s actually: This is where you are now, this is your learning goal, and this is your success criteria, and this is what you need to keep improving”.’

–Danika Hess, Assistant Principal, Reece High School (TAS)

As students engage in intervention, recognising and celebrating their progress can increase their buy-in and engagement, and strengthen a positive culture. Schools AERO visited noted that when students saw their own progress, this had a tremendous impact on their motivation and morale.

‘I think reducing that stigma comes back to really focusing on progress and making sure that they’re aware of the success that they are having. If they’re aware of the success that they’re having, then I find that’s a massive motivator for those students to keep going.’

–Zach Healey, Intervention Teacher, Como Secondary College (WA)

Taking a strengths-based approach – where educators recognise students’ strengths and the strategies they’ve used to gain success – supports feelings of agency and fosters engagement.

‘We have a celebration assembly in Term 4 for our students to celebrate their growth in the reading and numeracy programs. We invite families in to come and be part of that.

‘These students are not often recognised for their academic achievements, so this is an awesome opportunity to invite the parents in there. It’s incredible to see the pride on the students’ faces, when they are going to receive those certificates, knowing that they have put in the time and effort, and they have made growth. And there has been substantial growth in our students’ learning outcomes through the tiered intervention approach – growth in those lifelong skills that will enable them to have a range of opportunities once they leave here.’

–Thomas Murray, Principal, Reece High School (TAS)

4. Develop trust and positive relationships

Positive teacher–student relationships are important for student wellbeing and engagement.

When delivering small group or individualised intervention, teachers should leverage, build and maintain positive and trusting relationships with students receiving supports. Not only is this good practice for learning generally, but it supports students receiving intervention who have previously had negative experiences related to learning and are at risk of additional stigma.

When hiring staff to deliver intervention, schools should look to recruit staff who are not only well-trained to deliver interventions effectively, but also with demonstrated relationship-building skills, or those who have willingness to learn how to build positive relationships with students.

To understand their students and their needs, teachers and leaders must test their own assumptions and expectations – for example, that students aren’t progressing due to lack of motivation, rather than difficult past experiences or inadequate provision of support, or holding lower expectations for learning success for students from English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D) backgrounds.

In the schools AERO visited, staff sought to ensure each class reflected a positive, supportive environment. One way they achieved this was by bringing in different staff from across the school to meet students during their first class. By showing students the range of support available to them, they illustrated that the school was dedicated to supporting their literacy and numeracy needs. This also provided students with a space to address any misconceptions about intervention classes and set the tone for a positive classroom culture centred on transparency, support and celebration of success.

‘Initially, there may be some stigma attached to being placed in an intervention class. However, I think our first lesson with our students is really, really important. We make sure all staff are available. So various staff – our speech pathologist, teachers, SSOs [school services officers], literacy coordinator – all pop in. And that really makes students feel welcome and that they can see that there’s a large range of staff here to support them.’

–Georgina Davis, Literacy Teacher, Craigmore High School (SA)

More information

AERO's MTSS resources provide further information about using MTSS to support students:

- [using assessments to support an MTSS framework](#)
- [making staffing and timetabling decisions in an MTSS framework](#)
- [understanding why some secondary students struggle with reading](#)
- how to [support secondary students who struggle with reading using an MTSS decision tree](#)
- how to [assess these students to identify reading skills in need of improvement](#)
- how to [choose interventions](#) that target these gaps.

Acknowledgment

AERO would like to acknowledge the contribution of the following schools in developing content for this practice resource: Como Secondary College (WA), Parramatta Marist High School (NSW), Parafield Gardens High School (SA), Craigmore High School (SA), Mount Rowan Secondary College (VIC), East Loddon P–12 College (VIC) and Reece High School (TAS).

AERO would also like to acknowledge Dr Russ Fox and Melanie Henry for providing expert reviews of this practice resource.