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Christopher A. Sink
Old Dominion University, csink@odu.edu

Melissa S. Ockerman

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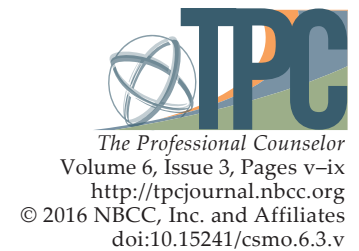
Introduction to the Special Issue

School Counselors and a Multi-Tiered System of Supports: Cultivating Systemic Change and Equitable Outcomes

Christopher A. Sink and Melissa S. Ockerman

Special Issue Editors

Designed to improve preK–12 student academic and behavioral outcomes, a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), such as Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) or Response to Intervention (RTI), is a broadly applied framework being implemented in countless schools across the United States. Such educational restructuring and system changes require school counselors to adjust their activities and interventions to fully realize the aims of MTSS. In this special issue of *The Professional Counselor*, the roles and functions of school counselors in MTSS frameworks are examined from various angles. This introductory article summarizes the key issues and the basic themes explored by the special issue contributors.

Keywords: **school counselors, multi-tiered system of supports, Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports, Response to Intervention, implementation**

School counselors must proactively adapt to the varied mandates of school reform and educational innovations. Similarly, with new federal and state legislation, they must align their roles and functions in accordance with their changing requirements (Baker & Gerler, 2008; Dahir, 2004; Gysbers, 2001; Herr, 2002; Leuwerke, Walker & Shi, 2009; Paisley & Borders, 1995). One such initiative, the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), requires educators to revise their assessment strategies, curriculum, pedagogy and interventions to best serve the academic, behavioral, and post-secondary education and career goals of all students (Lewis, Mitchell, Bruntmeyer, & Sugai, 2016). Specifically, MTSS is an umbrella term for a variety of school-wide approaches to improve student learning and behavior. The most familiar MTSS frameworks are Response to Intervention (RTI) and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS; also referred to as Culturally Responsive or CR PBIS). The latter model has been implemented throughout the U.S., spanning all 50 states and approximately 22,000 schools (H. Choi, personal communication, December 15, 2014). Moreover, 45 states have issued guidelines for RTI implementation and 17 states require RTI to be used in the identification of students with specific learning disabilities (Hauerwas, Brown, & Scott, 2013). Research indicates that when these frameworks are implemented with fidelity over several years, they are best practice for addressing students at risk for academic or behavioral problems (Lane, Menzies, Ennis, & Bezdek, 2013; Lewis et al., 2016).

In 2014, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) revised its RTI position statement to encompass MTSS, including both RTI and CR PBIS (ASCA, 2014). Although there is little evidence to support this assumption, the writers averred that MTSS seamlessly aligns with the ASCA National Model (2012a) in the three developmental domains (academic, social-emotional, and college/career). Nevertheless, school counselors should view MTSS frameworks as an opportunity to enhance their

Christopher A. Sink, NCC, is a Professor and Batten Chair of Counseling at Old Dominion University and can be reached at Darden College of Education, Norfolk, VA 23508, csink@odu.edu. Melissa S. Ockerman is an Associate Professor in the Counseling Program at DePaul University and can be reached at College of Education, Chicago, IL 60614, melissa.ockerman@depaul.edu.

school counseling programs through the implementation of a data-driven, multi-tiered intervention system. Doing so allows school counselors to utilize and showcase their leadership skills with key stakeholders (e.g., parents, caregivers, teachers, administrators) and to create systemic changes in their schools and thus foster equitable outcomes for all children.

The implementation of MTSS and its alignment with comprehensive school counseling programs (CSCPs) position school counselors to advance culturally responsive preventions and interventions to serve students and their families more effectively (Goodman-Scott, Betters-Bubon, & Donohue, 2016). By working collaboratively with school personnel to tap students' strengths and create common goals, school counselors can build capacity and thereby broaden their scope of practice and account- ability. Politically astute school counselors are wise to leverage their school's MTSS framework as a way to access necessary resources, obtain additional training and further impact student outcomes.

The research is scant on school counselor involvement with—and effectiveness in—MTSS imple- mentation. The available publications, including those presented in this special issue, suggest that the level of MTSS education and training for pre-service and in-service school counselors is insuffi- cient (Cressey, Whitcomb, McGilvray-Rivet, Morrison, & Shandler-Reynolds, 2014; Goodman-Scott, 2013, 2015; Goodman-Scott, Doyle, & Brott, 2014; Ockerman, Mason, & Hollenbeck, 2012; Ockerman, Patrikakou, & Feiker Hollenbeck, 2015). There are legitimate reasons for counselor reluctance and ap- prehension. For example, not only must school counselors add new and perhaps unfamiliar duties to an already harried work day, some evidence indicates that they are not well prepared for their MTSS responsibilities. Consequently, it is essential for both in-service professional development opportuni- ties and pre-service preparation programs to focus on best practices for aligning CSCPs with MTSS frameworks (Goodman-Scott et al., 2016).

To address the gaps in the counseling literature on successful school counselor MTSS training, implementation, and collaboration with other school personnel, this special issue of *The Professional Counselor* was conceived. Moreover, the articles consider various facets of MTSS and their intersection with school counseling research and practice. Overall, the contributors hope to provide much needed MTSS assistance and support to nascent and practicing school counselors.

Summary of Contributions

Sink's lead article in this special issue situates the contributions that follow by offering a general overview of foundational MTSS theory and research, including PBIS and RTI frameworks. Subse- quently, literature-based suggestions for incorporating MTSS into school counselor preparation cur- riculum and pedagogy are provided. MTSS roles and functions summarized in previous research are aligned to ASCA's (2012b) School Counselor Competencies, the 2016 Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) Standards for School Counselors (2016) and the ASCA (2012a) National Model.

The next two articles report on MTSS-related studies and specifically discuss new school counselor responsibilities associated with MTSS implementation. Ziomek-Daigle, Goodman-Scott, Cavin, and Donohue reveal through a case study the various ways MTSS and CSCPs reflect comparable features (e.g., school counselor roles, advocacy, accountability). The participating case study counselors were actively engaged in MTSS implementation at their school, suggesting that they had a relatively good idea of their responsibilities in this capacity. Addressing RTI in particular, Patrikakou, Ockerman, and Hollenbeck's investigation reported that while most school counselors expressed positive opin-

ions about this MTSS framework, they lacked the self-assurance to adequately perform key RTI tasks (e.g., accountability and collaboration). Perceived counselor deficiencies in RTI implementation also point to a potential disconnect between the ASCA (2012a) National Model's program components and themes and current RTI training of pre-service and practicing school counselors, thus suggesting a need for improved pre-service and in-service education.

School counselors are called upon to be culturally responsive and competent. They are advocates for social justice and equity for all students (Ratts, Singh, Nassar-McMillan, Butler, & McCullough, 2016; Singh, Urbano, Haston, & McMahan, 2010). Two articles speak to this issue within the educational context of MTSS. Belser and colleagues maintain that the ASCA (2012a) National Model and MTSS are beneficial operational frameworks to support all students, including marginalized and so-called problem learners (e.g., at-risk students). An integrated model is then proffered as a way to improve the educational outcomes of disadvantaged students. Positive and culturally sensitive alternatives to punishment-oriented school discipline methods are discussed as well. Similarly, Betters-Bubon, Brunner, and Kansteiner address school counselor roles in devising and sustaining culturally responsive PBIS programs that meet student social, behavioral and emotional needs. In particular, they report on an action research case study showing how an elementary school counselor partnered with other stakeholders (i.e., school administrator, psychologist, teachers) to achieve this goal.

The final article by Harrington, Griffith, Gray, and Greenspan overviews a recent grant project intended to establish a quality data-driven MTSS model in an elementary school. The manuscript spotlights the role of the school counselor who collaborated with other project leaders and educators to use social-emotional data to inform and improve practice. Specifics are provided so other practitioners can replicate the project in their schools. In brief, this contribution emphasizes the importance of data-based decision-making in MTSS implementation.

Conclusion

School counselors are faced with a myriad of responsibilities that severely tax their energy and time. Competing demands from internal and external stakeholders as well as legislative changes and educational innovations stretch these practitioners to be more efficient and effective in their services to students and families. Regrettably, MTSS implementation adds to counselors' "accountability stress." Some counselors anticipate that PBIS and RTI frameworks will go the way of other short-lived educational trends, relieving them of the responsibility to take action. However, anecdotal and empirical evidence reported in this special issue and elsewhere suggests these professionals are in the minority. School counselors largely perceive the potential and real value of MTSS programs. They desire to partner with other school educators to help all children and youth succeed. As contributors to this issue indicate, the ASCA (2012a) National Model and PBIS and RTI frameworks can be integrated to achieve higher student academic and social-emotional outcomes. With these articles, school counselors-in-training and practitioners have additional support to successfully address their MTSS duties and advocate for increased education in this area. Continued research is needed to guide efficacious MTSS practice designed to foster equitable educational outcomes for all students.

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