Podcast Episode 33

Hello, everyone. Welcome to the Education Table where I answer your questions about education and inclusive practice in 10 minutes or less. I am your host, Katie Novak, and today's question is one I hear everywhere.

And it's one that sounds really simple until you try to apply it in school with real live learners. What does the 80% guideline in MTSS actually mean? Now, if you're listening, I am sure you have seen the MTSS triangle.

Tier 1 is for all students, Tier 2 is for some students, and Tier 3 is for a few students. And often you'll also see percentages next to those tiers. The most common version suggests that when we serve all students through the lens of inclusive and evidence based practices that all of them will be included and about 80% of them will make really great progress with Tier 1 alone.

So we often see that Tier 2 is for 15 to 20% of students who will need additional support, and an even smaller group will really need intensive intervention in Tier 3. Now, the intent behind those numbers is not meant to be prescriptive. It's to illustrate how a healthy system is designed to function when Tier 1 is really strong as the core.

Now, of course, when we are working with real kids in real schools, we cannot treat those numbers as hard and fast rules because students clearly are so much more complex than easy percentages and their needs are always fluctuating over time. But that being said, the estimates are still very useful because they raise an important design question. If a large portion of students need support beyond Tier 1, what is that actually telling us about the core?

Now, in signature Education Table style, let's get into stories, research, and then strategies to answer this question. If you've ever been to a data meeting and you're looking at student data, you've probably heard someone say, ugh, we are not at 80% meeting expectations or 80% proficient. And so Tier 1 isn't working.

And that comment leads to concern or debate because the next implication feels really, really overwhelming. If the number of students who need support is larger than 20%, are we supposed to just now start providing small group instruction to everyone? So before jumping to conclusions, it really helps to slow down that conversation and ground it in what this looks like in practice.

And this is something I am going through right now. I am supporting an amazing, amazing team who is doing the really hard work of mapping out interventions in terms of, like, what is the Tier 1 experience? What Tier 2 interventions do we have available in each domain?

When we're talking about behavior, social, emotional, wellness, and academics and ultimately what is available for Tier 3. And when teams map their interventions, the questions often come up about how do we determine who qualifies for these additional services? And this is really thoughtful, intentional work.

But as you're having these conversations, it's likely to come up that we're looking at about only 20% of students are going to receive these supports. And so how does that guideline fit in and how can we use it in really productive ways? Because when this happens, there are generally two different responses.

The first response is, okay, we see that there's a lot of work to do in Tier 1. Let's get to it. Let's strengthen the core before we start expanding the interventions.

On the other side, you know, some people recognize the need for more staffing, more time, more interventions, different schedules because there are so many kids who need additional support. And just to be clear, both of these perspectives reflect care and a deep commitment to kids. It's just how do we address these questions using the evidence base.

So let's get into the research. Now, to be clear, the 80% guideline is not meant to be a rigid cutoff or a pass/fail line. It's a really good rule of thumb to help teams answer one essential question.

Is our Tier 1 strong enough to support all learners? That is the question. Its purpose is not to judge schools or label systems, but really to protect Tier 1 from being overshadowed.

Because when Tier 1 is underdeveloped, systems naturally try to compensate by expanding Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports. But over time, intervention becomes a substitute for high quality evidence based core instruction, which is not sustainable and it's not equitable. So in that sense, the 80% guideline functions as a Tier 1 health indicator.

It really prompts teams to look at the clarity of expectations for Tier 1, the alignment of instruction to grade level expectations and core values, the consistency of routines and language across settings, and the integrity of evidence based practices. This has to be in place as the foundation before we start increasing intensity. So if 40% of students are really struggling with transitions, that likely signals that a Tier 1 routine needs refinement rather than individual student barriers.

More research aligned, interpretation of all this tells us that when fewer than 80% of students are meeting expectations, the first move needs to be, how are we going to strengthen Tier 1? And so let's get into some strategies to help move this conversation forward in our schools and districts. So once teams better understand the intention behind this 80% guideline, maybe it's listening to this podcast, for example, the next step is to figure out how to talk about this productively because we want to move the system forward.

So one simple move is to reframe the guideline with a single sentence. And here it is. The tier one guideline of 80% is a diagnostic for the health of Tier 1.

Okay, the 80% guideline is a diagnostic assessment of Tier 1. It is not necessarily a Tier 2 entry rule or the cut score for students who need more support. And that one line really prevents some of the confusion around this guideline and it really opens up the door to a much more balanced conversation.

Another really important strategy is to remember and share that no single data point should function on its own as entry or exit criteria for additional support. MTSS, as with all things in education, works best when decisions are based on multiple indicators and not a single score and not a single moment in time. Proficiency, of course matters, but so does significant growth.

And a student who is not yet meeting a benchmark but is making really accelerated progress may need something very different from a student whose performance is flat or declining. So when teams are only looking at single scores, they risk over identifying students for intervention and also potentially risk missing the impact of instruction that is really effective in starting to take hold. And so this is where the broader lens becomes really essential.

Rather than relying on a single cutoff, teams can take the time to consider where students are, the context, what is working well and what are the challenges. And we can talk about under what conditions are students most successful in Tier 1 and how do we scale those practices across the school? So as teams start using this lens, a common question that's going to come up is okay, so what do we do when there are 30 or 40 or 50% of students who have these significant needs?

And the answer is direct and supportive. When there is a shared gap across a very, very large group, it is an opportunity to strengthen Tier 1 instruction. If many students are struggling with self regulation, we need to embed self regulation routines universally.

If academic vocabulary is a significant barrier to comprehension, we need to embed evidence based vocabulary practices across all content areas in Tier 1 If we notice that student discussion or collaboration is a barrier, we need to explicitly embed those skills. We

don't want to curate dozens of Tier 2 groups for something that belongs in core instruction. And so that clarity is especially important at the secondary level where concerns about foundational literacy and math are very real.

Students can absolutely access grade level learning when the conditions are right. And this requires universal design for learning as well as supplemental explicit foundational instruction when it's necessary. But it's a two lane approach.

Lane one is really focused on Tier 1 grade level standards, meaning making, and universally designed access. And lane two is that explicit targeted foundational instruction with frequent progress monitoring. So growth data is absolutely essential when we're providing supplemental supports because it helps us to see when students are ready to exit that level of support and they can rely primarily on Tier 1 for their growth and achievement.

So in bringing this all together, we cannot intervention our way out of weak Tier 1 and the 80% rule helps us to see when there's an opportunity to strengthen and build Tier 1 so we don't have to try to intervention our way out. That being said, we can absolutely strengthen the outcomes of an entire system, including all of our tiered supports, by investing in a strong core. When you step back and you look at all of this together, the purpose of the 80% guideline becomes much clearer hopefully.

If fewer than 80% of students meeting benchmark are successful, we have to look at Tier 1 design and we have to look at creating consistent evidence based practices before we escalate supports. Because at its core, MTSS is not about sorting or labeling students. It's about building systems where fewer students need additional support to reach their highest levels of potential.

So thank you so much for listening to the Education Table. Until the next episode, onward!