Leading for Pandemic Recovery

Strategies to Support Accelerated Reading
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Leading for Literacy Post-Pandemic

Executive Summary

The purpose of this guidance document is to highlight the utility of the Lead for Literacy Framework for aiding pandemic recovery efforts in reading. The document extends general guidance that was provided in *Returning to School During and After Crisis: A Guide to Supporting States, Districts, Schools, Educators, and Students through a Multi-Tiered Systems of Support Framework* by focusing specifically on reading acceleration.

The guide is meant to be used in conjunction with the Lead for Literacy website and can optimally be used after a reading of *Returning to School During and After a Crisis*.

Audience

Useful recommendations are provided for:

- School Leaders (administrators, reading coaches, school psychologists)

Outcomes

This guide presents nine recommendations, related to systems implementation, assessment, and instruction and intervention, to address pandemic recovery and student learning loss. After reading this document, leaders will *understand the rationale* for using multitiered systems of support in reading, like the Lead for Literacy Framework, to support pandemic recovery. They will be able to locate and use a host of free resources to *support implementation* efforts. They will also understand which aspects of multitiered systems of support may require recalibration.
Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic created unprecedented challenges for school systems in the United States. As school systems plan recovery efforts, elementary school leaders need to implement strategies early on that will help them effectively and efficiently support student learning.

Apart from health and safety concerns, one of the foremost challenges faced by school leaders is creating a schoolwide reading model that addresses both increased levels of average student need, as well as increased disparities in levels and types of student need. Multi-tiered systems of support in reading (MTSS-R), such as the Lead for Literacy (L4L) Framework, will be powerful organizational tools to support the learning of all students, especially students with or at risk for disabilities. After reading this document, school leaders should do the following to improve MTSS-R implementation in their schools:

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Measure current schoolwide MTSS-R implementation levels

2. Prioritize improving schoolwide Assessment and Instruction and Intervention practices
Background: COVID-19 Has Slowed Typical Reading Development

Widespread school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic have resulted in slower average reading growth for students compared to typical years. From February to April of 2020, the percentage of schools that were closed for in-person instruction jumped from about 1% to nearly 90%. By September 2020, school closures fell to about 37%, but increased again throughout the fall and winter such that an estimated 56% of schools were closed to in-person instruction in December (Parolin & Lee, 2021). Throughout the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years, school systems struggled to meet the needs of students and families during trying and constantly changing conditions. Though not yet well-documented, COVID has and will continue to cause disruptions into 2021-2022 as increased rates of in-person schooling lead to increased rates of transmission and quarantining among children.

Early predictions of the pandemic’s impact on student reading suggested that schools would see declines in average reading performance when students returned to school. Kuhfeld et al., (2020), for example, used estimates from research on absenteeism and summer learning patterns to project learning trajectories during school closures. They reported that students would return to school in the fall of 2020 with approximately 63 to 68% of learning relative to a typical school year, with the largest reductions in the earliest grades.

Estimates based on data from the fall of 2020 seem to support these projections. One analysis of early reading abilities found that fall 2020 scores were significantly lower than fall 2019 scores. Though students at every grade-level were less likely to be at benchmark, the impact was largest in the early grades and on foundational reading skills (Gray & Powell-Smith, 2021). Along similar lines, a study of oral reading fluency development in 100 school districts found that learning essentially stopped in the spring of 2020 when schools closed. Gains were more vigorous than normal in the fall of 2020, but second and third grade students were still about 30% behind expectations based on typical conditions (Domingue et al., 2021). Meanwhile, a report prepared for the Ohio Department of Education found that average reading achievement declined by approximately 0.23 standard deviations in the state between fall 2019 and 2020, roughly equivalent to one-third of a year’s worth of learning (Kogan & Lavertu, 2021).
COVID-19 Has Also Exacerbated Disparities

It is important that school leaders understand that, even though the average reading ability of students is lower than it was compared to typical years, the impact of COVID will not manifest equally across schools or students. Large socio-economic, geographic and demographic disparities exist in the extent to which students were exposed to school closures (Parolin & Lee, 2021). Schools with higher shares of students who were non-Native English speakers, free and reduced-priced eligible, and non-White were more likely to close, as were schools with lower average levels of achievement (Parolin & Lee, 2021). Family and home environments also differ in the extent to which they were able to support out-of-school learning. For example, the National Center for Education Statistics (2021) estimates that in January 2021, nearly 20% of fourth grade students did not have access to either the internet or the devices required to carry out distance learning. Thus, even in localities where remote learning options existed, it is not necessarily the case all students were able to utilize it.

The different environments to which students were exposed during interruptions to in-person schooling have resulted in different learning patterns. Domingue et al., (2021) found that students at lower achieving schools fell further behind in oral reading fluency development. In Ohio, students were more likely to be not on track in Language and Literacy, with a higher percentage of children scoring in the lowest performance level than in any previous year (Kogan & Lavertu, 2021). Overall fall achievement scores were lower for Black, Hispanic and economically disadvantaged students (Kogan & Lavertu, 2021). There was also variation across districts. About 87% of districts experienced a decrease in in their percent of students scoring proficient or higher (Kogan & Lavertu, 2021), but other district experienced no decline.

The Lead for Literacy Framework Can Help School Support Recovery in Reading

As students return to the classroom with typically lower and more varied skill profiles, school leaders will need an organizational strategy to provide effective and efficient support to all students. The L4L Framework may be particularly useful in this regard. The L4L Framework is a guide that helps school, district and state leaders navigate the process of evaluating, building, implementing, and improving teacher implementation of evidence-based literacy practices within a comprehensive schoolwide reading model.
The framework addresses:

1. standards priorities and goals,
2. administration, organization, and communication,
3. instruction and intervention,
4. assessment, and
5. professional development and job-embedded learning.

In brief, the framework holds that effective school leaders use standards, priorities, and goals to make schoolwide reading a reality. They use administration, communication, and planning to focus on continuous improvement. They focus on high quality instruction and intervention. They use assessments to promote databased decision making. They also use job-embedded training to help their personnel develop professionally. L4L’s technical assistance is designed to build the school leaders’ capacity in each of the elements.

Recommendation 1: Measure Current Schoolwide MTSS-R Implementation Levels

School leaders should begin recovery efforts by taking stock of their school’s strengths and needs as they relate to the L4L Framework. The L4L website hosts a free tool, called the L4L Framework Navigator, that leaders can use to measure implementation levels of each framework element. We recommended that leaders use this tool as early as possible to strategize recovery efforts. Though MTSS-R is not the only approach leaders will need to promote recovery, it is a particularly promising one for supporting students with disabilities and students with diverse learning needs.
The Rationale for Using the L4L Framework

Since the beginning of 2020, MTSS-R, such as the L4L framework, have been increasingly identified as useful for coordinating service delivery and accelerating learning for students with or at risk for disabilities. MTSS-R was mentioned in the U.S. Department of Education’s roadmap for safe reopening (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). MTSS-R has also been promoted by technical assistance providers (e.g., Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports et al., 2020), state governments (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2020; Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2021), and advocacy groups (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2021). We recommend using the L4L framework to support recovery efforts because the focus on multi-tiered support and databased decision-making are aligned with recommendations for effectively supporting students with different instructional needs (e.g., Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Scott & Martinek, 2006; Spillane, 2012).
Even prior to the pandemic, most states had adopted MTSS-R (Berkeley et al., 2020) to help schools simultaneously support students with a range of learning needs, especially students with disabilities (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). By screening for risk and providing evidence-based intervention to at-need students within a tiered model, schools have been able to use MTSS-R to reduce initial gaps in reading ability by accelerating the learning of at-risk students (e.g., Wanzek et al., 2016, 2018). Because the cut-scores used to assess academic risk in MTSS-Rs are ultimately arbitrary (Petscher et al., 2019), MTSS-R can theoretically be used with little or no modification to promote pandemic recovery. That is, even though the disruptions caused by COVID are likely to result in higher base rates of risk and more heterogeneity in beginning of the year student reading ability,

- **The fundamental components of MTSS-R should not need to be modified to promote recovery.**

- **Rather, what is likely to need modification is the degree to which intervention is provided (e.g., adjusting cut-scores for intervention) and the intensity with which intervention is provided along the dimensions of the Taxonomy of Intervention.**

The use of MTSS-R is also consistent with the guidance we provided in the *Returning to School During and After A Crisis* guidebook with our colleagues at the Center on Positive Behavior.
Interventions and Supports, the National Center on Improving Literacy, the State Implementation and Scaling Up of Evidence-Based Practices, and the I-MTSS Network.

Our general guidance in that guide was grounded in four key principles:

- Equity
- Outcomes
- Systems
- Data
- And Practices

We recommended that school systems keep equity at the center of their recovery efforts by using an MTSS framework to differentiate support for students and monitor for equitable outcomes. We also recommended that school systems make student outcomes the ultimate criterion for decision making, including policy, funding, practice selection, implementation, and professional development. We recommended that school systems prioritize the most effective and efficient practices and use data to inform decision about (a) which students and families needed the most support, (b) which supports needed to be adjusted, (c) which implementation protocols are working, and (d) which outcomes are being achieved. Finally, we recommended continued investment into existing systems to support high fidelity implementation across time.

In brief, we recommended that school systems

(1) provide support through coordinated implementation efforts,

(2) leverage what is already working, and

(3) get back to basics by focusing on a few high impact practices.

Investing in MTSS-R is one way to realize these goals.
Recommendation 2: Prioritize High-Quality Assessment and Instruction and Intervention

In addition to investing in their school’s MTSS-R, we recommend that school leaders focus their efforts on improving assessment, and instruction and intervention. These two areas will have the largest, most direct impact on student learning. Furthermore, schools may need to pivot from in-person to virtual instruction or vice versa throughout the year, thus warranting extra attention to these areas. None of this is to imply that the other L4L framework elements should be ignored. Improvements in other areas may be necessary for improving assessment and instruction and intervention practices. However, limiting the scope of their recovery plans will help school leaders stay focused.

Visit The Lead for Literacy Website

The remainder of this guide is designed to help leaders implement MTSS-R, and highlight areas in which they may need to recalibrate MTSS-R practices in the areas of Assessment and Instruction and Intervention. Given this purpose, it is highly recommended leaders use the guidebook in conjunction with the L4L website after reading this document and the general guidance in Returning to School. L4L’s website is organized around the
framework elements so that it serves as an in-depth virtual implementation guide. Each framework element has its own page so leaders can learn about the importance of the element, and quickly find an array of related resources, such as indicators of success and technical assistance products, to support implementation efforts. By design, the website provides extensive guidance on MTSS-R implementation, whereas this guide only covers the basics so that it can address common questions about recalibrating assessment and intervention strategies to promote pandemic recovery. The website also hosts the L4L Framework Navigator self-assessment tool, which will be helpful for planning recovery.

Keep Planning for Continuous Improvement

As leaders begin to strategize recovery efforts, they should keep in mind that they can make use of our recommendations no matter where they are in the MTSS-R implementation process by incorporating them into a continuous improvement plan. A continuous improvement plan is a framework that describes a process for improving over time. A good continuous improvement plan ensures that users capitalize on successes and address persistent areas of need. L4L’s recommendations for continuous improvement are illustrated below. If leaders already have a similar model, they should continue using it.

Once leaders have used the L4L framework navigator to self-assess MTSS-R implementation levels, they should develop a plan to promote the continuous improvement of Assessment and Instruction and Intervention. The following sections will help leaders develop this plan and alert them to potential implementation challenges that may need to be addressed over time.
Assessment

To help plan recovery efforts, this section of the guide describes what leaders may be observing in assessment data, possible reasons for those observations, and four recommendations for action. These recommendations are listed in the table below.

It should be emphasized that these recommendations are intended to support local analysis and interpretation of data because the appropriateness of any course of action will depend on local conditions. Just as the impact of COVID has varied across schools, so do MTSS-R implementation levels and areas of strength and needs. Consequently, schools may need to flexibly increase or decrease the amount of time spent on assessment and the degree to which students are provided with Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions.

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To promote recovery from COVID-19, the foremost goal of all schools should be achieving and sustaining high levels of MTSS-R implementation levels. Implementing MTSS-R to high levels will reduce average levels of risk. It will also facilitate equitable approaches to intervention and promote confidence that the instructional environment of the school is not contributing to an individual student’s level of risk.

An integral step in implementing MTSS-R is ensuring that screening data are being used to effectively support students in an equitable manner. To make effective use of screening data, it is essential that schools have established and well-understood protocols that specify the interrelation between scores and instructional practice. Schools without clear protocols, and schools with protocols at a low levels of implementation, should focus on implementing their protocol in accordance with L4L recommendations rather than focusing on making temporary changes.

The recommendations that follow are primarily aimed at helping school leaders who already have experience screening within MTSS-R think through whether their protocols need to be adjusted. If a school has little to no experience screening in an MTSS-R, reviewing these recommendations may help it develop and implement a higher quality screening protocol, but the foremost goal going forward should be to implement a screening protocol that follows best practice recommendations from the National Center on Improving Literacy.
Recommendation 3: Screen students and compare results to historic trends for the school or district

One of the first actions leaders should undertake is to screen students for reading difficulties in accordance with local policies (e.g., Berkeley et al., 2020; Gearin et al., 2021). The purpose of screening in an MTSS-R is to identify students who are at risk for poor outcomes. Screening is not diagnostic. Rather, screening is a brief, reliable, and valid assessment to identify which students may need additional assessments and instructional support. The tools should demonstrate diagnostic accuracy for predicting learning outcomes. The National Center on Improving Literacy and the National Center on Intensive Intervention have published many free tools to help schools implement technical adequate screening practices.

Once leaders have screened students, they should compare trends in risk-status to historic trends in the school or district. Initial research suggests that many leaders will observe a greater number of students who are classified as being at-risk on beginning reading screeners, as well as lower average scores overall. However, this is not a foregone conclusion for all schools. Comparing screening results to historic data can help leaders gauge the size of COVID’s local impact. Change is also expected to occur at different rates across grades. By comparing this year’s results to historic trends, leaders can better determine whether and to what extent they need to account for grade level in their recovery plan. Once leaders have a sense of how risk levels compare to those of prior years, they should reflect on what change in risk levels really means.
What does “Risk” Really Mean?

It is essential that school leaders understand what “risk” on a screener really means because the definition of risk has implications for their school’s recovery strategy and practice. Early reading screeners are intended to classify students who are at risk for reading difficulties. Typically, scores on reading screeners predict low end-of-year achievement on a nationally normed reading assessment. To aid educators in decision making, test publishers often identify cut-scores — scores below which students have a high risk of low reading achievement. These cut-scores may appear in the technical manual and support products, such as data dashboards and student level reports.

Cut-scores for reading difficulties do not identify qualitative differences between students. Though cut scores are typically generated with real-world data, they are ultimately arbitrary. Students just above and just below a cut-score are generally similar in terms of ability and risk-level even though the test classifies them into two separate groups. How similar students in these groups are, on average, depends on the measure and grade. It is important to emphasize that lower average levels of beginning reading ability due to COVID will almost by definition lead to more frequent observations of risk for reading difficulties. This dynamic is a function of how the cut-scores were created. Most cut-points were established using data collected before the pandemic, during typical circumstances, when schools were operating...
normally, and when average beginning reading ability was higher. By comparison, students affected by the pandemic will appear to be at greater risk because they are less likely to achieve historic benchmarks. Check your test manual to determine when norms were set.

Just as cut-scores do not reflect qualitative differences between students, they do not specify the source of an individual student’s risk, nor the student’s potential for growth. They are meant to prompt educators and parents to investigate and reflect on a student’s reading development so that appropriate student supports can be provided. This process is made easier within an MTSS-R, where patterns in student growth and the provision of instructional support is well-documented. For example, without clear screening and intervention protocols and records of instructional receipt, it is difficult to know whether students are having difficulty learning a skill, or whether they simply have not had enough instruction in it.

That said, some schools may wish to make temporary adjusts to their protocols due to the unusual circumstances. Many schools may see increased levels of risk. As illustrated in the MTSS-R triangle above, we typically expect to see about 80% of students having their needs met by Tier 1 core instruction, 15% requiring additional Tier 2 support, and 5% needing intensive intervention in Tier 3. After fall screening, however, some schools may find that their triangle is “upside down,” with most students seeming to need a Tier 2 or Tier 3 intervention. In such cases, adjusting assessment and intervention protocols may be warranted. Along similar lines, schools may have additional funds to support recovery, but there may be restrictions on how the funds must be used. In cases where schools aim to provide more intervention support than they would during a typical year, adjusting assessment and intervention protocols may be a useful tactic. The following recommendations will help leaders think through whether adjusting aspects of an assessment protocol would be useful.
Recommendation 4: Consider Adjusting Schoolwide Progress Monitoring Protocol

Adjusting a school’s progress monitoring practices may be an effective way to support recovery. Progress monitoring is a form of frequent assessment where data are used to estimate rates of learning. Knowledge about student learning rates allows educators to make inferences about how a student’s growth compares to that of their peers and how it has changed over time. It also allows an evaluation of whether adequate progress is being made or whether instructional changes are necessary to promote growth. Progress monitoring is particularly helpful in the context of instructional interventions because it helps educators determine whether individual students need more support.

In effective schoolwide models, progress monitoring assessments are used to evaluate whether students are responding to instruction and intervention, and to set learning goals/intervention accordingly. They are also administered to students receiving intervention at regular intervals and involve regular communication with families.

Adjusting progress monitoring practices may promote recovery for three main reasons:

- For schools that do not progress monitor (or progress monitor only infrequently), increasing rates of progress monitoring may further the goal of providing targeted support to vulnerable populations that were most affected by the pandemic. Not every instructional intervention will work for every student. Progress monitoring helps evaluate whether students are receiving appropriate support.

- For schools facing atypical patterns in student risk, adjusting rates of progress monitoring may contribute to a more efficient use of time and resources. In some schools, average risk levels will have changed such that many students will require some type of follow-up assessment after the fall screener. Depending on the proportion of students, local policy requirements, and preexisting assessment practices, schools may benefit from increasing rates of progress monitoring, or conversely, reducing progress monitoring in favor of more universal screening.

- For all schools, documenting whether student growth is occurring through progress monitoring can also inform building- or system-level decisions by increasing confidence that the current recovery is working or raising questions about whether further changes are necessary.
Recommendation 5: Consider Adjusting Schoolwide Universal Screening Protocol

As suggested above, some schools may benefit from adjusting the number of times the conduct universal screenings. Though many schools only screen once per year in the fall, many assessment systems recommend assessing multiple times per year at certain benchmark periods. In typical circumstances, increased levels of screening in the fall and winter is not related to increased levels of accuracy (VanDerHeyden et al., 2018), but there are still several benefits to multiple screenings:

- Higher levels of screening are related to higher end of year outcomes, especially for the most at-risk students (VanDerHeyden et al., 2018).
- Having multiple, longitudinal datapoints may be vital for making inferences about system-level effectiveness. For example, if a school does not reliably progress monitor, it may not have another technically adequate method for considering whether recovery strategies are working.
- Multiple datapoints may also be helpful for making inferences about the cause of an individual student’s risk status, especially in a pandemic environment, where disruptions may make it more challenging to interpret a single test score.

Depending on how risk-levels have changed, it may benefit schools to adjust the rate at which they conduct universal screenings. When deciding the appropriate course of action, schools should consider that the level of effort required to implement progress monitoring or rescreening will depend on local conditions. In addition to asking big-picture questions about the cost, amount of time, and scheduling requirements to make changes to a protocol, leaders should consider some finer-grained information that may help with logistics:

- **Can the screening assessment be used for progress monitoring?** Screening and progress monitoring assessments have distinct technical adequacy considerations, but many measures have validity evidence for both purposes. Visit the National Center on Intensive Intervention’s Tool Charts for more information.
- **What are the screener’s gating procedures?** Many assessments provide guidance on “gating”, or procedures that can help prevent unnecessary testing in students who are not at-risk. Depending on a school’s recovery plan and average level of student risk, leaders might consider adopting or discarding these gating procedures in conjunction with progress monitoring or rescreening to promote the most efficient and effective test schedule for the school.
Recommendation 6: Consider Adjusting Schoolwide Cut-Scores for Intervention

A final strategy that schools might use to promote a more efficient and effective recovery is adjusting their cut-scores for intervention. As indicated above, cut-scores are arbitrary and typically selected because they offer an optimal tradeoff between correctly identifying students who truly need intervention and not incorrectly identifying students who do not truly need intervention. When the number of students who require intervention outstrips the school’s ability to provide it, or if funds become available for the express purpose of providing Tier 2 or 3 interventions, adjusting cut-scores for intervention may be a reasonable course of action. In the former scenario, adjusting cut-scores may promote a more efficient use of resources. In the latter scenario, adjusting cut-scores may provide a greater number of students interventions.

If leaders believe it may be useful to adjust the cut scores in their intervention protocol, their next step should be to review the technical manual for the school’s screener to evaluate the feasibility and ramifications of adjusting cut-scores. Often, test publishers know the classification accuracy of every score for every measure from the ROC analyses that were used to identify each measure’s cut-score. This information may be available in a screener’s manual, or it may need to be requested from the test publisher.

For many reading screeners, adjusting a cut score a few points up or down will likely not have a major negative impact on the score’s overall classification accuracy. However, it will probably affect the balance of true positives (i.e., students correctly identified as being risk), false positives (i.e., students incorrectly identified as being at-risk), true negatives (i.e., students correctly identified as not being at-risked), and false negatives (i.e., students incorrectly identified as not being at-risked). These changes may or may not be useful for schools, depending on their individual circumstances:

- For example, if a cut-score for intervention is lowered, a greater proportion of students who need intervention may be incorrectly classified as not needing it (i.e., false negatives go up). However, students who are classified to receive intervention will be more likely to truly need it (i.e., false positives go down).
- In typical circumstances, it would be difficult to know whether the tradeoff is worth it because helping one group has the potential to deprive the other of resources. However, in schools where there are more students who need intervention than there are interventions, it may be desirable to increase the likelihood that Tier 2 and 3 interventions are given to the students who truly need them.
• Conversely, if additional funds become available for the express purpose of providing intervention, schools may wish to use a higher cut-score for risk and provide interventions to students who might not have received them in a typical year “just to be on the safe side”.

Despite some potential benefits, it should be kept in mind that it will not always be feasible or practical to adjust cut-scores. First, there may be policy factors that affect the utility of adjusting cut-scores. For example, there may be national or local requirements concerning the expenditure of COVID relief funds that incentivize or disincentivize changing assessment protocols and rates of intervention provision. Second, the instructional context may also influence the utility of adjusting cut-scores. Tier 2 and 3 intervention is most effective in contexts where high-quality Tier 1 instruction is reliably delivered. If Tier 1 instruction is not consistently high-quality, energy may be better spent improving that area. Finally, technical limitations may make it unfeasible or impractical to adjust cut-scores. For some measures and grades, the classification accuracy may become unacceptably low if the cut-score is adjusted. Alternatively, there may be no practical benefits to making minor adjustments because the classification accuracy remains relatively stable. Leaders will need to think through these factors before deciding the appropriate course of action.
Instruction and Intervention

Apart from adjusting assessment practice, schools may benefit from adjusting instruction and intervention practices. This section of the guide makes three recommendations in these areas:

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<td>9. Use Tutoring to Accelerate Student Learning</td>
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As discussed in the introduction, these recommendations assume that (a) average student reading ability has declined, and (b) gaps between at-risk students and typically performing students have increased due to COVID. Though these assumptions will hold for many schools, they will not hold for all schools. Leaders should follow the recommendations in the Assessment section to evaluate their appropriateness for their school.

Promoting Recovery through High-Quality Instruction & Intervention

As with any major initiative or priority, promoting student learning recovery in the aftermath of COVID-19 will require school leaders to proactively and regularly plan and allocate resources in their buildings. MTSS-Rs are designed to facilitate this type of planning and allocation. In a three-tiered reading system, instruction and intervention are delivered through Tier I (core) instruction, Tier II supplemental intervention, and Tier III intensive intervention. The characteristics of an effective multi-tiered system of support are shown below:
While the level of instructional support students receive in reading will vary in intensity across the three tiers in an effective MTSS-R, the goal is the same – to accelerate learning and ensure access to grade level content for all students.

The recommendations that follow are primarily aimed at helping school leaders strengthen tiered systems of instruction and intervention that are already in place to maximize acceleration efforts. They are aligned with The New Teacher Project's Learning Acceleration Guide, which emphasizes the importance of focusing on learning acceleration, rather than remediation, as a key strategy for ensuring students access grade level content. They also support the goal of ensuring that all reading instructors can provide support for students within the context of grade-level work and within classroom settings (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, 2021). If a school does not have a tiered system in place for providing increasing levels of support for students struggling in reading, reviewing these recommendations may help develop an effective delivery model.

### Recommendation 7: Enhance Core (Tier I) Instruction

As students return to fully in-person learning with increased academic and social-emotional needs, effective core reading instruction is central to a comprehensive, schoolwide MTSS-R – particularly now. Effective Tier I instruction provides support to all students, including students who may benefit from additional supplemental supports. The Lead for Literacy Center’s indicators of success for effective, schoolwide Tier I instruction are as follows:
For school leaders, setting post-pandemic instructional priorities will involve helping teachers both maintain literacy skills among students as well as promote recovery for students whose reading development was halted or stalled. Ensuring that critical reading skills are being appropriately addressed based on student need can support learning recovery efforts for both aims - to build on present levels of literacy while providing the content necessary for students to “catch up.” To frame this recommendation through a lens of recovery, it is helpful to return to the theory of reading development and the essential components of reading.

What are the Priority Reading Skills?

High-quality, scientifically-based reading instruction is grounded on the importance of building both language comprehension and word recognition skills to develop skilled reading (Scarborough, 2001; Hoover & Gough, 1990).
The decrease, or even absence, of in-person schooling for large populations of students likely resulted in decreased opportunities for some students to adequately develop and practice crucial reading skills. Although we do not know the full extent to which these school closures or transitions to remote learning affected the quantity of learning opportunities, prior research on the absence of in-person instruction during summer vacation has frequently observed decreasing or flattening reading growth and widening achievement gaps between lower- and typically achieving students widening (Cooper et al., 1996; Downey et al., 2004; Quinn et al., 2016; Quinn & Le, 2018).

What do these trends mean practically? Literacy instruction grounded in the science of reading acquisition has long been recommended for struggling readers (National Reading Panel, 2000). To make up for lost learning time, it is critical that all elementary classrooms focus on the essential components of reading as priority skills. These include code-based components - phonological awareness, phonics/decoding, and fluency with connected text; as well as meaning-based components – vocabulary and comprehension. Leaders can learn more about how to help teachers address priority reading skills in conjunction with existing standards and curriculum in the What Works Clearinghouse’s Practice Guide addressing “Foundational Skills to Support Reading for Understanding in Kindergarten Through 3rd Grade.”

To ensure students learn these critical reading skills, it is also critical that they are being taught in the most effective ways. Explicit and systematic instruction is the basis of high-quality reading instruction. To support recovery efforts, it is important to ensure that teachers and interventionists are provided ongoing and job-embedded support through regular observation of lessons to make note of these characteristics:

- **Explicit**
  - Scaffolds: “I do – we do together—you do alone”
  - Clear modeling & demonstration of what students should know & do

- **Systematic**
  - Small instructional steps that progress from simple to more complex
  - Pre-teaching & re-teaching of Tier 1 concepts

- **Opportunities to Respond**
  - Consistent, supportive, & immediate corrective feedback
  - All majority of students engaged at Tier 1
  - At least 6-8 opportunities per minute for each student to respond (Tier 2) and 8-12 opportunities per minute (Tier 3)
How Can Focusing on Priority Reading Skills Accelerate Learning?

Leaders would also do well to consider the instructional implications of the potential changes to student reading development. The image below illustrates when students, on average, acquire specific skills by grade level. However, students may need instruction on skills from prior grades especially if they did not receive full levels of instruction due to disruptions in schooling. For example, first graders may need additional instruction in phonological awareness to support the instructional transition to basic decoding.

St. Martin et al., 2020

To improve word recognition and decoding, and help students return to benchmark levels of performance, leaders should strive to ensure that both core curriculum and targeted interventions address the essential components of reading. This focus on key reading skills and knowledge that are foundational to subsequent grade levels will help teachers meet the reading needs of a variety of students. Specific strategies for helping teachers do this prioritization of teaching and learning in K-3 schools can be found in the Council of Chief State School Officer’s Restart & Recovery guidance accessible at https://ccsso.org/resource-library/restart-recovery-considerations-teaching-learning-prek-3rd-grade-recovery-school.
The following strategies provide more specific examples of how leaders can help teachers enhance core reading instruction at Tier I to support recovery efforts for all students:

**Prioritize critical pre-requisite reading skills at each grade level**

- **Consider:** Is every teacher focusing on content that will help each student read on grade level, using the most effective instructional strategies?
- **Strategies:** Help teachers focus curriculum and lesson planning on building in the most important content knowledge and skills that students will need to master grade level content (i.e., identifying power standards). Ensure that teachers are clear on which students are performing below grade level in reading (and help them diagnose specific foundational skills—see assessment section above).

**Maximize learning opportunities for all students**

- **Consider:** Is instruction occurring through varied learning structures (whole group, small group, independent) throughout each classroom’s core reading block?
- **Strategies:** Train staff in using strategies/programs that can accelerate learning for all students (i.e., differentiated instruction, peer assisted learning, hands-on learning). Encourage the use of practices that engage and reinforce student learning, like providing opportunities to practice and immediate, corrective feedback. Facilitate a continuum of support by engaging families and collaborating to support student learning at home (see https://improvingliteracy.org/family for resources).

**Designate time for instructional collaboration within and across grade levels**

- **Consider:** Are professional learning opportunities built into the school day? Are you as a school instructional leader an active participant in the professional learning?
- **Strategies:** Establish professional learning communities as cycles of collective inquiry to assess current practices, examine results, and make individual and collective adjustments to improve student reading outcomes. Align staff learning opportunities with student needs (based on assessment data) and overall system needs (based on implementation data). Allocate time for cross-subject and grade-level collaboration to reinforce learning across content areas and settings (i.e., reading and explicit instruction in social studies).

**Provide teachers with high-quality training and support**

- **Consider:** Are teachers prepared to address a wide range of reading related needs at Tier II? What challenges are they facing, and what supports are available to them?
- **Strategies:** Conduct classroom walkthroughs to determine whether practices and supports are occurring with high fidelity and frequency (walkthrough tools available at https://www.meadowscenter.org/library/resource/instructional-walkthrough-tools). Create a professional development plan that addresses common areas of instructional need through varied adult learning formats (workshops, coaching, etc.).
Recommendation 8: Intensify Tier II & Tier III Reading Intervention

Students who are identified by screening and other assessments as at risk for poor reading outcomes and in need of enhanced support due to COVID-19 will require more intensive intervention. The Lead or Literacy Center’s indicators of success for effective, schoolwide Tier II (intervention) instruction and Tier III (intensive) intervention include:

**Indicators of Success**

- Tier II (Intervention) instruction occurs in small groups (3-8 students), for at least 30 minutes, 3-5 days per week in addition to Tier I (Core) instruction.
- Tier II intervention is evidence-based (explicit and systematic on up to 3 foundational skills using a standardized program or practice with fidelity).
- Multiple types of assessment data are used to determine the focus of Tier II (Intervention) instruction.

**Indicators of Success**

- Tier III (Intensive Intervention) instruction occurs in groups of 1-3 students daily for 45-120 minutes.
- Intensive intervention is evidence-based (explicit and systematic on up to 3 foundational skills using standardized programs and intensified practices).
- An intensive intervention provides opportunities for extensive practice and high-quality feedback.
- Instructional supports are integrated throughout the intensive intervention to support student cognitive processing, as appropriate, and based on student individual needs (i.e., use of student graphing, self-monitoring checklists, reward statement charts).
- Multiple types of assessment data are used to determine the focus of Tier III (Intensive Intervention) instruction.

Intensifying intervention involves providing students with greater support than what they would typically receive during core (Tier I) reading instruction – which is a critical part of recovery efforts to close pandemic related learning gaps. For schools that do not currently provide at-risk students with additional reading intervention support beyond the core, establishing a tiered intervention system that is based on assessment and implementation data is an important place to start. For schools with established intervention programs, intensification remains important because 5-10% of students may not respond to Tier I instruction (O’Connor & Fuchs, 2013; Fuchs, Fuchs, & Malone, 2017).

This NCII checklist provides an efficient mechanism for teams to consider the areas in which they can intensify new and existing interventions for those students most in need of accelerated learning.
As illustrated below, students with intensive reading needs receive explicit, systematic instruction at Tier I as well as through a targeted intervention platform (Tier II and/or Tier III). The intensification of instruction occurs as students are provided with supplemental, smaller group learning opportunities at Tier II (for students who are below benchmark in reading) or Tier III (for students who are significantly below benchmark in reading) to review and practice targeted skills that they may not be grasping during differentiated Tier I instruction. Leaders can work with leadership/MTSS-R teams, as well as teachers, reading specialists, and interventionists, in their buildings to utilize the National Center on Intensive Intervention’s Taxonomy of Intervention Intensity to increase the quality of reading instruction and intervention, with an ultimate goal of accelerating student reading outcomes.

In the figure above, a teacher (T) delivers Tier 1 instruction to twenty five students, five of whom need Tier 2 support (students 1-5), and two of whom need Tier 3 support (students 1 and 2).

Schoolwide, systems-level adaptations, such as a change in programming or personnel, can be considered when current programs are implemented with fidelity for enough time in accordance with developer guidelines, and with careful consideration of what the data is showing as far as student response to the current instruction and intervention being provided.

The National Center on Intensive Intervention (NCII) provides a research-based framework for using data to intensify instruction at Tier 2 and Tier 3 – known as data-based individualization (DBI). Learn more about DBI here.
The following strategies provide more specific examples of how leaders can support the intensification of reading instruction and intervention at Tier II and Tier III in their buildings using many of the taxonomy dimensions, if data suggests a need to strengthen supports for students below the benchmark in reading due to COVID-19 or other reasons:

**Increase instructional time for reading intervention on the master schedule**

- **Consider:** Do you provide sufficient time for reading intervention at Tier II and Tier III in your master schedule?
- **Strategies:** Increase the length of sessions (i.e., from 25 minutes to 35 minutes); increase the number of interventions delivered each week (i.e., from 1 program per grade level to 3 programs per grade level); increase the total number of sessions provided each week (i.e., from 3 times per week to 5 times per week). Strategies for scheduling intervention, and examples of master schedules, can be found in NCII’s Strategies for Scheduling guidance document: https://intensiveintervention.org/resource/strategies-scheduling-how-find-time-intensify-and-individualize-intervention.

**Increase the effectiveness of reading intervention programs and practices**

- **Consider:** Are your reading intervention programs and practices evidence-based? How do you know?
- **Strategies:** Evaluate the impact and efficacy of new and existing reading intervention programs (effect sizes above .25 indicate that an evidence-based practice has value in improving outcomes). Use NCII’s Taxonomy of Intervention Intensity & Academic Intervention Tools Chart (https://charts.intensiveintervention.org/aintervention), or the National Implementation Research Network (NIRN)’s Hexagon Tool (https://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/resources/hexagon-exploration-tool), to explore, select or evaluate reading intervention programs for use in your building.

**Tighten the focus of Tier II and/or Tier III intervention programs**

- **Consider:** Is it clear which skill(s)/reading component(s) each intervention group is focusing on? Are too many skills being addressed in each session/over the course of the intervention?
- **Strategies:** Reduce the number of priority reading skills being addressed within an intervention period. As data is used to develop and review intervention group focus areas, it is important that the focus areas 1) match student needs and 2) are narrow enough for explicit, systematic instruction of skills to occur within the intervention delivery timeframe.

**Help teachers increase the comprehensiveness of their reading intervention delivery**

- **Consider:** Are teachers/interventionists using explicit, systematic instruction to teach students during interventions? Are students engaged in the lessons and afforded sufficient opportunities to practice and respond?
- **Strategies:** Conduct classroom walkthroughs that observe for explicit, systematic instruction and increased opportunities for feedback during intervention periods. Ideally, students have an average of 6-8 opportunities to respond per minute to clear and concise teacher prompts during Tier II intervention; and an average of 8-12 opportunities to respond per minute during Tier III intervention. Following observation, provide targeted, job-embedded learning through workshops, coaching, or professional learning communities to help teachers increase the comprehensiveness of their instruction.
Recommendation 9: Use tutoring to accelerate student learning

A final recovery strategy recommendation to consider is tutoring. Nationwide, schools are increasingly using tutoring to address pandemic related learning loss – often to enhance or supplement existing reading intervention systems, as addressed above. In their recent synthesis of design principles for accelerating student learning with high-dosage tutoring, Robinson et al. (2021) identify several key research findings related to tutoring that are relevant for literacy leaders planning pandemic recovery efforts related to instruction and intervention:

- Tutoring can produce large learning gains for a wide range of students, including those with intensive learning needs and those who have fallen behind academically (Nickow, Oreopoulos, & Quan, 2020).
- While effective at all grade levels, reading tutoring is particularly effective for students in early elementary grades (K-2; J-PAL Evidence Review, 2020).
- High-dosage reading tutoring, defined as tutoring that occurs more than three days per week, or at a rate of at least 50 hours over 36 weeks, is particularly effective (Fyer, 2016; Harris, 2008)
- Tutoring provides a high return of investment, particularly compared to other educational interventions (Harris, 2008).

While not typically something that has been used in-school as part of tiered intervention systems (Kraft & Falken, 2021), tutoring affords school leaders more creative opportunities to support students with pandemic and/or other reading related needs. Students can be tutored one-on-one or in small groups – through pockets of time during the school day, as well as after school or on weekends. By offering training and support, school leaders can cast a wider net of personnel resources than they might with their traditional intervention periods by involving volunteers, college students, teacher candidates, and even retired educators. However, it is important for school leaders to recognize that tutoring, even high dosage tutoring, is unlikely to return positive results without a high quality of implementation (Robinson et al., 2021).
In August 2021, the US Department of Education identified 5 key characteristics of effective tutoring according to available research in their “Strategies for Using American Rescue Plan Funding to Address the Impact of Lost Instructional Time” guidance document. School leaders can use these strategies to design and implement effective tutoring programs in their buildings:

**Use trained educators as tutors**
- **Consider:** Which personnel on your staff have qualifications to serve as tutors (e.g., interventionists, paraprofessionals)? Are there community or nonprofit resources available that provide highly trained tutors?
- **Strategies:** Capitalize on current personnel who could provide additional tutoring, through ARP ERRSR (American Recovery Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief) funds to expand current budget; Seek out and connect with trained tutoring programs, including service programs (City Year, Americorps); Partner with teacher preparation programs at local college/universities or public libraries for teacher candidates as well as volunteers, such as retired educators.

**Provide high dosage tutoring each week**
- **Consider:** Do you have access to evidence-based tutoring programs? Are they high-dosage? Can any existing intervention programs be used to deliver tutoring, 1:1 or with small groups of students?
- **Strategies:** Conduct an intervention inventory to review implementation requirements for existing programs; Consider purchasing new programs, if needed (visit https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc or https://www.proventutoring.org to explore options for programs with documented efficacy).

**Conduct tutoring during the school day whenever possible**
- **Consider:** What portions of the school schedule represent underutilized time? Can core classes and enrichment classes be condensed to provide all students with some degree of tutoring access throughout a school-day/week, if data suggests this is warranted?
- **Strategies:** Re-adjust class or period durations to create a dedicated tutoring block for students; Temporarily rotate enrichment classes with tutoring blocks; Plan for tutoring to occur as supplemental to core instruction and without interrupting intervention.

**Emphasize attendance and focused worktime during out-of-school tutoring**
- **Consider:** What are obstacles to promoting strong attendance, if using out-of-school time (before or after school, weekends) for tutoring? How can participation be increased and worktime be focused during out-of-school tutoring?
- **Strategies:** Encourage attendance through incentive programs (reward party, field trip, etc.); Ensure out-of-school time programs are high-dosage to counteract issues of attendance; Monitor and support tutors to ensure fidelity to tutoring practices; Involve parents and families in a commitment for students to attend out-of-school tutoring.

**Align with evidence-based core curriculum**
- **Consider:** Do the skills and strategies within each tutoring program align with the Tier I core curriculum? Are they grounded in the reading research-base and address priority foundational reading skills?
- **Strategies:** Have reading teachers and coaches review scope and sequence of tutoring programs, and compare to core curriculum content; Examine ways that tutoring reinforces the evidence-based practices in the classroom, such as through distributed learning or fluency practice; Ensure tutors coordinate and communicate with teachers to maintain alignment and fidelity to core curriculum.
Conclusion

As leaders work to support students in the wake of COVID-19, they will likely need to implement strategies that can help students make up for lost instructional time. As ever, the challenge is determining how to do so most efficiently when students have different learning needs. To assist leaders on this front, this guide presented nine recommendations:

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. **Measure current schoolwide MTSS-R implementation levels**

2. **Prioritize improving schoolwide Assessment and Instruction and Intervention practices**

3. **Screen students and compare results to historic trends for the school or district**

4. **Consider adjusting schoolwide progress monitoring protocol**

5. **Consider adjusting schoolwide screening protocol**

6. **Consider adjusting schoolwide intervention cut-scores**

7. **Enhance Core (Tier I) Reading Instruction**

8. **Intensify Tier II and Tier III Reading Intervention**

9. **Use Tutoring to Accelerate Student Learning**
In making these recommendations, the guide explained the rationale for using MTSS-Rs in general, and how and why leaders might adjust local protocols to respond to COVID-related challenges their school may be experiencing. Throughout the guidebook, a host of free resources were identified that can assist with implementing and adjusting MTSS-R. These resources include other strategic documents, such as *Returning to School During and After Crisis: A Guide to Supporting States, Districts, Schools, Educators, and Students through a Multi-Tiered Systems of Support Framework* and the *TNTP Learning Acceleration Guide*, which many schools and districts are already be utilizing. This guide extended these documents by describing the reading-specific changes leaders may wish to consider to best support students with and at-risk for disabilities.

As leaders begin to implement these strategies, remember that the Lead for Literacy website is designed to help implement an effective schoolwide reading model. Using this guide in conjunction with the website will help identify tools and resources efficiently.
References


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