

HOW TO TURN SCHOOL DATA INTO INSIGHTS & ACTION

# An MTSS Guide for District Leaders: Supporting Tier 1 Instruction to Drive Student Growth, Every Day

By Dr. Sarah Brown & Lorri Jensen



Featuring tips and sample meeting agendas  
from MTSS expert Dr. Sarah Brown



Districts collect data to take action. Behind every piece of information are multiple decisions districts make that can serve teachers, leaders, and ultimately, student outcomes.

Districts are not suffering from a lack of data. Rather, it's challenging to take action on all the information within school systems. Every week, leaders log into multiple systems, stare at dashboards and spreadsheets, and walk away asking, "So what do we *actually do next?*"

In the 24-25 school year, educators used an average of 50 unique edtech tools (LearnPlatform by Instructure, 2025). With the use of all of these tools, schools encounter similar patterns, regardless of their size. Their platforms are disconnected, and barriers to rich data use are abundant.

#### Common data challenges districts face:

- Data are fragmented into different programs when leaders need to analyze them side by side
- Access to all the systems becomes cumbersome and time-consuming, resulting in leaders not having access to timely data
- Lack of staff to regularly analyze and make recommendations based on the data
- Data are not tracked relative to local goals
- Implementing next-step actions based on data takes expertise and time



Schools that successfully navigate these common issues do so by implementing a **Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS)**. By aligning existing data to district priorities, acting on local data regularly and efficiently, and using a collaborative improvement process, MTSS empowers leaders to leverage insights to drive student outcomes. MTSS enables teachers and leaders to turn data into meaningful next steps.

This guide is written for district and building leaders who want to design an MTSS that is evidence-aligned and practical. It is designed to close the gap between data and action so that systems, teams, and classrooms move confidently toward their goals in aligned ways. The goal of this guide is to help leaders organize local data, align it to goals and priorities, and use it within a collaborative improvement cycle that drives real instructional change.



### Meet Dr. Sarah Brown

Sarah Brown, PhD, is a consultant and co-author of the best-selling books, *Effective Universal Instruction* and *MTSS for Reading Improvement*. She empowers schools to maximize reading growth through data-driven MTSS with her MTSS Data Academy. She's served in roles including the Bureau Chief leading Special Education and MTSS implementation for Iowa, Special Education Director, Professional Learning Administrator, and School Psychologist. Sarah is passionate about empowering systems to improve outcomes for every learner.



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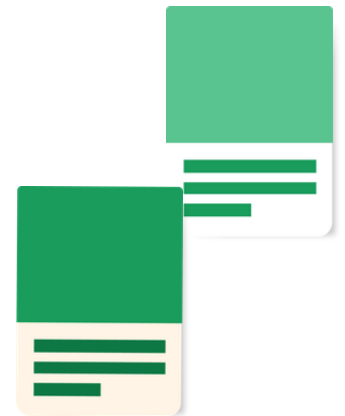
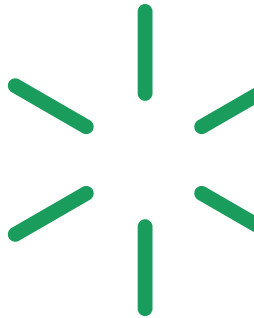
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## What Are the **Tiers of MTSS** ?

MTSS is a multilevel proactive framework that uses data to allocate resources to address both educator and student needs (Brown & Stollar, 2025). MTSS is intended to be proactive and preventative in nature, using ongoing academic, behavioral, social skill, attendance, and other student data to match the right level of instruction and support to the needs of each and every student.

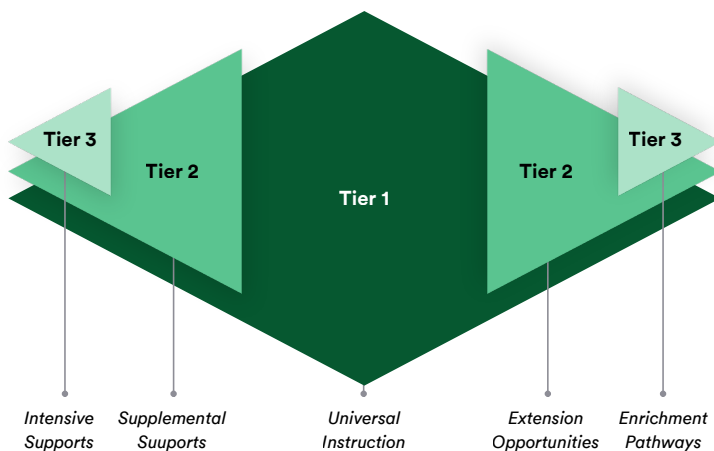
Equally important is *what MTSS is not*. MTSS is *not* a program, a place, a person, or a time of day on the schedule. It is *not* intended to be implemented as just “screen to intervene,” and it is *not* simply “getting kids into Tier 2.” If the majority of students in a grade are flagged as at risk, Tier 1 needs should be considered, as opposed to addressing all needs through Tier 2 and 3 interventions alone.

### Tier 1 is the Foundation. Don't Neglect It!



Universal instruction in Tier 1 is the foundation upon which everything else is built. A strong Tier 1 is essential for scaling student success across a district.

The MTSS Framework



#### Tier 3: Intensive Intervention

- Curriculum: Supplemental and intensive
- Instruction: Explicit and systematic
- Assessment: Diagnostic, progress monitoring
- Setting: Small group and/or 1:1

#### Tier 2: Targeted Intervention

- Curriculum: Supplemental and targeted
- Instruction: Explicit and systematic
- Assessment: Diagnostic, progress monitoring
- Setting: Small group

#### Tier 1: Universal Instruction

- Curriculum: Standards-based
- Instruction: Common, evidence-based
- Assessment: Screening, common
- Setting: Whole group and sometimes differentiated small group

Using data to organize time, people, materials, and professional learning across tiers, MTSS ensures more students meet grade-level expectations in Tier 1, and fewer require intensive support. As a result, the interventions provided to students who still need them can be delivered with sufficient intensity to close learning gaps.

Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports are targeted supports layered on top of strong core instruction and are designed to accelerate student progress toward grade-level standards (Torgenson, 2006) or provide students with supplemental opportunities for enrichment. MTSS—especially Tier 1—relies on actionable data. Districts need a cohesive, easy way to review all their data in order to identify gaps and proactively address students’ needs.

## About District Data: How Can Districts Use the **Right Data** to Solve the Right Problem?

Districts have complex and detailed assessment plans that cover a variety of assessment purposes.

On paper, these plans look robust, but in practice, they often feel fragmented and overwhelming (Hamilton et al., 2009). Teams tend to think in terms of individual tests or tools instead of the purpose each piece of information is meant to serve. When implementing MTSS at your districts, it’s important to help shift your team’s mindset on assessments: *Within MTSS, assessment is a **purpose**, not a **product**.*



Understanding the types of tools and data schools require to meet educator and student needs is a first step to being able to use the data to drive action within an MTSS.

Table 1.1 outlines the types of assessment that are important for teams to use on an ongoing basis to drive schoolwide growth. A district may have multiple tools that serve each purpose. For example, a reading screening test, attendance data, and discipline referrals can all be used for the purpose of screening.

**Table 1.1. Purposes of Assessment at Each MTSS Tier**

Assessment	Purpose	When	Tier 1	Tier 2	Tier 3
<b>Screening</b>	Measure broad performance and growth across all students	Multiple times throughout the year	✓	✓	✓
<b>Benchmark, Interim, or Curriculum-Embedded</b>	Assessment embedded within a curriculum that informs next instructional steps	Periodically	✓	✓	✓
<b>Diagnostic</b>	Identify skill strengths and gaps	Any time of the year		✓	✓
<b>Summative</b>	Measure overall mastery and inform grading and state reporting	Any time of year or EOC	✓		
<b>Formative</b>	Check for skill-specific understanding to identify next instructional actions	Ongoing, embedded within instruction	✓	✓	✓
<b>Progress Monitoring</b>	Evaluate the effectiveness of instruction plus an intervention	Frequently and regularly		✓	✓

The same assessment can be used to answer questions at the classroom and district level (and grade and school). For example, screening data can be used at the district level to address program evaluation questions and at the classroom level to proactively identify individual students who need intervention.

Not all assessments are used at every level, but some assessments are used at multiple levels of the educational system to answer different questions educators and leaders have.

Once a team understands the types of data that every school needs, then they can map current tests to these assessment purposes and identify any gaps and overlaps using a tool like the one in [Appendix A](#). Some common examples of things teams might find include:

- Elementary schools have two tools that both provide screening information
- The middle school lacks a valid progress monitoring tool in reading
- A behavioral survey is being used, but no progress monitoring tools are available
- A screening tool is being used for K-5 math, but it doesn't seem aligned with the research base behind math teaching and learning

And, as introduced above, even having a strong assessment plan doesn't mean that it's simple to take action on the assessment data. **After data are collected, empowering educators and teams to turn data into meaningful action is part of the power of MTSS.**



## A Practical Framework for Turning Data **Into Action**

A practical data-use framework does not start with tools; it starts with priorities and questions that set our perspective. Priorities like: *"We want 80% of students reading on grade level by the end of grade 3,"* or *"We want to reduce the number of students flagged as chronically absent in half by next year."*

Once the priority is clear, teams form questions:

- What data will help us monitor this goal?
- What thresholds will we use to define **"on track"** and **"at risk"**?
- How often do we need to answer this question to proactively understand if our plans are effective and address any arising needs?

## How to Identify Data That Isn't Supporting Your MTSS Framework

Just as importantly, teams need a way to decide when to stop collecting data that is no longer serving their goals. Some questions to ask include:

- Do these data answer an important question for us?
- Are these the best data sources to answer this question?

**If the answer to either of these questions is consistently no,** consider discontinuing the collection of these data, and help teams understand how they can use other data to meet their needs.



This is also where MTSS can support the system, not as another initiative, but as the organizing framework for how teams use data across the system.

## How to Build an MTSS Mindset

To see real achievement growth as a result of MTSS, schools need to shift from relying solely on Tiers 2 and 3 to considering the entire system of support as an opportunity to meet all student and educator needs. Otherwise, teams will over-rely on intervention serving too many students, with diluted resources and low growth as a result.

### *What does an MTSS mindset look like?*

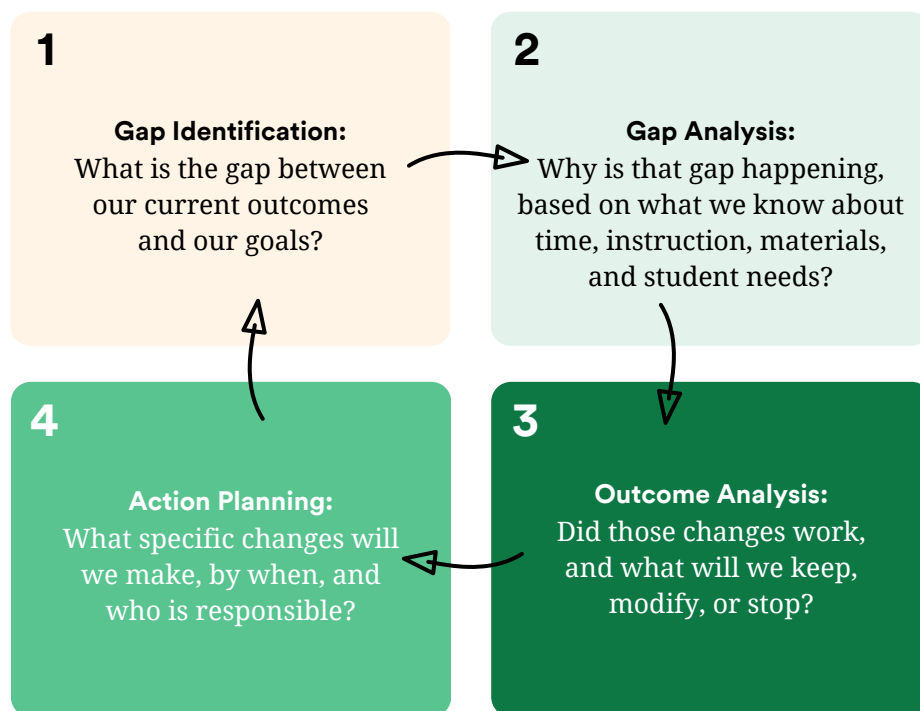
- **A collaborative improvement cycle** is used throughout the year to empower educators to take action on data. Leaders provide teams with the questions to ask with data, as well as the visualizations to use, for each time of the year. When leaders provide teachers with these simple resources, conversations immediately level up to be more action-oriented and impactful.
- Teams are not expected to analyze and act on data alone, but **meet with their grade or content level team frequently** and regularly to make next-step instructional decisions based on actionable data.
- Teams keep the **focus on those factors that are controlled within the school day**. There are some things we don't have control over that are impacting student success, but there's also so much that educators and the school system do that impacts student success. Teams that raise student achievement believe that their actions will result in student growth (Anderson et al., 2023).

MTSS gives districts a shared language and framework and becomes the vehicle by which schools can drive success for their local reading, math, and social-emotional goals.

## The Collaborative Improvement Cycle: Engine of **MTSS**

The Collaborative Improvement Cycle (CIC) drives MTSS at every level of the system (Brown & Stollar, 2025). It provides teams the perspective to consider as they analyze data and decide next-step actions at the district, school, grade, or individual student level and across every Tier of support. The CIC includes the following steps:

### *The Collaborative Improvement Cycle (CIC)*



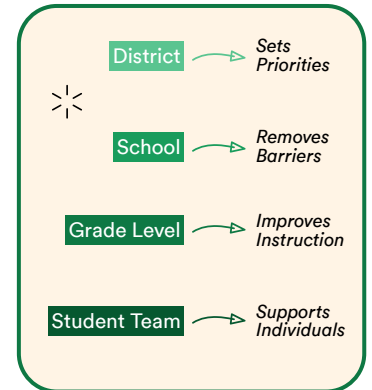
The power of the CIC is that it gives teams a structure by which to analyze and act on data. Without the CIC, teams fall into several common gaps, such as getting stuck in gap analysis and never getting to action planning, or skipping over gap analysis altogether.

This structure also supports educators regardless of the data or team. A district leadership team can use it to look at district-wide gaps in student groups on statewide testing data, a grade-level team can use it to look at Oral Reading Fluency data for their grade level, and a student-level team can use it to review progress monitoring and intervention log data to evaluate a single student’s growth.

## Using the Collaborative Improvement Cycle to Prioritize Tier 1 in Every Team

A proactive MTSS means that data are used in a planful manner and resources across all tiers are considered to meet needs.

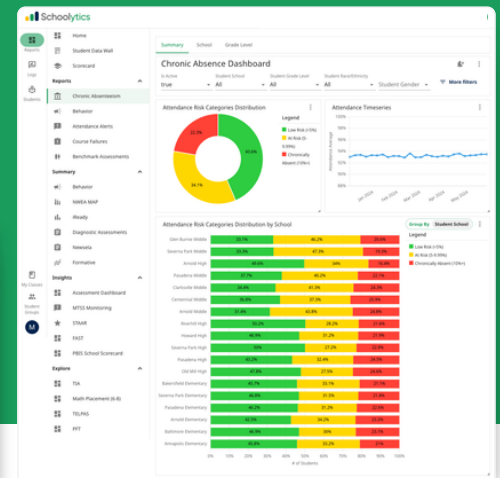
A **district leadership team** sets priorities. For example, they may routinely review attendance growth data and identify that chronic absenteeism rates have dropped by 25% in the last year and are excited to celebrate the progress teams have made. Upon disaggregation by student group, they notice that students who receive free and reduced lunch have not made the same progress in attendance growth as all students. They decide on a district-wide initiative to promote attendance that will equitably serve all student groups, including those students who receive free and reduced lunch.



To facilitate this collaborative cycle, **Schoolytics by Newsela** provides a dedicated data analyst and the dashboard views your teams need to turn insights into impact. Access the disaggregated data required to identify barriers, improve instruction, and support individual students—all in one place.



Enrollment	Student Name	Student School	Student Grade Level	Days Absent (Cumulative)
☑	Carley, Kim	Paoliville Elementary	02	23
☑	Robert, Daniel	Salisbury Elementary	04	21
☑	Cross, Michelle	Antelope Elementary	01	25
☑	Cookie, Mary	Seawater Park High	10	20
☑	Williams, John	Paoliville High	09	17
☑	Durkin, Amy	Seawater Park High	11	18
☑	Ungert, Susan	Paoliville High	09	21
☑	Johnson, Tanya	Paoliville Elementary	05	21



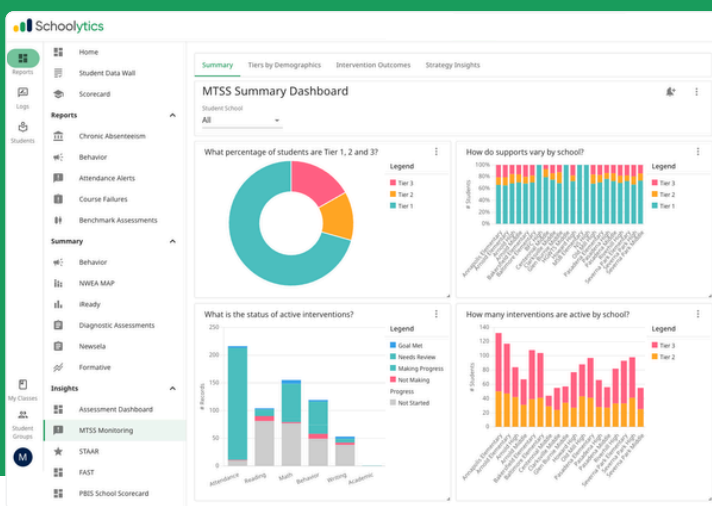
A **building leadership team** removes barriers. Imagine the team is reviewing disaggregated data and identifies that students from marginalized groups are less represented in gifted and talented programs in the building. The team reviews the process for identification for the program and changes it from being teacher and parent referral to using screening data.

A **grade-level team** improves instruction. Say a team reviews progress monitoring data for a math intervention group and identifies that most of the students in the group are not on track to meet their goals. Instead of intensifying individual student plans, the team decides to review the entire group plan and to increase group meetings from 3 to 5 days a week.

## MTSS and Student Groups

Every student group brings its own pattern of strengths and needs, and the shared framework of MTSS allows teams to use the same collaborative improvement cycle to understand what students need and how to match the resources in the school to the needs across groups.

Even within groups, students will need different things. For instance, every multilingual learner is not the same and often needs quite different supports. The same is true for students who are gifted learners and those experiencing poverty. MTSS does not create separate systems for each of these groups, but a single framework that is flexible enough to respond to all needs.



Schoolytics makes MTSS monitoring easier with intuitive features that let you filter by schools, grades, and demographics. You can quickly analyze the interventions and supports implemented at each school, track how many students are receiving Tier 2 or Tier 3 supports, and monitor student growth and progress over time.

## The Meetings a **System Needs** (and the Data They Use)

MTSS is lived out in actions, not binders. To make data actionable, teams need clear structures for how they will use data throughout the year. Table 1.2 outlines the four core teams most districts need within their MTSS: *District Leadership Team Meetings, Building Leadership Team Meetings, Grade-Level Team Meetings, and Student-Level Team Meetings.*

**Table 1.2 Essential Meetings for MTSS**

Team	Purpose	Data Focus	Example Questions
<b>District Leadership Team (DLT)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>System Design &amp; District-Level Data Use</li> <li>Review district-wide data, set goals, and allocate human, time, material, and financial resources.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>District-level screening</li> <li>Outcome data</li> <li>Assessment system coherence across all assessment purposes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Do we have gaps or overlaps in our assessment system?</li> <li>Where might we have bias in our system related to student group growth and outcomes?</li> <li>Where do we need to invest in materials or PD?</li> </ul>
<b>Building Leadership Team (BLT)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Screening &amp; Intervention System</li> <li>Review school-level data, set school goals, design and evaluate the tiered instruction and intervention plan, and remove barriers for teams.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>School-wide screening data</li> <li>Tier 1 effectiveness</li> <li>Intervention effectiveness</li> <li>Grade level team action plan review and needs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What will the focus of instructional coaching at each grade level be?</li> <li>Which grade levels fall below our benchmark expectations for Tier 1 growth?</li> <li>Which interventions consistently produce growth, and which do not?</li> </ul>
<b>Grade-Level Teams (GLT/PLCs)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tier 1 and intervention</li> <li>Review grade-level data and design, implement, and evaluate the Tier 1 instruction and intervention plan.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Screening, progress monitoring, curriculum- embedded and formative assessments.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What will our Tier 1 intervention be?</li> <li>How will we reteach the last lesson, given the results of the curriculum-embedded test?</li> <li>What are the next steps with grade-level intervention groups?</li> </ul>
<b>Student-Level Teams</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Design, implement, and evaluate individualized intervention plans.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Review, Interview, Observational, Testing (RIOT) data on the Setting, Instruction, Curriculum and Learner (SCIL) (Hosp et al., 2014)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What is the specific skill gap?</li> <li>Where does a student place on our intervention program?</li> <li>What is the student's progress and what was our level of implementation of the intervention?</li> </ul>

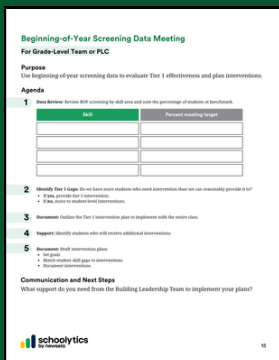
# Sample Data Meeting **Agendas** to Support Tier 1

Simply scheduling team meetings is not enough. Educators also need clear agendas that model how to analyze and take action on their data to experience success.

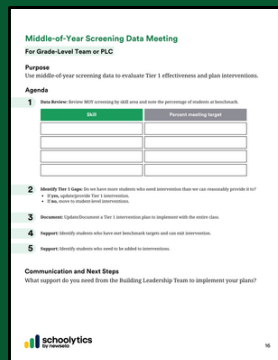
To build meeting agendas that support Tier 1 instruction:

1. **Consider the questions** teachers need to answer at a particular time of year.
2. **Determine the assessment** that will best match those questions.
3. **Develop an agenda** with the questions for teams to ask, aligned with the Collaborative Improvement Cycle. Include links to the data visualizations that teams need to take action for efficient, effective meetings.

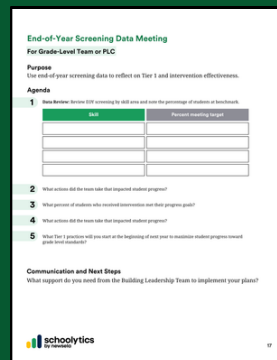
To make it easier, we've created three sample agendas that you can easily print and share with your team before your next data meeting!



**Beginning-of-Year Meeting Agenda**



**Middle-of-Year Meeting Agenda**



**End-of-Year Meeting Agenda**



# Beginning-of-Year Screening Data Meeting

## For Grade-Level Team or PLC

### Purpose

Use beginning-of-year screening data to evaluate Tier 1 effectiveness and plan interventions.

### Agenda

- 1 Data Review:** Review BOY screening by skill area and note the percentage of students at benchmark.

Skill	Percent meeting target

- 2 Identify Tier 1 Gaps:** Do we have more students who need intervention than we can reasonably provide it to?
  - If **yes**, provide tier 1 intervention.
  - If **no**, move to student-level interventions.

- 3 Document:** Outline the Tier 1 intervention plan to implement with the entire class.

- 4 Support:** Identify students who will receive additional interventions.

- 5 Document:** Draft intervention plans
  - Set goals
  - Match student skill gaps to interventions
  - Document interventions

### Communication and Next Steps

What support do you need from the Building Leadership Team to implement your plans?

# Middle-of-Year Screening Data Meeting

## For Grade-Level Team or PLC

### Purpose

Use middle-of-year screening data to evaluate Tier 1 effectiveness and plan interventions.

### Agenda

- 1 Data Review:** Review MOY screening by skill area and note the percentage of students at benchmark.

Skill	Percent meeting target

- 2 Identify Tier 1 Gaps:** Do we have more students who need intervention than we can reasonably provide it to?
  - If **yes**, update/provide Tier 1 intervention.
  - If **no**, move to student-level interventions.

- 3 Document:** Update/Document a Tier 1 intervention plan to implement with the entire class.

- 4 Support:** Identify students who have met benchmark targets and can exit intervention.

- 5 Support:** Identify students who need to be added to interventions.

### Communication and Next Steps

What support do you need from the Building Leadership Team to implement your plans?

# End-of-Year Screening Data Meeting

## For Grade-Level Team or PLC

### Purpose

Use end-of-year screening data to reflect on Tier 1 and intervention effectiveness.

### Agenda

- 1** **Data Review:** Review EOY screening by skill area and note the percentage of students at benchmark.

Skill	Percent meeting target

- 2** What actions did the team take that impacted student progress?
- 3** What percent of students who received intervention met their progress goals?
- 4** What actions did the team take that impacted student progress?
- 5** What Tier 1 practices will you start at the beginning of next year to maximize student progress toward grade level standards?

### Communication and Next Steps

What support do you need from the Building Leadership Team to implement your plans?

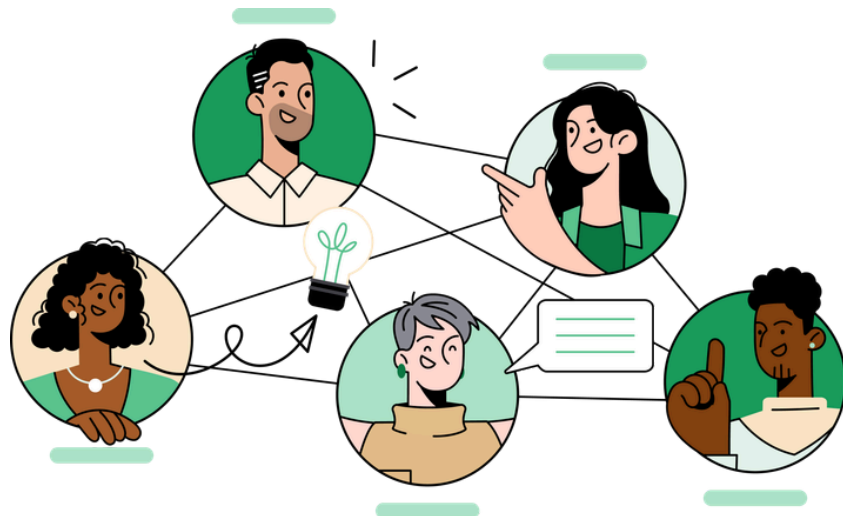
## Scale and Sustain: Leading **Effective** Data Use

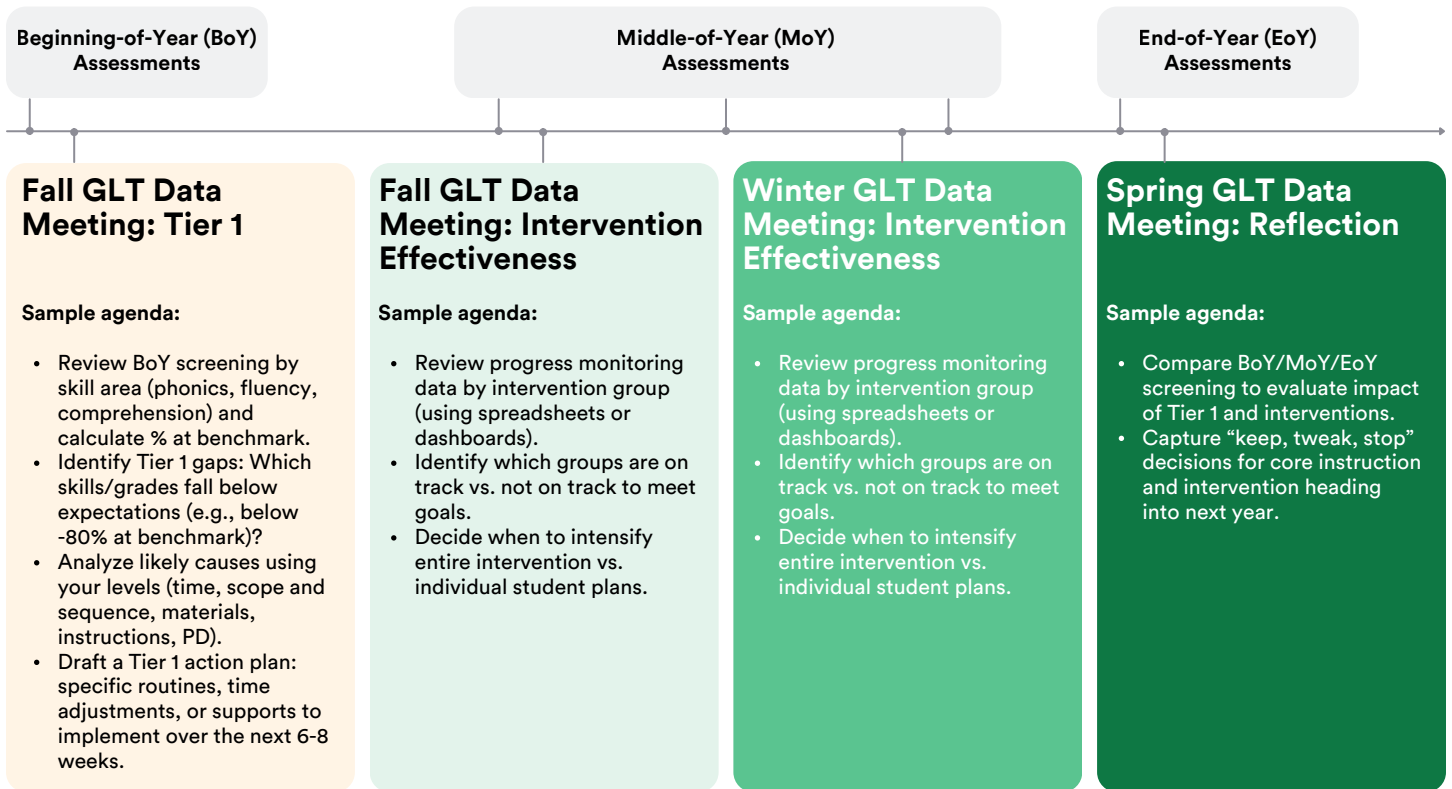
Like any school change initiative, MTSS requires strong leader support to sustain and build confidence and capacity amongst teams.

As leaders change, new priorities arise, and other resources flex, the improvement efforts that were once effective also need to shift to remain impactful. To build collective teacher efficacy around data use (Donohoo et al., 2018), leaders should:

- **Schedule and protect at least four GLT meetings** per year aligned to screening windows (two in fall, one in winter, and one in spring).
- **Pair every scheduled data meeting with a clear agenda** so that teams know exactly how to use the data to make decisions.
- **Use short, job-embedded professional learning** around any new instructional initiative and plan for that to continue for years, not weeks or months. Supporting the instructional changes teams commit to in an ongoing way, instead of relying on stand-alone workshops, is essential to effective implementation. (Balta, et al., 2023; Joyce & Showers, 1982; Knight, 2007)

Leaders also need to proactively anticipate barriers that are likely to arise during MTSS implementation. That means proactively identifying likely challenges such as time, teacher skill, clarity about assessments, and matching student data. Then, a plan for supports such as schedule changes, assessment maps, and lists of available Tier 1 and Tier 2 routines can be provided in advance of such barriers arising. Attending team meetings periodically on a schedule helps leaders see where teams are stuck and allows them to refine their support over time.





Relatedly, when introducing new data tools or unified MTSS platforms, resist the urge to use every feature at once.

Start with one high-leverage use case, like “Use the platform to support GLT Tier 1 gap identification at each screening window.” Keep the collaborative inquiry questions consistent across old and new tools so the process feels familiar even when technology changes.

In the beginning, building and educator teams may find regular data use with an agenda following a collaborative improvement cycle awkward or challenging. But, over time, as teams have repeated opportunities to reflect, they grow more confident and more effective in using data. And, because the entire team is using the data, as opposed to one team leader, schools are building capacity in data understanding and use.

**Your District Checklist for Scaling Effective Data Use**

- ✓ **Schedule:** Align screening windows to four GLT meetings per year: two in fall, one in winter, and one in spring.
- ✓ **Define:** Set a clear meeting agenda so that teams know exactly how to use the data to make decisions.
- ✓ **Practice:** Use consistent questions during collaboration to build confidence in data analysis over time.
- ✓ **Support:** Use short, job-embedded professional learning around any new instructional initiative.

## Bringing It All **Together**

When you align data systems to local goals and priorities, use MTSS as a framework (not a time of day, a person, or a program), and anchor meetings in a simple Collaborative Improvement Cycle, you move from simply having a lot of data to being data-informed and action-rich.

The goal is not perfect data or perfect plans but rather having empowered, confident teams that regularly look at data, make evidence-aligned decisions, and learn from the results.

You do not need another initiative. You need a clear, shared way to connect the data you already have to the decisions your teams are already making. When that happens, data stop being a compliance task and start being a lever for equity and improved outcomes for every student, every day.

### DISTRICT SPOTLIGHT

Cicero District 99 needed a unified approach to student data and support.

#### The Challenge? Data Siloes.

Cicero District 99 was looking for an adaptable platform that could **combine their core student data with MTSS workflows** to achieve their goals:

- Improve data access for stakeholders
- Remove barriers
- Ensure students receive timely intervention services



Learn how Cicero D99 partnered with Schoolytics to meet their unique needs in the [case study](#).



### Ready to learn more?

Explore how Schoolytics can help your district unify data and support MTSS by connecting with our team: [schoolytics.com/contact](https://schoolytics.com/contact)

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# Appendix A: School **Assessment** Map

Assessment	Grade Level (s)	Content Area	Purpose	Time of Year
Social-Emotional Behavior Survey	6-8	SEB	Screening	October