BRANCHING MINDS   🔍

Communication Planning for MTSS

Instituting MTSS   Leadership in MTSS

Harness the Flow and Let the Information Go

The original blog post below was created in 2021. Although most aspects of it are still valid and important to apply in the context of communicating about MTSS, I could not republish this without an update that would take into consideration our new ways of learning and communicating since the pandemic, and the speed with which we have embraced new technologies, change, and ways of pivoting quickly. So here is what I would love for each reader to consider as you read this article:

It is crucial to harness the flow and let information go. The traditional approach to sharing information often involves bureaucratic processes and strict hierarchies, hindering effective communication and collaboration. However, by rethinking how information is shared, school districts can unlock new possibilities for alignment and cooperation among stakeholders.

Rather than getting caught up in determining the perfect size, audience, or timing for sharing information, you should focus on **creating streamlined and inclusive channels for communication**. Embracing technology can facilitate the flow of information, allowing teachers, administrators, students, and parents to access relevant updates and resources at the moment they are needed.

By adopting a more open and transparent approach to information sharing, school districts can **foster a culture of collaboration and innovation**. This encourages stakeholders to actively contribute their insights, ideas, and expertise, ultimately leading to better decision-making processes and improved outcomes for students. Moreover, when

information flows freely, it empowers individuals to take ownership of their roles within the district and promotes a sense of shared responsibility for the overall success of the educational community.

Let's consider how we can harness the flow of information related to MTSS and enable its widespread dissemination. Districts can empower stakeholders and foster an environment of collective growth and success when everyone is "in the know."

Original Blog Published in 2021

For many educators the *acronym* MTSS may be new, but the *work* of MTSS is quite familiar. Most educators can agree that:

- All students deserve effective core instruction
- As students' needs increase, so should the support educators provide them
- Every child is unique and should be known and cared for holistically
- Using both quantitative and qualitative data in service of understanding and supporting every students' needs is essential to achieve positive outcomes in school and in life

These commitments have been part of almost every school district's mission, goals, and plan in some form across the country for decades. MTSS, or Multi-Tiered System of Supports, may be a rebranding of these commitments and best practices in education, but what it comprises is in no way a new initiative.

And yet, because to some it may have a new name or acronym, or require a new practice or meeting agenda to evolve the way we achieve the work, it becomes embroiled in the idea of a "new initiative." We can all hear the groan of educators across the country when they hear their school leaders utter those two little words. Initiative fatigue is a real drain on system-level change work, often leaving teachers to feel like there's no point in learning a new tool, practice, or approach because it'll be replaced before they can master it.

But what if MTSS was not presented as a new initiative, but simply an enhancement of existing practices? What if what really gets in the way of a successful implementation was merely the way we communicate (or don't!) about it?

💡 **Related Resource:** Turnkey slides for introducing MTSS to your team

As districts and schools look to strengthen their MTSS, the way school leaders communicate the goals and the evolution of work becomes a forerunner of its acceptance, adoption, and eventual success.

Here are some steps for a seamless transition:

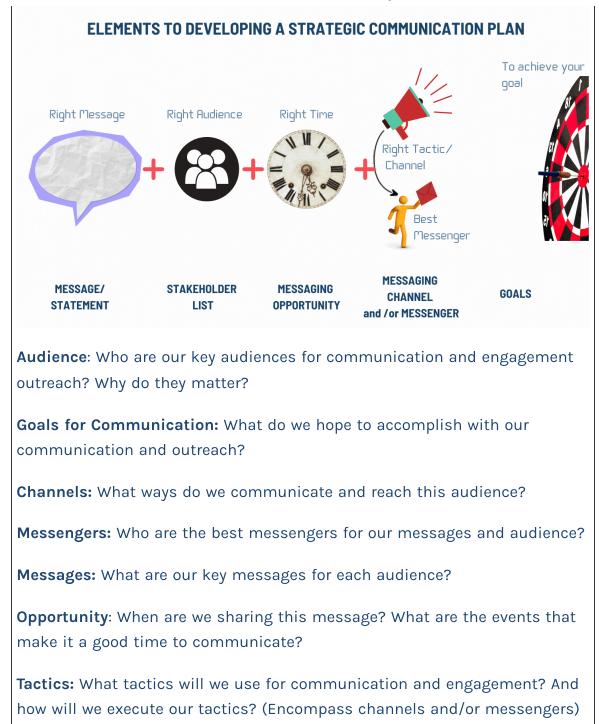# 1. Establish a Culture of Communication

Whether you're just starting to embrace MTSS as your framework or you've already begun your implementation, taking the time to plan your communications strategy and align it to your vision and goals is crucial.

School districts that develop thoughtful communication plans do more than just push important information out to their stakeholders. These districts build a culture of engagement, transparency, and trust that's critical to ensure the practices of MTSS are sustainable and scalable across schools. Poor communication can lead to unmanageable expectations, confusion, and opposition to change.

It's important to remember that **communication needs to be bidirectional**. One-way communication may get the message out, but it does not allow for easy feedback. Reciprocal communication is critical if the leadership team is to achieve buy-in and support from all impacted by the MTSS effort (Biech, 2007; Fixsen et al., 2005). Many aspects of this work require infrastructure such as resources and shared time to collaborate that only a school leader can provide. School leaders need to listen to staff concerns, suggestions, and questions; and be responsive to their needs to make sure staff are set up to be successful.

It's helpful to both establish new communication channels and embrace the ones you have no control over, such as teacher-to-teacher channels, or school-to-family conversations. These channels are influential and can either support or detract from the goals of this work. That's why it's important to equip everyone with the correct information. Multiple channels and methods of communication ensure access and equity.

"Communication is timely and reciprocal, authentic and ongoing!"

ELEMENTS TO DEVELOPING A STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION PLAN

Audience: Who are our key audiences for communication and engagement outreach? Why do they matter?

Goals for Communication: What do we hope to accomplish with our communication and outreach?

Channels: What ways do we communicate and reach this audience?

Messengers: Who are the best messengers for our messages and audience?

Messages: What are our key messages for each audience?

Opportunity: When are we sharing this message? What are the events that make it a good time to communicate?

Tactics: What tactics will we use for communication and engagement? And how will we execute our tactics? (Encompass channels and/or messengers)

2. Define Goals of the Communication

An important step in communications planning is to establish clear communications goals that are deeply connected to your district's decision to implement MTSS and its overall goals for student learning.

When adopting MTSS, districts often fall into the trap of talking more about the technologies, tools, and requirements, than the desired evolution of teaching and learning.

Your communications goals should focus primarily on building understanding and support for MTSS's role in achieving your district's definition of student success.

It's even more important to set targeted communications goals that reflect your school or district's unique opportunities or challenges. Do you have teachers who are resistant to change? Are there community members whose support you need for upcoming funding measures? Are families skeptical? Develop communications goals that target those audiences and underscore your objectives for student learning as the reason for MTSS.

Think about it as:

What do we hope to accomplish with our communication and outreach?

- For ALL Stakeholders:

    - Tell our story
    - Articulate what MTSS is and what it is not
    - Articulate the opportunity and benefits that MTSS brings to our students
    - …

Time to practice:

Popcorn ideas: What are other goals for the general audience?

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3. Define the Audience

Identifying your target audience is at the heart of any effective communication. Understanding your key stakeholders, what they care about, and how best to reach them, is critical to the success of your communication efforts.

- Identify your stakeholder audiences; internal, and external

Think about it as:

Who are our key audiences for communication and engagement outreach? Why do they matter?

Internal

- Teachers
- School Leaders
- School Psychologists
- Counselors/Social Workers
- Admin Staff
- …

External

- Families
- Community Partners
- School Board
- Funders
- Foundations
- …

- Know your audiences: Analyzing your audience will help you uncover information that you can leverage to build common ground between you and the members of your various audiences.

  - Polls & surveys are definitely some of the most straightforward tactics to know more about your audience. A well-defined series of specific questions can help you get to know everything & anything we want to know about our audience. It's also pretty seamless to set up a poll or survey and start collecting feedback.
  - Look to identify each group's top issues, concerns, values, etc. Glean insights on what special communication needs they have, and what technologies they can readily access.

- Identify the best methods to reach them (channels): Email, phone calls, group texts, local news, website, social media, meetings, newsletters, meetings, posters, handouts, PD sessions, etc.
- Identify the best messenger to reach them: Although a superintendent or a district leader is always the "official" messenger for the district, identifying and preparing other trusted messengers to deliver key messages about your MTSS plan is essential.

  - Make sure to identify the most trusted messenger for each audience. Students are always the best messengers! Whenever possible, share students' voices and

stories. Teachers and principals are good messengers for families. Principals and district leaders are good messengers for the community.

- Messengers could also be teacher unions, community development organizations, teacher leads, coaches, school leaders, etc.

4. Craft the Message

Now that you have clarity about who your audiences are, the best channels, and the best messengers to reach them, you can start designing your message.

Think about what communication you want to impart to meet your communication goals. What do you hope to accomplish with communication and outreach? What do you want to say to engage the audience to take desired actions?

Start by articulating a clear message that captures the core reason behind implementing MTSS. This is enormously helpful in building understanding and support for your efforts. Sometimes called an "elevator pitch," this big picture, an aspirational message, should work for all audiences and appeal to the heart as well as the head.

5. Tailor the Message to the Audience

The next step would be to tailor your messages to reflect the key reasons why you're implementing MTSS and explain its benefits to each particular audience. **Remember to present it as integrated and integral to the rest of teaching and learning rather than a new initiative.** Segmenting these messages by the audience will ensure the information you are sharing is the most compelling.

6. Put it All Together

The purpose of a communication plan is to help manage the change process. This provides a method to ensure the school leadership team is providing a consistent message, giving the necessary information to the appropriate groups, and helping them understand why the change and timeline are necessary.

Communications Planning Worksheet
Adapted from The [Learning Accelerator](#)

Audience: Who are your key audiences for communication and engagement outreach? Why do they matter?	Goals: What do you hope to accomplish with your communication and outreach	Timeline or Messaging Opportunity: When are we sharing this message? Or What are the events that make it a good time to communicate?	Messengers: Who are the best messengers for your messages and audience?	Messages: What are your key messages for each audience?	Tactics: What tactics will you use for communication and engagement? How will you execute your tactics?
Teachers	• •	• •	• •	• •	• •
School administrators	• •	• •	• •	• •	• •
Parents/ Guardians	• •	• •	• •	• •	• •
Community partners	• •	• •	• •	• •	• •
Media					
Students					
Other					

Final Communication Planning Tips

Communicate as openly as possible. As you talk with others about the changes you plan to implement, be as transparent as possible about the values driving the work.

For district leaders:

- Make sure your vision for MTSS in your district is clear, your "why" is commonly understood, and you develop messaging that makes sense for your entire community, not just those steeped in education jargon and familiar with the components of MTSS.
- Connect your MTSS practice back to the work that educators are already doing to support their students. MTSS isn't new, it's just a more streamlined, intentional, data-driven way of providing what each learner needs to be successful!
- Open the information valve and let it flow — what are the decision, barriers, and important data that you are considering? The school leaders in your charge will benefit from easy access to that information, and will have a better understanding of district actions.
- Communicate often with your teachers, families, and community as a whole about MTSS.

For school leaders:

- Talk about MTSS whenever you can. Include examples in newsletters to highlight how it helps students.
- Whenever possible, share stories of successful intervention from your school.
- Remember that the outcome of student intervention is something that your families and community really care about, so celebrate the work so they can see those outcomes too!

For teachers:

- Talk about MTSS on Back to School Nights and during family conferences.
- Help your students understand any changes in practice. While you're among the best messengers, your students can be a tremendous asset because what they perceive and say really impacts what families think.

> *Do you want more resources for starting MTSS in your school or district? Check out:*
>
>   - Our Ultimate Guide to MTSS
>   - The MTSS Meetings Guide and Toolkit
>   - The First 100 Days of Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS): An MTSS Guide for Education Leadership
>   - The MTSS Buy-in and Mobilization Guide
>   - MTSS Guide for Families and Community Members

References

Content adopted from:

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