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# Incorporating a Multi-Tiered System of Supports Into School Counselor Preparation



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With the advent of a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) in schools, counselor preparation programs are once again challenged to further extend the education and training of pre-service and in-service school counselors. To introduce and contextualize this special issue, an MTSS's intent and foci, as well as its theoretical and research underpinnings, are elucidated. Next, this article aligns MTSS with current professional school counselor standards of the American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) School Counselor Competencies, the 2016 Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) Standards for School Counselors and the ASCA National Model. Using Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and Response to Intervention (RTI) models as exemplars, recommendations for integrating MTSS into school counselor preparation curriculum and pedagogy are discussed.

**Keywords:** multi-tiered system of supports, school counselor, counselor education, American School Counselor Association, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, Response to Intervention

When new educational models are introduced into the school system that affect school counseling practice, the training of pre-service and in-service school counselors needs to be updated. A multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) is one such innovation requiring school counselors to further refine their skill set. In fact, during the school counseling profession's relatively short history, counselors have experienced several major shifts in foci and best practices (Gysbers & Henderson, 2012). The latest movement surfaced in the 1980s, when school counselors were encouraged to revisit their largely reactive, inefficient and ineffective practices. Specifically, rather than supporting a relatively small proportion of students with their vocational, educational and personal-social goals and concerns, pre-service and in-school practitioners, under the aegis of a comprehensive school counseling program (CSCP) orientation, were called to operate in a more proactive and preventative fashion.

Although there are complementary frameworks to choose from, the American School Counselor Association's (ASCA; 2012a) *National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs* emerged as the standard for professional practice, offering K–12 counselors an operational scaffold to guide their activities, interventions and services. Preliminary survey research suggests that counselors are performing their duties in a more systemic and collaborative fashion to more effectively serve students and their families (Goodman-Scott, 2013, 2015). Other rigorous accountability research examining the efficacy of CSCP practices supports this transformation of counselors' roles and functions (Martin & Carey, 2014; Sink, Cooney, & Adkins, in press; Wilkerson, Pérusse, & Hughes, 2013). As a consequence of the increased demand for retraining, university-level counselor preparation programs and professional counseling organizations (e.g., American Counseling Association, ASCA, National Board for Certified Counselors) have generally responded in kind. Over the last few decades, K–12 school counselors have been instructed to move from a positional approach to their professional work to one that is programmatic and systemic in nature.

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As mentioned above, the implementation of MTSS (e.g., Positive Behavioral Supports and Responses [PBIS] and Response to Intervention [RTI] frameworks) in the nation's schools requires in-service counselors to augment their collaboration and coordination skills (Shepard, Shahidullah, & Carlson, 2013). Essentially, MTSS programs are evidence-based, holistic, and systemic approaches to improve student learning and social-emotional-behavioral functioning. They are largely implemented in educational settings using three tiers or levels of intervention. In theory, all educators are involved at differing levels of intensity. For example, classroom teachers and teacher aides are the first line (Tier 1) of support for struggling students. As the need might arise, other more "specialized" staff (e.g., school psychologists, special education teachers, school counselors, addictions counselors) may be enlisted to provide additional and more targeted student interventions and support (Tiers 2 or 3). Even though ASCA (2014) released a position statement broadly addressing school counselors' roles and functions within MTSS schools, research is equivocal as to whether these practitioners are implementing these directives with any depth and fidelity (Goodman-Scott, 2015; Goodman-Scott, Betters-Bubon, & Donahue, 2016; Ockerman, Mason, & Hollenbeck, 2012; Ockerman, Patrikakou, & Feiker Hollenbeck, 2015). Moreover, school counselor effectiveness with MTSS-related responsibilities is an open question.

To sufficiently answer these accountability questions, there is a pressing need for university preparation programs to better educate nascent school counselors on MTSS, particularly on the fundamentals and effective ways PBIS and RTI can be accommodated within the purposes and practices of CSCPs (Goodman-Scott et al., 2016). While educational resources and research are plentiful, they are chiefly aimed at pre-service and in-service teachers and support staff working closely with special education students, such as school psychologists (Forman & Crystal, 2015; Owen, 2012; Turnbull, Bohanon, Griggs, Wickham, & Salior, 2002). Albeit informative, nearly all school counselor MTSS research and application publications are focused on in-service practitioners (ASCA, 2014; de Barona & Barona, 2006; Donohue, 2014; Goodman-Scott, 2013; Martens & Andreen, 2013; Ockerman et al., 2012; Ryan, Kaffenberger, & Carroll, 2011; Shepard et al., 2013; Zambrano, Castro-Villarreal, & Sullivan, 2012). With perhaps the exception of Goodman-Scott et al. (2016), who provided a useful alignment of the ASCA National Model (2012a) with PBIS practices, there are few evidence-based resources for school counselor educators to draw upon in order to rework their pre-service courses to include MTSS curriculum and instruction. To successfully prepare counselors to work within PBIS or RTI schools, students must understand the ways MTSS foci are aligned with professional counseling standards for practice. Such a document is noticeably absent from the literature.

The primary intent of this article is to offer school counselor educators functional and literature-based recommendations to enhance their MTSS training of pre-service counselors. To do so, MTSS programs are first contextualized by summarizing their major foci, operationalization, theoretical underpinnings and research support. Next, the objectives of MTSS models are aligned with the ASCA (2012b) School Counselor Competencies and the 2016 CACREP Standards for School Counselors. Finally, using PBIS and RTI models as exemplars, recommendations for school counselor preparation curriculum and pedagogy are offered.

## **Foundational Considerations**

Since MTSS programs are extensively described in numerous publications (e.g., Bradley, Danielson, & Doolittle, 2007; Carter & Van Norman, 2010; Forman & Crystal, 2015; R. Freeman, Miller, & Newcomer, 2015; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Horner, Sugai, & Lewis, 2015; McIntosh, Filter,

Bennett, Ryan, & Sugai, 2010; Sandomierski, Kincaid, & Algozzine, 2007; Sugai & Simonsen, 2012), including articles in this special issue, there is little need to reiterate the details here. However, for those school counselor educators and practitioners who are less conversant with MTSS's theoretical grounding, research evidence and operational characteristics supporting implementation, these topics are overviewed.

MTSS programs by definition are comprehensive and schoolwide in design, accentuating the importance of graduated levels of student support. In other words, the amount of instructional and behavioral support gradually increases as the student's assessed needs become more serious. Although the most prominent and well-researched MTSS approaches, PBIS and RTI, are considered disparate frameworks to address student deficits (Schulte, 2016), the extent of their overlap in theoretical principles, foci, processes and practices allows for an abbreviated synthesis (R. Freeman, et al., 2015; Sandomierski et al., 2007; Stoiber & Gettinger, 2016).

Initially, RTI and PBIS programming and services emerged from special education literature and best practices. Over time these evidence-based approaches extended their reach, and the entire student population is now served. Specifically, PBIS aims to increase students' prosocial behaviors and decrease their problem behaviors as well as promote positive and safe school climates, benefitting all learners (Bradley et al., 2007; Carter & Van Norman, 2010; Klingner & Edwards, 2006). Although RTI programs also address students' behavioral issues, they largely focus on improving the academic development and performance of all children and youth through high-quality instruction (Turse & Albrecht, 2015; Warren & Robinson, 2015). RTI staff are particularly concerned with those students who are academically underperforming (Greenwood et al., 2011; Johnsen, Parker, & Farah, 2015; Ockerman et al., 2015; Sprague et al., 2013). Curiously, the potential roles and functions of school counselors within these programs were not delineated until many years after they were first introduced (Warren & Robinson, 2015). Even at this juncture, often cited MTSS publications neglect discussing school counselors' contributions to full and effective implementation (Carter & Van Norman, 2010). Instead they frequently refer to behavior specialists as key members of the MTSS team (Horner, Sugai, & Anderson, 2010).

### **MTSS Theory and Research**

PBIS and RTI model authors and scholars consistently implicate a range of conceptual orientations, including behaviorism, organizational behavior management, scientific problem-solving, systems thinking and implementation science (Eber, Weist, & Barrett, n.d.; Forman & Crystal, 2015; Horner et al., 2010; Kozleski & Huber, 2010; Sugai & Simonsen, 2012; Sugai et al., 2000; Turnbull et al., 2002). It appears, however, that behavioral principles and systems theory are most often credited as MTSS cornerstones (Reschly & CooLoong-Chaffin, 2016). Since PBIS and RTI are essentially special education frameworks, it is not surprising that behaviorist constructs and applications (e.g., reinforcement, applied experimental behavior analysis, behavior management and planning, progress monitoring) are regularly cited (Stoiber & Gettinger, 2016). Furthermore, MTSS frameworks are in concept and practice system-wide structures (i.e., student-centered services, processes and procedures that are instituted across a school or district), and as such, holistic terminology consistent with Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory and other related systems orientations (e.g., Bertalanffy general systems theory and Henggeler and colleagues' multi-systemic treatment approach) are commonly cited (see Reschly & CooLoong-Chaffin, 2016, and Shepard et al., 2013, for examples of extensive discussions).

MTSS research largely demonstrates the efficacy of PBIS and RTI models. For instance, Horner et al. (2015) conducted an extensive analysis of numerous K–12 PBIS studies, concluding that this systems approach is evidence-based. Other related literature reviews indicated that PBIS frameworks



are at least modestly serviceable in preschools (Carter & Van Norman, 2010), K–12 schools (Horner et al., 2010; Molloy, Moore, Trail, Van Epps, & Hopfer, 2013), and juvenile justice settings (Jolivet & Nelson, 2010; Sprague et al., 2013). Across most studies, PBIS programming yields weak to moderately positive outcomes for PK–12 students from diverse backgrounds (e.g., African American and Latino) and varying social and academic skill levels (Childs, Kincaid, George, & Gage, 2015; J. Freeman et al., 2015, 2016). Similarly, evaluations of RTI interventions are promising for underachieving learners (Bradley et al., 2007; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Greenwood et al., 2011; Proctor, Graves, & Esch, 2012; Ryan et al., 2011). Students tend to especially benefit from Tier 2 and 3 interventions. In their entirety, PBIS and RTI models are modestly successful frameworks to identify students at risk for school-related problems and ameliorate social-behavioral and academic deficiencies. It should be noted, however, that the long-term impact of MTSS on students' social-emotional outcomes remains equivocal (Saeki et al., 2011). As mentioned previously, there is a paucity of evidence demonstrating that school counselors indirectly or directly contribute to positive MTSS outcomes. As with any relatively new educational innovation, research is needed to further clarify the specific impacts of MTSS on student, family, classroom and school outcome variables. The next section summarizes the ways MTSS frameworks are viewed and instituted in school settings.

### **Operational Features**

For school counselors to be effective MTSS leaders and educational partners, they must understand the conceptual underpinnings and operational components and functions of PBIS and RTI frameworks. Given the introductory nature of this article, we limit our discussion to essential characteristics of these frameworks. Extensive practical explanations of MTSS models abound in the education (R. Freeman et al. 2015; Preston, Wood, & Stecker, 2016; Turse & Albrecht 2015) and school counseling literature (Goodman-Scott et al., 2016; Ockerman et al., 2012, 2015). To reiterate, MTSS frameworks are designed to be systems or ecological approaches to assisting students with their educational development and improving academic and behavioral outcomes. As described below, they attempt to serve all students through graduated layers of more intensive interventions. School counselors deliver, for example, evidence-based services to students, ranging from classroom and large group interventions to those provided to individual students in the counseling office (Forman & Crystal, 2015). By utilizing systematic problem-solving strategies and behavioral analysis tools to guide effective practice (Sandomierski et al., 2007), students who are most at risk for school failure and behavioral challenges are provided with more individualized interventions (Horner et al., 2015).

Practically speaking, MTSS processes and procedures vary from school to school, district to district. To understand how these frameworks are operationalized, there are numerous online school-based case studies to review. For instance, at the PBIS.org Web site, Ross (n.d.), the principal at McNabb Elementary (KY), overviewed the ways a PBIS framework was effectively implemented at his school. Most importantly, the reach of PBIS programming was expanded to all students, requiring a higher level of educator collaboration and “buy in.” Other pivotal changes were made, including (a) faculty and staff visits to students' homes (i.e., making closer “positive connections”); (b) the implementation of summer programs for student behavioral and academic skill enrichment; (c) additional school community engagement activities (e.g., movie nights, Black History Month Extravaganza); and, (d) further PBIS training to improve school discipline and classroom management strategies. Other MTSS schools stress the importance of carefully identifying students in need of supplemental services and interventions using research-based assessment procedures (e.g., functional behavioral analysis or functional behavioral assessment [FBA]). Most schools emphasize these key elements to successful schoolwide PBIS implementation: (a) data-based decision making, (b) a clear and measurable set of behavioral expectations for students, (c) ongoing instruction on behavioral expectations, and (d) consistent reinforcement of appropriate behavior (PBIS.org, 2016).

Furthermore, MTSS frameworks, such as PBIS and RTI, have two main functions. First, they offer an array of activities and services (prevention- and intervention-oriented) that are systematically introduced to students based on an established level of need. Second, educators carefully consider the learning milieu, particularly as it may influence the development and improvement of student behavior (social and emotional learning [SEL] and academic performances). MTSS staff must be well educated on the signs of student distress, including those indicators that suggest students are at risk for school-related difficulties (e.g., below grade level academic achievement, social and emotional challenges, mental health disorders, long-term school failure). Moreover, educators should be provided appropriate training on various assessment tools to determine which set of students require more intensive care.

Within a triadic support system, all students (Tier 1: primary or universal prevention) are at least monitored and assisted by classroom staff. Teachers are encouraged to document student progress (or lack thereof) toward academic and behavioral goals. At the first level, school counselors partner with other building educators to conduct classroom activities and guidance to promote academic success, SEL (e.g., prosocial behaviors), and appropriate school behavior (Donohue, 2014). Counselors also may assist with setting behavioral expectations for students, suggest differentiated instruction for academic issues, collect data for program decision making, and conduct universal screening of students in need of additional behavior support (Horner et al., 2015). In short, the aim of Tier 1 is to (a) support all student learning and (b) proactively recognize individuals displaying the warning signs of learning or social and behavioral challenges.

Once the signals of educational or behavioral distress become more pronounced, relevant staff may initiate a formal MTSS process. For example, in many states and school districts, within the context of an MTSS, the struggling learner becomes a “focus of concern” and a multidisciplinary or school support team is convened (Kansas MTSS, 2011). Panel members are generally comprised of the school psychologist, administrator, counselor and relevant teachers. Counselors may be asked to collaborate with other educators to appraise the student’s learning environments. If potential hindrances are detected, these must be sufficiently attended to before further educational intervention is provided. Once the determination is made that the “targeted” learner received high-quality academic and behavioral instruction, and yet continues to exhibit deficiencies, the student is considered for Tier 2 services (Horner et al., 2015). School counselor tasks at this level may include providing evidence-based classroom interventions, short-term individual or group counseling, progress monitoring and regular school-home communication. Other sample interventions might involve the application of a behavior modification plan, the assignment of a peer mentor and tutoring system, and the utilization of “Check and Connect” (Maynard, Kjellstrand, & Thompson, 2013) or Student Success Skills (Lemberger, Selig, Bowers & Rogers, 2015) programs.

In most cases, identified students make at least modest progress at Tier 2 and do not require tertiary intervention. Even so, a small percentage of students receive Tier 3 services involving, for example, a comprehensive FBA, additional linking of academic and behavioral supports, and more specialized attention (Horner et al., 2015). School counselor support at this level commonly incorporates and extends beyond Tier 2 services. Ongoing consultation with and referrals to community-based professionals (e.g., learning experts, marriage and family counselors, child psychiatrists, and clinical psychologists) and out- or in-patient treatment facilities may be necessary.

In summary, the essential focus of collaborative MTSS programming is to improve student performance by first carefully assessing student strengths and weaknesses. Once these characteristics are identified, the MTSS team, with input from the school counseling staff, develops learning

outcomes and, as required, may institute whole-school, classroom, or individual activities and services to best address lingering student deficiencies. As such, counselors should be significant partners with other appropriate staff to deliver the needed assistance and support (e.g., assign a peer mentor, provide individual or group counseling, institute a behavior management plan) to address students’ underdeveloped academic or social-emotional and behavioral skills. To close the MTSS loop, follow-up assessment of student progress toward designated learning and behavioral targets is regularly conducted by teachers with assistance from counselors and other related specialists. Based on the evaluation results, further interventions may be prescribed. School counselors therefore contribute essential MTSS services at each tier, promoting through their classroom work, group counseling and individualized services a higher level of student functioning. Regrettably, anecdotal evidence and survey research suggest that many are ill-equipped to conduct the requisite prevention and intervention activities (Ockerman et al., 2015). The following sections attempt, in part, to rectify this situation.

### Alignment of MTSS With Professional School Counselor Standards and Practice

Before considering the implications for pre-service school counselor preparation, school counselors and university-level counselor educators should benefit from understanding the ways in which MTSS school counselor-related roles and functions are consistent with the preponderance of the ASCA (2012b) School Counselor Competencies and CACREP (2016) School Counseling Standards. Because there are so few publications documenting school counselor roles and functions within MTSS frameworks, a standards crosswalk, or matrix, was developed to fill this need (see Table 1). It should be noted that the ASCA standards and CACREP competencies are largely consistent with the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards’ (National Board; 2012) School Counseling Standards for School Counselors of Students Ages 3–18+. As such, they were not included in the table.

**Table 1**

*Crosswalk of Sample School Counselor MTSS Roles and Functions, ASCA (2012b) School Counselor Competencies, and CACREP (2016) School Counseling Standards*

	ASCA School Counselor Competencies	CACREP Section 5: Entry-Level Specialty Areas – School Counseling
MTSS School Counselor Roles and Functions*	I. School Counseling Programs B: Abilities & Skills	1. Foundations 2. Contextual Dimensions 3. Practice
Shows strong school leadership	I-B-1c. Applies the school counseling themes of leadership, advocacy, collaboration and systemic change, which are critical to a successful school counseling program  I-B-2. Serves as a leader in the school and community to promote and support student success	2.d. school counselor roles in school leadership and multidisciplinary teams

Collaborates and consults with relevant stakeholders	I-B-4. Collaborates with parents, teachers, administrators, community leaders and other stakeholders to promote and support student success	3.l. techniques to foster collaboration and team-work within schools
Collaborates as needed to provide integration of services	I-B-4b. Identifies and applies models of collaboration for effective use in a school counseling program and understands the similarities and differences between consultation, collaboration and counseling and coordination strategies	1.d. models of school-based collaboration and consultation
	I-B-4d. Understands and knows how to apply a consensus-building process to foster agreement in a group	
Provides staff development related to positive discipline, behavior and mental health	I-B-4e. Understands how to facilitate group meetings to effectively and efficiently meet group goals	
Leads with systems change to provide safe school	I-B-5. Acts as a systems change agent to create an environment promoting and supporting student success	2.a. school counselor roles as leaders, advocates and systems change agents in PK–12 schools
Intervention planning for SEL and academic skill improvement	I-B-5b. Develops a plan to deal with personal (emotional and cognitive) and institutional resistance impeding the change process	2.g. characteristics, risk factors, and warning signs of students at risk for mental health and behavioral disorders; 2.h. common medications that affect learning, behavior and mood in children and adolescents; 2.i. signs and symptoms of substance abuse in children and adolescents as well as the signs and symptoms of living in a home where substance use occurs; 3.h. skills to critically examine the connections between social, familial, emotional and behavior problems and academic achievement
Provides risk and threat assessments		

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**II. Foundations B: Abilities and Skills**

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II-B-4. Applies the ethical standards and principles of the school counseling profession and adheres to the legal aspects of the role of the school counselor	2.n. legal and ethical considerations specific to school counseling
II-B-4c. Understands and practices in accordance with school district policy and local, state and federal statutory requirements	2.m. legislation and government policy relevant to school counseling

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**III. Management B: Abilities and Skills**

Effective collection, evaluation, interpretation and use of data to improve availability of services	III-B-3. Accesses or collects relevant data, including process, perception and outcome data, to monitor and improve student behavior and achievement	1.e. assessments specific to PK–12 education
Assists with schoolwide data management for documentation and decision making	III-B-3a. Reviews and disaggregates student achievement, attendance and behavior data to identify and implement interventions as needed	
Collects needs assessment data to better inform culturally relevant practices	III-B-3b. Uses data to identify policies, practices and procedures leading to successes, systemic barriers and areas of weakness	
	III-B-3c. Uses student data to demonstrate a need for systemic change in areas such as course enrollment patterns; equity and access; and achievement, opportunity and/or information gaps	3.k. strategies to promote equity in student achievement and college access
	III-B-3d. Understands and uses data to establish goals and activities to close the achievement, opportunity and/or information gap	
	III-B-3e. Knows how to use data to identify gaps between and among different groups of students	
Measures student progress of schoolwide interventions with pre/post testing	III-B-3f. Uses school data to identify and assist individual students who do not perform at grade level and do not have opportunities and resources to be successful in school	
Promotes early intervention	III-B-6a. Uses appropriate academic and behavioral data to develop school counseling core curriculum, small-group and closing-the-gap action plans and determines appropriate students for the target group or interventions	3.c. core curriculum design, lesson plan development, classroom management strategies and differentiated instructional strategies
Designs and implements interventions to meet the behavioral and mental health needs of students	III-B-6c. Creates lesson plans related to the school counseling core curriculum identifying what will be delivered, to whom it will be delivered, how it will be delivered and how student attainment of competencies will be evaluated	
Provides academic interventions directly to students	III-B-6d. Determines the intended impact on academics, attendance and behavior	3.d. interventions to promote academic development
	III-B-6g. Identifies data collection strategies to gather process, perception and outcome data	

Coordinates efforts and ensures proper communication between MTSS staff, students and family members

III-B-6h. Shares results of action plans with staff, parents and community

III-B-7b. Coordinates activities that establish, maintain and enhance the school counseling program as well as other educational programs

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**IV. Delivery B: Abilities and Skills**

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<p>Provides specialized instructional support</p>	<p>IV-B-1d. Develops materials and instructional strategies to meet student needs and school goals</p> <p>IV-B-1g. Understands multicultural and pluralistic trends when developing and choosing school counseling core curriculum</p> <p>IV-B-1h. Understands and is able to build effective, high-quality peer helper programs</p>	<p>3.c. core curriculum design, lesson plan development, classroom management strategies and differentiated instructional strategies</p>
<p>Engages in case management to assist with social-emotional and academic concerns</p>	<p>IV-B-2b. Develops strategies to implement individual student planning, such as strategies for appraisal, advisement, goal-setting, decision making, social skills, transition or post-secondary planning</p>	<p>3.m. strategies for implementing and coordinating peer intervention programs</p> <p>3.g. strategies to facilitate school and postsecondary transitions</p>
<p>Understands social skills development</p>	<p>IV-B-2g. Understands methods for helping students monitor and direct their own learning and personal/social and career development</p>	<p>3.f. techniques of personal/social counseling in school settings</p>
<p>Provides interventions at three levels</p>	<p>IV-B-3. Provides responsive services</p> <p>IV-B-3c. Demonstrates an ability to provide counseling for students during times of transition, separation, heightened stress and critical change</p>	
<p>Coordinating with community service providers and integrating intensive interventions into the schooling process</p>	<p>IV-B-4a. Understands how to make referrals to appropriate professionals when necessary</p>	<p>2.k. community resources and referral sources</p>
<p>Train/present information to school staff on data collection and analysis</p>	<p>IV-B-5a. Shares strategies that support student achievement with parents, teachers, other educators and community organizations</p>	<p>2.b. school counselor roles in consultation with families, PK–12 and postsecondary school personnel, and community agencies</p>
<p>Implements appropriate interventions at each tier</p>	<p>IV-B-5b. Applies appropriate counseling approaches to promoting change among consultees within a consultation approach</p>	

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**V. Accountability B: Abilities and Skills**


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Collects, analyzes, and interprets school-level data to improve availability and effectiveness of services and interventions

V-B-1g. Analyzes and interprets process, perception and outcome data

3.n. use of accountability data to inform decision making  
3.o. use of data to advocate for programs and students

Uses progress monitoring data to inform counseling interventions

Understands history, rationale, and benefits of MTSS

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*Note.* \*Primary sources: ASCA (2012b, 2014); CACREP (2016); Cowan, Vaillancourt, Rossen, & Pollitt, (2013); Ockerman et al. (2015).

The MTSS School Counselor Roles and Functions column was generated from several sources, including a recent study examining school counselors' RTI perspectives (Ockerman et al., 2015), ASCA's (2014) RTI position statement, and a lengthy school psychology publication that specifically addresses school counselor roles in creating safe MTSS schools (Cowan, Vaillancourt, Rossen, & Pollitt, 2013). Essentially, the crosswalk reveals that K–12 school counselor MTSS roles and functions correspond substantially with the ASCA (2012b) School Counselor Competencies and CACREP (2016) Standards. Similarly, MTSS school counselor tasks fit well within the broad and longstanding role categories traditionally associated with counseling services: (a) coordination of CSCP services, interventions and activities; (b) collaboration with school staff and other stakeholders; (c) provision of responsive services (e.g., individual and group counseling, classroom interventions, peer helper and support services, crisis intervention); (d) consultation within school constituencies and external resource personnel; and (e) classroom lessons (i.e., MTSS Tier 1 services; Burnham & Jackson, 2000; Goodman-Scott et al., 2016; Gysbers & Henderson, 2012; Schmidt, 2014; Sink, 2005). Since the ASCA (2012a) National Model also is a systemic and structural model aimed at whole-school prevention and intervention of student issues, school counselor MTSS roles (direct and indirect services) also align reasonably well with the model's components (e.g., foundation, management, delivery and accountability; Goodman-Scott et al., 2016). In short, including MTSS into the pre-service training of school counselors is professionally defensible as well as best practice.

## Implications for School Counselor Preparation

PBIS and RTI frameworks are now firmly established in a majority of U.S. schools. As documented above, research, particularly within the context of special education, largely demonstrates their positive impact on student academic achievement and SEL skill development, as well as on school climate (Horner et al., 2010, 2015; McDaniel, Albritton, & Roach, 2013). However, school counselors in the field report a lack of MTSS knowledge and their roles and functions within at least RTI schools are somewhat inconsistently and ambiguously defined (Ockerman et al., 2015). In some circumstances, school counselors' MTSS duties may not fully complement their CSCP responsibilities (Goodman-Scott et al., 2016). Given these realities, many school counselor preparation programs need to be revised to effectively account for these limitations. To accomplish this end, the following literature-based action steps are offered. First, counselor educators should conduct a program audit, looking for

MTSS curricular and instructional gaps in their school counseling preparation courses. Curriculum mapping (Jacobs, 1997) is a useful tool to recognize program content deficiencies (Howard, 2007). Essentially, the process involves

the identification of the content and skills taught in each course at each level. A calendar-based chart, or “map,” is created for each course so that it is easy to see not only what is taught in a course, but when it is taught. Examination of these maps can reveal both gaps in what is taught and repetition among courses, but its value lies in identifying areas for integration and concepts for spiraling. (Howard, 2007, p. 7)

Second, the various options for program revision should be weighed. The two most obvious alternatives are to either add a separate school counseling-based MTSS course or to augment existing courses and their content. Classes already focusing on topics associated with MTSS theory, research and practice (e.g., special education, at-risk children and adolescents, comprehensive school counseling, strengths-based counseling and advocacy) are perhaps the easiest to modify. Certainly, accreditation standards and requirements, funding implications, and logistical concerns must be considered.

Third, specific MTSS content and related skills should be reviewed and syllabi revised accordingly. To inform decision making and planning, Table 2 provides sample core MTSS content areas associated with school counselor roles and functions. Curriculum changes might involve strengthening these four broad areas: (a) assessment, data usage and research, (b) general knowledge and practices, (c) specific interventions, and (d) systems work. To alleviate potential redundancies in pre-service education, it is imperative that any proposed modifications be aligned with current CSCP training (e.g., ASCA’s [2012a] National Model; see Goodman-Scott et al., 2016 for details). Consult the crosswalk provided in Table 1 to ensure that any course changes are consonant with ASCA’s (2012b) School Counselor Competencies and CACREP (2016) standards.

**Table 2**

*Core MTSS Content Areas Aligned With School Counselor Roles and Functions*

Content Areas
<p>Assessment, Data Usage and Research</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Academic and SEL skill assessment and progress monitoring</li> <li>• Applied experimental analysis of behavior/functional behavior analysis (FBA)</li> <li>• Behavioral consultation assessment</li> <li>• Evidence-based (data-based) decision making and intervention planning (academic and social-behavioral issues)</li> <li>• Research methods (e.g., survey, pre/posttest comparison, single subject designs)</li> <li>• Student and classroom assessment/testing</li> <li>• Use of student assessment and schoolwide data to improve MTSS services and interventions</li> </ul>
<p>General Knowledge and Practices</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Best practices in support of academic and social-behavioral development</li> <li>• Integration with comprehensive school counseling programs (e.g., ASCA National Model)</li> <li>• Ethical and legal issues</li> <li>• Educational, developmental and psychological theories (e.g., behaviorism, social learning theory, ecological systems theory, cognitive, psychosocial, identity)</li> <li>• Effective communication</li> </ul>

- Students at risk and resiliency issues (i.e., knowledge of early warning signs of school and social-behavioral problems)
  - Leadership and advocacy
  - Mental health issues and associated community services
  - Models of consultation
  - Multicultural/diversity (student, family, school, community) and social justice issues
  - Referral
  - Special education (e.g., relevant policies, identification procedures, categories of disability)
- 

#### Specific Interventions

- Check and Connect (Check In, Check Out)
  - Individualized positive behavior support (e.g., behavior change plans, individualized education plans)
  - Peer mentoring/tutoring
  - Schoolwide classroom guidance (academic and SEL skill related)
  - Short-term goal-oriented individual and group counseling
- 

#### Systems Work

- Collaboration and coordination of services with counseling staff, MTSS constituents, external resources and families
  - Consultation with caregivers, educational staff and external resources
  - Staff coaching/liaison work (e.g., conducting workshops and training events to improve conceptual knowledge and understanding as well as skill development)
  - MTSS (PBIS & RTI) structure and components and associated practices
  - Resource providers (in-school and out-of-school options)
  - Policy development addressing improved school environments and barriers to learning for all students
  - Systems/interdisciplinary collaboration and leadership within context of comprehensive school counseling programs
- 

*Note.* Primary sources: Cowan et al. (2013); Forman & Crystal (2015); R. Freeman et al. (2015); Gibbons & Coulter (2016); Goodman-Scott et al. (2016); Horner et al. (2015); Ockerman et al. (2015); Reschly & Coolong-Chaffin (2016).

Finally, course syllabi need to be updated to integrate desired curricular changes and appropriate instructional techniques instituted. It is recommended that counselor educators design the MTSS course using a spiral curriculum (Bruner, 1960; Howard, 2007). This theory- and research-based strategy rearranges the course material curriculum and content in such a way that knowledge and skill development and content build upon each another while gradually increasing in complexity and depth. Research informed pedagogy suggests that MTSS course content be taught using a variety of methods, including direct instruction for learning foundational materials and student-centered approaches, such as case studies and problem-based learning (PBL), for the application component (Dumbrigue, Moxley, & Najor-Durack, 2013; Ramsden, 2003; Savery, 2006). Specifically, given that scientific (systematic problem-solving) and data-driven decision making are indispensable educator practices within MTSS frameworks, these skills should be nurtured through “hands on” and highly engaging didactic methods rather than relying on conventional college-level teaching strategies (e.g., recitation, questioning and lecture; Stanford University Center for Teaching and Learning, 2001). Specific activities could be readily implemented during practicum and internship. PBL invites students to tackle complex and authentic (real world) issues that promote understanding of content knowledge as well as interpretation, analytical reasoning, interpersonal communication and self-assessment skills (Amador, Miles, & Peters, 2006; Loyens, Jones, Mikkers, & van Gog, 2015). Problems can take the form of genuine case studies (e.g., a sixth-grader at risk for severe depression),



encouraging pre-service counselors to reflect on issues they will face in MTSS schools. Succinctly stated, when developing a new course or refining existing courses to include MTSS elements, counselor educators are encouraged to use research-based methods of curriculum design and student-centered pedagogy.

## Conclusion

School counselor roles and functions must be responsive to societal changes and educational reforms. These shifts require university-level counselor preparation programs to be adaptable and open to new practices. K–12 schools around the nation are committed to instituting MTSS (PBIS and RTI) to better educate all students as well as to reduce the number of learners at risk for academic and social and emotional problems. School counselors largely indicate that they require further training on these MTSS frameworks and best practice (Goodman-Scott et al., 2016; Ockerman et al., 2015). It is therefore incumbent upon counselor education programs to revise their curriculum and instruction to meet this growing need. This article provides a clear rationale for instituting pre-service program changes, as well as summarizes MTSS's theoretical and research foundation. Literature-based recommendations for pre-service course and curricular modifications have been offered. Preparation courses are encouraged to align their MTSS curriculum and content with ASCA's (2012b) and CACREP's (2016) school counseling standards, and the role requirements of comprehensive school counseling programs. Subsequent research is needed to determine whether this added level of pre-service education support actually impacts school counselor MTSS competency perceptions, and more importantly, whether schoolchildren and youth are positively impacted by better trained professional school counselors.

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