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A STATE GUIDE FOR RETURNING TO SCHOOL DURING AND AFTER CRISIS:

A Guide to Supporting States,
Districts, Schools, Educators, and
Students through a Multi-Tiered
Systems of Support Framework
during the 2020-2021 School Year

CENTER ON POSITIVE BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTIONS AND SUPPORTS
STATE IMPLEMENTATION AND SCALING UP OF EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICES CENTER
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NATIONAL CENTER ON IMPROVING LITERACY
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A State Guide for Returning to School During and After Crisis:

A Guide to Supporting States, Districts, Schools, Educators, and Students through a Multi-Tiered Systems of Support Framework during the 2020-2021 School Year

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Purpose, Outcome, Context, Guiding Principles, and Rationale for the Guide

Purpose

This abbreviated state guide describes the use of a multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) framework, like positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS), to support the return to school in a manner that all students, families, and educators are supported effectively, efficiently, and relevantly. This guide is *not* a primer on MTSS or PBIS. (For a basic introduction, see the [Implementation Blueprint](#).) This guide *is* a set of considerations for experienced leaders to enhance, adjust, or adapt their action plans to meet the current context.



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* Table numbers are retained from the [complete guide](#); therefore, tables are NOT numbered continuously in this abbreviated guide.



In particular, this guide provides recommendations for **State leaders** (Chief State School Officers, members of state-wide leadership team) as they enhance their state-wide action plan to include a comprehensive plan for returning to school during a significant public health crisis. (A [complete guide](#)⁷ that includes state, district, school, and classroom recommendations to support implementation of key practices is available on pbis.org.)

Outcome

The ultimate outcome of this work is to support **students, families, and educators**^{*} during the transitions back to school during and following the global pandemic in a manner that prioritizes their health and safety, social and emotional needs, and behavioral and academic growth.

Context

During Spring 2020, COVID-19 has disrupted many aspects of our “normal” home, school, work, and community relationships, expectations, and routines. It has also contributed to economic challenges that have impacts at the global, national, state, local, and family levels. Although we have learned valuable lessons from past tragedies and crises (e.g., natural disasters, accidents, violence), mitigation, healing, and recovery are unlikely to be like anything we have experienced.

The COVID-19 public health crisis has also highlighted disparities in health care, and disproportionate health



outcomes for people of color. Simultaneously, a national movement, fueled by ongoing violence toward and murders of Black people, has resulted in a national movement to make Black lives matter. Given the inequities that have long existed in education, this movement encourages educators to examine their own practice and ensure that students who are black, indigenous, and people of color also benefit from education.

Given the current and future progression of COVID-19 and on-going economic challenges, the return to school in Fall 2020 will be challenging. However, given the national focus on equity, there is also reason for hope and an opportunity to design education that works for all. Thus, as students, family, school, and community members consider a “restart” of school,

* We view educators as a general term that includes all school members who collectively support students, including general and special education teachers, school nurses, instructional assistants or para professionals, counselors, janitors, school psychologists, administrators, social workers, administrative assistants, bus drivers, coaches, speech and language pathologists, occupational therapists, and other related personnel



effective, efficient, culturally relevant, and contextually appropriate decision making must guide our planning and implementation.

As such, our restart will be more than “flipping a switch” to turn school back on. For example, consider the following **current and anticipated conditions**:

- Students, families, and educators have experienced multiple disruptions to instruction during Spring 2020, and resuming school will be another change. On-going or fluctuating needs may continue to cause disruptions for students, families, and educators throughout the next year.
- Gaps among students will be larger than ever before due to disruptions in and unequal access to instruction. Although some students may have maintained or increased skills during remote learning, many students, especially students with or at risk for disabilities, may have experienced interruptions in access and needed social, emotional, behavioral, and/or academic supports.
- The structure of school may be different with environmental changes to enable physical distancing, practices for keeping safe and healthy, and variations of remote, hybrid, and in-person learning.
- Requirements to wear masks and maintain physical distance may make it harder to establish positive connections when educators and students are together.

- Early career educators may have experienced interruptions in their pre-service and induction support, and may enter the field at a critical time with less preparation.
- Resources (budget, time) may be limited, affecting (a) availability of training, coaching, and technical assistance and (b) educators’ roles and responsibilities (e.g., coach re-assigned to classroom). Requirements to modify space to ensure physical distance may further tax resources.
- There may be greater emphasis on using new practices and less emphasis on developing systems to support educators in implementing effective practices correctly and consistently.

Given these conditions, we must deliberately (re)arrange teaching and learning environments within an MTSS framework so (a) all students experience vibrant, positive, and constructive adult and peer relationships; (b) students who are at risk for academic, social, emotional, and/or behavioral difficulties proactively receive increased and targeted supported; and (c) students with disabilities or other significant academic, social, emotional, and/or behavioral challenges receive intensive and individualized supports to promote positive and equitable outcomes for all students.



Guiding Principles

Our recommendations are grounded in the **core elements of PBIS/MTSS** (Figure 1).

- Prioritize **equity**. MTSS is for all students, families, and educators. Use the MTSS framework to differentiate supports for students, and monitor to ensure equitable outcomes are observed.
- Make student growth and benefit central to all decisions. Student **outcomes** that reflect equitable learning opportunities must be the ultimate criteria for all decisions, including those related to funding, practice selection and implementation (see [Hexagon Tool](#)[®]), policy, and professional development.
- Prioritize the most efficient and effective **practices**. Emphasize practices that are supported by evidence, match the local culture and current context, and promote high-quality implementation across time. Integrate, align, and connect practices within domains: (a) effective environments, instruction, and intervention to support social, emotional, and behavioral (SEB) growth and (b) high leverage academic instruction to support student learning. If a new practice is identified, consider evidence, contextual fit, and feasibility (see [Hexagon Tool](#)[®]). Most importantly, do a few important and relevant practices well, that is, with the high degree of accuracy, fluency, durability, and adaptability.
- Use **data** to inform decisions about (a) which students, families, and educators need which supports (screening); (b) continuing, adjusting, or fading supports for students, families, and educators (progress monitoring); (c) ensuring all students, families, and educators experience benefit (equitable outcomes); and (d) supports are being implemented with fidelity.

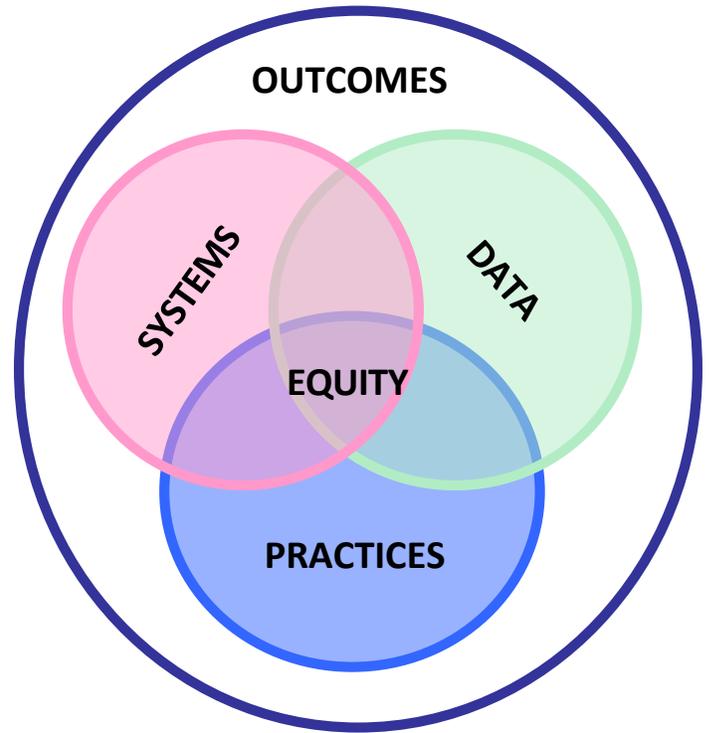


Figure 1. Core elements

- Continue to invest in **systems** to support high-fidelity implementation across time. Leverage existing leadership teams to guide planning and implementation, and consider efficient and effective means to support educators' professional learning and wellness within current resources, experience, and expertise.

Rationale

Given this context, we see a strong rationale for (1) providing support throughout the implementation cascade and (2) leveraging what works in existing systems,



1. Provide Support Throughout the Implementation Cascade

As stated, the ultimate goal of support is student growth and benefit. To realize that benefit, consider how to provide support throughout the implementation cascade. **State** and regional leadership teams coordinate training, coaching, and evaluation to support all districts within the state. **District** leadership teams provide training, coaching, and evaluation to support all schools within the district. **School** leadership teams provide on-going coaching to support educators and monitor their implementation of key practices in **classrooms** that ultimately support **student** growth and benefit. At the same time, bi-directional communication creates feedback loops

throughout the cascade; for example, educators learn from students and adjust or enhance their classroom practices; and districts communicate needs, resources, and lessons learned to inform state-level systems, as *Figure 2* illustrates.

This abbreviated state guide provides [recommendations for state](#) leadership teams to leverage existing systems. (A [complete guide](#)¹⁰ that includes state, district, school, and classroom recommendations to support implementation of key practices is available on pbis.org.)



Figure 2. Implementation cascade from district support to student benefit.



2. Leverage Existing Systems

To maximize both benefit and efficiency, enhance and adjust existing systems to support implementation. As educators implementing MTSS/PBIS, the [Implementation Blueprint](#)¹¹ [district/state capacity-building graphic](#)¹² (Figure 3) may be a familiar organizational structure to consider both **executive team functions** (stakeholder engagement, funding

and alignment, policy, and workforce capacity) and **implementation functions** (training, coaching, and evaluation) of leadership teams. We recommend state leadership teams enhance these elements throughout their response to the public health crisis (see [Table 2](#)).

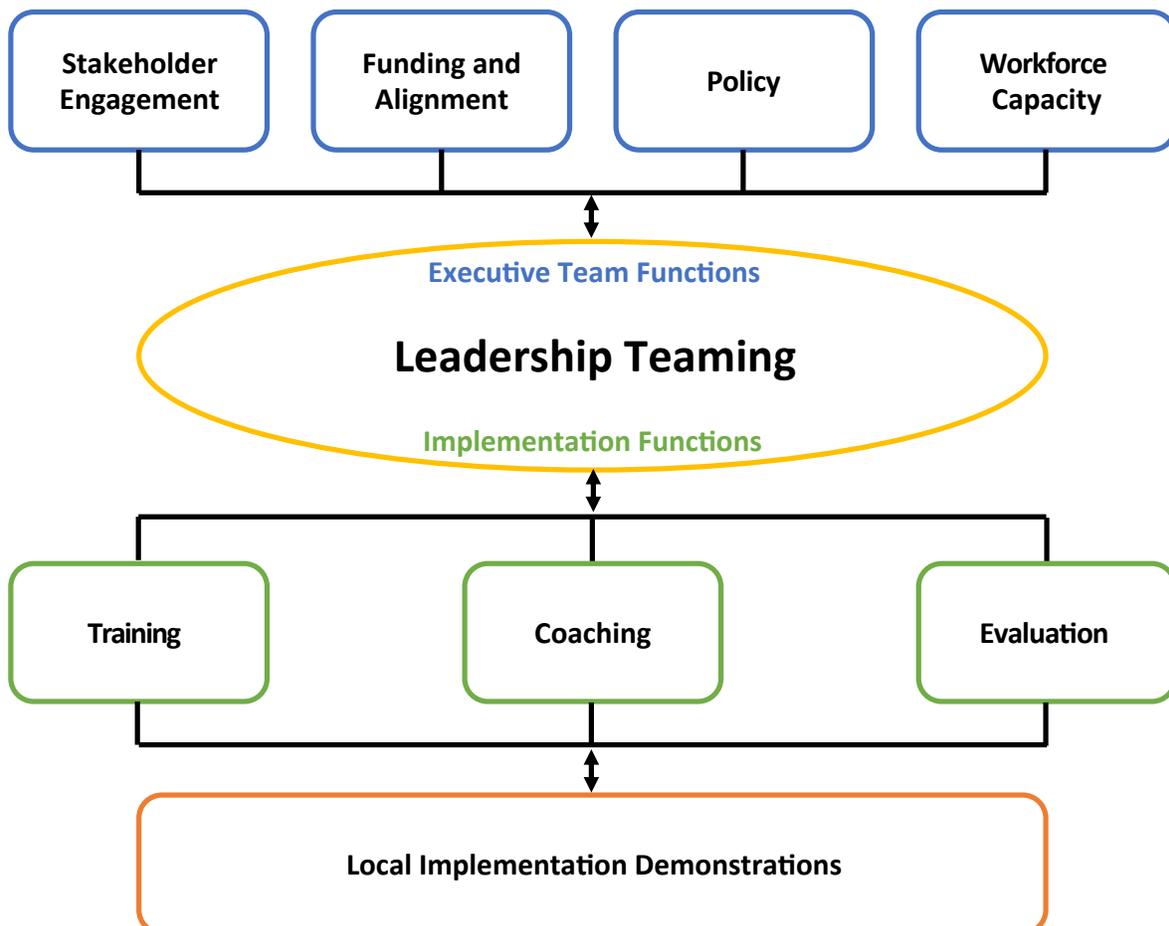
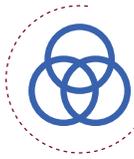


Figure 3. Implementation blueprint graphic.



Guidance for State Leadership Teams for the Transition Back to the 2020-2021 School Year

At the **state level**, the goal is to provide state leadership, by engaging in executive and implementation functions, to support districts, schools, educators, families, and students. In addition, states highlight district demonstration examples of innovative ways to support implementation of

key practices. *Table 2* presents considerations for enhancing, adjusting, or adapting state-level implementation of key systems features throughout the school year.

Critical Systems	Key Considerations	Prior to Return to School	Initial Return to School	After Initial Return to School
<p>Leadership Teaming</p>	<p>Invest in state-level leadership¹³, and consider whether your leadership team includes members with all relevant areas of expertise (e.g., health, safety, mental health, school-based behavioral health, school nursing, academic content expertise, special education, IT, social service agencies, education associations, youth). Use effective team meeting approaches (e.g., Team Initiated Problem Solving [TIPS]¹⁴, plan-do-study-act [PDSA]¹⁵) to maximize the effectiveness of remote and in-person team meetings, prioritize team-based and data-driven decision making, and maintain an action plan to prompt key implementation steps.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide resources to help districts and schools determine effectiveness of leadership teams to guide MTSS within the changed context • Identify and onboard new team members who may be critical in new context (e.g., health, safety, mental health, school-based behavioral health, school nursing, academic content expertise, special education, IT, social service agencies, education associations, youth) • Provide flexible professional learning opportunities, tools, and resources for leadership teams to support MTSS implementation • Network with other state and district leaders to share planning ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revisit team membership during initial return to school, ensure members have relevant areas of expertise • Provide guidance to address barriers to implementation and provide for ways to encourage correct and consistent implementation of MTSS • Engage network of state and district leaders to learn about implementation successes and barriers to adjust and enhance support • Provide guidance for how to implement data-driven problem solving with limited data from Spring 2020 (e.g., use data from Fall 2019, limited data from Spring 2020, and new screening data from Fall 2020) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revisit team membership, meeting, and decision-making processes throughout year and adjust based on changing context and data • Provide resources for leadership teams to examine and identify process or policy barriers that interfere with implementation of MTSS • Provide guidance to address barriers to implementation and provide for ways to encourage correct and consistent implementation of MTSS • Engage network of state and district leaders to learn about implementation successes and barriers to continue to adjust and enhance support

Note: IT = information technology; MTSS = multi-tiered systems of support; PDSA = plan-do-study-act; SEB = social, emotional, behavioral

Table 2. Considerations for state-level implementation of key systems to support districts across the timeline of crisis response and recovery.



Guidance for State Leadership Teams for the Transition Back to the 2020-2021 School Year *continued*

Critical Systems	Key Considerations	Prior to Return to School	Initial Return to School	After Initial Return to School
<div style="border: 1px solid blue; border-radius: 10px; padding: 5px; width: fit-content; margin: 0 auto;"> Stakeholder Engagement </div>	<p>Consider a range of strategies (e.g., website, newsletters, in-person or virtual community meeting, phone calls) to maintain regular bi-directional communication with stakeholders (families, community organizations, public health and medical professionals, school boards) to promote effective collaboration and support.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess needs of educators, families, and students to inform planning • Communicate anticipated context for returning to school and implications for implementation of effective practices within a MTSS • Focus on priorities to promote positive, predictable, safe, and successful environments • Expand stakeholder group to include public health and local medical professionals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actively engage and visibly promote stakeholder support for implementation of MTSS • Provide updates to stakeholders on implementation efforts (e.g., successes and challenges to be addressed) • Gather and act on stakeholder input to improve implementation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain regular updates to all stakeholders on MTSS implementation and impact on students' SEB and academic growth • Gather and act on stakeholder input to improve implementation and address barriers
<div style="border: 1px solid blue; border-radius: 10px; padding: 5px; width: fit-content; margin: 0 auto;"> Funding & Alignment </div>	<p>Consider how to leverage existing and/or secure new funding streams to (a) support integrated implementation of key practices, (b) address new or intensified need (e.g., food security, SEB, academic, mental health), and (c) flexibly provide support students and staff. Also, consider opportunities to integrate and align¹⁶ initiatives, programs, and practices to maximize efficiencies.</p>	<p>With funding cuts resulting in reductions in personnel and resources, provide guidance on possible funding sources,¹⁷ repurposing existing funding sources, or community resources to support crisis response needs including, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expanding school nursing resources and facilities • Infrastructure for technology • Academic initiatives • Behavioral health initiatives • Provision of meals and other material resources • Grief and crisis response 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide online information (e.g., webinars) or contact information for districts and schools for clarification in use of funds to support MTSS • Leverage existing state association virtual meetings or networks to provide information and gather input from leaders regarding use of funds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check in with various district and school teams to understand updated needs to align funding for implementation efforts • Communicate with individuals at state and district levels who influence policy and budget decisions

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Table 2. Considerations for state-level implementation of key systems to support districts across the timeline of crisis response and recovery.



Guidance for State Leadership Teams for the Transition Back to the 2020-2021 School Year *continued*

Critical Systems	Key Considerations	Prior to Return to School	Initial Return to School	After Initial Return to School
<div style="border: 1px solid blue; border-radius: 10px; padding: 5px; width: fit-content; margin: 0 auto;"> Policy </div>	<p>Consider necessary adjustments to the language and/or implementation of policies and procedures most affected by the public health crisis, including those related to health and safety, attendance, opportunity gaps, curriculum standards, grade promotion or graduation, discipline, and related areas. Ensure policy adjustments intentionally address and enhance equity.¹⁸</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review current policies to ensure they support implementation of key practices to meet academic and SEB needs of all students Review policy to promote equity of access to instruction and supports, and share concerns and suggestions with policy makers Consider regulatory flexibility, including attendance policies due to pre-existing conditions of students and staff Revisit policies that disproportionately impact marginalized populations, and engage various stakeholders to co-develop policies and practices that support equity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communicate policy with districts and schools to promote MTSS and clarify priority for academic and SEB needs Provide resources for leadership teams to examine and identify process or policy barriers that interfere with implementation of MTSS Assess impacts of policy changes on all students and staff, and adjust as needed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Revisit policy to determine if there are barriers to effective and efficient implementation of academic and SEB support within MTSS framework Share concerns and suggestions with policy makers at state and federal level
<div style="border: 1px solid blue; border-radius: 10px; padding: 5px; width: fit-content; margin: 0 auto;"> Workforce Capacity </div>	<p>Consider unique needs of (a) early career educators who may have experienced interrupted pre-service and induction support, (b) educators with minimal experience using technology to support students in a remote environment, and (c) educators learning to build/strengthen relationships with physical distancing, and (c) all staff learning new health and safety protocols.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide guidance for districts and schools to identify skillsets for successful implementation of MTSS Create and provide supports (training and coaching plans, tools, guidance documents) to help districts and schools with workforce development Provide guidance to assess and monitor staff wellness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue to assess and monitor staff wellness, needs of workforce capacity, and effectiveness of supports to guide decision-making on modifications Review, modify (if necessary), and provide supports (training and coaching plans, tools, guidance documents) to help districts and schools with workforce development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue to assess and monitor staff wellness, needs of workforce capacity, and effectiveness of supports to guide decision-making on modifications Review, modify (if necessary), and provide supports (training and coaching plans, tools, guidance documents) to help districts and schools with workforce development

Note: IT = information technology; MTSS = multi-tiered systems of support; PDSA = plan-do-study-act; SEB = social, emotional, behavioral

Table 2. Considerations for state-level implementation of key systems to support districts across the timeline of crisis response and recovery.



Guidance for State Leadership Teams for the Transition Back to the 2020-2021 School Year *continued*

Critical Systems	Key Considerations	Prior to Return to School	Initial Return to School	After Initial Return to School
Training	(Re)establish a professional development plan , ¹⁹ and consider training topics all staff may need to support students during the return to school year, including training in key practices (Table 2), health and safety, equity, and related topics. Consider flexible training methods (e.g., remote and in-person).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop training capacity at state level or provide a plan to develop alternative training capacity Provide for flexible professional learning opportunities that focus on key practices for academic and SEB supports and high-quality implementation to promote equitable outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide guidance and tools to determine knowledge/skills gaps that impact successful educator implementation of MTSS Provide a plan for how educators may access additional professional learning opportunities in flexible formats 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide guidance and tools to determine knowledge/skills gaps that impact successful implementation of MTSS Provide access for educators to access additional professional learning opportunities provided in flexible formats
Coaching	Consider flexible coaching approaches ²⁰ to support implementation of key practices, including remote coaching, peer-to-peer support, or self-management, given the potential for disruptions to traditional coaching models and restricted resources.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide resources to help districts and schools determine local coaching capacity for MTSS within the changed context, and provide guidance to link capacity need to coaching plan Provide guidance for identifying and developing coaching capacity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide resources and tools for coaching to take place during first few months of school with guidance for more focused coaching for educators who are in new positions or serving different functions than in the past Use data to evaluate effectiveness of coaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide resources and tools for coaching with guidance for more focused and more frequent coaching for educators who require more greater support Provide state-level professional learning opportunities to improve local coaching capacity

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Table 2. Considerations for state-level implementation of key systems to support districts across the timeline of crisis response and recovery.

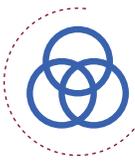


Guidance for State Leadership Teams for the Transition Back to the 2020-2021 School Year *continued*

Critical Systems	Key Considerations	Prior to Return to School	Initial Return to School	After Initial Return to School
<div style="border: 1px solid green; border-radius: 10px; padding: 5px; width: fit-content; margin: 0 auto;"> Evaluation </div>	<p>(Re)establish an evaluation plan²¹ to collect and closely monitor data on health, safety, SEB, and academic needs and outcomes alongside fidelity and capacity data; to (a) identify students, family, educators, schools, and districts that require additional support, (b) evaluate the fidelity and outcomes of support, and (c) drive data-based adjustments to maximize benefit for all during remote and in-person learning. Consider State Systems Fidelity Inventory (SSFI)²² and State Capacity Assessment (SCA)²³ to assess state-level implementation fidelity and capacity, respectively.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (Re)establish and enhance data calendar to monitor transition and support continuous PDSA cycles,²⁴ including consideration that capacity and fidelity may change throughout the year • Provide guidance on adapting previous evaluation strategies to context of return to school • Provide supports to collect, analyze, and act on data for academic and non-academic content in MTSS • Clarify what data are most necessary to guide effective implementation and successful outcomes • Provide support to remove redundant or less relevant assessments • Ensure process is in place to examine and act on disaggregated data²⁵ to promote equity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use data calendar to monitor transition and support continuous PDSA cycles • Provide supports and resources to screen students who may need more intensive academic and/or SEB supports • Provide evaluation resources (describing method, process, procedure) for determining needed staff supports to implement MTSS • Provide evaluation resources for determining family satisfaction and engagement. • Apply MTSS logic to differentiate support to districts based on need • Examine disaggregated data at the state and district levels, and ensure action steps are in place to promote equity for all students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use data calendar to monitor transition and support continuous PDSA cycles • Provide supports and resources for periodic screening and progress monitoring for students • Provide supports and resources for regular evaluation of staff implementation fidelity of MTSS • Provide supports and resources for regular evaluation of family satisfaction and engagement with MTSS • Apply MTSS logic to differentiate support to districts based on need • Examine disaggregated data at the state and district levels, and ensure action steps are in place to promote equity for all students
<div style="border: 1px solid orange; border-radius: 10px; padding: 5px; width: fit-content; margin: 0 auto;"> Local Implementation Demonstrations </div>	<p>Highlight local district- or school-based examples of educators effectively supporting students, including effective implementation of key practices during in-person and remote-instruction, integration and alignment of support, and using data to drive decisions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify districts and schools that have adjusted supports for effective implementation of academic and/or SEB MTSS, and share with other districts and schools • Emphasize critical practice components that also address local need and context 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify schools and districts that demonstrate successful initial return to school implementation of MTSS in any or all areas of academic and SEB and share • Identify how implementation is supported and share 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify schools and districts that demonstrate success after the initial return to school implementation of MTSS in any or all areas of academic or SEB supports and share • Identify how implementation is supported and share

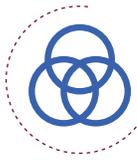
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Table 2. Considerations for state-level implementation of key systems to support districts across the timeline of crisis response and recovery.



Embedded Hyperlinks

1. <https://www.pbis.org>
2. <https://sisep.fpg.unc.edu>
3. <http://www.mtss.org>
4. <https://improvingliteracy.org>
5. <https://leadforliteracy.org>
6. <https://www.pbis.org/resource/pbis-implementation-blueprint>
7. <https://www.pbis.org/resource/returning-to-school-during-and-after-crisis>
8. <https://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/resources/lesson-1-hexagon-tool>
9. <https://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/resources/lesson-1-hexagon-tool>
10. <https://www.pbis.org/resource/returning-to-school-during-and-after-crisis>
11. <https://www.pbis.org/resource/pbis-implementation-blueprint>
12. <https://www.pbis.org/topics/districtstate-pbis>
13. <https://www.pbis.org/resource/four-key-actions-for-state-education-agency-teams-to-support-implementation-of-multi-tiered-systems-of-support>
14. <https://www.pbis.org/resource/pbis-forum-in-brief-tips>
15. <https://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/resources/activity-l61-apply-pdsa-cycle-your-work>
16. <https://www.pbis.org/resource/technical-guide-for-alignment-of-initiatives-programs-and-practices-in-school-districts>
17. <https://www.ed.gov/coronavirus>
18. <https://www.pbis.org/resource/key-elements-of-policies-to-address-discipline-disproportionality-a-guide-for-district-and-school-teams>
19. <https://www.pbis.org/resource/training-and-professional-development-blueprint-for-pbis>
20. <https://www.pbis.org/resource/coaching-for-competence-and-impact-brief-1-defining-coaching>
21. <https://www.pbis.org/resource/evaluation-blueprint-for-pbis>
22. <https://www.pbis.org/resource/pbis-state-systems-fidelity-inventory-ssfi-pilot-version-v0-1>
23. <https://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/resources/state-capacity-assessment-sca>
24. <https://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/resources/activity-l61-apply-pdsa-cycle-your-work>
25. <https://www.pbis.org/resource/pbis-cultural-responsiveness-field-guide-resources-for-trainers-and-coaches>



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