

## Multi-Tier System of Supports in Middle Schools

October 24, 2012 2:00 PM - 3:04 PM

### **About this Talk**

THE TALK HAS CONCLUDED.

SCROLL BELOW FOR QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS.

Join **Jonathan Ross** as he explores the application of multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) in middle school settings and answers your questions about key issues. He will offer specific tips for how school teams can work together to introduce and sustain MTSS. Mr. Ross will also offer examples to illustrate the application of RTI practices that increase student achievement for academics and behavior at the middle school level.

Read more about [Jon Ross](#).

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### **Transcript**



**Chris Carter**

What are some of the best middle school-level intervention programs you have come across, specifically computer-based reading and math?



**Jonathan G. Ross**

For math, we used "SuccessMaker" at my former school. It is published by Pearson. We set it up on dedicated computers in two classrooms. For a couple of periods a day, it was used as a scheduled class for some of the most needy kids. The rest of the day it was used as an open lab in which math teachers could schedule their classes. Students liked the high level of engagement and reinforcement. The teachers appreciated the constant feedback on progress. For reading, at my current school, we have the "Teen Biz" computer program in place. This is used in all of our reading intervention classes to progress monitor student comprehension. Again, it is highly interactive and provides almost immediate teacher feedback.



**Carola Petterson**

Did you have any resistance from staff members or parents when you introduced the RTI framework? How did you identify this resistance and how did you address it?



**Jonathan G. Ross**

Fortunately, I believe we prevented much of the push back by "rolling in" our program with one grade the first year. We spent the summer preparing to implement the framework in our 6th grade

**A** program first. That narrowed the number of teachers who needed training and also helped us better identify those who were resistant. By giving those teachers proper training and support, we got most of them on board. As that year progressed, they began to share some of their success stories with colleagues in the 7th and 8th grades. By the time the next year rolled around, we had the vast majority of staff on board with the plan. For the parents, we publicized the heck out of the program. Various pieces of information were sent home and a parent orientation was conducted. Again, the more that they learned about what we were doing, the more they liked it. It also helped that we were getting positive results for many kids from the start.

**Q** **Amanda Sailors**

How do middle school intervention programs balance the need for standard protocol approaches to improve basic skill level with the need for problem-solving interventions to support students in the core curriculum?

**A** **Jonathan G. Ross**

This is probably the area where I still struggle the most to find balance. The best advice that I can give is to treat your intervention programs similar to the way an emergency room uses triage to deal with patients. Students who are in the most urgent need have to get the basic skills established before they can succeed in the core curriculum. That doesn't mean that they should not be exposed to it, it just means that the focus and concern should be on the basic skills. The teachers in the core curriculum need to differentiate their instruction in order to make sure students who lack some basic skills are still getting opportunities to learn. The days are long gone of just presenting the material and leaving it up to the students to learn it. It is incumbent upon every educator to demonstrate multiple methods of instruction that provide all students access to the core curriculum. As with everything that we are discussing, it all comes down to the framework of your intervention program and the schedule that allows for both the interventions and the core to exist together.

**Q** **Kevin Fisher**

Can you share examples of how middle schools are scheduling to help support students with low level math and reading skills? We have a high percentage of incoming students each year that struggle with foundational skills.

**A** **Jonathan G. Ross**

Several participants have posed this question in various ways, so I will try to cover all of the bases for scheduling in one response. First, I would say that you have to be prepared to evaluate the entire schedule. It is that important. At my former school, we had just made some changes to our schedule to add a 90 minute block to the day. Once we added our intervention framework, we had to change the schedule again to accommodate it. In our second year of implementation, we changed the schedule a third time in 3 years in order to have interventions in every grade level. My point being that you must be prepared to make whatever changes necessary in order to have

**A** the multi-tiered system of supports. It is just that important. So how did we do it? I believe that I have alluded to our "Intervention" period in another response. This class period was taken from a time that was formerly used for club meetings, music rehearsals and assemblies. In reality, we could not afford to have this time going unused so often. Thankfully, our music program was staffed by miraculous teachers who understood the importance of what we were doing. We made accommodations for them in other areas in order to try and make up for this time that they were losing. We also revamped our reading program to provide an additional time for intervention. Our Tier 2 & 3 students would now receive interventions during the actual intervention period and then again during the reading class time. At my current school, students give up an encore class period and, in some cases, their social studies class in order to receive support in reading. None of this is rocket science to most of you I am sure. It is just a matter of being willing to look closely at every single program in place and decide which are the most important for students to take. Again, the emergency room triage analogy that I made earlier fits best. When students are so significantly below grade level in reading no one should argue that social studies or related arts classes are as important as an intervention.

**Q** **Stephanie Collins**

When are students needing additional supports identified? How do you organize your master schedule so those students can receive Tier 2 and 3 interventions when needed?

**A** **Jonathan G. Ross**

In most cases, successful programs use a universal screening tool to identify the students in need of intervention right at the beginning of the school year. The tool needs to be practical to use and generate accurate results. This "benchmark" is then used to monitor student progress throughout the year. The master schedule needs to be organized to provide the additional interventions while taking a minimum amount of time away from the core curriculum. In my previous school, we used a time period that was already built into the schedule right after homeroom. We changed it from an unstructured "tutorial" period that was also used for assemblies and rehearsals, to a protected class period called "intervention." At my current school, students receive such interventions in place of an Encore or Social Studies class. Our numbers of Tier 2 and 3 students are smaller here, so a school-wide dedicated class period is not necessary.

**Q** **Paul Reynolds**

Which type of behavior and academic universal screening measurements are administered in your district? How is student progress monitored once the at risk students are identified?

**A** **Jonathan G. Ross**

I can only respond to the academic universal screening as that is the limit of my experience. In my previous school we used the DIBELS to establish a benchmark for every student in the school. In my current school, we look first at the student PSSA results (Pennsylvania state assessment) along with Study Island results from the previous year (if available). Students determined to be at risk

**A** can be given an IRI, GRADE Comprehension measure and/or the Oral Reading Fluency test on AIMSweb. These same assessments are then used along with our "Teen Biz" computer reading program to help progress monitor students during the year.

**Q** **Kelly McCrossin**

For a school in the early stages of planning for RtI implementation, what is the most essential component of RtI to introduce first? Where should we start?

**A** **Jonathan G. Ross**

This is a great question because it is where many schools go wrong before they even start. The single most important component in the early stages is to attempt to get buy-in from the staff. A comprehensive program may require some systemic changes. If this is done without at least giving the teachers an opportunity to express concerns, the plan will face an uphill battle before it even begins. Try gathering as much relevant information as you can and share it in an open forum with the staff. Give them time to discuss the plan with each other. Often times, they will pick up on potential pitfalls that the planners may have missed. Of course there will always be those who reject any sort of change. I always try to ask the question posed by reknowned author and educator Todd Whitaker, "What do my BEST people think?" After teacher buy-in, I would say that finding research-validated interventions is the most important step. I am sure we will talk more about that later today.

**Q** **Leslie Greenfield**

Our staff has been shrinking due to budget cuts, so it is challenging to provide the interventions students need. Can you offer suggestions for how to do more with less?

**A** **Jonathan G. Ross**

In both my previous and current schools, I have been fortunate to have been surrounded by extremely dedicated and talented staff. At my prior school we had a Literacy Coach, Anna Marie, who would spend hours helping to organize the data and getting it in the hands of those who needed it. Anna Marie would also research interventions and help find programs that would address areas of concern. Even after we had established our framework, she continued to refine and improve upon what we were doing. We are similarly blessed at my current school with our Academic Advisor, George. He is able to help the teachers make decisions about interventions and student progression through the tiers by collecting data and helping them to interpret results. My point being that no matter what system you have in place for staff, it is integral that you have outstanding people like Anna Marie and George in place to oversee what happens on a daily basis. Please note that I said "outstanding" people. Good enough, is not good enough for your multi-tiered intervention program. From my perspective, it can be the deciding factor between a successful and unsuccessful school. Hiring the best people, putting them in place and getting out of their way is the best way to do more with less. I know it sounds like a greeting card answer, but it is true.

**Q** *Julie Gallo*

What are research-based interventions that can be used with middle school students?

**A** *Jonathan G. Ross*

I would say that the most effective interventions depend on the need of the students. If you are looking for Tier 3 programs that address decoding, I would suggest the Wilson reading program or SRA-corrective reading. "Rewards" is an outstanding program for multi-syllabic decoding. As you move into Tier 2, students need more help with fluency and comprehension. Programs such as "Read Naturally" and "Soar to Success" have been helpful in our experience. The "Teen Biz" program that I mentioned earlier is also an excellent comprehension tool that is also helpful for progress monitoring. Most programs operate Tier 1 as the core curriculum, which is fine. However, if you are concerned about the ability of your core to establish and sustain a robust comprehension and vocabulary for your students, then I would suggest an intervention called "Great Books."

**Q** *Brad Clark*

Any suggestions on managing progress monitoring with content teachers?

**A** *Jonathan G. Ross*

GIVE THEM TIME TO DO IT. If you want it done, and done right, give them any available time that you can. For instance, most middle schools have a team meeting period for teachers that takes place in addition to their prep period. We use one day a cycle (our Encore letter day rotation) to allow teachers the opportunity to examine data and monitor student progress rather than have a team meeting. The time had actually been used previously as a duty period for monitoring the halls and so forth. We bring the teachers together in one place and spend a couple of minutes showing them another way to monitor progress. Then they are given the remainder of time to work with that new strategy or examine data in a way previously covered. If they have proper training and time, there is no excuse not to do proper progress monitoring.

**Q** *Karen Lefevre*

Should interventions in Tier 2 and 3 follow the alignment of the core curriculum? What strategies can you suggest for making sure students access the core content when their reading skills are far below grade level?

**A** *Jonathan G. Ross*

In a perfect world, Tier 2 and 3 interventions would be coordinated with the core curriculum. Unfortunately, that is not always possible because of the students' needs. However, I firmly believe that it is important to provide children with exposure to the core with support. For example, we have a program at my school for learning support students called "curriculum support". This is a class period that takes place during the students regular encore time. Each curriculum support class is geared toward math, language arts, or organization. The objective of these courses is to

**A** provide additional support for the student in the core curricular area where they need it most. Again, they have to sacrifice going to an encore class to do this, but it is necessary in order to help them find success in the core.

**Q** **Jennifer Brooks Smith**

How can we structure intervention in mathematics within the confines of a set 55 minute per class schedule?

**A** **Jonathan G. Ross**

I would look into the SuccessMaker math lab program that I mentioned in another response. It is computer-based and requires a dedicated lab (or laptop cart). Teachers can bring their classes in for 10-15 minutes a couple of times a week. That will provide a small level of intervention and progress monitoring for the teachers while they continue with the core curriculum.

**Q** **Brad Clark**

What is the teacher's role? While a student may need more than one content-area teacher to be involved, how in-depth is the teacher's responsibility?

**A** **Jonathan G. Ross**

The teacher's responsibility is of incredible importance. They must work with the interventionists (if it is not themselves) to monitor student progress and identify those at risk. They must also differentiate their instruction to provide all students equal access to the core curriculum.

**Q** **Ben**

We find that there is a wide gap of resources between literacy and math in terms of available/vetted screening tools, diagnostics, and corresponding interventions. Why is this the case, and what can we do as a district to work towards a more aligned/robust Math MTSS to "catch up" to the literacy structures and resources?

**A** **Jonathan G. Ross**

This is the most difficult area of MTSS for me. For some reason, the research is behind on math interventions for middle school aged students. My only guess is that the early stages of implementation were focused on literacy. Only recently have schools started to look for a framework to create for math interventions. What I can recommend is the SuccessMaker math program that I have mentioned earlier and the creation of a math intervention class of some sort. We have a class for students who need additional support that is called MathPlus. While not ideal, because they take it in place of their core math class, it has proven to help move students back into the core by the time they leave us in 8th grade. I would suggest you look at the [What Works Clearinghouse](#) site.

**Q** *Laura Mosby*

Is it okay for a School Psychologist to give diagnostic tests (such as the GORT) to inform a Tier 3 Intervention, or is the School Psych only involved in special education referrals?

**A** *Jonathan G. Ross*

I would say that, in terms of your MTSS it is "All Hands on Deck"! If someone is properly trained to administer a diagnostic, and they have the time to do it, then go for it. In my position, our school psychologist already has an incredible backlog of special education testing. I can't imagine a scenario in which she would be able to do such testing. For us, this would fall on the interventionist who is working with the child.

**Q** *Violetta T. Uramkin*

We are looking for a behavioral intervention for students who are capable of work completion but refuse to do it. We have an executive function intervention for students whose organizational difficulties impede their work completion but not for those who simply refuse to do it.

**A** *Jonathan G. Ross*

I do not have a great deal of experience in behavioral interventions. When we started our program, our hope was that if we decreased the frustration level of students in the classroom by improving interventions, then the behaviors would improve. It was a gamble, but it did work for us. For students who refuse to work, I can only suggest that you remain committed to finding an intervention that makes the connection for them. Keep trying new and research-validated methods and get them engaged. Another area that we have found success with student engagement is our use of "Data Coaching." We meet regularly with students to review their achievement results and progress monitoring data. This helps to engage them in the metacognitive activity of thinking about how they learn. They become active in their learning process rather than just passive observers.

**Q** *Earleen Tudor*

Without assistants in a middle school setting how do you organize small RTI groups effectively?

**A** *Jonathan G. Ross*

Generally speaking, I would avoid the use of assistants in an RTI framework to begin with. They are not certified to teach and, usually, not trained in the specific intervention that is being implemented. My suggestion would be to remain open to re-organizing your program in order to make effective use of all staff. Just this past year we made a drastic change to our program in order to better meet the needs of students. Previously, we had students separated by grade level in their classes. Each class that was going on simultaneously had students receiving interventions at various Tiers. This year, we combined the classes and grouped students across grade levels who

**A** were in common interventions. This was a more efficient use of staff for us.

**Q** **Bob**  
What is the difference between MTSS and RTI?

**A** **Jonathan G. Ross**  
To me, they are one in the same. In some cases, districts will use MTSS as the umbrella for the RTI program because RTI is often thought to focus on academics and they want a behavior component as well. Most of the time, MTSS and RTI are really just two different ways to describe the same type of intervention program.

**Q** **Kris Kaase**  
What is the biggest Rtl challenge for middle schools?

**A** **Jonathan G. Ross**  
Without a doubt, the biggest challenge is scheduling and staffing. Between budget cuts and the various stakeholders pulling schools in different directions, it has become increasingly difficult to optimize the use of staff. I think that you will see several questions related to these two areas today, along with my ideas for how to overcome such struggles.

**Q** **Leah N**  
How do you see intervention or problem solving teams being utilized effectively in middle schools?

**A** **Jonathan G. Ross**  
If I understand your question, the problem solving team is involved in a process that has 4 basic steps: Step 1 is Problem Identification. What is the problem? Identify a benchmark and analyze gaps. Step 2 is Problem Analysis. Why is the problem occurring? Develop a hypothesis and brainstorm solutions. Step 3 is Intervention Design. What are we going to do about it? Develop interventions in those areas for which data are available and hypothesis verified. Step 4 is Response to Intervention. Is it working? I view this as a cycle that leads you back to Step 1 where you re-evaluate what you are doing to check for progress. This can be done for the school-wide MTSS framework or for consideration of individual student progress.

**Q** **Blake Reddick**  
How is the best way to ease into Rtl at the secondary level? Would you start with academic or behavioral Rtl or any other suggestions

**A** **Jonathan G. Ross**  
I would begin with academic. Our reasoning was that we believed an improved academic program



**A** would decrease student frustration and improve behavior. The best advice that I could give for easing into the implementation would be starting with one grade level (the lowest in your school). Get those students and staff on board. Work out the bugs. This will help with buy-in from everyone else in the school.

**Q** **Mary McDade**

Based on research what is the necessary reading intervention time needed to make up gaps for middle school?

**A** **Jonathan G. Ross**

While I do not have specific research to point to, I can tell you that in our experience you can do one thing to help make up the gaps. Implement your MTSS framework to work in conjunction with the core curriculum rather than as a replacement for the core curriculum. It is vitally important for students to maintain access to a differentiated core curriculum that meets them at their level while also being provided with an intervention that helps to close that gap.

**Q** **Matt**

What is commonly being used as a benchmark measure at the secondary levels?

**A** **Jonathan G. Ross**

Before giving examples, let me stress the criteria for any benchmarking tool. I would look for a measure that is efficient, practical, and accurate. It is helpful if the screening and progress monitoring are the same, but not mandatory. We have had positive experiences with DIBELS and AIMSweb as our benchmark measure. This year, we began using Study Island as another universal screening tool. I have also heard positive things about EdCheckup, STAR and Scholastic.

**Q** **Nicole Bucka**

How can schools create the coaching support needed for Tier 1 data use with evidence based practice? What ways have you seen schools create this capacity?

**A** **Jonathan G. Ross**

We have taken a two-pronged approach to addressing support for Tier 1 data use. As principal, have served as the first prong to show teachers the importance of the data and provide them with knowledge on how to access it and what it all means. Our second prong has been to identify and use teacher leaders to continue the support of data use. With a large staff such as ours, we needed to put those comfortable with the use of data in a position to support their colleagues. We have an academic advisor who does this with scheduled grade level meetings that occur once a cycle. We also have professional development days dedicated to the interpretation and application of such data.

**Q** *Julie W. Owens*

How do you schedule students for RTI? What classes do they miss? How many times a week do they meet for Tier II and Tier III intervention. We are having problems because a few students qualify for both Math and ELA interventions.

**A** *Jonathan G. Ross*

As I have stated several times, the scheduling question is a common problem. Please check out some of my other responses for a general answer to your question. However, you do bring up the additional point about frequency of intervention. In my experience, if your MTSS is going to be a success, the Tier 2 and 3 interventions must occur daily. If other subjects, such as electives/encore classes or a core class like social studies, have to be sacrificed, then so be it. Students who need both math and ELA interventions are depending on us to help them acquire these skills that are undeniably more important than any other subject area.

**Q** *Jeanette Rodriguez*

How do you provide "early Intervention" support to teachers at the Middle Schools? How can we match students' own deficits with core curriculum?

**A** *Jonathan G. Ross*

I am interpreting early intervention to mean training teachers on how to use the interventions. In that case, I would say that you need to provide them the time to do so. We have received tremendous support from the Pennsylvania Department of Education in getting our teachers access to intervention training that helps them understand the problems of their students and how they can be overcome. I would be hesitant to "match" student deficits with the core curriculum. Student deficits need to be matched with the interventions that they require. The core curriculum needs to be differentiated for all students, so they can all have equal access.

**Q** *Beth*

What do Middle School multi-tiered systems look like for identifying, intervening, and progress monitoring?

**A** *Jonathan G. Ross*

Identifying begins with universal screening of all students to determine who needs interventions. The interventions are usually set up in 3 levels or "Tiers." Tier 1 being closest to the core curriculum, Tier 2 usually a strategic intervention, and Tier 3 a more intensive intervention. Progress monitoring occurs weekly in Tier 3, bi-weekly in Tier 2, and usually quarterly in Tier 1.

**Q** *P Kivett*

Middle school teachers and administrators often don't see the use of screening the higher

**Q** performing students. How do we help them transition from using Rtl for evaluation purposes to using it for instructional purposes?

**A** **Jonathan G. Ross**

This is currently an area of focus for me and what we are trying to accomplish at my school. What we are trying to do is get buy-in from the students and their families by exposing them to their own data. Too often, students are passive data producers and not active data consumers. They come in and take the tests and then never think about them again. In our Data Coaching model, students and teachers of all levels sit down together and review student progress. Once the students begin to understand their role, they rely on the staff to provide additional data. This helps the teachers to understand its effectiveness for students of all levels.

**Related Reading from RTINetwork.org:**

- [A Middle School Principal's Perspective: The Story of an Rtl ?Convert?](#) by Jonathan G. Ross
- [Response to Intervention in Secondary Schools: Is It on Your Radar Screen?](#) by Barbara J. Ehren, Ed.D.
- [Screening for Reading Problems in Grades 4 Through 12](#), by Evelyn S. Johnson, Ed.D., and Juli L. Pool, Ph.D.
- [Integrating Academic and Behavior Supports Within an Rtl Framework](#), by Hank Bohanon, Ph.D., Steve Goodman, Ph.D., and Kent McIntosh, Ph.D.

**Additional Resources:**

- [National Center on Response to Intervention](#)