

with Tier 1, core instruction, alone. In some cases, schools discuss these score ranges in terms of tiers (1 to 3), or even color codes (Tier 1 is green, Tier 2 is yellow, and Tier 3 is red). This could be an example of fixed mindset thinking about tiered systems of support. A growth mindset perspective would, in contrast, regard students and their instructional needs flexibly, and the tiers as ways of organizing resources in support of those needs.

Whereas cut scores can be useful guidelines for planning purposes, they do not necessarily convey information about actual instructional needs, which can vary considerably—even for students who received the same or similar scores on a test used for screening (e.g., Szadokierski et al., 2017). It is important, when discussing screening data, not to speak categorically about students (i.e., a “Tier 1 student,” a “Tier 2 student,” or a “Tier 3 student”); there is no such thing as a tiered student. Tiers are ways of describing resource allocation or intensity of intervention. Working from a fixed mindset, or speaking categorically about tiers and students, takes attention away from instructional needs and can reframe a conversation in terms of the category of a student’s needs instead of their instructional needs. In other words, when the focus is on identifying students or interventions in terms of tiers, less attention is paid to the degree to which instruction or intervention will match students’ learning needs. This can lead to a second common pitfall to be avoided in implementation of NJTSS: missing needs for Tier 1, or class-wide intervention (e.g., Burns et al., 2015).

***Recommendation:** Avoid language that categorically labels students or interventions as “Tier 1 students” or “Tier 3 student or intervention.”*

Problem 2: Thinking of Tiers as Diagnoses

It is not uncommon, on reviewing fall/winter/spring screening data, for schools to find a large proportion of students in a cohort scoring below a “Tier 2” cut score. Depending on the circumstances, teams working with a fixed orientation toward tiered supports might attempt to address the issue by implementing Tier 2 intervention for a disproportionately large number of students within a grade. This can tax the system’s resources to implement intervention for students with more severe needs and might also fail to address underlying reasons for widespread low achievement (interventions might not effectively target missing skills and knowledge).

From a growth mindset perspective, a scenario in which a large proportion of students in a grade level score below the cut score is a signal for necessary changes in Tier 1 instruction. Such changes, which might be considered a form of “Tier 1 intervention,” may be based on a close review of the alignment between students’ existing skills, curriculum, and instructional methods (diagnostic assessment; [Section 2](#)). A number of students with relatively greater skill deficits may still receive additional support via intervention(s) in higher tiers. When considered from a growth mindset perspective, tiers are primarily a way of organizing resources in proportion with students’ relative levels of need. The instructional or intervention activities that happen within tiers must shift based on the needs of students at those levels.

***Recommendation:** Screening data help us understand relative levels of need and may be used to inform intervention resource allocation in all tiers of an NJTSS.*

Problem 3: Missed Opportunities for Improvement

Schools implementing tiered services can expect to see at least some growth from students receiving social-emotional and behavioral and academic interventions, on average. There will often be substantial variability in rates at which students make progress during intervention (e.g., O’Keeffe et al., 2017). While some of this variability will be the result of individual differences between students, a considerable proportion will be related to characteristics of interventions themselves or how interventions are implemented. When approached from a fixed mindset, interventions are selected based on precedent (“we use this intervention because it is what we have”) or based on perceived categorical match (“Tier 2 intervention for Tier 2 students”). Outcomes of intervention implementation might be seen as products of student characteristics (Tier 2 student becomes a Tier 3 student; student is referred for evaluation for special education) or intervention characteristics (“We tried this intervention once, it didn’t work, and we’ll stop using it from now on because we know it is not effective”).

A pronounced example of this mistaken approach occurs when students with disabilities are excluded from receiving high-quality interventions that are otherwise available to their general education peers or vice versa, often due to misconceptions about funding restrictions. Some educators assume that interventions funded through general education resources cannot be used to support students with disabilities, creating unnecessary

1. District and School Leadership

Leadership at the district level sets the vision and leads planning and initial implementation of tiered frameworks. Leadership at the school level helps the vision manifest in terms of practices and outcomes. Leadership acquires and allocates resources that include personnel, funding, and time. Leadership has an important role in promoting capacity of school staff to engage in data-based decision making and carrying out the activities of tiered systems of support (e.g., Choi et al., 2019).

Building Capacity Through Recruitment

Some of the skills that are useful in successful implementation of NJTSS are not typically (or not easily) covered in undergraduate and graduate progress for education professionals. These may include, but are not limited to, skills and knowledge around academic assessment, data management, academic intervention, and social-emotional and behavioral assessment and intervention. Strategic recruitment can promote these capacities within staff.

- Connect with institutions of higher education that prepare education professionals with knowledge of the ideas and practices associated with NJTSS,
- Connect with professional organizations that promote NJTSS,
- Think broadly about unique contributions of individuals from a wide range of positions (Hiring an NJTSS Coordinator or NJTSS Coach can be beneficial, but not sufficient.), and
- Recruit generously. Some skill redundancy can be advantageous.

Building Capacity Through Organization

The degree to which educators in a school district can successfully carry out tiered systems is associated with the ways in which they are organized. This organization refers to structuring of teams that carry out aspects of NJTSS (see [Section 3](#)) and how educators' skillsets are shared throughout schools or districts.

In the context of education, how staff are organized can be characterized as siloed or integrated. The term silos refers to separate, isolated activities or areas of focus that operate independently, often without much communication or collaboration between them. In a school setting, silos might include separate teams focused solely on academics, behavior, or special education, where information and strategies are not readily shared between these groups.

When the activities of NJTSS (i.e., screening, instructional changes, progress monitoring) occur in silos, it can lead to gaps in student support, missed opportunities for prevention and intervention, and a lack of coordinated response to complex student needs. In contrast, organization of NJTSS is "integrated" when there is communication and collaboration between components of NJTSS, such as collaboration between different school teams, like teachers, counselors, administrators, and special education staff, to share data and develop interventions that address the whole child.

An important and sometimes overlooked example of siloed versus integrated structure is that of the involvement of students with disabilities in tiered systems of support. A major priority of NJTSS is the prevention of serious learning difficulties through frequent assessment, data-based decision making, and intervention; tiered frameworks have also seen increased use in the identification of students with specific learning disabilities (SLD). Although effective implementation of tiered frameworks of support has been known to reduce the number of referrals of students for evaluation for special education, it is important to remember that the purpose of this framework is not, and never has been, to be a barrier between general and special educational services. The purpose is not to prevent students from receiving evaluation or IEPs. Similarly, students who do receive IEPs remain eligible to receive intervention at any tier within the framework, depending on individual needs.

Building Capacity via Professional Development

Traditional Professional Development

Professional development (PD) through on-the-job training is a standard practice but cannot be expected to lead to lasting change in practices without attention to several items, including the willingness and current capacities of the school system and staff to adapt practices or acquire new skills, as well as characteristics of PD initiatives themselves. Traditional PD for educators comes in the form of a standalone workshop. These are characterized by the following:

- In lecture formats, educators are passive participants, and experts (either from within or outside of the school system) deliver information.
- Training is separate from worksite (i.e., held outside of educators' classrooms, offices, etc.), and
- In a workshop format, educators participate in a one-time activity that is highly time bound, lasting a few hours before concluding.

This type of professional development has been shown to have limited impact on educators' practices (Desimone et al., 2002), but, if conducted well, *can* be expected to increase educator familiarity with, or knowledge of new practices (Goldschmidt & Phelps, 2010). Features of workshop-style professional development that help promote knowledge include focus, promotion of participants' engagement, coherence, sufficient time (for example, 20+ hours spread across a school year), and collective participation (i.e., teams participate in the training together; Desimone, 2011; Penuel et al., 2007).

An example of traditional professional development can be described as follows: a school district holds a one-day, lecture-based workshop on classroom management at the district office. Teachers passively listen to an external expert with limited interaction or practice. Though participants gain awareness of new strategies, the lack of follow-up, hands-on application, and sustained support leads to minimal long-term changes in classroom practices.

Whereas an alternative may proceed as follows: instead of a standalone workshop, the district implements a year-long PD program with technology-assisted coaching. Teachers receive initial training, participate in bi-weekly learning communities, and use a virtual platform that analyzes classroom interactions to provide immediate, personalized feedback. Virtual check-ins with district coaches build on insights provided through the platform, promoting a sustained improvement cycle in instructional practices and student outcomes.

Professional Development Through Coaching

The idea of coaching emerged over the course of several decades and primarily from the work of Joyce and Showers (2002). Coaching, in contrast with traditional lecture-based professional development, is characterized by work between a coach and educators (typically, but not necessarily always with one educator at a time). While teacher coaching typically evokes the idea of a specialist with a dedicated coaching role in a school system, *the idea of coaching in the context of support and PD for educators should instead be viewed as an activity or set of activities*. Some schools with sufficient resources do hire individuals into coaching roles (with or without the job title of "coach"), but others may build coaching activities into forms of support for educators, with aspects of coaching delivered by existing staff.

The aim of coaching is often to enhance aspects of practice and help the educator attain better student outcomes. Coaching is typically (a) "job-embedded," in that it occurs in the context of educators' practice (i.e., the classroom) and (b) relies on an ongoing, working relationship between coach and educators, instead of a single session.

Whereas traditional workshop-style PD may be useful in promoting knowledge, coaching has been demonstrated in multiple studies to be a viable way to impact *practice* (Kraft et al., 2018). This body of positive findings, however, should be considered alongside additional findings that positive effects of field-initiated (vs. researcher-initiated) coaching tend to be smaller. The following recommendations are worth consideration:

- For those school systems who add coaching activities to the responsibilities of specific staff as a part of the district's PD model, it is advisable that care be taken in the creation of **coach job descriptions and roles**. Many coaches take on administrative functions that are separate from educator PD (Kane & Rosenquist,

2019). Watch out for role creep, or the tendency for tasks of someone without well-defined responsibilities to increase in number or change in focus over time.

- Consideration can be given to the amount of **time** required for coaching activities. Individuals taking on the role of coach might be part or full-time positions, depending on the district's needs. Consider the number of educators each coach will support and average amount of time required per educator.
- Coaching can be **focused on specific goals**, intentional and strategic, and time bound. Consider adoption of **specific coaching** frameworks that were designed for specific purposes. Examples of specific coaching models might include coaching focused on behavioral strategies for paraprofessionals (Reddy et al. 2022), coaching focused on data-based decision making (e.g. Shanahan et al., 2025), coaching focused on Tier 1 classroom management and instructional strategy use (Reddy et al., 2017, 2021), or coaching focused on data-based decision making for early reading (Glover, 2017).
- Coaching, as with any profession, requires adequate **qualifications or skills for coaching**. These might be related to individuals' preservice training (e.g., a former school psychologist with experience in data use and management offering support as a data coach or a reading specialist engaged in coaching for middle school English/language arts classrooms). Qualifications for coaching might also be attained from specific training opportunities.
- Likewise, coaching activities could be more effective given guidance and **formative feedback** on their coaching.

Professional Development and Compliance With New Jersey Administrative Code

A strong professional development plan is also essential to sustaining compliance with the New Jersey Administrative Code (N.J.A.C.) 6A:16-8.1 and ensuring all staff understand their role in NJTSS implementation. Training opportunities focus on the following:

- **Understanding NJTSS and Legal Requirements:** Provide district-wide training on the regulatory components of N.J.A.C. 6A:16-8.1 and how they integrate with NJTSS. District and school leadership, including designated NJTSS staff, receive initial training. Building-level leadership, with the support of designated NJTSS staff, collaborates to provide turnkey training to all school staff.
- **Policies, Procedures, Documentation, and Reporting:** All schools provide training on the district's NJTSS policies, procedures, documentation, and annual reporting requirements. School administrators and designated staff collaborate to develop and provide school-level training for how their building will meet these requirements.
- **Best Practices in Tiered Interventions:** The district offers targeted training on Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 interventions to ensure consistency in application. This ongoing training is focused on one tier at a time and occurs over time.
- **Data Collection and Analysis:** Teaching staff are trained to document interventions, track student progress, and analyze data to inform decision-making. Initially, these trainings occur at the district level with information being adapted and turnkeyed at the school level.

Building Capacity Through Effective Time Management

Schedules for Screening

As discussed in [Section 2](#), the purpose of screening assessment in NJTSS is twofold: first, screening is conducted to identify the range of instructional needs across entire cohorts of students (i.e., the range of skills or functioning across a grade level at one point in time) and second, to provide a snapshot of the current average level and variation in skills or functioning (also called "benchmarking"). New Jersey schools are required to conduct at least two literacy screening/benchmarking assessments per year, which enables educators to review scores and evaluate gains in skill or functioning throughout the school year.

It can be helpful for schools to be strategic about when screening/benchmarking assessments are scheduled. Scheduling these assessments involves finding a balance between data needs (needs for planning and evaluation) and limited instructional time. There are two primary considerations in planning screening, including issues of evaluating impact of Tier 1 instruction (students' gains within the school year), as well as time required for intervention planning and implementation.

Table 7.2: Pros and Cons of Screening Schedules

Screening Frequency	Pros	Cons
Triennial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More frequent data collection allows for earlier intervention. • Better tracking of student progress over time. • More opportunities to adjust instruction based on data. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased testing frequency may contribute to assessment fatigue. • More administrative and instructional time required for screening. • Increased risk of premature correction if a program needs more time to have the intended effects.
Biannual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less disruption to instruction compared to trimester screening. • Allows for more instructional time between assessments. • Lower testing burden on students and staff. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fewer data points may delay interventions for struggling students or necessary adjustments to core instruction. • Less frequent screening could impact the duration students are receiving Tier 2/3 supports. • Instructional adjustments may come too late to significantly impact student outcomes.

Planning and Starting Interventions

Second, many decisions about starting or stopping interventions in Tiers 2 or 3 are made after screening data have been collected and reviewed by teams. For this reason, many districts that implement tiered supports identify a period of two weeks prior to this point to allow for screening to occur. In addition to starting times for intervention groups, the schedule for screening within a school needs to account for the length of time it takes to administer assessments across grade levels within a school (including time for scoring and data entry, if necessary), as well as time for teams to meet and review data.

Schedules for Progress Monitoring

As noted in [Section 2](#), in the subsection on Progress Monitoring, students benefit from teachers' use of progress monitoring data to inform decisions about interventions—whether to alter an intervention, discontinue intervention, or intensify intervention (escalate intervention to a higher tier of support). One common pitfall among schools that implement tiered supports is that progress monitoring data are not reviewed on a regular basis, and instructional decisions are delayed. This would be the case if, for example, decisions about starting, changing, or ending interventions were only made during screening/benchmarking periods. This can lead to diminished opportunities for growth for some students. For this reason, it is best to schedule meetings throughout the school year (several per semester) for teams to review individual progress data and make decisions to continue, discontinue, or somehow change interventions for students. (See [Section 2](#) on screening plans and [Section 3](#) on teams.)

Building Intervention Time Into Bell Schedules

One of the first challenges districts face in planning tiered supports is logistics (discussed in [Section 5](#)). Historically, schools in many states throughout the U.S. have approached academic and behavioral intervention on a case-by-case basis. Teachers might refer a student to a multidisciplinary team; the group would meet to discuss concerns and would recommend a plan (often to be carried out by the teacher) in the classroom. In NJTSS, schools build time for Tier 2 or 3 interventions into the school day. The best approach for setting such schedules may be different between schools, given local variables. The NJDOE created a [resource](#) to guide schools through designing bell schedules that offer a time and a place for intervention groups to occur.

2. Positive School Climate

School climate comprises the combined feelings and perceptions of school community members about how it feels to be a part of the school community. These feelings and perceptions are situated in individuals' unique identities and their interactions with other community members. Students' and educators' perceptions of school climate can change over time and are shaped by factors at various levels. Events that occur nationally or regionally might have an influence on other events (policy decisions, for example) at the state and local levels. Smaller environments, such as classrooms, contain their own events and trends that contribute to climate.

Empirical evidence supports the notion that school climate is connected to meaningful outcomes for all students, staff, and parents/caregivers. Positive school climates may foster greater rates of student engagement, which in turn is associated with higher levels of student academic achievement. Such climates may also contribute positively to the physical and social-emotional well-being of both students and staff. Promoting the overall well-being of all staff and students creates conditions for effective teaching and learning that lead to more positive student academic and developmental outcomes.

Promoting Positive School Climate for Students

A variety of factors might help improve or maintain students' collective sense of a healthy school and classroom climate. These include practices that promote inclusion (socially and academically), as well as practices that boost students' sense of efficacy.

Inclusion and Belonging

Students might feel included in, or that they belong in, their classrooms and schools to the extent that they are invited and able to participate in social and academic activities that occur there. Examples of barriers to inclusion may be those that are linguistic, socio-economic (i.e., money, social networks) or physical (i.e., time, physical abilities). Several strategies to promote students' sense of inclusion and belonging may include the following:

- Encourage students to explore and express identities through learning and social activities,
- Evaluate learning and extracurricular activities for the extent to which they are accessible to students of wide-ranging abilities (i.e., physical or perceptual abilities) and linguistic backgrounds,
- Incorporate social and intra-personal skills into classroom instruction (social-emotional learning). This helps set and maintain standards for interactions between students and may also help promote development of stronger relationships between students and educators, and
- Create opportunities to practice social and intra-personal skills over time. Creating opportunities for students to practice social and emotional skills not only helps grow and maintain those skills over time, but also may offer students a greater number of opportunities to establish meaningful connections with other members of their classrooms and schools.

Boosting Students' Sense of Self Efficacy

In addition to helping students feel they belong with their peers and educators at school, and are valued members of their school communities, is the degree to which students feel they are, or can be, successful in school or classroom activities. These feelings may be influenced by interactions between students and their teachers. Teachers play a large role in setting behavioral norms and classroom climates; ways in which teachers communicate expectations and offer feedback could enhance or diminish students' feelings about their abilities and their value as a member of the classroom. Specifically, the quality of a classroom climate can be improved or maintained through **prioritization of reinforcement over punishment**. In other words, using various forms of praise or encouragement to promote desired behaviors and skills versus relying on forms of correction or criticism to shape behaviors or skills.

Promoting Positive School Culture and Climate for Staff

School climate plays a significant role for both educators and students, with school leadership being key to fostering a positive environment. Effective leadership promotes a healthy climate by communicating, modeling, and normalizing a growth mindset for all staff members. This includes recognizing that each educator brings unique experiences and assets to the team, while also acknowledging the varying needs for professional development and support. Building on the importance of school climate and leadership, fostering trust and collegiality among staff is equally essential. When staff members feel supported and valued, they are more likely to embrace new practices, participate more effectively in initial implementation, and make greater contributions or innovations that sustain or improve implementation over time. Furthermore, ensuring high-quality implementation requires a continuous formative evaluation of activities, both within and across tiers, as outlined in [Section 2](#) on observation practices and in [Section 9](#).

Assessing and Promoting School Climate

The [New Jersey School Climate Improvement \(NJ SCI\) Survey](#) and online platform was developed by the School Climate Transformation Project (SCTP) at Rutgers University in collaboration with the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE). NJ SCI is designed to help schools identify school climate strengths and needs and use data to create strategic plans to improve conditions for teaching and learning: <https://www.nj.gov/education/safety/sandp/climate>.

3. Family and Community Engagement

Just as district and school leadership actions and aspects of school climate facilitate implementation of, or outcomes of NJTSS processes, connections with students' families/guardians and outside community organizations are influential parts of the environments in which students develop, and as such, connections between school and these external environments can increase capacities of tiered systems.

Parents/Guardian Engagement

Although schools and districts are responsible for instructional decision making, parents/guardians are important elements of students' learning environments. Relationships between parents/guardians and school districts are associated with student social, emotional, and behavioral functioning, as well as academic achievement. As outlined in [Section 6](#) of this manual, a variety of strategies can be used to create partnership with parents/guardians, which may enhance implementation of NJTSS in multiple ways across tiers.

Community Engagement

The needs and resources of communities in which schools operate will vary, yet capacity for implementation of NJTSS can be enhanced by connecting with local and regional organizations or services that either impact students directly, through provision of specific services, or indirectly, through work that reduces barriers to student participation and growth. Both direct and indirect resources can either expand what support is available for students or enhance the effectiveness of implementation.

Examples of direct and indirect influences of community resources can include the following:

Direct Influences

- Collaboration between school and external mental health providers can boost student access to more intensive social-emotional and behavioral intervention.
- Schools and districts can benefit from opportunities to partner with outside organizations (i.e., department of education, state universities) in grant-funded projects focused on building and sustaining tiered support frameworks for students. Such projects and funding can bring additional training or personnel (e.g., coaches, interventionists, interns, etc.).

Indirect Influences

- Individuals or groups within communities may be resources to help schools engage in practices (i.e., communication with parents/guardians) that are culturally and linguistically aligned. Similarly, individuals or groups within communities can also be engaged by schools to help increase parent/guardian knowledge of school systems and how to access resources available to their children at all ages.
- Local, state, or regional organizations might offer schools resources for building capacity for design and implementation of NJTSS. For example, this can be found in the form of extended PD opportunities through graduate coursework focused on tiered systems or engagement with organizations that provide ongoing coaching to enhance teachers' use of specific practices.

Key Takeaways

- **Mindset is Crucial:** A growth mindset is essential for effective implementation. This perspective sees skills and behaviors as changeable, and views needs as having ecological (environmental) causes. In contrast, a fixed mindset assumes that behaviors are innate and unchangeable.
- **Use Data to Inform Tier 1 Changes:** If screening data shows many students scoring below a “Tier 2” cut-off, it can signal a need for changes in Tier 1, or class-wide, instruction. A growth mindset recognizes that screening data helps understand relative levels of need and guides resource allocation across all tiers.
- **Align Interventions with Student Needs:** Interventions are not inherently effective or ineffective. Their success depends on the alignment between the intervention’s features and a student’s specific learning needs.
- **Environmental Factors are Key to Success:** Implementation of NJTSS is significantly influenced by external factors, including district and school leadership, school climate, and family and community engagement.
- **Manage Time Effectively:** Schools must balance time for a variety of activities (i.e., assessments) with instructional time. Additionally, schools may benefit from building time into their schedules for Tier 2 and 3 interventions and for teams to meet regularly to review progress monitoring data.
- **Foster a Positive School Climate:** A positive school climate is linked to greater student engagement and achievement, as well as the well-being of both students and staff. Leaders can promote this by modeling a growth mindset and fostering trust and collegiality among staff.
- **Engage with Families and the Community:** Connecting with parents/guardians and community organizations can enhance the capacity of tiered systems.

Additional Resources

- [NJTSS Professional Learning Series](#)
- [NJTSS-Early Reading](#)
- [New Jersey Statewide Parent Advocacy Network: A Resource Collection for Families to Understand the NJTSS Framework](#)