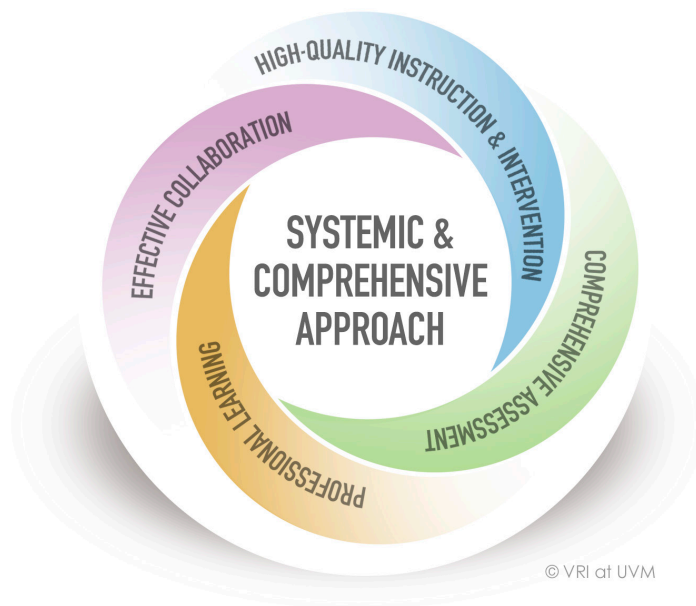


## Components of a Multi-tiered System of Supports/RtII

A **multi-tiered approach to instruction and intervention** is a comprehensive and systematic process for assessing and maximizing the opportunities to learn for all students within any content area. It emphasizes the importance of effective, culturally responsive, and differentiated first teaching and effective early intervening supports for both academics and behavior for all students, prior to making a referral for a special education evaluation. The VT AoE has identified a multi-tiered system for RtII as a major component of school improvement and effectiveness.

The **components** of Vermont's Multi-tiered System of Supports/RtII are:

- **A Systemic and Comprehensive Approach**
- **Effective Collaboration**
- **High-quality Instruction and Intervention that is Responsive and Differentiated**
- **Comprehensive and Balanced Assessment System**
- **Expertise (Well-designed Professional Learning)**



While providing flexibility in the selection of specific content, methods, and tools, these guidelines call for common elements in all schools/districts who wish to use a multi-tiered system. Schools/districts may wish to gauge their readiness for a multi-tiered approach by using the **Self-Assessment Tool**. The tool and other information related to each of these key elements, is available by visiting the Vermont Reads Institute at UVM website at [www.vriuvm.org](http://www.vriuvm.org). In the next five sections of this Field Guide, we provide an overview of the importance, characteristics, and essential elements of each of these five components, and some tools for getting started with MTSS-RtII.

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# Guiding Principles for a Multi-tiered System of Supports-Response to Instruction and Intervention (MTSS-RtII) <sup>1</sup>

The available evidence suggests that students' academic and behavioral success is promoted when schools and districts adopt a multi-tiered approach to teaching and learning. The following Guiding Principles, developed by consensus of the Vermont Statewide Steering Committee on RtII, build on and extend earlier work regarding RtII that is currently posted on the VTAoE website. They are offered as a starting point for schools wishing to implement a multi-tiered system of student supports to improve achievement for all students.

## Vermont's Guiding Principles for MTSS-RtII <sup>2</sup>

### Principle 1

Success begins with committed educators who believe that all students learn and can achieve high standards as a result of effective teaching.

### Principle 2

A successful **multi-tiered system** begins with the highest quality classroom instruction that is informed by research and supported by a standards-based curriculum.

### Principle 3

A coherent, articulated and **balanced assessment system** guides responsive teaching, informs educators and students about progress, and leads to effective decisions.

### Principle 4

The analysis and use of on-going performance data to monitor progress, inform instructional decisions, and refine ambitious goal-setting results in acceleration of student learning.

### Principle 5

Student success occurs when expert personnel provide targeted and **differentiated instruction** at the earliest indication of student need at a level of intensity that is responsive to the need.

### Principle 6

To address the full range of students' needs, schools provide a comprehensive, responsive system of instruction and intervention that reflects fidelity to the **research-based approach** while supporting teachers as they use keen observation to make decisions about and engage in responsive teaching.

### Principle 7

Dynamic, positive, and productive **collaboration** among students, families, and professionals with relevant expertise is the foundation for effective problem solving and instructional decision-making within a multi-tiered system.

### Principle 8

Effective leadership, including building administrator engagement and **distributed leadership**, is crucial for guiding and sustaining a multi-tiered system.

### Principle 9

The success of a **multi-tiered system** is dependent on continuously-developing expertise. Professional development for all members of the school community is needed to build capacity and sustain progress.

### Principle 10

These principles are interrelated and will be most effective when integrated within a coherent plan for continuous improvement that recognizes how recursive assessment, reflection, and adaptation are needed to improve instruction and increase student achievement.

<sup>1</sup> This is a consensus document of the Vermont Statewide Steering Committee on Response to Instruction and Intervention (RtII) (2011-2012).

<sup>2</sup> Highlighted terms are defined in the glossary.

## A SYSTEMIC AND COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH

### Essential Elements of a Systemic and Comprehensive Approach to MTSS-RtII

It is important to avoid a “haphazard approach” to RtII by building competency throughout the entire system (Huie et al., 2004). Success rests on a systemic approach that unifies general and special education in deliberate, intentional, ongoing collaboration to improve outcomes for all students. Through effective collaboration and data-driven conversations, educators can:

- develop coherent and consistent curriculum and behavior practices that guide instruction and intervention to improve outcomes for all students;
- reduce and eliminate disjointed programs across general, remedial, and special education;
- focus on prevention and reduce unnecessary student failure;
- provide more effective instruction for all students and reduce the number of students in special education; and
- pool resources and share expertise in order to meet shared goals for instruction and assessment.

As well, the specific details of a multi-tiered system of RtII need to be appropriate for the particular school/district and take into account leadership, expertise, the student population, expectations of the community, and available resources (International Reading Association, 2010). Despite considerable school-effectiveness research supporting a context-specific approach, some schools believe that there are legal requirements attached to RtII that limit their options. Fortunately, the language in IDEA intentionally provides latitude to LEAs in this regard and subsequent guidance documents like this one provide even stronger support for this concept. Schools and districts can and should develop and/or adopt an approach that best matches their needs and resources, while still honoring the Guiding Principles (see page 4).

A Systemic Comprehensive Approach is the foundation for all of the other components (see Figure 1 for a visual representation of the components of Vermont’s Multi-tiered System of Supports for RtII). It supports all of the other work and, without it, the work is not likely to be successful. It is shown in the middle, uniting the other 4 components, which are represented emanating from the systemic approach. They flow into each other and are all interrelated – success in one area affects success in another. For example, it is difficult to ensure “high-quality instruction and intervention that is responsive and differentiated” if the district/school has not developed or adopted a standards-based core curriculum that is vertically aligned and coordinated across contexts (general education, special education, etc.). Similarly, the development of a balanced assessment system cannot be the purview of individual teachers or grade levels. There are systems implications in each of the key elements of a multi-tiered system.

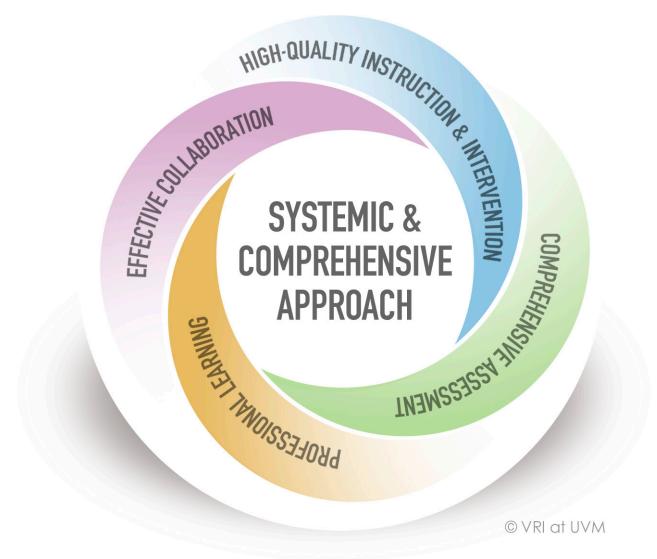


Figure 1. Components of Vermont’s MTSS for RtII

## EFFECTIVE COLLABORATION

### Essential Elements of Collaboration for MTSS-RtII

MTSS-RtII requires that schools create cultures that embrace change and institutionalize structures that promote teacher collaboration and comprehensive approaches to student learning (Dorn & Henderson, 2010). This collaborative approach often represents a fundamental shift in how schools identify and respond to students' academic and behavioral difficulties, and may require systemic change from an isolated work culture to one in which professionals from diverse backgrounds work together.

### Structures that Support a Collaborative Problem-solving Approach to MTSS-RtII

Collaboration advances the critical components of a multi-tiered system. Successful RtII models depend on a commitment of all professionals, school-wide and district-wide, to collaborate in providing a comprehensive purpose-driven assessment system and high-quality instruction and interventions (see Assessment and Instruction/Intervention sections of this document). All school professionals must commit to creating and supporting a problem-solving approach that enables teachers to learn from one another and promotes professional dialogue among general education, intervention, and special education teachers.

#### Teams

This is typically accomplished through teams. In a systemic approach to RtII, distributed leadership models and professional learning communities support collaborative problem-solving team structures such as data teams, teacher/specialist collaborations, grade-level intervention teams, and educational support teams (Costello, Lipson, Marinak, & Zolman, 2010).

Research suggests that effective teaming has a positive impact on both teaching practice and student achievement/behavior. In a multi-tiered RtII process, teams of administrators, classroom teachers, special educators, relevant specialists, and family members meet regularly to analyze student data and instructional practices to determine the needs of their students so that they can respond effectively. Any number of possible structures can support effective team decision-making. Here in Vermont, many schools have turned to Critical Friends (Bambino, 2002) or Professional Learning Communities (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

How do these teams work? Essentially, problem solving teams, which include relevant teachers, administrators, specialists and family members, analyze and discuss assessment information at the school, grade, classroom and individual levels and collaborate about why, what, and how to teach. Educators discuss and make decisions about:

- what students will learn (grade-level/course benchmarks; state standards);
- which culturally responsive, high quality instructional strategies and approaches will be used to ensure that students learn;
- how students' progress and achievement will be assessed within a balanced assessment system;
- how the team and/or others will intervene when students are not meeting benchmarks or are exceeding benchmarks and need additional challenges;
- next steps for individuals and groups of students; and
- what professional learning is needed to improve student outcomes.

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## HIGH-QUALITY INSTRUCTION AND INTERVENTION

### Characteristics of High-quality Instruction and Intervention

Excellent, relevant research on teaching and learning has burgeoned over the past 5 decades. We know a great deal more about “what works” today than we did 50 years ago (What Works Clearinghouse, n.d.). Some behaviors, approaches and conditions appear to be important in all circumstances and across all grade levels. For example, explicit instruction of both word-level components and comprehension strategies has a positive effect on students’ learning (Fielding & Pearson, 1994; Reed, Wanzek & Vaughn, 2012; Scanlon, Anderson & Sweeney, 2010). At the same time, the idea of “best practice” has been refined so that we understand much more clearly that all approaches work with some students/teachers and none work with everyone (Bond & Dykstra, 1967/1997; Edmonds et al., 2009; Mathes, et al., 2005; Torgeson, et al., 2001; Wanzek & Vaughn, 2008).

Classroom teachers and specialists often feel pressured to adopt specialized programs for struggling students. Issues of “program” and “approach” are hotly debated in many schools, sometimes limiting collaborative efforts. Studies that shed light on “what” instruction and “what” measures suggest there is not one approach that is essential for accelerating students’ reading achievement. Indeed, there is evidence that differing approaches can be equally successful as long as there is **expert teaching and careful attention to student progress** (D’Agostino & Murphy, 2004; Ehri, Dreyer, Flugman & Gross, 2007; Nye, Konstantopoulos, & Hedges, 2004) (emphasis added). In every case, close attention to students’ development is required to realize the potential of any approach (Comer, 2005a) and to recognize that the developmental trajectory over the course of a student’s school career must respond to changing needs and abilities. Some approaches that work well for younger students are not as effective for older ones (Carnegie Corporation, 2009; Edmonds et al., 2009). At every level, student engagement is a critical factor educators must strive for to create a school culture that builds confidence, competence, self-regulation, and motivation (Comer, 2005b; Fisher & Frey, 2010).

A multi-tiered system of support depends on excellent classroom instruction, but it also anticipates that some students will struggle (or be likely to flounder), even when provided with good initial instruction (National Mathematics Advisory Panel, 2008). Both instruction and intervention require our close attention. We must be able to describe our instructional offerings and be clear about how interventions are addressing students’ needs. While it is not possible to provide a comprehensive description of all essential elements involved in high-quality instruction and intervention, in this section, we provide a brief list and a detailed Instruction/Intervention Matrix of Essential Elements (Table 4). As well, we refer you to additional resources.

Several key attributes of instruction in successful learning contexts are notable, since they seem to be important in all settings and with both younger and older students:

- provided by expert teachers with both pedagogical and content knowledge;
- informed by research evidence and responsive to specific student–teacher interactions;
- differentiated —informed by on-going, instructionally relevant assessment;
- involves both explicit instructional approaches and opportunities for independent or self- selected activity; and
- designed for and responsive to the learning needs of diverse students.

## COMPREHENSIVE AND BALANCED ASSESSMENT

Table 5. Balanced Assessment System By Purpose

PURPOSE	WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE?	ASSESSMENT OPTIONS	NOTATIONS
<p><b>Screening</b></p> <p><b>To Identify Students Who Require a Closer Look</b></p>	<p>Data that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify or flag students who are struggling or may be at-risk of school failure and who will require closer monitoring</li> <li>Raise unanswered questions about individuals or groups of students</li> <li>Or, the effectiveness of core academic and behavioral curricula</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Dedicated screening tool</li> <li>Formal review of existing progress monitoring data</li> <li>On-going formative assessment data</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Data for screening purposes are collected for all students one or more times a year.</li> <li>Tests dedicated to screening (sometimes called universal screeners) are generally most important when: 1) there is no comprehensive assessment system in place that provides on-going information about individual students or, 2) students are new to school (i.e. PreK-K and/or middle/high school) and/or there are many new students each year.</li> <li>Screening for behavioral concerns involves reviewing trends for individual students as well as relevant themes within the total or disaggregated population (i.e., grade level/class, problematic time of day, location, etc.).</li> <li>If behavioral data are reviewed on a routinely fixed schedule, they may serve the purpose of screening in the absence of a standardized tool.</li> </ul>

## COMPREHENSIVE AND BALANCED ASSESSMENT

Table 5. Balanced Assessment System By Purpose (cont'd)

PURPOSE	WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE?	ASSESSMENT OPTIONS	NOTATIONS
<p><b>Diagnostic</b></p> <p><b>To Investigate and Analyze Learning Difficulties</b></p>	<p>Data that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inform the educator about possible causes of student difficulties</li> <li>• Explore the domain (literacy, mathematics or behavior) more comprehensively</li> <li>• Identify appropriate focus for instruction/intervention</li> <li>• Explore and identify possible effective instructional/intervention approaches</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Standardized diagnostic assessment tools</li> <li>• Closer and more detailed analysis of existing progress monitoring data</li> <li>• Additional measures/data to get a more comprehensive picture</li> <li>• Observations, interviews, and work samples</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diagnostic assessment is conducted with only some students but is often necessary to plan instruction and/or intervention to meet the needs of students who are experiencing difficulty.</li> <li>• The goal is to plan more effective and tailored instruction and/or intervention based on more refined information.</li> <li>• Students often provide excellent insights into their own learning strengths and needs. Their self-assessments should be carefully considered.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Progress Monitoring: Formative</b></p> <p><b>To Inform Instruction</b></p>	<p>Data that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide information to both educators and students about what has been learned, which objectives have been addressed, and what techniques have been successful</li> <li>• Help educators make decisions about what to teach, how to adjust their instruction along the way, and/or where to start</li> <li>• Data that reveals depth of understanding and partial or developing understandings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Any data that shows teachers what has been learned and what needs to be addressed instructionally</li> <li>• Student engagement in the process is pivotal</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Standardized information can be very helpful in planning overall instruction for groups of students.</li> <li>• As well, educators use on-going formative assessment data (including student self-assessment) to refine and adapt instruction for groups and individuals (see note above about student self-assessment).</li> </ul>

## COMPREHENSIVE AND BALANCED ASSESSMENT

Table 5. Balanced Assessment System By Purpose (cont'd)

PURPOSE	WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE?	ASSESSMENT OPTIONS	NOTATIONS
<p><b>Progress Monitoring: Periodic Benchmarking</b></p> <p><b>To Monitor Progress</b></p>	<p>Data that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Show educators (and others) what progress has been made during a specific period</li> <li>• Track student progress on identified tasks/benchmarks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• On-going formative progress monitoring data</li> <li>• Interim/periodic benchmark assessments</li> <li>• Standardized outcome measures</li> </ul>	<p>An array of data can and should be used to monitor student progress.</p> <p>A robust progress monitoring system can function in place of a separate screening measure.</p>
<p><b>Outcome or Summative</b></p> <p><b>To Verify Learning</b></p>	<p>Data that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confirm what students know and can do; typically at the end of year, semester, course, or instructional unit</li> <li>• Reflect an appropriate and comprehensive picture of the domain (literacy, mathematics, behavior)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Standardized test data to assess outcomes</li> <li>• Benchmark progress monitoring data</li> <li>• Formative assessment data demonstrating learning</li> </ul>	<p>Because data provide information about individual students and also about groups, it can be used to make decisions about instruction, curriculum and program adjustments.</p> <p>Protocols for examining outcome data should support educators as they use data for diverse purposes.</p>



## EXPERTISE (WELL-DESIGNED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING)

### Essential Elements of Expertise and Professional Learning within MTSS-RtII

Well-designed professional learning for MTSS-RtII honors research-based characteristics of well-designed professional learning and provides specific support for the development of expertise in the four critical components detailed in this Field Guide (systematic and comprehensive approach; effective collaboration; comprehensive, balanced assessment system; high quality instruction and intervention).

In this section, we identify essential elements of expertise and professional learning for each component of MTSS-RtII and conclude with research-based characteristics of effective, well-designed professional learning. While these elements are not all-inclusive, they can provide a good starting point.

#### Systemic and comprehensive approach

Professional learning for MTSS-RtII includes all educators in a school system and addresses the learning and skill needs at each level of the system. Purposes and processes of multi-tiered RtII and its implications for curriculum, instruction, assessment practices, and ongoing monitoring of schoolwide progress need to be understood by all within the system. At times, it may involve family and community members.

A school-based needs assessment of the current level and types of all educators' (teachers, specialists, administrators) expertise and an analysis of student performance data are essential components of a systemic and comprehensive approach to RtII. The results of this assessment can serve as the foundation for a professional learning action plan, which will be implemented and continually monitored and evaluated. Leadership ensures that the school's professional learning plan aligns with the school's improvement plan and includes:

- all educators within the system,
- understandings about roles and responsibilities,
- differentiation for professional learning needs,
- the four components of MTSS-RtII,
- sufficient time for professional learning activities and collaboration on aspects of multi-tiered instruction,
- job-embedded professional learning models,
- the use of experts and highly qualified professionals to provide targeted professional learning opportunities,
- a growth-oriented supervision model, and
- well-designed evaluations that determine whether the goals targeted by the professional learning opportunities have been achieved.