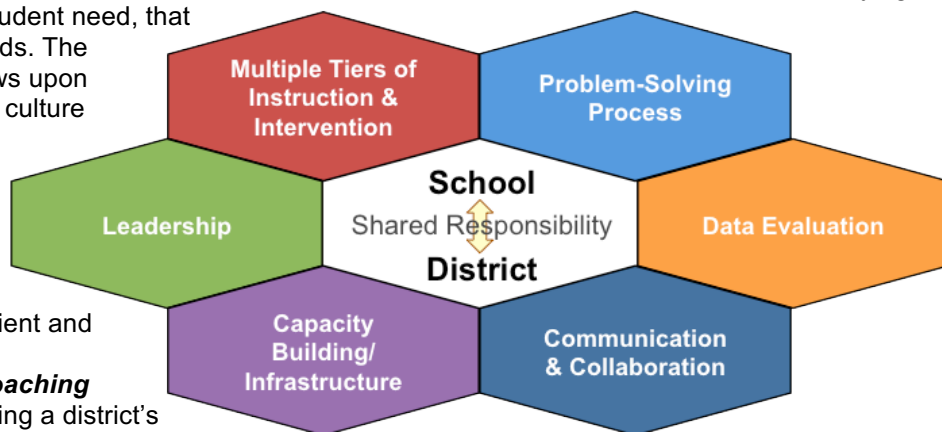


Systems Coaching and Leadership

Introduction

A Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) is an evidence-based framework designed to educate ALL students in an efficient and effective manner. MTSS uses a data-based problem-solving process to develop, implement, and evaluate academic and behavior instruction and interventions delivered in varying intensities (tiers), based on student need, that are aligned with state standards. The implementation of MTSS draws upon existing resources, skills, and culture within a district. The MTSS structure enables a district to maximize the impact of its existing resources by increasing its capacity to use data-based evaluation, strategic leadership, and efficient and effective communication and collaboration. The use of a **coaching process** is integral to increasing a district's capacity to sustain effective practices. The content of this fact sheet should be considered in the context of the six component MTSS model within the domains of *Leadership*, *Capacity Building/Infrastructure*, and *Communication & Collaboration*.



Content vs. Systems Coaching

Coaching has emerged as a popular approach to facilitate educators' capacity to adopt and implement evidence-based practices with fidelity (March & Gaunt, 2013; Sims, March, Barrett, & Knotek, 2015). *Content coaching* focuses on helping teachers improve instruction in a particular discipline such as reading, mathematics, and behavior (Neufeld & Roper, 2003). The majority of coaching in these models occurs at the one-on-one (coach-to-teacher) or small group (coach-to-teachers) level and focuses on enhancing classroom practices to improve student outcomes. *Systems coaching* shifts the concept of coaching from improving individual capacity to improving the coordinated capacity of groups of educators (e.g., district) to enhance implementation fidelity of empirically-based practices, as well as support and sustain whole school reform efforts (March & Gaunt, 2013; Sims, March, Barrett, & Knotek, 2015).

Systems coaching (v): the application of a set of skills that provides dynamic support and facilitation to develop the capacity of school or district teams to implement MTSS aligned with the school or district improvement plans in order to enhance student outcomes (March & Gaunt, 2013, p. 4).

Systems coaching requires the coordinated application of seven skill sets and behaviors necessary for systems coaching to be effective (see table below). These seven skills are interdependent and work in concert to sustain implementation of any large-scale (school or district) initiative meant to improve school outcomes. The District Leadership Team (DLT) coordinates, facilitates, and supports systems coaching at the district and school levels. School-Based Leadership Teams (SBLTs) ensure that district and school strategic plans are implemented with success. The SBLTs coordinate, facilitate, and support systems coaching at the school level to successfully implement the strategic plan.

The Relationship Between Leadership and Effective Systems Coaching

Leadership is a necessary component for successful implementation of systems change initiatives (Leithwood, 2010; Crawford & Torgeson, 2007), and five elements must be present in the system (district/school) to support a change initiative. Effective leaders ensure that these elements are present within the system. The elements are:

1. **Vision, focus, and consistent message of implementation**
2. **Focus on schools**
3. **Relationships based on mutual respect and shared responsibility**
4. **Expert problem solving**
5. **Investment in professional learning**

The presence of the five elements is an indicator of the system's readiness for change. The absence of these elements will threaten a systems change initiative. Systems coaching works best in a system that is ready for systems change and open to the process. *Effective* systems coaching is characterized by seven skill areas listed to the right. It becomes clear that effective systems coaching cannot occur without the five elements fostered through highly effective leadership. Effective leaders use systems coaching resources to accomplish improvements and change within the system. These are reciprocal processes that nurture each other to achieve system goals. In short, effective coaches are effective leaders, and effective leaders are effective coaches.

Conclusion

Systems coaching requires effective leadership at all levels of the educational system. The leadership teams at both the district and school levels hold primary responsibility for guiding and monitoring implementation and sustainability of MTSS over time. To be responsive to the needs of the organization, the leadership and coaching skillsets articulated in this fact sheet must be fused and applied adaptably based upon such factors as the local context and related resources or barriers, the goals of the initiative being implemented, and the level of the system in which the innovations are being applied (e.g., classroom, school, district, or state). The problem-solving facilitation skills and content knowledge among leadership team members strengthen over time through a distributed systems coaching approach which the leadership team then utilizes to provide guidance and support to all staff to implement MTSS with fidelity. Therefore, ongoing, high-quality, job-embedded professional learning for educators, coaching support staff, and leadership team members is a core mechanism for ensuring the sustainability of MTSS over time through self-examination and continuous improvement.

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| Systems Coaching Skills |
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| 1. Demonstrate effective interpersonal communication |
| 2. Use data-based student and organizational problem-solving strategies |
| 3. Disseminate content knowledge including but not limited to: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Organizational change b. Integrated multi-tiered system c. Academic/social-emotional/behavioral instruction d. Families/communities |
| 4. Facilitate team-based collaboration |
| 5. Support leadership |
| 6. Facilitate professional learning |
| 7. Evaluate the impact of the coaching process on system outcomes |