



SUSAN L. HALL

10 SUCCESS FACTORS FOR LITERACY INTERVENTION

Getting Results with MTSS in Elementary Schools

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Introduction

Educators are repeatedly enamored with the latest shiny penny. Over the last 25 years, initiatives have come and gone, shining brightly for a while and becoming the focus of excitement. Then, just as results begin to surface, attention shifts to the next promising initiative. When attention veers off, good ideas disappear—just as schools were starting to figure out how to implement them. Remember open-concept classrooms (classrooms without walls), learning styles, looping, 21st century skills, and brain gym? Educators want to believe that the hot new idea is sure to be the silver-bullet approach to education reform. If any of these initiatives were the answer, why haven't schools seen impressive gains over the long term?

With these observations in mind, why would anyone write a book in 2018 about Response to Intervention (RTI), or Multitiered Systems of Support (MTSS)? Isn't it on the decline? Actually, that's exactly why this book is needed now. Instead of focusing on strengthening MTSS implementation, attention has shifted to the newest thing. Three initiatives that are currently "hot" are personalized learning, flipped classrooms, and 1:1 technology programs that provide all students with laptops, iPads, or smartphones. How could such a fundamental idea as MTSS be treated as a fad that risks replacement by newer initiatives?

MTSS just makes good sense. It's a framework for schools to establish systems to identify struggling readers and to use data to differentiate instruction delivered in small groups, known as "tiers," to address students' identified skill deficits. It should be as fundamental to how elementary schools operate as assigning students grade levels, dividing students into homerooms with an assigned teacher, and organizing the day with a master schedule. A systemic approach to differentiating instruction to meet the needs of all students should

be nonnegotiable. It's not a fad, and it shouldn't be pushed aside for something else that draws the staff's attention.

The reason results have not been consistently strong is that in implementing MTSS, too many schools have left out critical components.

One reason it may be easy to push aside MTSS is that although results have been outstanding in some schools, they have been negligible in too many others. With mixed results, MTSS is now vulnerable to being overtaken by other initiatives. Yet the reason results have not been consistently strong is that in implementing MTSS, too many schools have left out critical components. Author David Kilpatrick (2015) states, "In developing the framework and process of RTI, the highly effective intervention methods that provided such outstanding results were left behind" (p. 14).

Kilpatrick's statement is true. However, it's more than proven instructional methods that have been left out of implementations. The systems and processes at the heart of MTSS have been left behind as well. Many schools think they are implementing MTSS, but their framework lacks some components that are critical to success. Those omissions explain the need for this book.

Why I Wrote This Book

Nearly every week of the school year, about a dozen consultants from my education consulting and professional development company, 95 Percent Group, are working in schools. We help hundreds of schools implement MTSS every year. During workshop presentations and onsite coaching visits, we learn what schools around the United States are doing in literacy under the name of "MTSS" or "RTI." It's not surprising that results are disappointing when so many components that make it work are missing.

Given the varying effectiveness of MTSS, the obvious question is, what are schools that are getting good results doing? When results are unimpressive, what's missing? These questions led to the development of a list of 10 success factors observable in schools that are getting significant gains in student literacy

with MTSS. The goal of this book is to illuminate these success factors with the hope that MTSS won't be one of those short-lived shiny pennies that disappears when the next initiative hits the scene. MTSS deserves to stay.

My Personal Story

I'm passionate about teaching teachers how to identify and address the needs of struggling readers. My passion comes from a personal story that started many years ago when my son was in 1st grade. One day he came home from school and asked me the following question: "Mom, why am I in the top math group and the lowest reading group?" I replied, "I don't know, but I'll find out."

That question began our family's journey. His 1st grade teacher could not have been any warmer or more encouraging to all her students, including our son. He went to school eager to learn, and we had done everything parents do to prepare their children to learn to read. We talked to him constantly and read to him every day. He entered school with a robust oral vocabulary, and he knew the alphabet.

When we first asked our son's teacher why he was in the lowest reading group, she said that boys sometimes develop later than girls and not to worry. At our spring parent-teacher conference, we asked if our son had moved up in reading groups. After she reported that he was still in the lowest reading group, we asked if he should be tested. His teacher said no and explained that she couldn't possibly refer him for testing because he wasn't a year behind yet. In the school's eyes, he hadn't failed yet. But in his eyes, he had already failed. His math abilities led to his placement in the highest group in that subject, but because he couldn't read like the other kids, my son felt he was failing in school. First graders think that the kids who can't read well are dumb.

At this point we took matters into our own hands and paid for a private evaluation. The psychologist told us that our son is dyslexic and so was probably never going to read well. Furthermore, this psychologist told us that it

Given the varying effectiveness of MTSS, the obvious question is, what are schools that are getting good results doing? When results are unimpressive, what's missing?

was unlikely our son would ever attend college. For two parents with graduate degrees, can you imagine how that felt? To say that we were panicked would be an understatement. Our son immediately began private tutoring, and my fascination with his struggles led me to return to graduate school, ultimately earning a doctorate in education.

Yet this story is not about our son's dyslexia. With a lot of great advice and a significant financial investment, we forged a path that enabled our son to go to college and graduate school, and he is now a successful architect. If his elementary school had been able to provide the instruction our son needed, we would have advocated for his qualification for special education services. Although it was the impetus, our son's experience with dyslexia has not been the focus of my career. What crystallized my life's mission was actually the contrast between the experiences of our two children in 1st grade. Our daughter, who is two years younger, had a different 1st grade teacher in the same public elementary school outside of Chicago. These two teachers taught reading completely differently. Our daughter's teacher had a deep knowledge of phonics and taught reading very explicitly. Our son's teacher used authentic literature and taught skills incidentally, only as students experienced confusion about words in text. His 1st grade teacher, as loving and caring as she was, had *no* idea how to help our son learn how to read. Our son needed the teacher his sister had, and our daughter would have read well with any teacher. I'm not going to tell you that our son could have learned to read without the multisensory structured language tutoring he had. His situation is different from many students' because he is dyslexic. However, what bothered me was a nagging worry about how U.S. schools were going to ensure that children learn to read well before they leave 3rd grade.

Our family's experience with two 1st grade teachers sparked my grapple with three pesky questions:

- What happens to kids who get off to a slow start in reading?
- Why do elementary teachers know different things about how to teach reading?
- Why doesn't every teacher have the knowledge and toolkit to help every child learn to read?

These questions led to my decision to start 95 Percent Group. Our passion is to inform and support teachers. We believe in teachers. They are good people

who are dedicating their lives to improving the lives of their students. Yet they haven't been provided what they need to teach all students to read. Our goal is to provide teachers with the knowledge to identify struggling readers, pinpoint their deficits with assessments, and provide effective intervention to address their needs. No technology to date has been proven effective at teaching children to read without a teacher; teaching reading is a complex process. Schools need informed teachers who possess a deep knowledge base about the brain processes involved in reading and the best instructional practices that have been supported by reading research. My dream is that every elementary teacher in the United States have a toolkit and a knowledge base to teach every student how to read.

A Note About Terminology

Authors often struggle with how to deal with the “he/she” quandary. Should the entire book always use the masculine *he*, switch between *he* and *she* every other chapter, use *he/she* everywhere, or mix them? In this book *he* and *she* are mixed without any intentional difference. When you read one or the other, just consider them interchangeable.

Another dilemma in writing this book is which term to use: *RTI* or *MTSS*. As noted earlier, *RTI* stands for “Response to Intervention,” and *MTSS* stands for “Multitiered Systems of Support.” This book will call it *MTSS*, because that’s the term that is currently more common in the United States. Some educators say that *MTSS* is more comprehensive than *RTI* because, at a minimum, it typically includes literacy, math, and behavior, and it may also include science and social studies. In some places, *RTI* includes only academic areas.

Both *RTI* and *MTSS* are labels for something that was previously called by other names. The term *RTI* started to gain traction in about 2005, and the use of *MTSS* is more recent. Before that, at least in the area of literacy, it was commonly called “Early Reading Intervention.” Although it didn’t include everything that’s in our current view of *RTI* or *MTSS*, Early Reading Intervention had many of the same elements. One difference is that the framework is more structured now. The focus of Early Reading Intervention was on identifying kindergarten and 1st grade students who lack precursor literacy skills with the goal of providing immediate small-group support, because early intervention results in faster progress than providing help in 3rd grade or beyond.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that MTSS in one state doesn't mean the same thing as MTSS in another state, which presents a challenge. Once again, in this book, *MTSS* means Multitiered Systems of Support.

What Is MTSS?

As noted earlier in this Introduction, MTSS is a framework to identify students who are not achieving at benchmark levels and to use data to inform decisions about what supports will help them reach expected performance. An MTSS framework typically includes a system for placing students into various tiers of support depending upon the severity of their needs. Often the framework includes Tier 1, which encompasses all students, and then two or more tiers of support that are provided only to below-benchmark students at different levels of intensity, depending upon need. A key piece of an effective MTSS framework is the assessment of below-benchmark students to pinpoint the deficits that are causing the difficulties. The resulting data provide a much-needed diagnosis before any decision on the types of targeted interventions to use. Students are assessed again to determine if the intervention is working and to decide on how to adjust the intervention to make it more effective; this process is referred to as "progress monitoring."

Another principle of MTSS is that *all* students receive what they need. Not only do the students who are furthest behind get additional minutes of intervention, but students who are at and above benchmark receive instruction that is differentiated for them as well.

Here is a definition of MTSS from the California Department of Education website (<http://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/ri/mtsscomprti2.asp>) as of July 2017:

In California, MTSS is an integrated, comprehensive framework that focuses on CCSS, core instruction, differentiated learning, student-centered learning, individualized student needs, and the alignment of systems necessary for all students' academic, behavioral, and social success. California has a long history of providing numerous systems of support. These include the interventions within the RtI² processes, supports for Special Education, Title I, Title III, support services for English Learners, American-Indian students, and those in gifted and talented programs. MTSS offers the potential to create needed systematic change through intentional design and redesign of services and supports that quickly identify and match the needs of all students.

Similarities and Differences Between MTSS and RTI

Generally, MTSS is considered to be a more comprehensive framework than RTI. Below is a list from the California Department of Education's website that explains the differences between MTSS and RtI² (California's name for RTI):

MTSS Differences with RtI²

MTSS has a broader scope than does RtI². MTSS also includes:

- Focusing on aligning the entire system of initiatives, supports, and resources.
- Promoting district participation in identifying and supporting systems for alignment of resources, as well as site and grade level.
- Systematically addressing support for all students, including gifted and high achievers.
- Enabling a paradigm shift for providing support and setting higher expectations for all students through intentional design and redesign of integrated services and supports, rather than selection of a few components of RtI and intensive interventions.
- Endorsing Universal Design for Learning instructional strategies so all students have opportunities for learning through differentiated content, processes, and product.
- Integrating instructional and intervention support so that systemic changes are sustainable and based on CCSS-aligned classroom instruction.
- Challenging all school staff to change the way in which they have traditionally worked across all school settings.

MTSS is not designed for consideration in special education placement decisions, such as specific learning disabilities. MTSS focuses on all students in education contexts.

MTSS Similarities to RtI²

MTSS incorporates many of the same components of RtI², such as

- Supporting high-quality standards and research-based, culturally and linguistically relevant instruction with the belief that every student can learn including students of poverty, students with disabilities, English learners, and students from all ethnicities evident in the school and district cultures.
- Integrating a data collection and assessment system, including universal screening, diagnostics and progress monitoring, to inform decisions appropriate for each tier of service delivery.

- Relying on a problem-solving systems process and method to identify problems, develop interventions, and evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention in a multitiered system of service delivery.
- Seeking and implementing appropriate research-based interventions for improving student learning.
- Using schoolwide and classroom research-based positive behavioral supports for achieving important social and learning outcomes.
- Implementing a collaborative approach to analyze student data and working together in the intervention process.

The Scope and Goal of This Book

The discussion of MTSS in this book is only about literacy. It doesn't include anything about MTSS in math or other academic areas, or as applied to behavior. In addition, this book focuses on literacy MTSS in elementary schools. Implementing MTSS in middle and high schools is different because student schedules are different, faculty are content specialists instead of generalists, and the structures are not the same as in elementary schools.

The goal of this book is to have educators evaluate their school's implementation of MTSS to see how it can be improved. MTSS is not new. Most elementary schools believe that they are already implementing MTSS in literacy. Yet results haven't been consistently strong. Many schools have had successes, although these spotlight examples are few and far between.

Be reflective and honest about whether your school's results are impressive. If they are not strong, determine the differences between your school's way of implementing MTSS and the approaches described in this book. Be willing to do things differently. MTSS implementation involves constantly evaluating, tweaking, and making changes. The work is never done. It's constantly evolving.

Overview of the Contents

Each of the book's 10 chapters relates to one of 10 success factors, expressed as recommendations for things to do:

1. Group by Skill Deficit
2. Use Diagnostic Assessments
3. Implement a Walk-to-Intervention Delivery Model
4. Monitor Progress with an Appropriate Assessment
5. Flood the Intervention Block with Extra Instructors

6. Use Intervention Time Wisely
7. Be Aware of What Makes Intervention Effective
8. Provide Teachers with Intervention Lesson Materials
9. Invest in Professional Development
10. Inspect What You Expect

An overarching element in this book is the understanding that teaching a child to read is both a science and an art. Let's look at the science part first.

An amazing thing about reading is that it's possible to pinpoint what a student can and can't do and figure out exactly what that student needs. An absolutely stunning amount of science addresses what skills students need to have by a certain point in time in order to learn to read. Scientific research shows the progression of stepping stones to learning to read, and which instructional practices work best for the students who struggle. Teachers don't have to guess about this. Best practice is to diagnose what skills a student hasn't yet mastered and then figure out a treatment plan. Treatment follows a good diagnosis.

Teaching reading is also an art—in various ways. I have deep respect for teachers who exhibit the art of teaching by motivating and connecting with students. Giving students feedback and observing what they just did wrong is also an art. There is no way to prescribe exactly what explanation will lead to a child “getting it”; teachers develop an instinct for what to try when a student isn't learning. There is also an art in matching text to student interests so children *want* to read.

The chapters that follow provide specific information and guidance to help educators understand the science and develop the art of teaching students to read.

1

Success Factor #1

Group by Skill Deficit

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One of the most important processes in MTSS is that of placing students in groups. Too often schools are using grouping processes that, from the outset, will limit potential student gains. The method of assigning students to groups makes *all* the difference in the results. A few key decisions drive results, and grouping is among the most important, which is why it is the first of the 10 factors for success.

An Early Experience in Forming Student Groups

In the early 2000s, eight schools in northwest Indiana participated in an early-reading initiative to provide professional development and materials to kindergarten and 1st grade teachers. Approximately 60 teachers gathered once a month for full-day workshops as participants in this effort, which was funded by a private foundation. The initiative's goal was to promote early identification and intervention for students who entered kindergarten unprepared to learn to read or who throughout kindergarten and 1st grade weren't making progress in acquiring the precursor and early skills needed to learn to read. Teachers received training on how to administer and score the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) universal screening assessment, how to interpret the data and place students in groups, and how to teach strategies in small groups. This initiative took place just after the National Reading Panel's report, *Teaching Children to Read*, was released in 2000, before the federal Reading First program had reached full swing.

Funding of this Indiana initiative enabled the hiring of two people part-time. As one of those hired, my role was to design the program and teach the monthly workshops; the second person was an experienced reading coach named Iris who visited each school between the workshops and modeled instruction for the teachers. Iris was amazingly talented. She had worked with

Title I students in Atlanta, Georgia, before moving to Indiana. Watching Iris work with small groups of students not only taught the teachers a lot but also allowed me to see many things that were working and not working. She was a major reason the program was so successful and helped influence the direction of my future work.

One of the most important lessons I learned was about forming intervention groups. At the start of the school year, students were grouped based on whether their scores resulted in a DIBELS categorization designated by the colors yellow or red, indicating the level of intervention needed. Teachers were instructed to look at all the kids in the yellow category and form groups of three to four students based on which students worked best together. This was common practice at that time.

One day while watching Iris work with a group of four kindergartners, my gut was telling me that something was wrong. Iris was laying out pictures of a man, a mouse, and a ball. After saying the name of each picture, she'd ask the students to tell her which picture didn't fit in the /m/ category. (A letter appearing between slash marks indicates the sound pronounced instead of the letter name.) One girl we'll call Amy was nailing every question Iris asked. She already knew it. Why was Amy in this group? A review of Amy's DIBELS scoring booklet led to one of those "aha" moments early in my work. Amy's score was above benchmark on Initial Sound Fluency, so why was she in the yellow benchmark level? She was above benchmark for that skill, but she didn't know her letter names. Amy's very low score on letter naming overshadowed her strong skills in hearing initial sounds in words. Because the benchmark level is determined by a weighted average that includes both of these skills, the method of grouping was placing students in groups to get instruction they didn't need.

Watching misplaced students like Amy showed that our grouping practices weren't good enough. A quest to do better led to a new process. The next month we showed up at the workshop with two grouping mats formatted as 2×2 grids. One mat was for the middle of the year (MOY) of kindergarten, and the other mat was for 1st grade MOY. Each mat had one indicator on the horizontal axis and another one on the vertical axis. Because there was a benchmark and below-benchmark level for each indicator, the mats were divided into four boxes. Teachers reviewed their students' DIBELS scoring booklets and placed names in the four boxes based on high or low scores in each measure. The benchmark status levels of yellow and red identified the

students whose booklets would be examined to place them in one of the four boxes, but those categories were no longer used for group placement. Sometimes a student whose level was red and another whose level was yellow would be in the same group.

The teachers returned to their schools and started meeting with their new groups. During the next couple of months, Iris and I observed the groups formed with this new approach. Not only did the teachers report that the students seemed to fit together better, but the progress-monitoring data showed larger gains than had been achieved with our previous grouping approach.

What about students scoring at benchmark levels? A common belief was that these students, who were in the green group, didn't need small-group intervention. This conclusion simply wasn't always accurate. For a handful of students whose weighted average composite score placed them at the benchmark level, the details in the scoring probes showed major deficits that could cause them to be below benchmark in the future if the deficits were not addressed. As they say, the devil is in the details. Therefore, back in the early 2000s our advice for teachers was to review students with benchmark composite scores to make sure that they were on track in all skills that would be important later. We paid especially close attention to students whose scores were barely in the benchmark range; we called these students "fence sitters."

This experience led to one major insight: the weighted average composite score that determines benchmark status levels can mask important details about an underlying deficit. Therefore, grouping based on the green, yellow, and red benchmark score categories is not as effective as grouping based on skill deficits. When students are placed in groups simply because they have been assigned the same benchmark score level (intensive/red or strategic/yellow), the approach doesn't go deep enough to help us understand *why* a student isn't at benchmark.

When students are placed in groups because they have the same benchmark score level, the approach doesn't go deep enough to help us understand why a student isn't at benchmark.

Changes in Terminology in Universal Screeners

In the early 2000s, color categories represented status levels that were often called Benchmark (green), Strategic (yellow), and Intensive (red). The labels *Strategic* and *Intensive* were intended to describe how serious the intervention would need to be for the student to improve enough to reach the benchmark level. Many things have changed since then. There is a different version of DIBELS called DIBELS Next. And those category names have changed over time to labels such as “Below Benchmark” and “Well Below Benchmark.” Figure 1.1 shows previous and current terminology.

FIGURE 1.1

Previous and Current Terms Used in DIBELS Universal Screeners

Color Coding	Previous Term	Current Term
Blue		Well Above Benchmark
Green	Benchmark	At or Above Benchmark
Yellow	Strategic	Below Benchmark
Red	Intensive	Well Below Benchmark

Common Grouping Practices and Why They Aren’t Effective

The goal of grouping for intervention is to create groups that are tightly formed based on students’ common skill deficit. Without good practices for group placement, it’s impossible for the instructor to address a student’s needs, especially because group time for intervention is typically only 30 minutes daily. Let’s look at some common practices and why they are not producing robust results.

Grouping by Benchmark Score Level (Green, Yellow, Red)

Using an example of a classroom report from a universal screener for the middle of the year in kindergarten, let’s see what happens if students are placed in the same group based on their benchmark score level on the composite score. First, let’s review the names of the skills assessed in kindergarten. There are four

indicators measured at this time of year for this grade level, and one indicator has two separate scores:

- **FSF—First Sound Fluency** (sometimes called Initial Sound Fluency): Assesses a student's ability to say the first sound in a word the assessor pronounces orally (without seeing print).
- **LNF—Letter Naming Fluency**: Assesses a student's ability to name letters while looking at them printed on a sheet (letters on page).
- **PSF—Phoneme Segmentation Fluency**: Assesses a student's ability to separately say each sound in a spoken word (no print).
- **NWF—Nonsense Word Fluency**: Assesses a student's ability to look at nonsense words and read them as if they are real words (nonsense words on page). There are two scores for this indicator:
 - **CLS—Correct Letter Sounds**: The ability to pronounce the correct sound for each letter in the nonsense word.
 - **WWR—Whole Words Read**: The ability to read the nonsense word as a whole word with all the sounds blended together.

Notice in Figure 1.2 that all five students are Below Benchmark (indicated with the yellow color coding) because their composite scores range from 85 to 116 points, and the minimum benchmark score is 122. Although these five students are all in the Below Benchmark category, they achieved this level in very different ways. Ashley scored below benchmark (yellow) on both phonemic awareness measures, FSF and PSF. In NWF, she scored at benchmark in reading letter sounds (CLS); however, she didn't read any whole words correctly (NWF WWR). Maria scored nearly the same as Ashley on the NWF CLS and was 10 points above benchmark on FSF and 1 point above on PSF.

Ashley needs more instruction on phonemic awareness, and given her low score on FSF, she probably should start with an early skill and work up. Maria is ready to focus on how to read blended words. With the proper focused instruction, Maria will most likely progress rapidly and be blending words quickly. Yet if the instruction starts at the phonemic awareness level that Ashley needs, Maria will be held back compared to the progress she could make if she skipped what she already knows and focused on what she needs now.

A concern about placing these five students together is how to determine an instructional focus that meets the needs of all of them. Most of the students need work on phoneme segmentation fluency (PSF)—especially Jose, who

FIGURE 1.2

Sample Classroom Report for Kindergarten, Middle of Year

Student Name	Benchmark					
	30-42	n/a	20-43	17-27	n/a	122-155
	FSF	LNF	PSF	NWF CLS	NWF WWR	Composite
Ashley	27 (yellow)	26	12 (yellow)	20 (green)	0	85 (yellow)
Jose	40 (green)	19	8 (red)	28 (green)	0	95 (yellow)
Kate	35 (green)	36	11 (yellow)	22 (green)	0	104 (yellow)
Maria	40 (green)	32	20 (green)	18 (green)	0	110 (yellow)
Sam	44 (green)	41	11 (yellow)	20 (green)	3	116 (yellow)

scored only 8 on that indicator. However, that approach would not be a good use of time for Maria, who is clearly at benchmark in both measures of phonemic awareness (FSF and PSF). Maria's focus should be on learning to read words. This example demonstrates why grouping by benchmark score level just doesn't work well.

One thing that bothers me is to hear students referred to as "red kids" or "yellow kids." A more sensitive phrase would be "kids in the red group." This advice is aligned with the sensitivity of person-first references for students who are receiving special education services. Rather than referring to "a dyslexic student," for example, we refer to "a student with dyslexia." The learning disability doesn't define the student's life but, rather, is just one aspect of it.

Grouping by Quadrants

I previously mentioned the idea of grouping by quadrants, an approach that is not based on composite scores. Students are placed in groups based on whether they score high or low on two specific indicators. During the Indiana literacy initiative, teachers studied their DIBELS student scoring booklets to place students in one of four quadrants based on their scores on two individual measures. Students who were at benchmark on the vertical and horizontal axis were placed in the upper-right quadrant. Students who scored low on both

skills were placed in the lower-left quadrant. The other two quadrants were for students who were low on one and high on the other.

Fast-forwarding to today, this quadrant-grouping method is available in some of the data management systems that are used for collection and reporting of assessment data. Three popular systems are available for DIBELS reporting:

- DIBELSnet, from Dynamic Measurement Group (DMG), the authors of DIBELS
- UO DIBELS Data System, from the University of Oregon Center on Teaching and Learning
- mCLASS:DIBELS Next, from Amplify

The table in Figure 1.3 shows the two key indicators included in the grouping worksheets in DMG's DIBELSnet system. If the quadrant approach to grouping was used with the five kindergarten students in our example, they would be grouped as shown in Figure 1.4.

FIGURE 1.3

Two Key Indicators for Initial Grouping Worksheets in DIBELSnet

Grade Level	BOY (Beginning of Year)	MOY (Middle of Year)	EOY (End of Year)
Kindergarten	1. FSF 2. Composite Score	1. PSF 2. NWF CLS	1. PSF 2. NWF CLS
1st Grade	1. PSF 2. NWF CLS	1. NWF WWR 2. DORF Words Correct	1. NWF WWR 2. DORF Words Correct
2nd Grade	1. NWF WWR 2. DORF Words Correct	1. DORF Accuracy % 2. DORF Words Correct	1. DORF Accuracy % 2. DORF Words Correct
3rd Grade	1. DORF Accuracy % 2. DORF Words Correct	1. DORF Accuracy % 2. DORF Words Correct	1. DORF Accuracy % 2. DORF Words Correct
4th-6th Grade	1. DORF Accuracy % 2. DORF Words Correct	1. DORF Accuracy % 2. DORF Words Correct	1. DORF Accuracy % 2. DORF Words Correct

Source: Dynamic Measurement Group. Used with permission.

FIGURE 1.4

Quadrant Approach to Grouping Five Kindergarten Students

Indicator	Low PSF	High PSF
High NWF CLS	Group 1 —Phonemic Awareness Intervention Ashley Jose Kate	Group 2 —Benchmark
Low NWF CLS	Group 3 —Intervention in Both Phoneme Segmentation and Letter-Sound Knowledge (PSF & NWF CLS)	Group 4 —Intervention in Letter-Sound Knowledge (NWF CLS) Maria Sam

Quadrant grouping provides better results than grouping by merely using the benchmark level. Preparing quadrants is fast and easy and certainly a good start. Dynamic Measurement Group even refers to it as “Initial Grouping” to indicate that the teacher must further revise these groupings based on other information about students’ skill levels, available resources, and magnitude of student need. I recommended the quadrant-grouping approach in the first edition of *I've DIBEL'd, Now What?* (Hall, 2006). Yet there's an even better way to group, which will be explored in Chapter 2. It requires using a diagnostic assessment instrument.

Outcomes of an Ineffective Grouping Process

Ineffective grouping processes lead to the following outcomes:

- Mixture of needs in the same group
- Lack of clarity about exactly which skills have been mastered and which are deficient
- Difficulty selecting appropriate instructional materials
- Unclear goals for the group
- Challenge in determining the best instrument to measure progress

These outcomes make clear why ineffective grouping processes can have such a negative effect on the chances of success in implementing MTSS.

Why DIBELS Is Prevalent in This Book

This book includes many references to DIBELS because DIBELS represents the category of universal screeners known as Curriculum-Based Measures (CBMs). DIBELS has been a popular assessment used by many schools throughout the United States, especially during the days of Reading First. Although educators today use many assessments and I don't advocate any one in particular, a discussion of assessments requires specifics. Therefore, I use DIBELS as an example of a universal screening assessment.

Many other assessments use indicators to predict overall reading achievement by assessing a limited number of skills as proxies for an entire area of skills. In addition, many assessments use levels with names similar to Benchmark, Below Benchmark, and Well Below Benchmark. Many assessments also use the green, yellow, and red color-coding to represent where students fall.

Why Universal Screeners Don't Provide Enough Data to Group by Skill Deficits

A key to successful MTSS results is tight grouping. When the word *tight* precedes the phrase *skill groups*, it means that all students in the group need to work on the same specific skill, so instructional time will be equally effective for each of them. The skill is not a broad area, such as "phonological awareness" or "phonics." For example, a kindergarten group is not composed to work on phonological awareness or even phonemic awareness but, rather, the specific skill within phonemic awareness—such as *phoneme segmentation*. Every minute of instruction is important, and because it's delivered in a small-group format, it's expensive. Instructional time has the potential to enable struggling readers to learn something they're missing. To be effective, student grouping has to be carefully designed.

Tier 2 and Tier 3 groups in an MTSS framework provide valuable time for struggling readers. Because whole-class instruction typically encompasses more than 20 students, it's impossible for the teacher to provide each student with specific feedback during this time. Therefore, what happens during the Tier 2 and Tier 3 small-group time really matters in terms of the results achieved in MTSS.

Universal screeners have a distinct purpose, and they do a great job in achieving that purpose. They are designed to assess all students multiple times

a year to see if they are on track, or at benchmark, at a specific time of the year—for example, BOY (beginning of the year), MOY (middle of the year), or EOY (end of the year)—in a designated grade level. Because these assessments are given to all students multiple times a year and most are administered one-on-one, they have to be completed in a limited number of minutes. They are designed with a few key indicators to predict overall reading achievement, which means that only a few skills—typically anywhere from two to five—are measured each time.

The authors who design universal screeners select which skills to measure based not on the most important skills for reading development but on the skills that best predict later reading achievement. For example, as noted earlier in this chapter, one of the skills measured in kindergarten is Letter Naming Fluency. It's not necessary for students to say the letter names to be able to read. What they do have to do is to look at a letter and say the sound while blending words. If letter-sound knowledge is more important than letter naming for reading, then why do nearly all the universal screeners measure letter naming? They do so because letter naming in kindergarten is predictive of who will read later. Letter naming seems to be a great proxy of kindergarten readiness. Children who come to kindergarten knowing letter names are often those who participated in high-quality preschool programs or were raised in households where parents or caregivers took the time to teach the child letter names.

Because the purpose of a universal screener is to quickly figure out which students are on track through measurement three times a year, the screener must be quick to administer. Therefore, typically there's only one indicator measured for each literacy area. Even if two skills are measured, they still may not provide enough information to show teachers where to start intervention.

Let's look at phonological awareness (PA), where often two areas are measured in kindergarten and 1st grade: First Sound Fluency (also called Initial Sound Fluency) and Phoneme Segmentation Fluency. Both measure phoneme-level skills, which is one of three levels of PA. When a student is low on one or both phonemic awareness measures, a teacher still doesn't know whether to go back to the syllable or the rime level as a starting point for instruction. Although assessing syllable awareness helps determine a starting point for students who are below benchmark, the extra time can't be justified for benchmark students.

As noted in the Introduction, teaching reading is an art and a science. One of the scientific aspects is the fact that research has clarified the order of skill development. Experts talk about the development of skills from phonological awareness to phonics to reading connected text fluently. There are well-researched sequences within several of these essential components of reading instruction. For example, according to research, phonological awareness develops from the syllable level to the onset-rime level to the phoneme level. The order of phonics instruction is also placed in a sequence from the easier to the more complex skills. Children are typically taught short- and long-vowel patterns before vowel teams or *r*-controlled vowels.

To group by skill deficits, it's essential to think in terms of a sequence of skills and to pinpoint where a student is in his development. If he can't get a benchmark score on Phoneme Segmentation Fluency, how is he on syllables and rhyming words? Think in terms of where he has mastery and where he is failing. Universal screeners do a great job at what they are designed to do. But if a student isn't at benchmark on the universal screener, the work is not done. It's critical to pick apart the skills one at a time, and that can't be done with a universal screener. That's why diagnostic assessments—the topic of Chapter 2—are necessary.

The most effective approach is to place students in groups by specific skill deficits, which means the teacher can clearly see what to teach.

Summing Up

Placement of students into small groups is a critical success factor in MTSS. Schools experiencing success are ensuring that the groups are skill based. A less effective grouping method is based on whether the student's universal screener composite score places him in the Below Benchmark or Well Below Benchmark status. Another common approach is to group from the universal screener indicators through a quadrant approach. This approach is better than the benchmark-level approach, but still not the optimum. The most effective approach is to place students in groups by specific skill deficits, which means all the students in a group need pretty much the same thing, and the teacher can clearly see what to teach.

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Susan L. Hall, EdD, is cofounder and CEO of 95 Percent Group Inc., an educational company whose mission is to help teachers and administrators identify and address the needs of struggling readers. 95 Percent Group provides professional development, diagnostic assessments, and instructional materials to teachers so that they have the knowledge base and tools to improve outcomes for struggling readers. Dr. Hall is especially known for her expertise on the use of literacy assessment data to inform differentiated instruction delivered in small groups to address specific skill deficits. For over 10 years, she served as a national LETRS trainer, and she is a DMG DIBELS Mentor Trainer. She also serves on the Dean's Leadership Council at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Dr. Hall is the author or coauthor of seven books about reading development, including *I've DIBEL'd, Now What? Next Edition* (Sopris, 2012), *Jumpstart RTI* (Corwin, 2011), and *Implementing Response to Intervention* (Corwin, 2008). She can be reached at shall@95percentgroup.com.

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