

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Sweeping changes have occurred in the last 15 years in the area of accountability and educational reform. Educators in the 21st century have been charged with ensuring high levels of learning for all students (DuFour, 2004), and progress toward this goal is now measured and publicly reported in the form of statewide accountability tests. Countless debates have occurred and numerous “reform initiatives” have been studied to try to discover the best way to improve our public education system. In an attempt to respond to the charge of improving outcomes for all learners, our nation’s schools have been subjected to a constant stream of new programs, initiatives, and frameworks to solve the problem, with little success. Results from the 2017 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP; National Center for Education Statistics, 2017) indicate a continued need to accelerate student growth in both reading and math. In the area of reading, 35% of fourth graders and 35% of eighth graders were “proficient” or “advanced” in reading. Results from the 2017 NAEP in the area of math indicated that 40% of fourth graders and 33% of eighth graders were “proficient” or “advanced” in math. Additionally, achievement gaps continue to persist between racial and ethnic groups.

According to Kastberg, Chan, and Murray (2016), results from the 2015 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) indicate that the average scores of U.S. 15-year-olds in reading literacy were lower than the averages in 14 educational systems, higher than in 43, and not measurably different than in 12 educational systems and the OECD average. In math literacy, the U.S. average was lower than more than half of the other education systems (36 of 69) as well as the OECD average, higher than 28 education systems, and not measurably different than 5.

Finally, significant gaps in academic performance exist between the general school population and subgroups of students, such as those with disabilities, members of minority groups, and children living in poverty.

The response-to-intervention (RTI) or multi-tiered systems of supports (MTSS) framework has quickly emerged as a methodology for improving outcomes for all students through high-quality instruction tailored to student needs within a data-based decision-making model. In fact, a recent national survey of K–12 administrators indicated that 61% of respondents are either in full implementation or in the process of districtwide implementation of an RTI/MTSS framework, up from 24% in 2007 (Spectrum K–12 School Solutions, 2010). Although it is promising that so many school districts around the country are beginning to implement the RTI/MTSS framework, we have observed that many districts implementing this framework immediately try to intervene and provide supplemental services and supports to all students who are not meeting grade-level expectations (e.g., Tier 2 and Tier 3 services). While we agree it is a natural tendency to focus on helping students who are at risk, we believe that a critical first step is to evaluate the effectiveness of the universal tier (e.g., Tier 1, core instruction). Most school districts in this country do not have the resources to intervene their way out of ineffective universal instruction. The universal tier is the first intervention for all students and is our largest opportunity to have an impact on student achievement. We hope that this book will bring the attention back to quality universal instruction to prevent large numbers of students from falling off track and needing additional services and supports.

DEFINITION OF THE UNIVERSAL TIER

Universal instruction is what “all” students receive in the form of academic and social–emotional instruction and supports. Universal instruction focuses on the implementation of the district’s core curriculum and is aligned with state academic content standards. It is differentiated to ensure that this instruction meets the needs of students. The amount of time dedicated to content-area learning and the focus of instruction are based on the needs of the students in a particular school. Some schools require more time than others in particular core curriculum areas, based on student demographics (readiness, language, economic factors) and student performance levels, to ensure that all students reach and/or exceed state proficiency levels. Schools spend significant amounts of time and money and enlist a significant number of personnel to make sure that universal instruction is well designed and based on empirical research documenting what works.

Teaching staff must receive sufficient and ongoing professional learning to deliver the universal instructional program in the way it was designed. The expectation is that if the universal tier is implemented with a high degree of integrity by highly trained teachers, then most of the students receiving this instruction will show outcomes upon assessment that indicate a level of proficiency that meets minimal benchmarks for performance in the skill area. The universal tier is more than a single textbook. It is all the materials and instruction used to provide the main classroom instruction in a particular content area—or, simply put, whatever it takes to get most students meeting grade-level standards!

EVOLUTION OF THE UNIVERSAL TIER

To understand what the universal tier is and its role in MTSS, it is important to dig into the history of factors that influence our current definition of universal tier. In addition, to continue improving the universal tier over time, it is also important to understand the factors that are likely to influence MTSS in the future. Such factors are likely to include key findings from research, influential policies, and our collective experiences as we work to meet the needs of all students by providing a common set of learning experiences.

Where We Have Been

An extensive review of the history of public education in the United States is beyond the scope of this book. However, developments in the last 30–40 years do provide a helpful perspective on what has preceded the current-day realities of education. In particular, there were several social, political, and educational forces in the 1970s and 1980s that, in many ways, started separately but have served as the precursor for a convergence of efforts into what we know today as the universal tier in MTSS. These efforts included individual student problem solving, standards-based reform, as well as several federal policies.

Individual Student Problem Solving

Individual student problem solving in education evolved from the late 1970s through the early 2000s. In many ways, it evolved because the approach of identifying students who required special education services by disability category, and trying to match treatments based on those categories, was not producing many positive outcomes for students with disabilities (e.g., Reschly & Tilly, 1999). Individual student problem solving, by contrast, was focused on matching treatments to student needs by answering four questions: (1) What is the problem?; (2) Why is the problem happening?; (3) What should be done about it?; and (4) Did the intervention work? (e.g., Bergan, 1977; Bergan & Kratochwill, 1990; Tilly, 2002). This is considered a functional approach to identifying student needs, as opposed to a categorical approach that is grounded in information gathered about students and their needs that occur naturally within their school experience.

Although some of these early efforts focused on special education identification, what emerged was a more collaborative approach to identifying student needs, with groups of educators and parents working in teams (Pluymert, 2014). This work took place before making decisions about students regarding their special education eligibility. Although the individual student problem solving approach was grounded in solid research regarding matching interventions to student needs, it fell short as a viable approach to meeting the needs of all students in schools. Trying to solve student learning and behavioral difficulties one student at a time was inefficient and very resource intensive. Although individual student problem solving remains an important part of school practice today, it is typically considered a part of a larger, more systems-based approach to using data to meet student needs—that is, MTSS.

Standards-Based Reform

Briefly, *standards-based reform* is a movement that rests on the assumption that setting high academic standards, then developing accountability for schools based on students' attainment of those academic standards, will drive changes in teachers' practice. Standards-based reform also assumes that all students can learn if they are held to a common or universal set of high academic standards (Porter & Smithson, 2001).

In general, this movement developed in response to U.S. students' low performance on standardized tests of achievement, compared to students in other countries. For example, the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk*, from the National Commission on Excellence in Education, described this low student performance. Based on this finding, one of the primary claims of this report was that educational goals for all students needed to be identified. In addition, the Second International Mathematics Study and Third International Mathematics and Science Study revealed differences in the content, depth, and breadth of instruction and the relationship of this instruction to student achievement (e.g., McKnight et al., 1987) across different countries, including the United States.

Findings from studies such as these gave rise to the phrase *mile-wide, inch-deep curriculum*. In other words, the instruction that students generally received in the United States covered a lot of different topics, but did not cover many of them well. This factor was cited as a primary contributor to the poor academic performance of students in the United States, when compared to students in other countries. These studies also highlighted the lack of clearly defined standards in the United States, when compared to other developed countries.

Important Policies

The efforts around standards-based reform and individual student problem solving, as well as the growing sentiment on social, political, and educational fronts, all culminated in the reauthorization of two important federal laws. The cornerstone policy for standards-based reform is known as the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Although this act has been reauthorized several times since 1965, the reauthorization that has received perhaps the most public attention was the reauthorization in 2001, known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). NCLB placed an unprecedented emphasis on the results of tests used in accountability systems, as well as on the importance that strong alignment exist between academic content standards and large-scale accountability measures. The spirit and intent of NCLB, as well as the growing support of problem solving and RTI as an alternative to the discrepancy approach to determining students' eligibility for special education services, was reinforced in the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 2004. Under IDEA 2004, students with disabilities are required to participate in accountability assessments, and schools and districts are held accountable to ensure that increasing numbers of these students are proficient. In addition, RTI was codified as an alternative to the discrepancy model as a means by which schools could determine whether or not a student was eligible for special education services.

Where We Are Going

Developments in the last 15 years have brought the importance of a strong universal tier within MTSS into stronger focus. These efforts have included a more systems-based preventive approach to problem solving, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), and the reauthorization of NCLB.

Systems-Based Intervention as a Preventive Approach to Problem Solving

We have learned through the implementation of individual student problem-solving efforts that although the approach can be effective for individual students, most school systems do not have the resources to meet the needs of all students using only this approach—especially when it comes to making universal tier improvements. In recent years, we have shifted the tactic to include individual student problem solving within a whole-system approach to problem solving known as *MTSS*. This shift arose both from the experience of educators implementing these practices in schools, as well as from public health models of disease prevention that differentiate primary, secondary, and tertiary levels of intervention, which increase in cost and intensity depending on the patient’s response to treatment (e.g., Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009; Vaughn, Wanzek, & Fletcher, 2007).

Standards-Based Reform: The CCSS

The CCSS movement evolved in response to the inconsistency of state standards across the nation, along with large numbers of students exiting high school unprepared for college and/or employment. It was not uncommon for students to be rated “proficient” in one state and “below basic” in another state. Questionable student outcomes, as well as concerns about the rigor of content to which students were exposed, prompted the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) to draft clear, consistent, and more rigorous standards known as the CCSS. Though optional for states to adopt, the CCSS were nonetheless partially adopted and implemented in 45 states. This widespread implementation may have been influenced largely by the U.S. Department of Education, which required states to adopt “college and career readiness standards” similar to the CCSS in order to be eligible for federal dollars as part of the Race to the Top grants, as well as to obtain a waiver on NCLB requirements.

Like many educational efforts that are implemented on such a large scale, the CCSS has drawn its fair share of both support and criticism, often based on incomplete or inaccurate information. For example, some critics of the CCSS have claimed that the Standards are curricula. However, they are not curricula, and despite a great deal of rhetoric, they do not dictate how teachers teach content. Although CCSS implementation has been controversial and “rocky,” it has resulted in an increased interest in core, or universal, instruction, and many teachers are enthusiastic about the challenge of implementing the Standards in their classrooms. This interest and enthusiasm are often the result of both increased access to

information and ongoing interaction with the Standards while collaborating with others around how to support and implement them. Although we agree that genuine debate about the CCSS, in the interest of ascertaining what is best for students, is critically important, it is a debate full of landmines and should be done with thoughtfulness and caution. For every poll that shows declining support for the CCSS, there is another poll showing support for the CCSS holding steady or even increasing.

The purpose of this book is not to take a side in this debate, but rather to inform and clarify two key areas: (1) the multiple perspectives in that debate, and (2) to put those perspectives in the context of the universal tier in MTSS. At the end of the day, academic content standards have been, and continue to be, a part of the educational system in the United States. As such, it is important that we, as educators, are informed about those standards and know how to use them effectively. With that said, some of the most common criticisms of the CCSS are that (1) they were not validated as research-based before being implemented, (2) teachers are not well-enough prepared to implement them, (3) textbooks and other curriculum materials published prior to the implementation of CCSS are not well aligned with them, (4) they are a federal overreach and an intrusion on student privacy, and (5) they minimize teachers as professionals.

ISSUE 1: RESEARCH BASE OF THE CCSS

- *Criticism: The CCSS were not validated by research before they were implemented.* The primary perspective of this criticism is that states were quick to adopt the CCSS and require schools to implement them before they had been tested in real-life classrooms, with real-life teachers and students, to see what impact the Standards would have on student learning. Without testing the Standards in smaller pilot projects, it was inappropriate for states to require schools to implement them. There is little debate about whether or not the Standards themselves were tested before adoption or implementation; they were not.

- *Support: The CCSS were developed based on research-based content and rely on aligned systems.* Supporters of the CCSS point to the fact that the Standards are internationally benchmarked and developed using information from research on what is important for students to know and be able to do in order to be college and career ready by the time they graduate. Furthermore, the impact of standards on student learning is the result of many factors, not just their content. Of central importance is that teachers provide adequate opportunities for students to learn what is in the Standards and that content needs to be rigorous (e.g., Gamoran, Porter, Smithson, & White, 1997). This holds true for students from the full range of socioeconomic levels and for students who have a wide range of prior achievement. Furthermore, assessments used to measure student learning, as part of a comprehensive and balanced assessment system, should be aligned with the CCSS. This alignment requirement can be viewed as necessary to be able to determine the impact the Standards have on student learning.

ISSUE 2: SPEED OF IMPLEMENTATION EXPECTATIONS

- *Criticism: Expectations to implement the Standards were too fast for states to be adequately prepared.* When the CCSS were first adopted by states, and schools were expected to start implementing the Standards, a great deal of concern was expressed by teachers, administrators, and other educators that not enough time was provided for teachers to prepare to implement them. In some cases, schools were given only 1 or 2 years to “fully implement” the Standards. States did not have enough time to develop and provide the professional learning programs and support to schools that were needed to implement the Standards effectively.

- *Support: The speed and nature of implementation expectations are flexible.* Supporters of the CCSS often point out that issues related to the speed of implementation expectations are not dictated by the CCSS per se. States have flexibility in how they increase the supports and professional learning needed by teachers to increase their preparedness, while taking an approach of improving implementation of the CCSS over time. State preparedness has increased faster than anticipated due to the fact that resources can be shared across the country, since most states have adopted the Standards (or a form of them).

ISSUE 3: ALIGNMENT OF TEXTBOOKS AND OTHER CURRICULUM MATERIALS

- *Criticism: There are very few textbooks and curriculum materials aligned with the CCSS.* Related to the speed of implementation expectations, critics of the CCSS often claim that the options schools have for textbooks and other curriculum materials aligned with the CCSS are very limited. In addition, there has been growing distrust of the textbook industry because of the claims that some publishers make that their materials are “aligned” with the CCSS. However, upon inspection, educators and researchers often find that the claims on the shiny gold “Aligned with the Common Core” sticker on the front cover of the materials is misleading, at best. Coupled with many educators’ feeling of uncertainty about how well the materials they find online, get from colleagues, or develop themselves align with the CCSS, critics often claim that it is unreasonable to expect teachers to implement the CCSS.

- *Support: Alignment of textbooks and curriculum materials is improving since the development of the CCSS.* Supporters of the CCSS will often point out that a variety of resources and tools have been developed and made freely available online to help educators and publishers of curriculum materials review and develop materials more tightly aligned with the CCSS. For example, Achieve, the CCSSO, and Student Achievement Partners have developed a resource called the Toolkit for Evaluating Alignment of Instructional and Assessment Materials (Achieve, Inc., Council of Chief State School Officers, & Student Achievement Partners, 2014). The purpose of the toolkit is to catalyze the impact that the CCSS can have on student achievement by increasing the prevalence of CCSS-aligned, high-quality instructional and assessment materials.

- Furthermore, researchers and educational organizations have started formally reviewing textbooks and other curriculum materials for CCSS alignment and making those reviews freely available online, such as Achieve the Core, Ed Reports, and the Open Education Resources Commons (OER Commons). Supporters claim that the CCSS have made it possible for unprecedented cross-state collaborations, leveraging the collective wisdom and influence of the education community to rapidly increase access to high-quality, standards-aligned instructional materials and to reduce costs to districts.

ISSUE 4: ROLE OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

- *Criticism: The CCSS are a product of federal overreach.* One of the most-cited criticisms of the CCSS is that the federal government has a significant and negative hand in the development and implementation of the Standards. In addition to accusations of backroom deals with influential groups that shaped the content and rapid implementation expectations of the CCSS, critics point to two main actions that involved the federal government. First was the U.S. Department of Education's requirement that states adopt college- and career-readiness standards in order to obtain a waiver for NCLB requirements that coincided with the rolling out of the CCSS. For critics, this requirement was viewed as the federal government's attempt to coerce states into adopting the CCSS. Second, the U.S. Department of Education also provided funding for two state-led assessment consortia, the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC), and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) to develop assessments aligned with the CCSS. For critics, this was viewed as providing financial benefits to both states and testing companies to engage in more unnecessary testing.

- *Support: The CCSS are a state-led effort.* Supporters of the CCSS will often point out that the federal government neither led nor paid for the development of the CCSS. The development of the CCSS was led by the NGA and the CCSSO. It was launched in 2009 by state leaders, including governors and state commissioners of education from 48 states, two territories, and the District of Columbia. In addition, NCLB waivers did not require adoption of the CCSS. States could adopt a different set of college- and career-readiness standards, including developing their own. States were also free to develop or select their own large-scale accountability assessments. Since 2010, many states have decided to adapt the CCSS, or have adopted different standards and assessments.

ISSUE 5: ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT LEARNING

- *Criticism: The CCSS will cause an increase in inappropriate testing.* The era of NCLB was one of increasing angst and backlash from educators regarding the use of testing. In particular, the use of large-scale, standardized summative assessments to make high-stakes decisions about areas such as school funding, whether or not teachers and principals kept their jobs, and the public's perception of schools contributed to an increase in the

stress educators experienced. Inside these concerns is perhaps one more directly related to the teacher–student experience: namely, that these assessments are not sensitive to student learning from week to week, month to month, and don't provide timely, instructionally relevant information. Critics have viewed the federal funding of SBAC and PARCC as an attempt to further standardize education across the country by using tools that are punitive and not instructionally relevant.

- *Support: The CCSS can help drive more appropriate assessment practices.* Supporters of the CCSS will often point out that the Standards do not come with testing requirements or even tests. They detail important knowledge for students to acquire and be able to use. As college- and career-readiness standards, the CCSS contain a wide range of higher-order thinking skills that are difficult to assess with large-scale, standardized summative assessments. Recognizing this, as well as the compelling research behind formative assessment practices (e.g., Black & Harrison, 2006), both SBAC and PARCC are also developing resources to support comprehensive, balanced assessment systems (i.e., interim, formative, and diagnostic tools) in addition to summative assessments. These are tools that support teachers to make day-to-day instructional decisions.

ISSUE 6: RESPECT FOR THE PROFESSIONALISM OF TEACHERS

- *Criticism: Standards minimize teachers as professionals.* Perhaps at the center of all of these criticisms is a sense that teachers are not getting the respect they deserve as professionals. The resistance from critics when states were mandated to develop their own standards that were required to be implemented in the era of NCLB escalated when most of the United States adopted or adapted the CCSS. Critics argue that not only were teachers not represented in the development or adoption of the CCSS, but that even having standards as requirements was a negative intrusion into the decision making of classroom teachers who know what is best for their students. Additionally, many critics blame the CCSS for the other issues raised above, because each of these issues magnified and accelerated the impact of those issues.

- *Support: Standards help teachers maximize their time and skills in working with students.* Supporters of the CCSS will often point out that the Standards were developed with the input of a wide range of teachers and other education stakeholders. An extensive review of the development process is described at www.corestandards.org. Furthermore, many supporters of the CCSS claim that the Standards were developed to support teachers in their efforts to meet the needs of all students, not to restrict teachers or to convey a lack of respect. As professional learning and instructional resources have become more available, teachers are beginning to feel more comfortable with the CCSS. Teachers spend countless hours trying to meet the needs of their students, being asked to do more and more with less and less. Supporters of the CCSS claim that by defining at least part of what students are supposed to know and be able to do, that can help free teachers to spend more time understanding what their students need to be successful in learning those standards.

Important Policies: Every Student Succeeds Act

The combination of NCLB and IDEA brought an unprecedented level of pressure and external accountability to schools in the United States. As the years have passed since 2001, backlash against NCLB has increased as well. A great deal of criticism was directed toward the U.S. Department of Education for several reasons, including what many perceived to be an overreliance on test scores and unrealistic expectations that all students be proficient in reading and mathematics. At the same time, with the increased attention on test scores, many in the public as well as the research community were critical of states that set the bar for student proficiency on their tests too low, and of schools that continued to demonstrate stagnant student achievement.

NCLB was reauthorized in 2015, and is now known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA; 2015). Currently, much remains to be defined and understood about the practical implications of ESSA when compared to NCLB. However, one of the points that is currently known is that even though the adequate yearly progress method of holding schools accountable is no longer in place, what is in place is the continued use of large-scale, standardized tests required for grades 3–8 and one grade in high school. These tests still need to be aligned with high-quality standards—which currently means college- and career-readiness standards like the CCSS. Moving forward, state departments of education have been given increased responsibility to define accountability systems for their states to replace those in the NCLB. How this effort will impact the implementation of effective universal tier practices within MTSS remains to be seen. With that said, this is an excellent opportunity for educators to get involved in the opportunities offered by states to shape what ultimately becomes the accountability systems for ESSA in your states.

THE UNIVERSAL TIER AND MTSS: QUALITY COMPONENTS

When defining high-quality universal instruction, the challenge is to develop instruction that is articulated and taught in the way it is intended to be taught. We also expect universal instruction to be viable, with content sequenced and paced appropriately in the time available for instruction. In addition, universal instruction needs to be rigorous and challenging to all students. And finally, we want universal instruction to be relevant and make the connection between what is being learned and students' everyday lives. To overcome these challenges and ensure high-quality instruction, several components must be in place.

The Center on Response to Intervention (www.rti4success.org) has developed a rubric for assessing the implementation of an MTSS framework. The multilevel instruction section of the rubric focuses on universal instruction, and five key areas are included as indicators of quality universal instruction: (1) research-based curriculum and materials, (2) articulation of teaching and learning processes, (3) differentiated instruction, (4) standards-based, and (5) exceeding benchmark levels. First, we expect that all universal curriculum materials and instructional strategies are research-based for all students to the extent possible. Sec-

ond, we expect that teaching and learning objectives are well articulated from one grade to another and within grade levels so that students have highly similar experiences, regardless of their assigned teacher. Third, we expect that teachers can describe how they differentiate instruction for students on, below, or above grade level, using classroom-level data to identify and address the needs of students. Fourth, we expect that universal reading and math curricula are aligned with the CCSS or other state standards. Finally, we expect that schools provide enrichment opportunities for students exceeding benchmark levels and that these opportunities are implemented consistently at all grade levels. We know that in order to meet all of these expectations, teachers need relevant and timely data to inform their instruction, and schools need to be organized in a way that provides ample collaboration time for teacher teams to use these data to inform their instructional practices.

BARRIERS TO ADDRESSING UNIVERSAL TIER INEFFECTIVENESS

Making lasting impact on the universal tier is not something that can be done with a few small changes implemented by a handful of dedicated crusaders. Because of that, and other reasons, improving the universal tier is often avoided or even ignored. Common barriers to addressing the universal tier are described next.

Assuming That MTSS Are about Intervention

Many schools go into MTSS endeavors expecting to start by identifying the students who need interventions and exploring the interventions that will change outcomes in their buildings for these at-risk students. This is, in fact, how many of us were trained to implement RTI decades ago, and it appears to be a logical place to start. However, we found that the practice of first identifying students with additional needs rarely resulted in *all* students performing successfully for multiple reasons. First, we relied on the existing infrastructure to provide interventions. Rarely were new resources added or existing resources used in a different manner, which resulted in the system “maxing out.” Teachers were doing all they could with the resources available, as they continue to do today. Second, interventions were often created one student at a time, which resulted in low-intensity, ineffective practices being put in place. Furthermore, the master schedule often was never modified. For instance, a student in fourth grade may be identified as a student who struggles with math. An intervention is identified, but, due to staff availability and the schedule, the student receives the intervention for only 15 minutes a day, 4 days a week. Assuming that this intervention is matched to the student’s need, the lack of intensity is likely to result in very slow learning progress. Instead, we assert that initial MTSS work must address the foundation of universal instruction. The universal tier is the first intervention for all students and is our opportunity to have the largest impact on student achievement by creating a sustainable and strong learning foundation upon which to build edifying supports for those who need them.

Assuming We Have Done It Already

We also encounter school teams that shun universal tier improvements because they believe this work has been occurring for years in their district. This work on the universal level is ongoing, so it is understandable that schools would want to shift focus and try new interventions to support struggling students. However, the lack of success at improving universal tier services does not absolve us from continuing this important work. It should, in fact, give us greater urgency to get it right!

Challenging Beliefs about Learners' Abilities to Achieve Academic Success

Many educators sometimes believe that outside, unalterable factors are strong enough to keep a child from learning, despite our best efforts. In these cases, excuses are made for not providing the most intensive interventions, delivered with relentless fidelity by the best teachers. In these cases we often ask teachers to think about which parents they want to tell that the system has given up on their child. It is important to empower teachers by reviewing the research on factors related to student achievement. Chapter 6 discusses several high-impact research-based instructional strategies that are related to curriculum, teaching, and the school environment.

Most educators believe (and research supports) the importance of holding high expectations for students. We know that students often rise to the expectations set for them. At the same time, our expectations may be directly related to what we have seen happen in the past. So, if we have always seen about 70% of students meeting expectations, we will not be surprised when only 70% meet current expectations. Subsequently, we will not necessarily feel a sense of urgency to change something about the system in order to improve achievement. Additionally, if we have seen students who struggle in kindergarten continue to struggle through their school career, we will start to have lower expectations for those students who have academic and/or social-emotional challenges early on. In reality, the goal of system improvement is to allow each and every child to succeed. Overcoming complacency with low achievement is a barrier that will need to be actively addressed throughout the process of system improvement. As achievement rises, though, this complacency will diminish, becoming less of a concern.

It is also interesting to examine our expectations about interventions. Additional resources (time, instruction, etc.) are provided, in theory, in order to raise achievement and close the achievement gap. However, often a team predicts that just the opposite will occur. They will hypothesize that an intervention will not have the intended impact and the child will need more intensive intervention, prior to implementation of an initial intervention! This pattern should be addressed immediately, every time it is conveyed. If members of the team believe an intervention will not be successful, it should be intensified immediately.

The Swinging Pendulum of Initiatives

Education is notorious for the syndrome of the swinging pendulum of initiatives. Think about it: What is the main professional learning focus for the current year? What was it last

year? The year before? Chances are your answer is not the same for each year. If we believe that something is worth our time, and our time is precious, our focus should remain relentless on the implementation of that work, regardless of a new school year and a new fad.

The Culture of Closed Classroom Doors

*Until recently, our education system was notorious for its culture of isolation. Each classroom teacher was assigned a group of students, and it was his or her responsibility to ensure success. Collaboration with other staff did not happen regularly (aside from professional learning days). With the more recent focus on professional learning communities (PLCs), the responsibility for success of grade-level students is shifting to all teachers in that grade level. We also see additional instructional resources being allocated to the universal tier (e.g., instructional coaches, paraprofessional support, specialized services). School culture should ensure that teachers feel safe discussing their instructional challenges with each other. Teachers should also feel comfortable with grouping children differently, which may result in children shifting classrooms, or even grade levels, for particular lessons. Furthermore, teachers should feel comfortable accepting additional support into their classrooms. In those cases, we also need to ensure that *everyone* who teaches each child feels accountable for that child's success. It is not enough to collaborate. We have to take responsibility for our outcomes and share our results—celebrations and challenges alike.*

System versus Teacher Issues

When poor student outcomes occur in education, the system is quick to blame the teacher. The result is that individual teachers feel afraid and then unwilling to share their instructional challenges. In reality, when teachers are not successful, it is most often a system-level problem. Teacher success is dependent on many variables, including the materials to which they have access, the training they receive, the additional support and collaboration that are available to them, and countless other variables. When teachers are not successful, it is the job of the *system* to identify barriers and address them.

Lack of Knowledge about the Current State of the Universal Tier

Educators have a long history of trouble-shooting problems with individual students, and they often come ready to solve those problems with a comprehensive knowledge of the student's skill sets. System-level needs are much more challenging to address for multiple reasons. First, we find that principals often are not aware of the universal instructional practices being used in their schools. They know that training has occurred and materials have been purchased, but they are unable to answer the question, for example, "What does second-grade reading look like in your school?" Even more surprising, perhaps, is that they know how many minutes are scheduled for literacy instruction but rarely know how the time is being used. We find, over and over, that the schedule does not necessarily match practice for multiple, systemic reasons. At times, it is because classes such as art and physi-

cal education interfere. Other times, teachers have modified the master schedule to meet other classroom needs. And sometimes, other student services, such as speech therapy, interrupt universal instruction. Adequate knowledge of instructional practices in a school is essential if a principal is to lead the effort to improve the effectiveness of the universal tier.

Lack of Collaborative Teams

Collaboration is essential if school improvement efforts are to succeed. Teams allow staff to share ideas and discuss problems. They also allow for improved consistency of implementation when teams discuss new practices, model effective instructional practices for each other, examine student data, and problem-solve implementation problems. However, even though collaborative teams are important, an MTSS adoption survey (Spectrum K–12 Solutions, 2010) indicates that only 25% of districts implementing MTSS have collaborative leadership teams in place! Without these teams, extensive systems change is unlikely to occur.

THE CHALLENGE

After reading through the introduction to this book, with discussions of stagnant student achievement and lists of systemic barriers to successful implementation of universal tier changes, it is tempting to throw up our hands and say, “Too much!” This is an understandable reaction, as it is hard enough to navigate the day-to-day challenges of teaching students without needing to figure out how to make potentially significant changes to universal instruction. However, we have embarked on the journey of writing this book to share with you our experiences in tackling this change process.

We have found that making systemic changes to the universal tier is a big challenge. But, we have also seen amazing professionals undertaking extraordinary challenges to make meaningful changes to universal instruction that effect a difference in the lives of their students. All of us have worked with multiple school districts and have witnessed impressive outcomes for all students when universal instruction is the “target.” So, we pose to you that it is, in fact, possible to engage in the ongoing process of improving universal instruction. After all, educators are in the business of facilitating continual improvement to enhance outcomes. The key to success in making effective changes to universal instruction is starting with a positive perspective, thinking systemically, and working collaboratively. We highlight these key factors throughout this book as we describe our approach to improving universal instruction.

Our challenge and your challenge, then, is this: to use a positive, systemic, collaborative approach to improving universal instruction. To accomplish this goal, we outline four actions for teams: (1) Dig deeply into universal tier work; (2) allocate time and resources to this system-level work; (3) identify barriers and develop plans to address them; and (4) continue conversations by monitoring, evaluating, and modifying action plans as implementation unfolds.

Digging into Universal Tier Work

What exactly do we mean by “digging into universal tier work”? After all, teachers are working hard every day to support the learning of their students; constantly trying to figure out what those students need; and adjusting what they, as teachers, are doing to help them. Many teachers believe they are already digging in! When we talk about digging into universal tier work, we mean that the whole school is working collaboratively to reflect on the work happening at all levels as a way to ensure effective instruction. Truly digging into universal tier work is a long-term commitment to improvement; it is not an initiative, a purchase, or a formation of professional learning teams. Digging into universal tier work requires regular, systemic work that involves everyone in the process, and that is considered part of regular practice and not something else to add on top of what is already done day in and day out. The barriers to success can be many and varied and require ongoing attention and effort. We address some ways to commit to the work of improving the universal tier in Chapters 4 and 5.

Allocating Time and Resources

Allocating time and resources to improving universal instruction may seem daunting and overwhelming to educators. After all, we haven’t even discussed all of the important work that is needed to support targeted and intensive interventions, with progress monitoring, for learners who are struggling and need additional support. Although this is understandable, it is nonetheless critical that districts and schools find a way to push past this barrier. Districts and schools that ensure that analyzing universal instruction is a top priority by embedding it in their school cultures remove the barrier of feeling overwhelmed. One step toward making universal instruction a top priority is to declare it publicly and to document the decision. Many districts include improving universal instruction in their strategic plans. At the risk of minimizing this important step (which is certainly not our intention), the next step is necessary to ensure that the intention is met: namely, to allocate time and resources to engage in the work.

Taking this step can also seem overwhelming. After all, time and resources are typically in short supply. That is why it’s important that digging into the universal tier becomes embedded in the culture, and not viewed as an add-on to existing work. Another way to put it is this: You may be at a place where you need to think differently about allocating the resources that you already have in order to truly prioritize digging into universal tier work. This is a very common conversation that is had, and it can be a difficult one. It is important to understand and believe that this conversation is needed, not because people have been making bad choices or have not already dedicated time and resources to working on the universal tier. But in our experience with schools implementing an MTSS framework, discussions about universal tier typically focus exclusively on curriculum materials and collecting universal screening data. After a few years, these discussions shift to the next new “initiative.” The result is that there has not been enough time to facilitate conversations about deep, meaningful improvements to the universal tier, to implement strategies for improvements, and to evaluate the impact of these changes.

The challenge, then, is figuring out how to allocate adequate time and resources to ensure that the work of improving the universal tier is regular, ongoing, and deeply embedded in the fabric of the district and school. Every school system is different in terms of available resources and the needs that must be addressed. There is, therefore, no specific amount of time or resources a school system needs to allocate to improve the universal tier. In Chapters 4 and 5, we describe some specific ways to determine how much time and which types of resources are needed specific to the local context. Briefly, it is necessary to examine overall levels of achievement using information such as universal screening data, policy requirements, and degree of consensus and skills to engage in the work. These considerations can help with decision making regarding budgets, improvement and professional learning plans, and the master schedule that should all help drive what happens, day in and day out, in districts and schools.

Identifying Barriers and Developing Plans to Address Them

Earlier in this chapter, we identified several common barriers to reflecting on and working to improve the universal tier. We revisit these barriers throughout the book. Barriers need to be identified and addressed at this global level, just to get the conversations and work started. Once the work has begun, you will examine barriers at an even deeper level by using the practices and strategies that we describe in this book.

At times, it may feel like the process is getting personal and focuses too much on the negative and not enough on the positive. Let us be perfectly clear: Digging into universal tier work is about building on the strength of what you and your colleagues are already doing, and providing you with the resources and support you need to do it in a more efficient and effective manner. This is an important point because it can influence how everyone collectively thinks about trying to improve the universal tier. It is common to hear educators talk about all of the factors that influence student learning that are outside of their control (e.g., socioeconomic status, home factors, medical diagnoses). In this book, we focus on factors that are under the direct control of educators—curriculum, instruction, environment, and schoolwide organization. We emphasize all the factors we *can* control that have an influence on student outcomes.

The challenge, then, is for districts and schools to examine their systems with an assumption that the solutions lie within the local context. So, this is not about blaming those who work in the school or viewing the problem as located within students or their caretakers. Instead, we ask districts and schools a basic but challenging question: “What are the barriers to successful implementation of the universal tier?” Thinking about the work of improving the universal tier is foundational to everything else that needs to be done. The assumption is that there are *elements in the system* preventing teachers, administrators, and other school personnel from successfully implementing some necessary aspects of the universal tier. Once the barriers are accurately identified and successfully removed, the educators working in that system will have a clearer path to successfully implementing universal tier practices.

For example, a school may be losing instructional time due to noninstructional events like morning announcements and assemblies. In this example, the barriers to implementing

a schedule that maximizes instructional time are noninstructional activities that may be positive but are often overlooked as factors that can interfere with instruction. Removing these barriers may be as simple as having a committee review the schedule and provide alternatives to how announcements and assemblies are handled. In Chapters 5–8, we go into more detail about ways in which districts and schools can identify and remove barriers to successful universal tier implementation, and to monitor the impact of those changes over time.

Continuing the Conversations

As we have said, improving the universal tier is not about purchasing materials, nor should it be viewed as a new “initiative.” Improving the universal tier is about collaborative, ongoing work that gets embedded in the fabric of the district and school. Even as barriers to implementation are successfully identified and removed, it is important to continuously evaluate improvements to the universal tier. As new students come through, as school personnel come and go, as new requirements and exciting new initiatives come to the forefront over time, it is easy to lose track of what has already been successfully changed and which efforts were not as effective at positively impacting change.

The challenge, then, is to ensure that the positive changes are sustained and that less effective practices and strategies are not repeated. To successfully face this challenge, it is critical that the culture of collaboration continue to be nurtured, and that the positive changes that have been made are documented, regularly revisited, and ultimately sustained over time. Strategies to keep the conversations going include incorporating them into local handbooks, other policy documents, and the schedule and to show staff how those conversations are acted upon and lead to positive change.

ORGANIZATION OF THIS BOOK

Throughout this book, we suggest using an action planning process that incorporates answering the following five questions:

1. Is universal instruction effective?
2. If the universal tier is not sufficient, what needs must be addressed?
3. How will the needs identified in universal instruction be addressed?
4. How will the effectiveness and efficiency of universal instruction improvements be monitored over time?
5. Have improvements to universal instruction been effective?

Chapters 2 and 3 provide prerequisite information on learning targets and universal assessments. Then we dive into the five questions just listed. Chapter 4 provides information on how teams can use assessment data to determine if a school’s universal instruction is effective. Chapter 5 provides a framework for determining why universal instruction may

not be effective. Chapter 6 describes how to address the needs identified to improve universal instruction. Chapter 7 discusses how teams can monitor the effectiveness and efficiency of universal instruction and changes in the universal tier over time. Finally, Chapter 8 provides a framework for evaluating improvements to universal instruction. We conclude with a chapter on “continuing the journey” and tips for sustainability. The challenges are many, and the work is daunting, but we know it is possible to achieve. The universal tier impacts each and every child who walks into the school and therefore is worth the time and attention needed to improve it. Throughout this book, we offer strategies and supports to engage in universal tier improvement, as well as encouragement to continue this journey!

Discussion questions are included at the end of each chapter to support district, building, and grade-level teams as they read this book. As each chapter is read, the questions are designed to prompt reflection and to be applied to the specific setting of each school.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How is the universal tier defined in your building or district?
2. What process does your building or district use to ensure that universal curriculum and instructional materials are research-based?
3. What else, in addition to curriculum and instructional materials, is used to support student learning in the universal tier?
4. What assumptions do educators in your building or district hold about the MTSS framework? If the majority of educators believe that the framework is about providing supplemental and intensive interventions to at-risk students, how will you go about addressing this implementation barrier?
5. How are educators in your building or district challenged to hold, and held accountable for, high expectations for all students? How does the system support a focus on “alterable variables” or factors that can be changed within the instructional day?
6. How familiar are educators in your building or district with the CCSS? What supports are in place to assist teachers to implement the Standards?
7. How has your building or district established a collaborative culture for discourse and decision making?