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We Built Interventions, Then We Learned to Protect Tier 1: How One Middle School Reimagined MTSS Around What Students Actually Need



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The Question That Changed Our Work

"If you build an intervention class, you will find students to fill it."

I had heard some version of that warning before. At first, it sounded almost cynical. Schools create intervention classes because students need support. If those classes are full, doesn't that mean we are meeting needs?

Over the past several years at Fox Lane Middle School, our team began to understand the warning differently.

We had set out with a worthy goal: to build a Multi-Tiered System of Supports strong enough that no student would fall through the cracks. We wanted clearer structures for identifying student needs, stronger Tier 2 and Tier 3 options, and better systems for determining whether those supports were actually producing meaningful growth.

And we built them.

We strengthened our Tier 2 and Tier 3 entry and exit criteria. We expanded intervention offerings. We created WIN—What I Need—to address executive functioning, organization, work completion, and academic habits. We developed a Foundational Literacy Skills class focused specifically on phonemic awareness, decoding, and fluency. We created integrated supports that could provide students with academic and organizational help within their daily schedules. We also began building stronger structures for students transitioning out of intervention so that support did not simply disappear once they exited a tier.

Those changes mattered.

But as our systems became more sophisticated, our thinking began to shift.

The question was no longer simply, "How do we make sure students receive intervention?"

A more difficult question emerged:

> *How do we make sure intervention does not unnecessarily separate students from the very environment in which we ultimately want them to succeed?*

That question changed our work.

From Filling Programs to Identifying Needs

Many MTSS conversations begin with genuine concern.

A student's STAR data raises questions. Report-card performance begins to decline. Work completion becomes inconsistent. Classroom behaviors change. Reading is laborious. Organization is poor. A student appears overwhelmed by grade-level expectations.

It is easy for the next question to become:

> *"What intervention should we put this student in?"*

Our team began trying to resist that question.

Instead, we started asking:

> *What specific skill deficit or barrier is preventing this student from accessing learning, and what targeted support is most likely to address it?*

That shift—from concern to precision—has been one of the most meaningful parts of our evolution. "Struggling" is not a diagnosis.

Two students can both have low grades and require entirely different responses. One may need explicit foundational reading instruction. Another may be able to read grade-level material but struggle with organization and work completion. Another may need support applying academic skills independently across multiple classes. A multilingual learner may be developing English proficiency while demonstrating strengths that are obscured when we look only at a single assessment or classroom outcome.

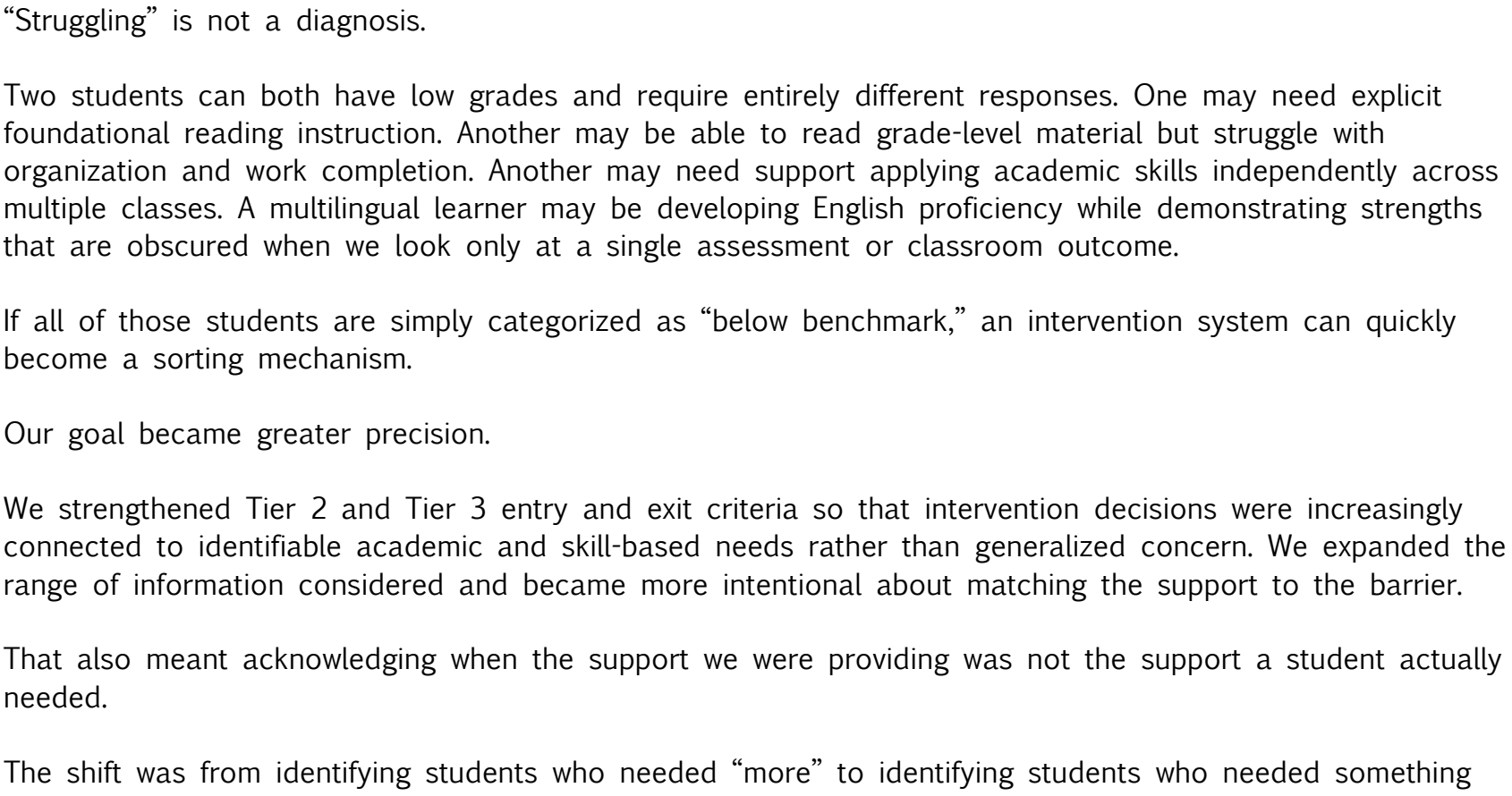
If all of those students are simply categorized as "below benchmark," an intervention system can quickly become a sorting mechanism.

Our goal became greater precision.

We strengthened Tier 2 and Tier 3 entry and exit criteria so that intervention decisions were increasingly connected to identifiable academic and skill-based needs rather than generalized concern. We expanded the range of information considered and became more intentional about matching the support to the barrier.

That also meant acknowledging when the support we were providing was not the support a student actually needed.

The shift was from identifying students who needed "more" to identifying students who needed something **different, targeted, and responsive**.



Changing the Meeting Changed the Work

One of the most significant changes in our collaborative practice came through the evolution of our problem-solving meetings.

What began as Problem Solving Meetings developed into what we now call PRISM meetings.

The name changed, but much more importantly, the conversation changed.

A productive MTSS meeting cannot simply be a collection of adults describing everything that is going wrong for a student.

“The grades are low.”

“He doesn’t complete anything.”

“She seems lost.”

“He needs more support.”

Those statements may all be true. But none of them, by themselves, tell us what to do next.

Our PRISM process asks us to slow down and look across multiple data points. Depending on the student, that can include STAR performance, report-card data, classroom behaviors and observations, student work, attendance, intervention information, and other relevant evidence.

From there, the team works to identify the specific barrier affecting success, develop a clear and measurable goal, establish an action plan, determine which educators are responsible for particular supports, and then monitor the student’s response.

The goal is not simply to document that a student is having difficulty.

The goal is to develop a hypothesis about what the student needs and determine whether our response is actually working.

That sounds obvious. In practice, it requires discipline.

It also requires the right people at the table.

Classroom teachers, interventionists, counselors, administrators, and support staff each see different parts of a student’s experience. Over time, we have intentionally strengthened communication with our ESOL teachers as well. Their expertise has helped us develop a more comprehensive understanding of our multilingual learners and better analyze the root causes of academic challenges.

When a multilingual learner is not experiencing success, for example, the question cannot simply be whether the student is “behind.” We have to consider language development, literacy skills, instructional access, previous educational experiences, and other factors before determining what kind of support is appropriate.

That deeper collaboration allows us to make better decisions.

Families are another critical part of the process.

We have expanded timely communication with parents and guardians so that family engagement is not simply something that occurs after an intervention decision has been made. Families can help us understand what we may not see in school, provide additional context, and work alongside the team in developing effective supports.

We have also strengthened K–12 MTSS collaboration through ongoing conversations across grade levels. Those meetings have helped us better understand students as they transition from one level to another, articulate our systems more clearly, and work toward greater consistency in how supports are identified and provided.

The stronger our process has become, the clearer one lesson has been:

Data becomes valuable when it changes what adults do next.

Intervention Cannot Become an Address

Another significant shift involved how we thought about movement between tiers.

Too often, intervention can become an address.

A student enters Tier 3 and, before long, Tier 3 begins to feel like part of the student's identity. Adults become accustomed to the placement. Schedules get built around it. The intervention continues because it exists rather than because current evidence tells us it remains the right response.

But a tier should describe the intensity of support a student needs at a particular moment, not who the student is.

We have worked to create a more fluid system.

Students should be able to move between levels of support as their needs change. Equally important, exiting an intervention should not mean that every support suddenly disappears.

This became particularly important for students successfully exiting Tier 2.

Rather than simply returning students to their regular classes and hoping that progress continues, we developed a system of embedded monitoring through MTSS teacher push-in support, particularly in Social Studies and Math. Students can receive support in the environment where they are being asked to apply their skills while teachers continue monitoring progress in real time.

That bridge matters.



If a student has spent months receiving targeted instruction and then demonstrates enough growth to exit, our response should not be:

> *"Great. You're done."*

The better question is:

> *What support will help this student successfully transfer those skills into the classroom and continue moving toward independence?*

Integrated support gives us a way to respond quickly if difficulties reemerge while keeping the student connected to core instruction.

Moving down a tier is not the absence of support.

It should represent a change in support.

When More of the Same Is Not the Answer

One student's experience helped crystallize this lesson for our team.

I will call him "R."

R entered our system receiving daily Tier 3 literacy intervention. On paper, we were doing what an MTSS system is supposed to do: identify a student experiencing difficulty, provide intensive support, and monitor progress.

Except R was not making the gains we expected.

There was an easy conclusion available to us: perhaps he simply needed more of the intervention he was already receiving.

Instead, the team went back to the question beneath the placement:

What does R actually need?

Additional assessment showed that his primary need was not general reading comprehension. He needed support in foundational reading skills.

That distinction mattered.

R was placed in our Foundational Literacy Skills class, where instruction focused more specifically on phonemic development, decoding, and fluency.

This time, we saw meaningful growth.

R eventually made enough progress to successfully exit Tier 3 literacy intervention. He transitioned into Tier 2 WIN support, where the emphasis could shift toward executive functioning, organization, work completion, and academic habits. Integrated supports continued throughout his schedule.

By the end of eighth grade, R had experienced a highly successful year and was preparing to transition to high school.

His story represents more than the success of one intervention class.

It represents the importance of being willing to question our first hypothesis.

Had we simply increased the intensity of the original intervention, we might have spent considerably more time providing a support that was not addressing the root of his difficulty.

R's experience reinforced a principle that now shapes many of our conversations:

> *When a student does not respond to an intervention, the answer is not always to increase the dose. Sometimes we need to reconsider our hypothesis.*

Providing more of the wrong support is not responsiveness.

The Unexpected Destination: Tier 1

Perhaps the most important lesson from our efforts to strengthen Tier 2 and Tier 3 has been somewhat ironic.

e better our intervention system became, the more convinced we became that our most important MTSS work was actually Tier 1.

That does not mean intensive intervention is unnecessary. Some students absolutely require specialized, explicit, and sustained support.

But Tier 1 is not simply what happens before intervention.

It is where students spend the majority of their school day. It is where they encounter grade-level content, build relationships with teachers and peers, develop academic identities, and learn how to navigate increasingly complex expectations.

The goal of MTSS cannot be to become increasingly efficient at removing students from that environment.



Our goal has increasingly become to keep students connected to strong Tier 1 instruction whenever possible while adding targeted support based on demonstrated need.

That realization has shaped where we believe the work needs to go next.

One priority is creating stronger, longer-term partnerships between intervention teachers and classroom teachers. Building trust, shared understanding, and a common instructional approach takes time. Longer-term pairings can make possible deeper co-planning, more consistent use of literacy strategies across settings, and more seamless support for students throughout the day.

The expertise developed in intervention classrooms should travel.

When interventionists discover strategies that help students access text, decode unfamiliar words, organize their thinking, complete complex tasks, or communicate their ideas, that knowledge should not remain isolated within an intervention period.

It should influence classroom instruction.

We are also exploring whether there is a need for a literacy-focused support centered more explicitly on writing development. Some students demonstrate stronger reading skills but continue to experience difficulty with written expression, organization, and communicating ideas effectively. As with every addition to our continuum, however, the question cannot simply be, “Can we build another class?”

We now have to ask:

> *What does the student need, where can that need best be addressed, and what can we strengthen in Tier 1 before creating another destination?*

That question protects us from building programs simply because we can.

The Work Belongs to the Team

One of the most important parts of telling this story is being clear about where the work came from.

The ideas and systems described here were developed through the expertise, persistence, and collaboration of our educators.

Our teacher leaders—Lauren Gallivan, Katya Martinez, and Nichole Shortman—have been central to moving this work forward. They have helped examine our existing practices, identify gaps, develop new approaches, and continually push the team to think more precisely about what students need.

Our district MTSS coordinator, Amy Unger, has served as both a guide and an ally. Her perspective has helped us connect building-level innovation with broader K–12 thinking and strengthen alignment as students move through our district.

Their work reflects something that can be easy to miss when we talk about school improvement: meaningful change rarely comes from one person having a particularly good idea.

It comes from people learning together.

Leadership as Waymaking

As an assistant principal, this process has also reshaped how I think about my own role in school improvement.

I did not need to be the person with the best intervention idea.

The expertise was already in the building.

My responsibility was to help make a way for it.

I have come to think of that role as being a waymaker.

Sometimes that means protecting time for collaboration.

Sometimes it means connecting people who need to be in the same conversation.

Sometimes it means asking a question when a familiar system has become too comfortable.

Sometimes it means helping an idea survive the very real complications of schedules, staffing, competing priorities, and implementation.

And sometimes it means knowing enough to get out of the way.

Leadership does not have to mean owning the work.

In this case, it has meant trying to create the conditions in which the expertise of Lauren, Katya, Nichole, Amy, and the many educators working alongside them can become sustainable organizational practice.

That requires trust.

It also requires patience.

Systems do not become integrated because we put them on a flowchart. They become integrated through repeated collaboration, shared problem solving, examining results, making mistakes, adjusting course, and being willing to reconsider assumptions.

Our MTSS system is still evolving.

That is not a weakness of the work.

It is the work.

Five Questions to Take Back to Your MTSS Team

No school should try to copy another school's MTSS structure exactly. Schedules, staffing, resources, student populations, and community needs differ.

But the questions can travel.

Here are five that have become increasingly important for us.

1. **Are we identifying students, or identifying needs?**
   Before assigning an intervention, can the team clearly articulate the specific barrier the intervention is intended to address?
   "Below grade level" is not specific enough.
   "Struggling reader" is not specific enough.
   Precision in identifying the need allows greater precision in the response.

2. **Can students move easily in both directions?**
   Intervention should not be a one-way door.
   Clear entry criteria matter, but so do progress monitoring, transition plans, and exit criteria. Students' needs change. Our systems must be capable of changing with them.

3. **What happens after a student exits?**
   Success in intervention does not automatically guarantee success once intervention ends.
   Build a bridge rather than a cliff.
   Determine how the student will be monitored, where support can remain embedded, and how quickly the team can respond if needs reemerge.

4. What are Tier 2 and Tier 3 teaching us about Tier 1?

Interventionists develop deep knowledge about students and effective strategies.
How is that knowledge reaching classroom teachers?
The learning generated through intervention should strengthen the core.

5. Who owns the student?

If we find ourselves saying, “That is an intervention student,” “That is the counselor’s student,” or “That student belongs to another department,” we have probably revealed something important about our system.
Supporting students cannot belong to one teacher, one interventionist, one department, or one tier.
The answer we continue working toward at Fox Lane is simple:
We all do.

The System Is the Intervention

When we began refining MTSS, much of our attention was focused on strengthening Tier 2 and Tier 3. We wanted to ensure that no student fell through the cracks.

That goal has not changed.

What has changed is our understanding of how we accomplish it.

It is not enough to build more places to catch students.

We have to examine why they are falling.

We have to use data to identify needs with greater precision. We have to challenge our hypotheses when students are not responding. We have to create genuine movement between tiers. We have to maintain support as students transition toward greater independence. We have to listen to families. We have to include the expertise of ESOL teachers and other specialists. We have to collaborate across grade levels. And we have to make sure what we learn in Tier 2 and Tier 3 finds its way back into Tier 1.

The purpose of MTSS should not be to create increasingly sophisticated places to send students.

It should be to create an increasingly sophisticated school response to students.

That is the evolution we are still pursuing at Fox Lane Middle School.

Not a perfect intervention system.

A responsive one.

Tim Montalvo is an assistant principal at Fox Lane Middle School in Bedford, New York, where his leadership focuses on instructional equity, belonging, literacy, MTSS, and responsive support for multilingual learners. With more than a decade of experience in adolescent education, teacher development, and school leadership, he works closely with educators to strengthen Tier 1 instruction, scaffold access to learning, and create school cultures where students feel connected and capable. He also teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in education, psychology, and human services at Iona University and the College of Westchester. Across his work, Montalvo bridges K–12 and higher education through practical, relationship-centered approaches that support students, educators, and adult learners.

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