Response from the Field: Framework for All: Building Capacity for Service Delivery in Catholic Schools

Sandria Morten
University of Notre Dame, sandriamorten@nd.edu

Response from the Field: Framework for All: Building Capacity for Service Delivery in Catholic Schools

Cover Page Footnote

Acknowledgement from the Guest Editors This article is a response from the field to the article in this issue, A Framework for ALL: Building Capacity for Service Delivery in Catholic Schools by Drs. Michael Faggella-Luby and Christie Bonfiglio. We are grateful to Dr. Morten for her time and insight, as she thoughtfully connects the field of research and practice in Catholic education.

Response from the Field: Framework for ALL: Building Capacity for Service Delivery in Catholic Schools

Sandria D Morten[1]

A Framework for All: Building Capacity for Service Delivery in Catholic Schools (Faggella-Luby & Bonfiglio, this issue) presents Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) as a framework Catholic schools can utilize to provide a more equitable and inclusive learning environment for all students. In an effort to advocate for the effectiveness of this framework in the Catholic school setting, the authors define the framework, its key features, and the systematic supports necessary for implementation.

The article provides a succinct, yet comprehensive overview of MTSS as an umbrella that encompasses both Response to Intervention (RtI), typically considered to only address academic programming, and School-wide Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (SWPBIS), which provides a preventative and evidence-based model for addressing student behavior. This integrated framework aligns well with the notion that academics and behavior are inextricably linked, as students may express behavior challenges that are the symptom of academic difficulties or vice versa.

The key features of MTSS are defined including three tiers of service delivery: Tier 1 (universal support), Tier 2 (targeted group interventions) and Tier 3 (intensive, individualized interventions). The elements of Tier 1 instruction including an aligned, standards-based curriculum and differentiated instruction are consistent with the expectations for Catholic schools as outlined

---

1   Remick Leadership Program, University of Notre Dame

in the academic excellence standard of the National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Schools (Ozar & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2012). Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports meet the needs of the 20% of the school population who will need direct, research-based interventions aligned with specific academic or behavioral skill gaps. Vital to the implementation of MTSS is assessment systems, which can screen students to identify those at risk and in need of intervention, as well as monitor the progress of students and direct decisions for how the support should continue.

The authors also provide guidance for how Catholic schools can approach implementation of MTSS from a systematic level. First diocesan and school leadership must prioritize the MTSS framework, providing a rationale for its implementation and leveraging resources to support it. The establishment of leadership teams within schools is essential in order to analyze data to drive improvement of Tier 1 programming, as well as to make decisions related to Tier 2 and 3 interventions. School schedules must allow time for collaborative teaming and flexibility to provide targeted or individual interventions. Lastly, comprehensive professional development and coaching must be provided to the faculty in order to continually improve their practice in supporting students academically and behaviorally.

MTSS Implementation in Catholic Schools: Lessons Learned

When I was a Catholic school principal, I felt an urgency to improve in so many areas in order to truly meet the needs of all students. Whether it was backward design, differentiated instruction, or authentic assessments, it all seemed important and therefore, I was throwing it all at the teachers. They were overwhelmed, and initiative fatigue was setting in. Then I was introduced to MTSS and it provided a comprehensive structure that allowed me to focus and articulate the connections among the work that needed to be done. These aspects of high-quality education all fit neatly within Tier 1 and I was able to explain to the teachers that we needed to build a guaranteed, viable curriculum, delivered with evidence-based instructional practices, and assessed through universal screeners, as well as explicitly define, teach and positively reinforce behavior expectations. With this in place, we could provide a solid foundation for our students allowing 80% of our learners to meet grade-level expectations.

Once we had an understanding of the overall framework of MTSS, it was important to analyze the current reality of Tier 1 programming and identify a priority area to focus our improvement efforts. Boyle (2010) provides implementation rubrics for four pillars of Tier 1: curriculum, instruction, assessment, and behavior. Collectively assessing our school along these criteria allowed our faculty to recognize how some of the work we had already accomplished fit into this framework and to identify areas that needed further development. Together, we were able to choose an area to begin our work, which cultivated ownership and established clear goal posts.

In the years that followed, I worked with many schools to support the implementation of MTSS through professional development and consultation. Beginning with articulating an overall understanding of the framework, as Faggella-Luby and Bonfiglio present, and then assessing current functioning utilizing Boyle's (2010) implementation rubrics provided a starting point to the continual improvement every school needed to engage in. School-wide problems with academic achievement or behavior can always be tied back to Tier 1; therefore, it requires constant attention and focused improvement efforts.

One of the other key features of MTSS that makes it conducive to implementation in the Catholic school is the all-hands-on-deck approach. As mentioned in Faggella-Luby and Bonfiglio's article, Catholic schools very often do not have the specialized personnel such as special educators, interventionists, social workers, or behaviorists available to provide specialized support to students. However, Tier 2 of MTSS is designed with the intention that classroom teachers will deliver the interventions. Naturally, teachers need training in how to implement research-based interventions and resources; however, they are often already implementing interventions without even realizing it. Together the school staff can make structural shifts such as designated time for interventions within the schedule (e.g., W.I.N. time, or What I Need Time), a system to track data of specific interventions, and time for teachers to train one another on high leverage interventions to ease the burden off of individual teachers.

As Faggella-Luby and Bonfiglio assert, teaming is central to MTSS, and the establishment of a problem-solving team will greatly aid MTSS implementation in Catholic schools. This team can be comprised of teachers of various grade levels who also may have specific training, capacity, or affinity for working with students who may experience academic or behavior challenges. The problem-solving team can establish a process to receive referrals from individual teachers, engage in root cause analysis to understand the problem the student is experiencing, help the teacher to align logical interventions, support implementation of those interventions, and monitor effectiveness. This team breaks down teacher isolation and establishes a system for how to respond when a teacher recognizes a student's needs are not being met.

A well-functioning system of MTSS can also support Catholic schools in one other specific way, by supporting their access to proportionate share funding. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004) requires that the Local Education Agency (LEA) provide a proportionate share of federal IDEA funds to students with disabilities who are placed in private schools by their parents. This funding can be used for direct services to the student from the LEA or through a third party. However, in order to be eligible for this funding, the student must be evaluated by the LEA and receive a service plan. Most states are now requiring the use or RtI or MTSS as a means for identification of learning disabilities. If a Catholic school is not implementing research-based interventions and keeping data to track progress, it is very likely the student will not

qualify for services through the LEA. Therefore, ensuring our schools have access to all the funding and services possible for our students with disabilities is motivation to establish a system for MTSS.

Catholic schools must shift their ways of operating in order to more equitably serve a diverse population. "Equity in education demands each and every student in a community be invited, welcomed, and given a sense of belonging in a system of exceptional teaching and learning that is fluid, responsive, and dynamic and that uses all available resources matched to each student's need" (McCart & Miller, 2020 , p.4). MTSS can be the framework to drive this mission forward.

References

Boyle, M. J. (2010). *Response to intervention: A blueprint for Catholic schools*. NCEA.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). (2004). 20 U.S.C. §1400.

McCart, A., & Miller, D. (2020). *Leading equity-based MTSS for all students*. Corwin.

Ozar, L. A., & Weitzel-O'Neill, P. (2012). *National standards and benchmarks for effective Catholic elementary and secondary schools*. Loyola University Chicago, Center for Catholic School Effectiveness.