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Hello, everyone. This is Katie Novak, and you're listening to the Education Table, a micro podcast where I answer your questions about inclusive education in ten minutes or less. Today's episode is a special leadership edition where I explore the question, what is a multi tiered system of support, or mtss? I'll share a story about the importance of building a strong foundation, dive into the research on the importance of implementation drivers, and then offer concrete leadership strategies to build effective multi tiered systems of support. Let's get started. Let me start with a story about my love for building the perfect ice cream sundae. Now imagine a sundae bar, a buffet of ice creams and toppings and whipped cream. Everything you can think of, cherries and sprinkles. But imagine if you don't start with a solid foundation or scoop of ice cream.

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For me, it is chocolate peanut butter cup hands down. That is the perfect base, but I know that is not super inclusive. Some of you are going to want some soft serve, some sorbet, maybe you like vanilla, but essentially you need some sort of base because a bowl of M and MS does not a sundae make. And without the foundation of the ice cream, all the toppings just kind of fall flat. Now, the same concept applies when implementing mtss in our schools. Without that strong foundation of all students getting what they need in tier one, the additional supports will not be as effective. So just as a Sunday needs a really strong base, our education system needs really strong core instruction to support every student but us. As leaders, we have to leverage lots of different strategies to build this strong foundation.

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So as we dive into research and statistics about what we can do as leaders to build a strong multi tiered system, it's important to break up that acronym because MTSS is so much more than just the tiers of support. It's about creating a really comprehensive support system to ensure that all students receive the help that they need in addition to really high quality tier one instruction. According to the implementation Research Network, effective MTSS implementation relies on three key drivers, leadership, competency, and systems. So first, let's talk about MT. MT is simply the three tiers of support. All students are included in tier one. Some students also receive tier two, and then even fewer students will receive tier three. But how does the system support that?

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That is the SS, and that is essentially assuring that all educators have what they need to support all learners in tier one. They also have the data culture that is necessary to determine who needs additional support and for how long. And they have to have all of the resources necessary to provide that support, professional development, high quality instructional materials, really innovative technology, authentic assessments, and time just to work together and leverage collective efficacy. So when you're talking about the system of support, that's much more what you do as a leader. Because you arrange for professional development, you are able to work with educators to create a schedule that allows for supplemental support and also time for co planning and professional learning communities. And you have a lot of opportunity to allocate resources to best support teachers and families to support students.

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So, in short, the system of support is everything that we do in schools in an effort to include more students and increase their outcomes in tier one, while also recognizing the need for additional support for some students. So as leaders, we need to be really committed to leveraging these drivers strong leadership, teacher competency, and the systems drivers which help us with implementation, including scheduling and high quality instructional materials and a data culture. And what we will learn is that when we're able to advocate and put these things in place, when schools have strong systems of support, we can increase student outcomes. For instance, a study by Fixon found that schools with robust implementation frameworks had much higher rates of student achievement and reduced disciplinary incidents.

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The National center on Intensive Intervention highlights that data based decision making and effective MTSS systems lead to better student performance and more efficient use of resources. And goodness gracious, we also know that it increases teachers satisfaction because they're getting supported and reduces burnout, which we know is absolutely necessary. So the question is, how can we do this work? So let's talk about some concrete strategies for implementing multi tiered systems of support effectively aligned with the research and the principles of UDL. First, we need to start with clear, firm goals. What are we doing with multi tiered systems of support? This requires us to make our goals really clear for our educators and families and students, but we also need to create a vision for this work. What is it that we're trying to do?

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What does a tier one environment that supports all students look like? And it can be really great to collaborate with all stakeholders to create this vision for a multi tiered system. So you might work with all of your educators and youre or a parent advisory group and some students to complete a vision protocol that really unpacks your school or district's commitment to MTSS inclusion and universal design for learning. And once you have that vision, start to create additional documents that unpack what each component or what each driver looks like as the system is working towards that vision. So, for example, what does it look like to have an inclusive tier one environment. What does universal design for learning look like in practice? If using high quality instructional materials, what are the expectations for their use with integrity?

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And how do those materials align with universal design for learning so that all educators understand what the goal is for inclusion and mtss, but also what is it that they are supposed to do to work toward that goal? As leaders, we need to set a vision and we need to help to create clarity around what we're doing, why we're doing it, and then how we are going to measure that. It is going to be so important that we create feedback loops that we can measure implementation of all of these drivers. So if we're going to change our professional development model, how are we measuring whether it is effective? If we're going to change our schedule, how are we going to measure if it is effective? If we're going to adopt new materials, how will we know if they are effective?

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All of this comes down to embracing a data culture. The second thing that we can do, outside of creating a really clear vision, unpacking firm goals, and allowing teachers to use flexible means to work toward those goals, it's also critical that we embrace a culture of data. We have to highlight the importance of fidelity of implementation once we decide together what implementation is going to look like, and then we have to encourage regular reflection on practices to determine their impact on students. Because right now the system is producing the results that it gets, and so we need to do things that are different if we expect different results. So we have to remind our staff that we're going to commit to new practices with integrity.

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But even if we use a practice with integrity, it is possible that it will not positively impact our students. And if that is the case, it needs to change, because building a system of support is working towards the vision of every single student included together in tier one and every student having positive outcomes as a result. To do that, we need to support teachers with their professional learning, with their understanding of what MTSS is and how to implement that with opportunities to have really high quality resources, and then also ensure that we're always listening to the impact that those changes have on teachers, students they serve, and their families. To wrap up, remember that MTSS is more than just tier one, tier two, and tier three.

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It's about creating a cohesive system that supports all learners, including our educators, and starting with a vision of strong tier one, inclusive instruction. By focusing on leadership, competency, and systems drivers and implementing strategies that align with these principles, we can build a foundation that supports student and teacher success. Check out the show notes for more resources on MTSS implementation and subscribe if you love it. Thank you so much for joining me at the education table. Until next time onward.