



Closing the Reading Gap:

An Actionable Guide for Effective Reading Intervention at the Secondary Level

Leverage the MTSS framework to help your secondary students accelerate their reading growth.



What’s Inside

Introduction 1

MTSS in Middle and High School 2

Common MTSS Misconceptions..... 3

What Makes Secondary MTSS Different from Elementary? 4

MTSS Non-Negotiables 5

Profiles of Struggling Readers 7

Using Student Data to Make Instructional Decisions 8

Data-Based Decision-Making: The Literacy Intervention Navigator 9

Strong Tier 1 Instruction Across Content Areas..... 10

The Work Ahead 12

References 13

Appendix: Literacy Intervention Playbook..... 15

- Section A: MTSS System Actions (Admin and Leadership) 15
- Section B: Reader Profiles (Quick Match Guide)..... 17
- Section C: Tier 1 Instruction Strategy Cards..... 18
- Section D: Data Action Cards..... 19
- Section E: Implementation Checklist 20

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Guide Every Student Toward the Finish Line

Remediating reading in Grades 6–12 is a marathon, not a sprint. Because gaps are often wider and may take more than one school year to close, secondary schools must plan for sustained, multi-year intervention practices. Using the MTSS framework as a guide, our goal is to provide a blueprint for tackling this complex issue in a practical and effective way.

What We Believe

1. Adolescent reading gaps are a systemic problem, not a student problem.

Most middle and high schoolers reading below grade-level are struggling due to missed instruction and/or misaligned supports, not lack of ability. Treat the issue as a school improvement goal, not just remediation.

2. Intervention is not a solution for Tier 1 problems.

While intervention can enhance core instruction, it cannot replace it. Tier 1 must be strong independently across content areas and include purposeful strategy instruction in word analysis, comprehension, and writing.

3. Intervention is “core plus more,” not “instead of.”

Students need credit-bearing intervention classes in addition to core English classes so they receive consistent, high-quality instruction without falling further behind. This instruction should be planned across multiple years.

4. Target the cause, not the symptom.

Comprehension is an outcome. If decoding and/or language skills are weak, comprehension lessons alone will not change that.

For a schoolwide roadmap outlining best practices of effective intervention planning, see [Appendix E: MTSS Implementation Checklist](#).



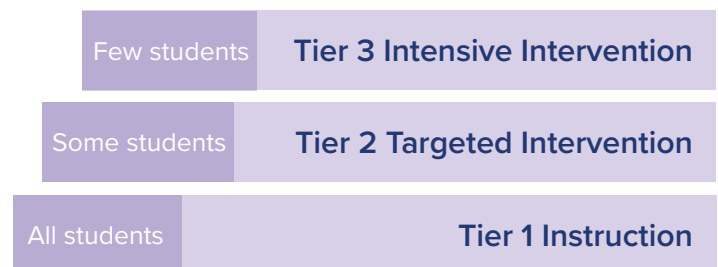


MTSS in Middle and High School

Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS) is a three-tier framework for problem-solving and preventing academic and behavioral issues (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). Each tier increases in intensity to identify and address students' reading needs through intervention.

- **Tier 1** provides explicit, high-quality core instruction across content areas for the whole class.
- **Tier 2** interventions offer instruction in smaller groups (10–12 students) for those facing challenges in certain reading areas, such as reading multisyllabic words, vocabulary development, and comprehension. These interventions should complement the core instructional program (Capin et al., 2024).
- **Tier 3** interventions target students with significant word reading issues, providing more intensive and systematic phonics instruction compared to Tier 2 (Capin et al., 2024).

Both Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions leverage increasingly explicit teaching methods to enhance students' literacy development (Capin et al., 2024; Torgesen et al., 2007; Vaughn et al., 2008). Teachers can determine interventions based on the results from diagnostic assessments and leverage a collaborative problem-solving process to align instruction to assessment data.



Practical Tier 1 routines aligned to this framework can be found in [Appendix C: Tier 1 Instruction Strategy Cards](#).

Common MTSS Misconceptions

To fully explain how MTSS works, we must first clarify what MTSS is not.

1.

MYTH: Interventions are completely different from instruction.

Like core programming, interventions provide explicit and systematic skills instruction; however, interventions need to be even more explicit, breaking down content into smaller steps and increasing opportunities for guided practice, feedback, and repetition. Interventions are focused and data-driven, whereas Tier 1 instruction encompasses a wide range of skills, covering all standards for a grade. While more limited in scope, interventions *are* a type of instruction, and the role of the teacher is profound in this process.

2.

MYTH: MTSS is a pathway to a special education referral.

All students should be included in the MTSS process. Students with and without disabilities should be analyzed within the system to ensure that instruction meets their individual needs. This is not a special education initiative or a means of identifying students with disabilities.



3.

MYTH: Students who struggle to read should have interventions instead of Tier 1 instruction.

MTSS = Core + More. In other words, you cannot replace core instruction with intervention because students will never catch up. Instead, add interventions to core instruction to augment learning.

4.

MYTH: Intervention classes are a time for homework help, test-taking, and extra assistance with coursework.

To be effective, interventions must directly address students' current reading skills—including in fluency, phonics, phoneme awareness, vocabulary, and/or syntax—based on the data collected. The key is to use this time to teach these skills and propel students forward in their literacy capacity.

What Makes Secondary MTSS Different from Elementary?



Intervention and Prevention

At the secondary level, the primary focus shifts from preventing reading difficulties to remediating them (Fuchs & Vaughn, 2012). While Tier 1 prevention is still critical, many students may enter secondary school with gaps that can only be addressed with Tier 2 and Tier 3 support.



Universal Screening Data

In the younger grades, universal screening is administered three times a year to all students. In the older grades, specifically in high school, schools can use early warning indicators (EWIs) in place of typical screening assessments. EWIs utilize available data—including attendance data, behavior data, middle and high school course performance, and state assessment scores—to consistently and accurately identify students who, according to research, are at the most significant risk of academic failure (Allensworth & Easton, 2007).



Scheduling

Secondary students are enrolled in an intervention course for credit so that they do not fall behind.



Core Literacy Instruction

In the elementary grades, Tier 1 reading instruction happens during a scheduled literacy block, where students are taught the five components of reading (phonics, fluency, phoneme awareness, vocabulary, and comprehension) (NRP, 2000). At the secondary level, literacy is taught across content areas, with a focus on concepts such as vocabulary, syntax, morphology, oral language, comprehension (through summarizing and questioning), and building knowledge. Content-area teachers are not necessarily teaching students how to read, but they are supporting literacy development through intentional, cross-curricular instruction.

MTSS Non-Negotiables

For MTSS to be successful at the secondary level, schools must have these six essential principles in place:

1. Full Administrative Support

Leaders adjust the master schedule, purchase instructional materials, assign staff, help select assessments, guide professional learning, and award course credits.

Tip: Leaders can build elective, reading intervention periods (45–60 minutes) for credit across Grades 6–8 and 9–12 with multiple sections.

Additional leadership actions that support strong scheduling structures are outlined in [Appendix A: MTSS System Actions for Secondary Schools](#).

2. Shared Decision-Making and Leadership

Cross-role implementation teams prevent personality-dependent decision-making and keep the focus on data and fidelity. These teams analyze schoolwide data from core instruction and individual student data from intervention instruction to inform ongoing professional learning, use of instructional materials, and individual student interventions.

Tip: Use a standing agenda that follows a Collaborative Problem-Solving Process and a common decision tree for multidisciplinary teams (Burns et al., 2005; Harlacher et al., 2024; Jimmerson et al., 2016). These trees guide decision-making for students across all tiers of instruction.

Guidance for establishing consistent MTSS team routines and decision-making structures is available in [Appendix A: MTSS System Actions for Secondary Schools](#).

3. Intervention Classes Built into the Schedule

In both middle and high school, reading intervention should be offered as an elective course and assigned to students with intervention needs. The course should be written into the master schedule with multiple sections to accommodate varying student needs and small groups, depending on the intensity of the interventions. Additionally, students should be able to earn grades and credits toward graduation. At the middle school level, a common period for differentiation can be built into the master schedule if several groups of students need differentiated reading instruction.

Tip: Create class rosters after gathering early warning data on students.

Tip: Staff these classes with two teachers—a reading specialist and a special education teacher or intervention specialist.

Additional support for organizing intervention groups and aligning placement decisions with risk indicators can be found in [Appendix A: MTSS System Actions for Secondary Schools](#).

✓ 4. Ongoing Professional Learning for All Teachers

Professional learning in literacy is not a “one and done” initial training. To be successful, it must be ongoing, with opportunities for classroom application and collaboration with fellow educators (Desimone & Garet, 2015; Guskey, 2002; Parsons et al., 2016). Secondary educators require professional learning in areas particular to adolescent literacy, such as vocabulary, comprehension, and overall explicit instruction. Professional learning to build oral language skills can also be helpful across content areas. In addition, intervention providers need professional development on their instructional materials, the language and literacy developmental continuum, and best practices in explicit reading instruction. All educators involved in the MTSS process should also have professional learning in the MTSS framework and the collaborative problem-solving process for teaming.

Tip: Train all staff in explicit instructional routines; train interventionists deeply in reading development and selected interventions.

Related implementation supports for building staff capacity are included in [Appendix A: MTSS System Actions for Secondary Schools](#).

✓ 5. Strong Tier 1 Instruction

Incorporating consistent routines and cross-disciplinary reading instruction on content such as morphology, vocabulary, syntax, and background knowledge helps struggling readers and prevents other students from falling behind. Strong Tier 1 instruction should include direct instruction in all content areas. You cannot intervene your way out of a Tier 1 problem!

Tip: Write this strategy into your school improvement plan to make it a priority.

Classroom-ready routines that strengthen Tier 1 instruction across disciplines are provided in [Appendix C: Tier 1 Instruction Strategy Cards](#).

✓ 6. Data-Based Decision-Making

Moving beyond intuition to the use of objective data sources will improve student support and outcomes. Teams can better assess their program strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement.

Tip: Engage teams in data-based conversations using the Collaborative Problem-Solving Process (Burns et al., 2005; Harlacher et al., 2024; Jimmerson et al., 2016): **(1) define the problem, (2) problem analysis, (3) plan development, and (4) plan evaluation.**

Example of the Collaborative Problem-Solving Process:

1. Students are reading below grade level.
2. Look at the diagnostic data to determine reader profile and student reading needs.
3. Select interventions aligned to those needs.
4. Use screening data and progress monitoring to gauge intervention effectiveness.

Tools that support ongoing use of screening, diagnostic information, and progress monitoring can be found in [Appendix D: Data Action Cards for Screening, Diagnostics, and Progress Monitoring](#).

Profiles of Struggling Readers

Spear-Swerling (2015) suggests that literacy interventions should be designed to address students' specific literacy subskill deficits. She identifies three categories of reading skill deficits: poor word recognition, poor comprehension, and mixed reading difficulties. It is important to note that not all struggling readers require comprehension interventions (Spear-Swerling & Vaughn, 2022).

In a study examining struggling readers in ninth grade, researchers identified various underlying skill deficits that contributed to students' overall reading difficulties (Brasseur-Hock et al., 2011). Of the three types of struggling readers, most had needs with word recognition, with the smallest subgroup being students who only struggled with comprehension. Half of the students struggled with both word recognition and language comprehension skills.

The four-quadrant model, based on the Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Hoover & Tunmer, 2020), is helpful for visualizing the variations in struggling readers and for grouping students by reader profile.

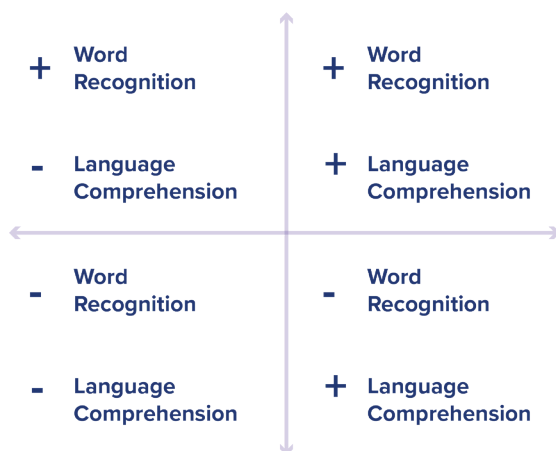
It is important to note that even within the same reader profile, students have varying instructional needs. For example, students who struggle with word recognition may need decoding interventions, such as learning vowel teams, or they may need interventions in advanced word study, working with multisyllabic words and morphology. Identifying a student's reader profile is helpful, but additional information is necessary for intervention planning.

When it comes to addressing the four subtypes of learner needs, **teachers must prioritize decoding and fluency instruction because fluent reading is the bridge to comprehension.**

The decoding threshold hypothesis explains that struggling readers must develop strong decoding skills, including advanced decoding skills, before they can fully understand what they read (Wang et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2024). For older struggling readers, this means teachers need to carefully consider the intensity, duration, and focus of decoding interventions. Students with poor word fluency should be given assessments to determine their decoding skills. When students do not have adequate word recognition skills, their reading comprehension is significantly limited, and they often do not make meaningful gains in comprehension—even when they receive direct instruction on comprehension strategies.

As a result, secondary students must make sufficient progress in decoding to move beyond this “threshold” in order to see improvement in reading comprehension. This often requires more explicit, intensive, and sustained decoding intervention than is typically provided at the secondary level. Effective interventions for these students should include targeted instruction in advanced phonics, morphology, syllabication, and etymology with repeated practice with connected text.

Subtypes of Reading Difficulties (Four Quadrants)



A quick-reference version of these reader profiles, including signs, instructional focus areas, and recommended intervention placements, is available in [Appendix B: Reader Profiles—Quick Match Guide](#).

Using Student Data to Make Instructional Decisions

Schools must leverage a variety of data types to identify which students need intervention, pinpoint what is needed, and check the efficacy of instruction.

See [Appendix D: Data Action Cards](#) for guidance on how each assessment can be used to support instructional decisions.

Assessment Definitions

Universal Screening (Grades 6–8)	- Identifies students who exhibit a reading difficulty or are at risk of reading difficulties - Administered three times a year
Early Warning Indicators (Grades 9–12)	- Identify which students may face reading challenges based upon attendance, grades, behavior, and state test data - Used in high school instead of universal screening assessments
Diagnostic Assessments	- Identify specific areas of reading difficulty - Only provided to students who are identified by screening or early warning indicators
Progress Monitoring	- Evaluates effectiveness of instruction and intervention - Sensitive to small changes - Only given to students receiving interventions
Summative/Outcome Assessments	- Measure student mastery of grade-level standards, which can also serve as part of the Early Warning Indicators for individual students - Provide insight into student growth for individuals and groups - Leverage insights to measure successful implementation of Tier 1

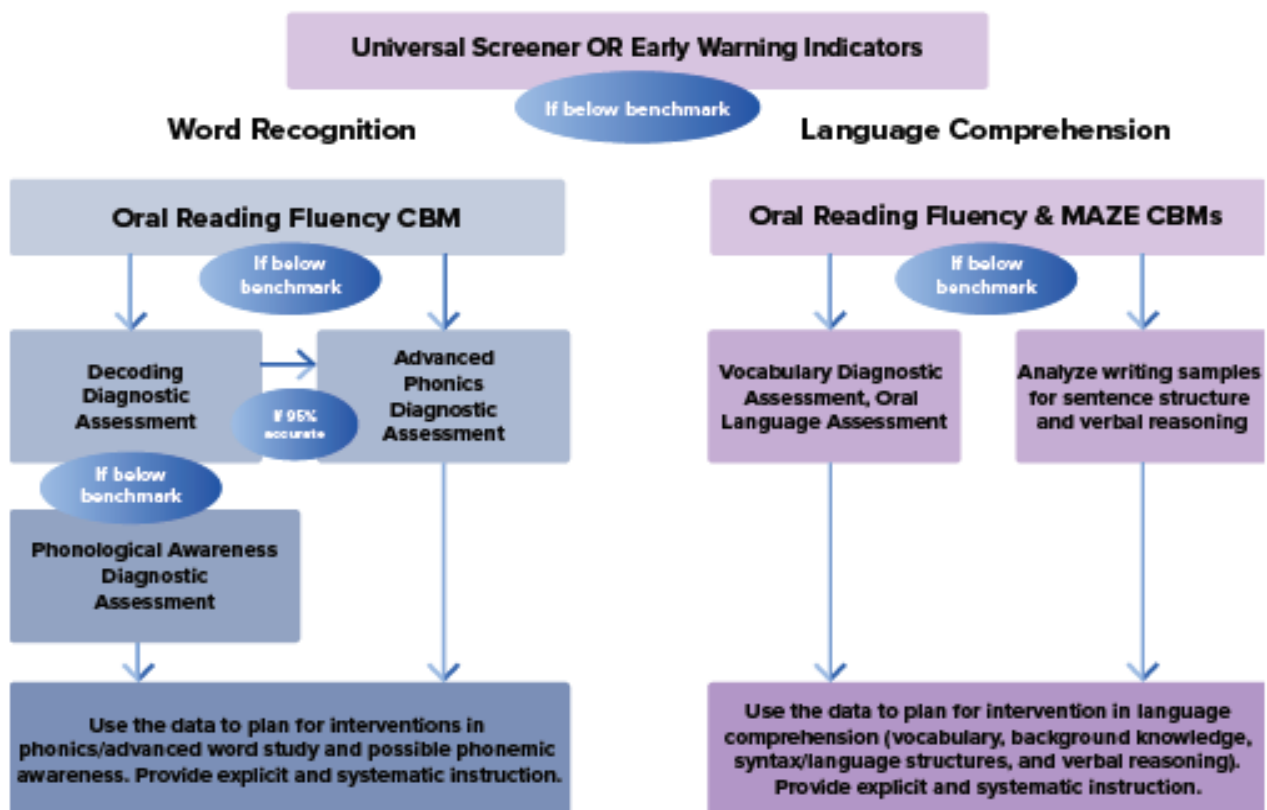
Data-Based Decision-Making: The Literacy Intervention Navigator

Because secondary students may exhibit a wide array of learning needs and reading challenges, it is essential to utilize data-based decision-making (DBDM) for planning personalized interventions (Vaughn et al., 2008). When teachers are equipped to conduct the right assessments and identify the root causes of reading comprehension issues, they can leverage this data to develop tailored intervention strategies for each student (Harlacher et al., 2024; Torgesen & Miller, 2009).

The flowchart below aids DBDM efforts within the collaborative problem-solving process, specifically in Steps 2 and 3, when educators need to collect diagnostic data and interpret it to plan for interventions. Word recognition deficits are on the left side of the navigator, and language comprehension deficits are on the right side. Word recognition assessments quickly rule out false positives that may be the result of trauma or other issues.

It is important to start the data analysis process on the left side of the chart with word recognition and then look at language comprehension skills, as up to half of struggling readers will require interventions in both. Once the student analysis is complete, the reader profiles can be used to begin grouping students.

Adolescent Literacy Intervention Navigator



Elia, M., Ashby, J., Russell Freudenthal, D. (2026). Planning Secondary Literacy Interventions: A Professional Learning Study [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Mount St. Joseph University.

Determining Placement with Reader Profiles

1. Word recognition needs, language strong*

Why: Decoding and automaticity limit fluency, which blocks comprehension.

Placement: Decoding/fluency intervention

2. Language needs, word recognition strong

Why: Vocabulary, syntax, and knowledge gaps cap understanding.

Placement: Language comprehension intervention using grade-level “stretch” text

3. Mixed difficulties (common in secondary)

Why: Years of limited access to print depress both word and language systems.

Placement: Blended block: advanced word study and language work with complex text

*While heterogeneous grouping can work for language needs, students with word recognition needs require differentiated support depending on severity.

Strong Tier 1 Instruction Across Content Areas

Effective Tier 1 instruction strengthens the building blocks that make grade-level reading possible. When all disciplines reinforce morphology, vocabulary, syntax, and writing, students develop the skills they need to access complex texts, build background knowledge, and engage in meaningful oral language and discussion. These practices help students connect new learning to what they already know so intervention can move faster and more students can succeed in core instruction.

Morphology: Explicit instruction in morphemes, the smallest meaningful units in words, strengthens decoding of multisyllabic words, supports spelling, and helps students analyze vocabulary through bases and affixes.

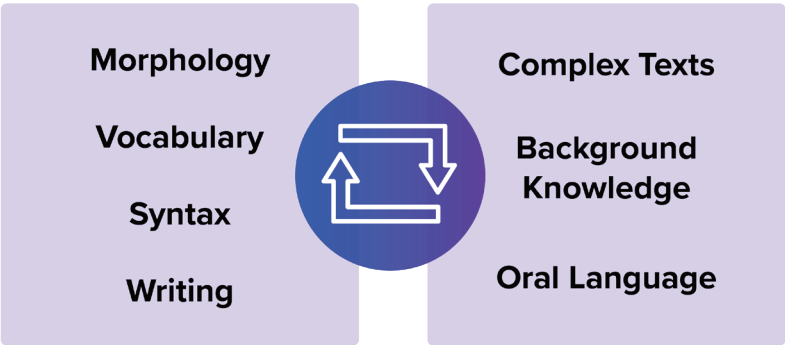
Vocabulary: Explicit vocabulary instruction connects pronunciation, spelling patterns, and meaningful word parts while providing clear definitions, examples, and checks for understanding. Instruction also includes using context clues and modeling academic language (Archer & Hughes, 2011; Gamez & Lesaux, 2015).

Syntax: Syntax, the arrangement of words and phrases in sentences, helps students understand how sentence structure conveys meaning, strengthening reading comprehension and writing (Chapel Eberhardt & Gillis, 2025).

Writing: Writing about academic content strengthens writing ability and content comprehension as students organize ideas and communicate understanding (Graham & Hebert, 2011). Effective instruction supports the writing process and syntactic structures.

Oral Language: Oral language provides the foundation for reading comprehension, as discussion, explanation, and academic conversation help develop vocabulary and deepen understanding of disciplinary content (Britton, 1970; Merritt & Culatta, 1998; Wolf et al., 2005).

Background Knowledge: Background knowledge supports comprehension of complex text as students draw on what they already know to make inferences, connect ideas, and integrate new information while reading (Cromley & Azevedo, 2007; Myers & O’Brien, 1998; Cain et al., 2001).



Appendix C: Tier 1 Instruction Strategy Cards offer classroom-ready routines that reinforce these core literacy practices across content areas.

The Work Ahead

Providing comprehensive reading intervention instruction in middle and high school can be challenging. Just like running a marathon, it is a process that requires ongoing dedication, with planning, training, and teamwork at every step. We are committed to supporting you along the way, starting with a Literacy Intervention Playbook to help you on the road to success.

Literacy Intervention Playbook

Section A: MTSS System Actions (Administrators and Leadership)

Section B: Reader Profiles (Quick Match Guide)

Section C: Tier 1 Instruction Strategy Cards

Section D: Data Action Cards

Section E: Implementation Checklist

Explore our intervention solutions that empower you to accelerate learning for every student:

mheducation.com/intervention

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Literacy Intervention Playbook Appendix

Instructional Tips, Action Cards, and Implementation Checklists

SECTION A

MTSS System Actions (Administrators and Leadership)

1. Build Intervention Blocks into the Schedule

Create 45–60 minute, credit-bearing reading intervention classes because students need core and more.

How to implement:

- Schedule multiple sections for small groups.
- Assign students based on data.
- Prioritize Grades 6–12 with multi-year planning.

2. Use a Standing MTSS Problem-Solving Agenda

The MTSS team meets with a consistent data-driven structure to ensure decisions are based on evidence.

How to implement:

- Use one shared decision tree.
- Follow four steps: Define → Analyze → Plan → Evaluate.
- Meet biweekly with all relevant staff.

3. Create Intervention Rosters from Screening or Early Warning Indicators

Build rosters only after reviewing risk data, ensuring equitable and accurate identification of need.

How to implement:

- Provide universal screening for Grades 6–8.
- Review Early Warning Indicators (EWIs), including attendance, grades, behavior, and state test scores for Grades 9–12.
- Group students by reader profile (word recognition, comprehension, or mixed needs).

4. Train All Teachers in Explicit Instruction Routines

Adopt and provide school-wide training in teacher modeling, guided practice, and independent practice with feedback to improve both Tier 1 and intervention outcomes.

How to implement:

- Prioritize co-planning time to integrate the new and revised teaching practices.
- Provide coaching on new teaching methods.
- Implement extensive training for interventionists on decoding/language.

5. Make Tier 1 Literacy Routines a Schoolwide Priority

Adopt 3–5 core literacy routines across disciplines because strong Tier 1 accelerates growth for all.

How to implement:

- Add routines to School Improvement Plan.
- Train staff and monitor with walkthroughs.
- Focus on morphology, syntax, vocabulary, and writing.

6. Use Data Early, Often, and Consistently

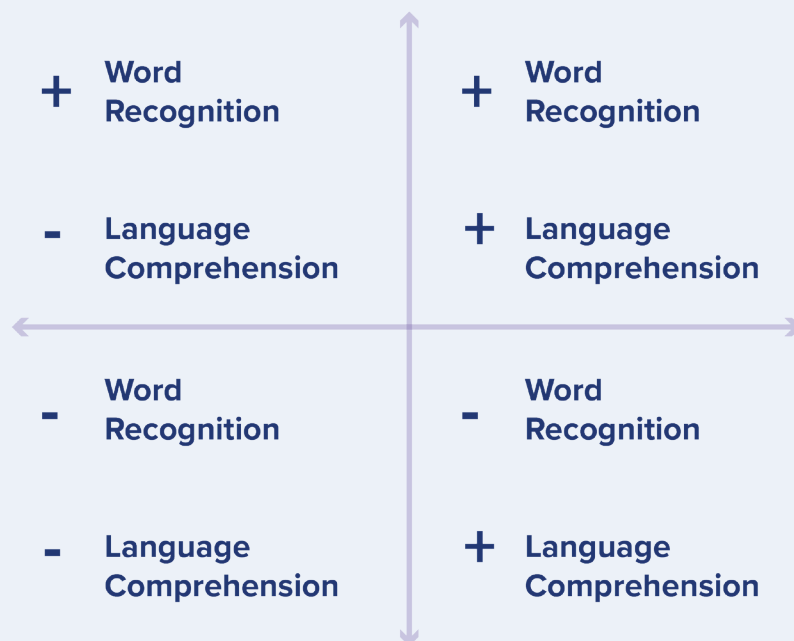
Intervention decisions should be data-based because correct placement = accelerated progress.

How to implement:

- Screen student population → Administer diagnostic tests → Monitor progress.
- Adjust instruction every 4–8 weeks.
- Review trends as a team.



Subtypes of Reading Difficulties (Four Quadrants)



SECTION B

Reader Profiles (Quick Match Guide)

1. Word Recognition Deficit

Signs: Slow reading, inaccurate multisyllable words

Teach: Advanced phonics, morphology, syllabication, and fluency

Intervention Placement: Decoding and fluency block

2. Language Comprehension Deficit

Signs: Strong decoding but weak vocabulary or syntax

Teach: Vocabulary, morphology, syntax, and background knowledge

Intervention Placement: Language comprehension using grade-level “stretch” texts

3. Mixed Difficulty

Signs: Weak decoding and comprehension

Teach: Word study, syntax, background knowledge, and vocabulary

Intervention Placement: Blended block

4. No Word Recognition or Language Comprehension Deficit (Typical Reader)

Signs: On track in both domains

Teach: Continue Tier 1 instruction

Intervention Placement: No intervention needed

SECTION C

Tier 1 Instruction Strategy Cards

Morphology Routine (All Content)

Teach 2–3 morphemes per week.

Instructional Tip:

- Break apart → Define → Apply in context.
- Reinforce across reading, writing, and discussion.

Vocabulary Routine

Select 5–8 high-impact words.

Instructional Tip:

- Use student-friendly definitions.
- Teach morphology and present examples/non-examples.
- Apply in writing and discussion.

Syntax Routine

Teach sentence comprehension and construction.

Instructional Tip:

- Model different ways to combine sentences.
- Deconstruct sentences to spotlight key components.
- Highlight punctuation and connectors.

Fluency Routine

Build accuracy and automaticity.

Instructional Tip:

- Model reading → Student practice.
- Conduct timed/untimed repeated reading.
- Implement phrase-cued reading.

Knowledge Boost Routine

Build and activate schema before reading.

Instructional Tip:

- Use visuals.
- Show timelines.
- Employ a key concepts chart.

Discussion Routine

Structure oral language practice.

Instructional Tip:

- Provide sentence stems.
- Use partner retells.
- Try “say it better” revision talk.

Writing Routine

Use writing to deepen understanding.

Instructional Tip:

- Integrate opportunities for quick writes.
- Ask students to summarize.
- Provide frames for constructed responses.

SECTION D

Data Action Cards

These cards summarize key data sources and how results might help inform instructional decisions. Use them during data meetings to support consistent practices across grades.

Screening

(Grades 6–8)

Purpose: Flag reading risk

Action: Administer three times per year

Key Questions:

- Which students are at or below benchmark?
- Are patterns emerging across grades or subgroups?

Possible Next Steps:

- Identify students needing diagnostic assessment.
- Determine if Tier 1 instructional adjustments are needed.

Diagnostics

Purpose: Identify root causes of reading difficulty

Action: Administer only to flagged students

Key Questions:

- Which skill gaps are impacting reading performance?
- What instructional focus is most needed?

Possible Next Steps:

- Match students to targeted interventions.
- Set measurable instructional goals.

Early Warning Indicators

(Grades 9–12)

Purpose: Identify risk using existing records

Action: Pull attendance, grades, behavior, and state test data

Key Questions:

- Which indicators show the greatest risk?
- Are multiple indicators present for individual students?

Possible Next Steps:

- Prioritize students needing additional support.
- Refer students for targeted diagnostics and/or interventions.

Progress Monitoring (Ongoing)

Purpose: Measure growth and adjust instruction

Action:

- Tier 2: Every 3–4 weeks
- Tier 3: Every 1–2 weeks

Key Questions:

- Is the student making expected progress?
- Does the intervention need to be adjusted?

Possible Next Steps:

- Continue, intensify, or change intervention.
- Document instructional decisions or changes.

SECTION E

Implementation Checklist

MTSS Structure

- ☐ Intervention periods scheduled (45–60 minutes)
- ☐ Credit-bearing
- ☐ Multiple small-group sections
- ☐ MTSS team uses decision tree and agenda

Data

- ☐ Universal screening (6–8) or EWIs (9–12)
- ☐ Diagnostics administered to flagged students
- ☐ Students assigned to correct reader profile
- ☐ Progress monitoring completed on schedule
- ☐ Instruction adjusted based on growth

Tier 1

- ☐ Morphology routine implemented schoolwide
- ☐ Vocabulary routine implemented schoolwide
- ☐ Syntax instruction embedded in all classes
- ☐ Background knowledge built or activated before reading
- ☐ Structured discussion routines used regularly
- ☐ Writing used as comprehension support

Intervention

- ☐ Small, homogeneous groups formed using diagnostic data
- ☐ Instruction aligned to student reader profiles (word recognition, comprehension, or mixed needs)
- ☐ Daily intervention period (45–60 minutes) with a consistent lesson structure
- ☐ Texts selected to match instructional need (controlled/decodable or grade-level stretch)
- ☐ Progress monitoring administered on schedule (Tier 2 every 3–4 weeks; Tier 3 every 1–2 weeks)
- ☐ Cumulative review embedded in each lesson
- ☐ High levels of teacher feedback and corrective instruction
- ☐ Explicit, systematic instruction in targeted skills (decoding, morphology, fluency, vocabulary, and syntax)

Professional Learning

- ☐ All staff trained on explicit instruction
- ☐ Coaching and modeling cycles scheduled
- ☐ Interventionists receive specialized professional development

The tools found in this playbook are informed by widely accepted MTSS research and adolescent literacy best practices and are designed for practitioner use.