

Special Education within MTSS: One Framework for All Students

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This document provides guidance and clarifies how special education is integrated within a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework, with a focus on the effective implementation of Data-Based Individualization (DBI) and Specially Designed Instruction (SDI).

Multi-Tiered System of Supports

The Michigan Department of Education [MTSS Practice Profile](#) defines MTSS as “A comprehensive framework designed to meet all students’ academic, social, and behavioral needs through evidence-based strategies. It integrates various levels of support, from whole-class instruction to targeted interventions, to address the individual needs of each student.” An MTSS framework ensures that all students receive support tailored to their needs when they need them.

Tier 1 is the universal instruction and differentiation intended to meet the needs of all learners.

Tier 2 is an intervention platform consisting of supplemental, targeted interventions intended for some learners who require support or extension beyond Tier 1.

Tier 3 supports provide intense individual interventions, building on Tier 1 instruction and Tier 2 intervention, for learners with highly accelerated, or severe and persistently challenged, academic and/or non-academic needs (Michigan Department of Education, 2020).

Misunderstandings about the MTSS framework have led some to believe that students are placed into separate Tiers and that special education is considered the highest Tier or outside the MTSS framework entirely. The [MiMTSS FAQ](#) document states, “Tiers are intended to be layered with intensification of supports matched to learner need.” A research-based process to identify whether intensification is warranted and how to intensify support is called Data-Based Individualization (DBI).

Data-Based Individualization

DBI is a structured, data-driven process that guides the intensification of intervention, beginning with Tier 2 supports. Interventions are intensified when any student or group of students is not responsive to less intensive supports implemented with fidelity. This means the intervention is strengthened with strategies designed to accelerate academic progress. This ensures that interventions are individualized and responsive to student progress. The [Taxonomy of Intervention Intensity](#) defines seven research-based dimensions to address intervention intensity.

The National Center on Intensive Intervention (NCII) highlights that many students who require intensive interventions are students with disabilities, stating, “Furthermore, DBI also provides schools with a validated approach for identifying and supporting students with severe and persistent learning and behavior problems, including students who may require special education. This is because the data collected through the DBI process can assist teams in assessing the need for specialized instruction, which is one of two requirements

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for determining eligibility for special education” (Intensive Intervention & Special Education, n.d.). Data-Based Individualization provides a systematic, explicit, and tailored process to intensify instruction when progress is insufficient. It is an evidence-based practice that supports any student needing intensive intervention and may support the evaluation process to determine eligibility for special education.

Specially Designed Instruction

Specially Designed Instruction (SDI) is required, intentional, instruction that is customized to address a student’s specific academic, behavioral, or functional needs related to their unique exceptionality(ies). SDI is developed and assigned through the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process, ensuring that instruction targets each student’s unique needs and skills not yet mastered. This individualized instruction is provided in addition to general education, not in place of it, and supports progress toward the student’s specific goals and objectives. The purpose of SDI is to enable students with disabilities to meaningfully access the general education curriculum and demonstrate proficiency on the same content standards as their peers. Specially Designed Instruction can be delivered at any time or location where school-related activities occur, as specified in the student’s IEP.

SDI involves adapting the content (what), methodology (how), or delivery of instruction (by whom, when, where) as appropriate to the needs of an eligible child to address the child’s unique needs due to their disability while ensuring access to the general curriculum and educational standards that apply to all children (IDEA [34 CFR §300.39\(b\)\(3\)](#)). The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) discusses how to apply the definition of Specially Designed Instruction and related services in the May 9, 2012, [Letter to Chambers](#).

Explicit instruction and intensive intervention are two research-based teaching practices that are key components of Specially Designed Instruction. Together, they offer a structured, focused approach to address a student’s area(s) of disability-related need by tailoring instruction based on individualized goals. While Data-Based Individualization can inform the development and refinement of SDI through progress monitoring and evidence-based interventions and adaptations, SDI is a distinct legal requirement under IDEA for students with disabilities. DBI, on the other hand, is a systematic process for intensifying interventions that applies to any student needing additional support, including but not limited to those receiving special education.

How Does Special Education Fit within MTSS?

Special education and MTSS are not separate systems—they are part of an integrated, comprehensive approach to supporting all students.

According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) [34CFR§300.114\(a\)\(2\)](#), “Special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only if the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily.”

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IDEA requires students with disabilities to receive services in the [Least Restrictive Environment](#) (LRE), ensuring access and participation to the maximum extent appropriate alongside their nondisabled peers. The MTSS framework reinforces and celebrates this by integrating special education across all Tiers, recognizing that LRE is a principle to guide a student's education program, not a place. Supports (evidence-based interventions, instructional tools, strategies, and resources) are classified by Tier based on the intensity of intervention required, focusing on the category of support rather than labeling the learner (i.e., a student is receiving Tier 3 support instead of "a Tier 3 student").

Students with disabilities receive universal instruction in tandem with appropriate [supplementary aids](#), services, and accommodations—such as adjustments to the environment, curriculum, equipment—as well as supports for staff and families to promote progress in the general education curriculum. Students who qualify for special education services require Specially Designed Instruction aligned to their unique needs that supplements core instruction and addresses the goals specified within the IEP. They may also require intensive academic or behavioral interventions, delivered through data-driven instruction and supports that are individualized within a continuum of programs and services.

The National Center on Intensive Intervention provides guidance and resources to assist states, ISDs, districts, and public school academies in implementing Data-Based Individualization within a Multi-Tiered System of Supports. According to NCII, "When implemented within a larger school-wide MTSS, students with disabilities are able to receive intensive intervention through DBI while ensuring access to aligned Tier 1 [class-wide] instruction and supports as well as Tier 2 [or 3] intervention in other areas of identified need" (Intensive Intervention & Special Education, n.d.). This approach (DBI) is particularly beneficial for students with disabilities who require intensive interventions.

Additional Resources

- [MDE Practice Profile](#)
- [Michigan's Multi-Tiered System of Supports \(MiMTSS\) Frequently Asked Questions](#)
- [National Center on Intensive Intervention: Taxonomy of Intervention](#)
- [Least Restrictive Environment Guide: MDE, October 2023](#)
- [Individualized Education Program \(IEP\) Development: Supplementary Aids and Services - MDE Office of Special Education - Michigan Department of Education](#)
- [Special Education & IEP Resources: Intensive Intervention | NCII](#)
- [Letter to Chambers, May 9, 2012 \(Office of Special Education Programs\)](#)

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Addressing Misunderstandings: Special Education and MTSS

Clarifying misunderstandings about how special education is integrated within MTSS helps remove barriers and increase opportunities for students with disabilities to succeed.

Special education is separate from MTSS

Special education is integrated within all Tiers of the MTSS framework. Students with disabilities access class-wide, Tier 1 instruction, and intervention supports through the MTSS framework, alongside their peers. Special education services are accessed as designated through their IEP and services and supports are intensified when needed.

Special education occurs only at Tier 3

While Tier 3 represents the most intensive level of support within a Multi-Tiered System of Supports, it is not synonymous with special education. Special education services can be delivered across all Tiers—including Tier 1 and Tier 2—through general education instruction, supplementary aids and services, accommodations, modifications, and other supports as outlined in an IEP. The level of support (or Tier) provided to all students is based on their individual academic, behavioral, or social-emotional needs. Students without disabilities may also receive intensive, individualized support at Tier 3 if data indicate a need.

Students receiving special education services are not eligible for interventions in addition to their Specially Designed Instruction and services provided within their IEP

Interventions can be provided in addition to the Specially Designed Instruction but cannot supplant the provision for a [Free and Appropriate Public Education](#) and services outlined within the IEP.

Moreover, as stated in the [Letter to Chambers \(OSEP, 2012\)](#), the use of instructional approaches or interventions with other students in the classroom does not preclude them from being considered special education or related services for a student with an IEP. “The Local Education Agency (LEA) must provide a child with a disability Specially Designed Instruction that addresses the unique needs of the child that result from the child’s disability, and ensures access by the child to the general curriculum, even if that type of instruction is being provided to other children, with or without disabilities, in the child’s classroom, grade, or building,” (OSEP).

It is important to recognize that interventions available to the broader student population can still qualify as SDI if they are customized to meet a student’s unique needs. What matters is that the instruction is intentionally tailored to address that student’s unique needs and ensure access to the general curriculum.

Having an IEP does not exclude students from receiving additional interventions.

Students with an IEP in special education need entirely new interventions

Many of the interventions used for all students within MTSS can be intensified for students with disabilities, meaning new interventions aren’t always necessary. The intervention selected should be a robust and evidence-based program or practice. The key is adjusting the content (what), methodology (how), or delivery of instruction (by whom, when, where) to meet the student’s unique needs related to their disability and IEP goals through

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Specially Designed Instruction. This may include increasing the intensity, frequency, or other dimensions outlined in the [Taxonomy of Intervention Intensity](#) based on the student's data.

Only special education teachers can provide interventions

General education teachers, special education teachers, and other support staff collaborate to provide interventions. A student with a disability may receive intervention support from someone other than the special education teacher. However, this instruction is in addition to the Specially Designed Instruction outlined in their IEP. The IEP team is responsible for overseeing the student's progress, but a team approach is critical to success.

Special education must be provided in a separate setting

Many special education services can be delivered within the general education environment. Collaboration between general and special education teachers ensures that students receive support in the Least Restrictive Environment to the maximum extent appropriate. This begins with considering whether the student's IEP goals can be met in the general education classroom with support from special education or related service providers. School staff should consider how students receiving interventions are grouped and who provides the intervention. All students, including those with IEPs, must receive intensified support when data indicates an adaptation is needed, along with the appropriate supplementary aids and services outlined in the IEP to ensure access to general education. While intervention may occur outside the classroom, it is not always necessary.

References

- Office of Special Education Programs. (2012, May). POLICY LETTER: May 9, 2012 to Special Education Advocate Ellen M. Chambers - Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Individuals With Disabilities Education Act. <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/idea-files/policy-letter-may-9-2012-to-special-education-advocate-ellen-m-chambers/>
- Intensive Intervention & Special Education. (n.d.). *Special Education & IEP Resources: Intensive Intervention*. National Center on Intensive Intervention. <https://intensiveintervention.org/special-topics/special-education>
- Michigan Department of Education, (2020). Michigan Department of Education Multi-Tiered System of Supports Practice Profile vs 5.0, Lansing, Michigan.
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