# Continuum of Services Overview

The Continuum of Services for Advanced Learning document provides district and school administrators guidance on how to utilize the multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) framework and talent development principles to serve all students, including students with advanced learning needs.

The Department has chosen to pursue an MTSS model to support talent development[[1]](#footnote-1) and advanced learning for several reasons:

* It allows schools to build on earlier efforts at MTSS implementation to leverage prior professional learning, capitalize on assessment and support­ infrastructure schools have developed around MTSS to date, and build on an emerging common vocabulary regarding services and supports.
* It helps avoid developing “one size fits all” approaches to serving students because students are different from one another in their past experiences, cultural identities, relative strengths, academic and creative interests, learning modality preferences, and more. Students who are advanced in one or a few academic areas may also be performing at or below grade level benchmarks in other areas. Many students may have BOTH needs for advanced learning in one or more areas and accommodations or supports related to disabilities or English language acquisition. The MTSS framework encourages schools to view each student as a unique individual and supports flexibility in mixing and matching intervention and support strategies to provide the best “fit” possible for learners, maximizing their potential.
* The MTSS framework supports thinking about academic, social-emotional, and behavioral development in an integrated and holistic way. Talent development research recognizes that cognitive and academic development does not occur separately from social-emotional and behavioral development. This guide attempts to highlight possible implications for social-emotional and behavioral support needs for students to maximally benefit from interventions and supports.
* The MTSS model, versus traditional approaches to gifted education, affords ALL students access to opportunities to discover and cultivate their individual interests and strengths versus reserving opportunities for talent development and advanced learning only for students already demonstrating exceptional achievement or unusually high cognitive or creative ability. This approach helps lessen the impact of “opportunity gaps” on access to advanced learning for students from lower income backgrounds and students from minoritized cultural subgroups who are almost universally underrepresented in traditional gifted education program models around the nation.
* The MTSS model emphasizes, and is compatible with, the state’s accountability framework that values and expects growth for all students, including those who are already “proficient” and beyond.

**A More Equitable and Inclusive Approach**

There are several significant drawbacks to traditional gifted education approaches which are designed around processes to identify students with high cognitive ability and who are already achieving at very high levels relative to their age peers to receive specialized instruction and support services. The proposed MTSS framework is aimed at avoiding some of the barriers to equitable participation inherent in traditional gifted education service models while simultaneously “removing the ceiling” for learning and growth for students who need accelerated learning opportunities to continue to grow and remain engaged in learning.

* Traditional approaches to gifted education tend to under-identify students from minoritized student subgroups, lower income backgrounds, households where English is not the first language, and some rural communities. Gifted students who also have disabilities (sometimes called “twice exceptional” students) are also at risk for under-identification. This is often partially due to bias in the student referral process but largely reflects overall “achievement gaps” and “excellence gaps” between subgroups.
* A growing body of evidence indicates that use of “front-loaded” interventions that expose students to advanced learning and enrichment opportunities in their areas of *relative* strength prior to screening for selective programming results in higher percentages of students from subgroups underrepresented in traditional gifted program models being identified for selective opportunities and increased participation in advanced Honors, AP, and dual enrollment coursework in high school. The proposed MTSS model emphasizes universal access to “Tier I” interventions to help encourage use of front-loaded interventions that help narrow excellence gaps.
* Traditional gifted education service models that primarily provide “pull-out” programs in “resource rooms” are expensive to implement because all of the pull-out programs are in addition to providing instruction in regular classrooms. Because these service options are costly to implement, schools serving lower wealth communities tend to provide fewer of these opportunities than more affluent communities, and many schools that do offer these programs set extremely selective eligibility criteria to limit the number of students identified for these services (and thereby limit costs) even though this often results in many students who would likely benefit from these programs being excluded. While the MTSS model does include as Tier III interventions targeted services that may be provided in resource rooms on a pull-out basis, they are not recommended as the primary approach to addressing advanced learning needs.
* The proposed MTSS model emphasizes greater use of academic acceleration. In part, this is because academic acceleration has been shown to be the most effective intervention for supporting increased academic growth. But, it is also because academic acceleration is perhaps the lowest cost approach to better meeting the needs of students in need of more advanced curriculum. It makes use of existing personnel, instructional materials, and space. Another advantage of using academic acceleration where advanced learners learn in settings with older students receiving grade-level instruction rather than relying primarily on pull-out arrangements is that the acceleration approach is much less likely to result in classroom grouping arrangements that do not reflect the cultural and economic diversity of the school as a whole.

**Rising to the Challenge of Implementing Effective Services in an MTSS Framework**

One key finding from a review of research on implementation of MTSS models is that successful implementation in schools depends on implementation being seen as a schoolwide effort rather than the responsibility of a few designated individuals assigned to “the program.”

For school leaders, effective MTSS implementation involves prioritizing professional learning to help teachers and aides recognize emerging student strengths and interests, creating time and space for collaborative planning between teachers and specialists who may be involved in some Tier II and III services, leading local policy development that supports equitable access to advanced learning opportunities and removes barriers to acceleration, and supporting consistent use of effective differentiation strategies across classrooms, including cultivating development of classroom management practices that enable successful and sustained use of differentiated instruction and problem based learning. School leaders should also monitor data and guide action research and evaluation efforts to ensure that students from all groups in the school have equitable access to talent development-focused opportunities and interventions and that services and supports provided are achieving their goals.

For counselors and school psychologists, effective MTSS implementation may involve supporting efforts to help teachers and school leaders identify students’ areas of relative strength, supporting successful transitions to accelerated placements, assisting students and families in developing more personalized goals and long-term educational plans, and partnering with teachers to integrate opportunities to develop psychosocial skills into core curriculum.

For teachers, effective MTSS implementation involves expanded use of differentiation strategies, targeted curriculum compacting, and integrating greater use of problem-based and project-based learning. Teachers also play key roles in recognizing indicators of emerging student interests and talents and providing and advocating for students to have opportunities to explore emerging interests and further develop known talents. Compared to traditional “pull-out” models of gifted education, MTSS models also require greater communication and collaboration between teachers and specialists who may guide or deliver some Tier II and III services.

For specialists providing services for English Learners, students with disabilities, Title I students, and formally identified gifted students in schools with existing programming, supporting effective MTSS implementation involves adopting “strength-based” intervention approaches where possible, highlighting the strengths and talents of students they serve to peers and colleagues who may tend to see students from these groups through “deficit lenses” that prevent them from providing appropriate challenge, partnering with teachers to ensure that students with unique learning needs receive accommodations and supports that allow them to access and participate successfully in in challenging learning experiences that relate to their strengths and interests.

Districts are encouraged to share this guide widely with faculty and staff and to engage stakeholders across the community in developing local plans based on the guide while reinforcing the idea that all stakeholders have important roles to play in successful implementation.

1. Talent development refers to the deliberate cultivation of knowledge and capabilities in specific domains. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)