How to use the MTSS framework to transform school reading achievement - with Dr. Sarah Brown & Dr. Stephanie Stollar

Triple R Teaching Podcast #214

Hello, this is Anna Geiger, author of *Reach All Readers* and creator of the Reach All Readers website. Today I'm interviewing Dr. Sarah Brown and Dr. Stephanie Stollar, who together wrote the book, *MTSS for Reading Improvement*. I'd like to read to you my endorsement for the book.

"In the rush to improve reading outcomes, schools often look for the perfect program, but even the best programs fail without an effective system behind them. Brown and Stollar bring MTSS to life through meeting templates, helpful charts, and real-world examples. Unsure if your school is over-testing? Their assessment audit will help you. Struggling with unfocused team meetings? Their ready-to-use agendas keep discussions productive. Confused about what to do with all that data? Their simple protocols guide analysis and action. Leaders will find exactly what they need inside MTSS for reading improvement - practical tools that take the guesswork out of implementation. Every leader serious about improving reading outcomes needs this book."

FYI, my recording software was acting funny at the beginning and I had to switch to Zoom a few minutes in, so the audio changes just a little bit, but then it's pretty consistent all the way through the rest of the episode.

If MTSS is new to you, as it was to me five years ago, I would recommend listening to the episode that I have that explains what MTSS is, as well as the episode which I've replayed before this one in your podcast player about MTSS in general. Here we go!

Anna Geiger:

Welcome Dr. Stollar and Dr. Brown!

Stephanie Stollar:

Hi, Anna.

Sarah Brown:

Hi!

Anna Geiger:

Glad to have you here.

Stephanie, you have been here before and some people may know you also wrote the foreword for my book, so we know each other very well. If you could just give a quick reintroduction to yourself.

Stephanie Stollar:

Sure. Thank you so much for having us on your podcast today. I'm Stephanie Stollar. I live in Cincinnati, Ohio. I have had many roles in education over the years. I started as a school psychologist, I worked as an assistant professor in a couple of different programs, and I spent a lot of years as a consultant supporting schools and districts to improve reading outcomes through MTSS, the topic of our book.

Anna Geiger:

Sarah, how about you?

Sarah Brown:

I've been in education for over two decades, starting as a school psychologist practicing in Illinois and Iowa, always in systems implementing what we now call MTSS. Since then, I've really had the privilege of leading teams at the district level, and later at the state level, before I transitioned into the private sector due to a family move where I led professional learning and supported MTSS in schools. Now I consult with schools around the country where I help them use data and their MTSS to improve reading outcomes and math outcomes using practical, actionable strategies. I'm really grateful to spend this time.

Anna Geiger:

Could you mention your book that you wrote previously, what that was all about?

Sarah Brown:

I co-authored *Effective Universal Instruction*, which is a book about Tier 1, and I wrote that because I was doing a lot of consulting with schools at the state level that needed Tier 1 support. All we could really find in terms of things that were published was a little bit around class-wide intervention, and then a lot of people were saying to buy a new set of curricular materials. That's obviously really important, but it's not the whole thing. We know that that alone does not result in system-wide change. I really saw a need for Tier 1, and that kind of is a similar piece with this book.

The schools that I work with... We see over the past several years schools have been really building up their expertise around the science of reading. We have schools that have been implementing pieces of an MTSS, sometimes for decades, still continue to be frustrated and struggle with seeing school-wide growth.

Just knowing that a systems-level view of this work, and taking that picture from aggregating your data and really being able to think about how can we support our educators and students differently, and in a more efficient and effective way, was what we both, Stephanie and I, saw as a need.

Anna Geiger:

Let's move into now discussing the content of your second book, which is *MTSS for School Improvement*. We're going to start by thinking about what is MTSS, and what's its role in the science of reading?

Stephanie Stollar:

I think about MTSS as the delivery mechanism for the reading research. It's the way we get the research institutionalized and contextualized into schools in a way that fits the needs of their students and the

resources that they actually have within their school. Yes, we need professional development, but professional development is not enough. Yes, we need things like good instructional materials, but that also is not sufficient. We have to have a way of bringing together the needs of the students and the research in a very practical, actionable, reasonable, and sustainable way.

That's what MTSS allows you to do, because it involves teams using data within a structured decision-making process, what we call the collaborative improvement cycle, to engineer evidence-based tiers of support. It is through having multiple tiers of support, those support systems, that we can get every student to be a successful reader.

There are many, many misunderstandings, just like there can be about the science of reading. Maybe one of the misunderstandings that you're encountering is that these are two different things, the science of reading and MTSS.

Anna Geiger:

Yes.

Stephanie Stollar:

Whereas I think about MTSS as one of the evidence bases. Sometimes you'll hear people talk about it as implementation science. These are not exactly the same thing, but similar ideas and concepts. It's an evidence-based way of using research to improve outcomes. We just happen to be talking about the reading outcomes specifically.

We hope that schools are not falling into the trap of having a team working on the science of reading or working on implementing dyslexia laws in their state and a separate team working on MTSS.

One of the reasons for writing our book was to really be explicit about bringing these evidence bases and these actions together.

Anna Geiger:

So why is MTSS more than just identifying who needs help and providing it?

Sarah Brown:

The hard part comes in that schools are really complex places. It gets really tough because of things like, what help is the right help for the students that we're finding? Should we provide that help as a small group or individual? Who's going to provide the help? When are we going to provide it? How will we make sure that students benefit from core instruction while they're getting the help? Then what do we do when our first idea for what the help might be isn't right.

It's all of those things, and more! People who are listening right now are likely like, "Yeah, and..." They're adding more things on.

That's why an MTSS is more than that. It's really that system-level perspective where we're looking at our data and listening to what it's telling us about using our resources right now to best meet educator and student needs.

It has several different components in it that we do outline in the book. If you are in a state that has its components, I bet they may not exactly match these, but likely you're going to see a lot of overlap

because what we tend to see is an MTSS can look different, but there are some underlining components that are all the same.

Having an impactful assessment system and data that you can trust. Having effective and efficient and equitable tiered supports across Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3. Having targeted professional learning, strategic leadership and teaming, and then a collaborative improvement cycle. These are pretty consistent across what we see and all of these pieces come together to form that system that can result in supporting the work that schools are doing right now to improve reading outcomes system-wide.

Anna Geiger:

Talking about the assessment, that is such an important piece. In the book, you have a lot of tools in the back for schools, administrators, and teams to basically look at what they're already doing and make some changes. One of those has to do with looking at the assessments that you have, and are those really achieving what you want them to achieve?

Can we start by talking about three general principles of assessment within MTSS?

Sarah Brown:

Yeah, so when we think about assessment, we're really thinking about what are the questions we have, and then what data can help us answer that? There are three questions that we see schools are asking all the time.

One is questions that require screening data. These are questions that require data that allow us to adequately and efficiently predict overall outcomes.

Another is diagnostic data. Sometimes people think about specific diagnosis of a disability there, but what we're really talking about is just diagnosing specific skill strengths and needs.

Then there's progress monitoring data, or data over time, to tell us how our system or individual students are growing, and how our interventions and our instruction is working for students in our system.

Anna Geiger:

So let's talk about if you're going to a school and you want to do an assessment audit, you want to basically collect all the assessments that they're doing and evaluate whether these are useful. Can you explain a little bit what an assessment audit would look like?

Stephanie Stollar:

For me, an audit of your assessments helps you do a crosswalk between those purposes that Sarah mentioned and the tools you're using. In my experience, there are both gaps and duplications.

In some schools, they have lots of assessments that they've just added on year after year. They have no idea why they're using them anymore. They don't actually help teachers with their work.

In other cases, there are questions that go unanswered. Teachers have questions about their students. School leaders have questions that they don't get answers to.

It's really clearly defining the purposes of assessment, screening, diagnostic, the progress monitoring functions, and then doing a high level look at, do you have tools that can answer those questions? And not just that the publisher said that they could answer those questions, because there's a lot of

confusion about this language, especially confusion about the term screening and diagnostic, but are those tools that you're using actually designed to give you the answers that you need?

An assessment audit is a basic grid. It is not fancy. You could certainly do it in a spreadsheet if you're more technologically inclined than I am. But it's a basic grid where you would list those assessment purposes down one side, and then the essential skill areas for early literacy may be across the top. That would include phonemic awareness, the alphabetic principle and basic phonics, accurate reading of text, fluent reading of text, and reading comprehension.

Then you would look for the intersection, and you would fill in the tool that you're using for each of those skill areas and assessment purposes. Most schools these days have screening measures for each of those skill areas that I mentioned. They sometimes have two. This is where those duplications will appear. If you're using something like MAP, and you're using something like Acadience Reading, you have two screening tools, and now you are spending time duplicating your efforts. You could spend that time instead teaching.

In other cases, you might find out you have a big open square in that grid. You have nothing for that purpose. In my experience, this often happens around instructionally-relevant diagnostic assessments. Many schools are now getting more sophisticated with having decoding diagnostics or even spelling diagnostic tools, but many are still lacking diagnostics in the areas of language comprehension or even aspects of reading comprehension.

I used to work for the authors of Acadience, and it's the tool that I'm most familiar with, so I'll just use that as an illustration. Acadience has screening and progress monitoring tools for all of those skill areas and they have a separate diagnostic assessment for each of those skill areas.

That's one efficient way to sort of cover your bases with one tool. You're working with one vendor, you're getting one set of training, and those different screening diagnostic and progress monitoring tools can work together as a coherent system. That's one illustration of how that audit might play out.

It's a really good activity for district leadership teams to engage in as they're implementing MTSS, and then to have those conversations about what are we going to select to fill the gaps that we have, and where are we going to de-implement one of those assessments that we might have two or three of.

Anna Geiger:

Just for people who are listening, because I do get this question a lot in email, I think teachers might be confused that don't have this figured out in their school by who gets which assessment. The screener is for everybody three times a year, but the diagnostic, not necessarily.

Sometimes we'll use a pretty quick phonics diagnostic assessment just to figure out if we want to form instructional groups or see how they're doing.

But then the comprehension one, that can that kind of assessment can take a long time. When would you when would you say that a teacher might want to give a comprehension diagnostic for a student?

Stephanie Stollar:

In my experience, this is not needed all that often, but there are students who do have difficulties in the area of language comprehension. What you might see in terms of a pattern of screening scores might be something like a student scores just fine, at benchmark or on track, with accurate reading of text, and maybe also on track with fluent reading of text, like a words correct score, but they are not able to do a basic retail. So even though the word recognition and fluency is in place, they're not able to at least

talk about what they've read. That's a pretty good indication from brief screening that maybe you want to explore those language comprehension skills.

The tool I mentioned, the Acadience Reading Diagnostic for comprehension, fluency, and oral language, would let you do some brief assessment of listening comprehension, of story grammar, of vocabulary, morphology, and syntax. They are some of those aspects of language comprehension that interfere with reading comprehension, but they are not the word recognition skills.

If you think about the Simple View, that screening of ORF accuracy and words correct takes word recognition out of the picture because those skills are just fine, and helps you target your thinking and your assessment questions in that language comprehension realm.

But you're right, this is not brief. This is a place where you can often engage your speech language therapist if you have one in your school. They certainly are well trained in doing this kind of instructionally relevant language comprehension assessment. That CFOL tool is designed for teachers, for reading specialists, for special educators, and you don't have to have special training to use it or interpret the scores.

Anna Geiger:

And just a reminder that diagnostic assessments are to help you decide what to do next. We don't just give the assessment to say, "Well, they have a problem with this and that. The end." We've got to figure out next steps. "Okay, now how am I going to remediate this particular skill?"

Do you have anything else to share about that, Sarah?

Sarah Brown:

I'm glad that you brought up teachers because I think that this is the hard part too. Teachers get attached to the data that they collect because that's what they're using on a day-to-day basis.

In our book, we actually have those assessment audits specifically starting at the classroom level or for the grade level teams to start, so that you can understand as a district, we may have adopted these assessments, but what's happening in classrooms is a lot different.

Some of listeners might be laughing now, like, "Yeah, yeah, I know what I use that I'm hiding here because I've used it forever and I find it helpful, and I believe and trust the data."

I think it's great to bring teachers into these conversations too, to understand what are you using and why are you using it? What is it telling you? How is it helping you instruct? That way, if the district is making a decision to shift assessments, whether that's through state guidance or because they have some understanding about technical adequacy and those purposes of assessment, that we can have those conversations alongside teachers. We want to be able to answer their questions too and help them feel confident in being able to use this data over time.

You hit the nail on the head when you said that the whole purpose of the data is then to *use* it. We only want to collect data that we can use, but we have to make sure that we empower teachers to be able to do that. That's the whole reason we're here.

Stephanie Stollar:

I want to circle back to this idea and expand on what you said, Sarah, about teachers to have information that helps guide their instruction. When I say instructionally relevant diagnostic assessment, that's what I'm getting at.

In our efforts to find and serve students with reading disabilities like dyslexia, some state laws have caused, I think, people to drift off into maybe some assessments that aren't quite as instructionally relevant.

I'm going to say it this way, in the old days, when this MTSS model was first conceptualized, one of the reasons for it was to move away from determining disabilities like dyslexia from an IQ test and a norm-referenced achievement test discrepancy. That was not very instructionally relevant, and some districts may still be stuck in that old model of using a discrepancy formula and really struggling with having students who are clearly low-performing readers in need of support, but not getting intensive support because they don't have that discrepancy.

The MTSS model was not solely designed for this reason, but it's one of the factors that caused it to be conceptualized, and it's a piece that schools are not yet always using.

We touch on this in the book that all of that classroom-based, relevant, ongoing progress monitoring data that you're collecting as the student is getting more and more intensive support is what can also be used for making decisions about eligibility for special education services and about continued eligibility, so in that reevaluation context as well.

I'm just tagging onto that because it's a common confusion. It's a misunderstanding about MTSS. I still see some schools doing good, direct, curriculum-based assessments in the name of what they might call RTI, and then stopping all of that when they suspect a student has a disability and reverting back to the old IQ discrepancy formula.

Anna Geiger:

Like you said, Stephanie, the whole point of this MTSS model is to keep giving kids what they need, not to say, "Now you qualify for something else, so now we're done with you." That's not the point.

Sarah Brown:

Well, and it's not helpful for teachers either because if you suspect a disability, a student's been struggling for a long time. But now you have to take 60 days and the school psychologist, of which I'm one of, takes the child and does some tests that nobody else can give or can understand really. They come back and they're like, "Yep, there's a reading problem."

It's like, "We knew that!"

If you are, as Stephanie talked about, thinking about or dipping your toe into using these types of data in the work that you're doing around reading to identify students who are eligible, I can't recommend enough the book, *The RTI Approach to Evaluating Learning Disabilities* by Kovaleski, VanDerHeyden, and Shapiro. It's fantastic. It gives very explicit guidance and step-by-step pieces that answer a lot of questions that schools will get as they're digging into doing eligibility a little differently.

Anna Geiger:

What do schools need to know about the collaborative problem solving model when they're looking to implement MTSS? In the past, and probably still, there are some schools that just think hiring one person to kind of take this on is going to solve it. Of course, that's never going to work. You have teachers who

have been doing their own thing for a long time with their door shut and maybe aren't really interested in sharing their students.

There's just so much more to this than just having a meeting every once in a while, so what is this all about?

Sarah Brown:

Yeah, so we want to start by thinking about, what is the data that we have, and what does our school need right now? What do students in our school need? What do our resources look like?

The collaborative improvement cycle is really about collaborating as a team to identify needs, to identify our current gaps, and then to identify very specifically what might happen next, which is a lot of times the hard part, right? What's going to help is the hard part, and then putting that into action and seeing how it's working. That's the bigger, better deal.

I always call it fifth grade science. It's your science fair project: gap identification, analyze it, make a plan, and then look at the outcomes.

Again, though, schools are complex places, and it takes really a village and teams to be able to implement and correctly identify specifically what is the root cause of this? What is the right action to put in place now, and how can we align our system to take that action?

As an example, I could be a second grade teacher, and I get my screening data back. If I'm left on my own, I'm able to look at my screening data and see, "Oh, I have 10 students in my class who all have some needs. Look, it looks like they have different needs." It isn't uncommon for teachers to have 10 students in their class who have needs. "I have a couple who have fluency needs, and a few who have phonics needs at different levels. What am I going to do now?"

If I'm left on my own, like that's going to be really hard to be able to support all of that in ways that are really going to improve outcomes without a team and collaboration to help me.

There are a lot of pieces, right? There's not one right way for it to work, but it is really about taking a model that will allow you to look at your data systematically, make next steps decisions that make sense, then analyze those outcomes.

What we've tried to do... I'm a big fan of supporting educators through providing them with data protocols, and with resources to help. As part of this book, we've included, for each of those steps, grade-level team and building-level team resources to help them think about what are the questions we should be asking when, and what are some of the next steps we might take?

Stephanie Stollar:

I like your fifth grade science project analogy because it is that hypothesis testing, right? It's the hypothesis *generating* that's so complicated and hard in schools.

When I ask teachers, who are looking at their aggregate screening data, the percentage of students who are on track to be readers in the future... When I look at that data with teams and I say, "What are the reasons why you didn't improve the percent at benchmark across this school year?"

They all have a list of reasons why. Everybody has their hypothesis about why the outcomes are what they are, they're just not sharing those with each other. And they're not really collecting any data about which one of those hypotheses, which one of those challenges that they're facing, is the priority. Which is the one that if we change that, it would have a positive ripple effect on everything else in our school?

The teaming structures that facilitate this decision making are really important, and they're not happening often enough in schools. We don't have common planning time routinely. We don't have school leadership teams and district leadership teams that are talking about what we're talking about right here. They might have those teams, but they are not talking about these topics.

Our book, as Sarah said, is positioned to give people the tools, the meeting agendas, the templates, the little bit of shaping around what they might currently be doing, to make it a little bit more effective.

Anna Geiger:

Your book is especially useful for leaders because as a teacher here and there trying to do this, they're not going to be successful. It really requires the whole school, and that starts with a strong leader who's bought in.

The book is really excellent, like you said, for basically helping you figure out what to do with these meetings, because we know it involves meetings, but what are they for? What do we do? I like what you said about everybody has their own ideas, but they're just not sharing them. Maybe they are just here and there, but there's no structure for acting on those opinions.

You talked, Sarah, a little bit about how a teacher might see their screening data and see they've got a bunch of kids that are really scoring low below benchmark, and they might not know what to do. This might be a good transition to talking about potentially grouping students for foundational skill delivery across classrooms.

There is a lot of talk in the, I don't like to use this phrase, but “science of reading world movement” right now, even though we know that's not exactly what that means, but the space where people are working to implement the science of reading, that are really focusing on giving whole class lessons no matter what in foundational skills. Could you share your perspective on that?

Stephanie Stollar:

Yes, I am part of those conversations and sometimes people want to put me at an opposite end of the people who are advocating for whole class or whole group phonics and spelling instruction. I don't see it that way, so I appreciate this question and a chance to clarify it.

I don't have a preference, whole group or small group, or honestly, if I did have a preference, it would be whole group because that's a lot easier to pull off - a lot easier.

What I am inclined towards is results, and what I don't see is results when there are a wide range of student needs in a classroom or a grade, and all the students are getting is whole group instruction with maybe a little dose of Tier 2 intervention, 20 or 30 minutes, a couple of days a week. I don't see that working.

That's why I've become more vocal, I guess, about suggesting to people that all that work they did to determine what students need, put them in groups, deploy their personnel flexibly across the grade level… All that work they did, and they're defining it as Tier 2, what many people call WIN time or What I Need time, they are able to also do that during Tier 1.

So if they found out that, let's say, a second grade student still can't read CVC words automatically, why would they spend time in Tier 1 trying to teach vowel teams, which is a lot more complex and difficult pattern to that student? Why wouldn't they use that time teaching what the student needs in Tier 1 and give them a second dose of that during the intervention time as Tier 2 or Tier 3.

I suggest that schools look at their data at the beginning of the year. I suggest that they do it as a grade level, because as Sarah said, if you are an individual teacher with 10 students who are low performing at the beginning of the year screening, it would be overwhelming to think I now have to plan for five different small groups, and then I also have to manage what is the rest of the class doing while I'm with a small group. I'm not advocating for that. I don't think that that's an efficient use of anybody's time.

I'm also not advocating for tracking. This is not the bluebirds, redbirds, and crows, and once you're in a certain group, you're in that group forever and for every subject all day. That's not helpful.

I'm suggesting that teachers get together as a grade level, and not just classroom teachers, but everybody who serves that grade level or has a stake in the outcomes for that grade level. That could include special educators, paraeducators, the SLP, the school psych, reading interventionists, EL support staff, anybody who's serving that grade level.

Sit down as a team and look at the needs of the grade level, and then make a decision about what should our Tier 1 look like? Given this range of student skills that we've just uncovered during our screening process, how should we organize ourselves? What should we be teaching and how during Tier 1? That way Tier 1 is not this mechanical stick to a pacing guide, rigid use of some big box core program, but Tier 1 is actually customized to the needs of the students in each grade level.

Anna Geiger:

And I think going back to Sarah talking about schools doing assessment just because they were told to and checking the box. In the same way, we shouldn't think that Tier 1 is just checking the box. "Oh, I've given everybody this program, just like it says." It should be about giving them what they need, whether that's whole group or small group, but figuring out what do they need and what's going to get us there the fastest.

Also just to reiterate, and maybe you mentioned it, but I just want to repeat it, that if schools do choose to differentiate groups by skill for that primary teaching of the foundational skills, that's not the only dose that kids get during the day. They're getting the Tier 2 or potentially Tier 3 later because otherwise there's no chance of catching up, right? We're not trying to hold them back. We're trying to give them extra opportunities to catch up by giving them two doses of the same, hopefully the same program, lessons in a row.

Sarah Brown:

Only for phonics, phonemic awareness, and decoding skills. For the language comprehension piece, that would typically not be differentiated, not in separate groups.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, that differentiation is within a lesson. Anything else?

Stephanie Stollar:

Yeah, I've seen it work in the context where not very many students are low performing. This is not set in stone, but let's say no more than 20% of the students are determined to be at risk or struggling readers at the beginning of your screening, like a small proportion. I've seen it work well in that context to teach decoding and encoding whole group with a little bit of small group pre-teaching of the next day's

concept, skill, or lesson so that students can keep pace with that. I've seen that work really, really well, especially when it started in kindergarten.

I've also seen that not work well, and it tends to not work well in the context where more than 20% of students are at risk or struggling readers.

It's a decision based on scale and efficiency. When you get beyond a certain number of students who need something more, it's just not possible to meet their needs always in whole group.

The targeted, flexible, skill-based grouping allows you to get instruction to those students right exactly at what they need to learn next. It allows you to build multiple opportunities, more times each school day, targeted at what they need, so that they make accelerated progress and catch up faster.

In schools that I've seen implement that approach, by the end of first grade, every student can read at grade level. Then there's no need to do this kind of differentiation in second grade and beyond because everybody's able to read, to decode, and they're able to then access whole group phonics instruction in those upper grades.

Anna Geiger:

Thanks for clarifying that.

When we think about MTSS, some people might say, “We tried it. It didn't work,” or “Yeah, I've heard of that. It never works.” I've heard both of those things.

When people say MTSS isn't working, what might be at play, and how can schools continue to improve their model?

Sarah Brown:

We're going to sound like school psychs here, but use your data, and then empower your teachers. It can mean several things.

Here's what I see a lot of right now. I think typically people equate MTSS with interventions, but I'm going to start with Tier 1 because that's the foundation.

A lot of what I see in Tier 1 today is that we've spent a lot of time doing really great professional learning around the construct of science and reading and the pieces in that. We have not spent a lot of time making connections explicitly to the instructional materials that teachers should be given. Teachers are being given all of this professional learning, then they're given a new set of materials, and they're expected to figure it out themselves. All of us, when we learn something new, are connecting it to our background knowledge and what we always knew.

I'm in classrooms a lot, and that's the first thing I would suggest you do is get yourself in some classrooms and see what's going on. Because what I see a lot of is that instruction isn't aligned with the science of reading and the science of learning.

For instance, maybe they're teaching some phonics skills, but as they have students reading, when students get stuck, they say things like, “Try again,” and then students immediately move their eyes from print and start guessing words. But they don't say, “Let's sound it out together.” Or I see teachers trying to still talk about pictures in decoding practice and those types of things, things that make it less efficient, but also less effective for some of our learners. Aligning also with the science of learning is a huge piece. Those are Tier 1 needs that I see right now.

In intervention what I see, I can only narrow it down to four.

The first is that we're trying to count on our intervention systems to meet the needs of too many learners. You mentioned, a couple of times now, that we might hire somebody, say you're the RTI person, and now you're going to go in and fix this, right?

When our data is telling us that we have too many students who need intervention, then we need to go back to improving our Tier 1, looking at class-wide intervention. It's providing intervention, but to everybody. That's the first piece.

The second thing I see is that we're not targeting specific skill deficits in intervention. We're counting on our interventions to do everything. Teachers are pulling from a variety of programs or strategies because they've seen them work one time, they feel confident with it, it works for some students. They try to kind of do a mishmash, and what we're not doing is targeting any specific skill, like very specific skill deficits.

The third thing is very common. We just don't get implementation, and so it's really hard. This is the third time I've said schools are complex places. Schools are complex places, and so it's hard to do things. Interventionists get pulled to sub regularly. There are lots of reasons we can't do what we expected.

Finally, we're not able to give adequate dosage, which just means that students aren't getting enough intervention to actually close gaps. There are a lot of reasons that MTSS isn't effective.

If I can give schools two strategies for using their data right away. One is to start with Tier 1. Your very first grade level team meeting with your screening data, make it around Tier 1 needs, and then come back for a second meeting around intervention needs. Then you can start to really meet those whole group needs before you move in to individual students.

Then secondly, shift your progress meetings when you talk about how students are doing in intervention to be away from individual students, to the group of students that's receiving the same intervention. That way you can identify if six out of the eight students receiving this intervention aren't on track to meet their goals and aren't making adequate progress, we're not going to talk about each of these kids and what we should change about each of their interventions. We're going to talk about what's going on with this intervention as a whole. It's more efficient, it's more effective, and helps point schools in the right directions for next steps also to do that.

Those are two things that schools could do right away to think about what might be the best needs next for their MTSS.

Stephanie Stollar:

I'll just piggyback on that. In that specific meeting where they're getting together, it's the percentage of students who are on track or not on track. When they reconvene at the middle of year screening or end of year screening, that's the data point to look at. Have we increased the percentage of students who are on track? Have we gone from 40% to 60% to 85% by the end of the year? That's the evaluation of the effectiveness of Tier 1.

Then I love that you mentioned the evaluation at the aggregate level of those small group Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions, and I would extend that to students who are on IEPs. If no one is ever exiting special education, if no one is ever moving down the tiers from more intensive to less intensive support, then we might need to be evaluating our systems. It's not just about looking at individual students, but looking at our system of support.

MTSS is not a thing we do. It's a way we do everything. It's a way of thinking. It's a way of being. It's a way of operating in schools.

And it's not a one and done. This is not a flash in the pan initiative. It's not, "Well, this year we did MTSS, so next year we're going to do some other initiative." This is very difficult for leaders. It's difficult for teachers to understand that it's not about waiting out the administrator, and then this will go away when they leave.

This needs to become the way that we work together in schools. It's the way we approach and view every problem because the problems will keep coming. When we solve one, then there's the next one that we need to deal with.

That is not a flaw of your system. That is what happens when humans are working together. Don't expect that this is something you can do for three years, and then you're over it and put it aside. It's continuous improvement. I just wanted to emphasize that.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, and that requires a big paradigm shift for a lot of people who think of teaching as just you and your students closing the door. That's how I taught. But understanding this is a team effort, always. The students belong to all of us, and we work together to figure out how to serve them.

Sarah Brown:

And it should make educators' lives better. It really should. It should make everybody in the school feel more supported and feel like they can be more successful, which is what we all want. That's the goal, right? That's why we tried to provide a lot of tools within this book to specifically to give educators and teams and leaders the resources they need to make MTSS effective for them and their students.

Anna Geiger:

I'm excited that you wrote it, and then we'll be sharing this in the show notes. Also, there might be opportunities this summer for book studies. I think at least one Reading League is doing it. Do you have anything to share about that?

Stephanie Stollar:

Yes, the state chapter system of The Reading League is offering a book study on our book this summer. The kickoff is June 18th. Sarah and I will be available through that book study to address questions that people have, and then the sessions are also recorded so people can access the content afterwards. Yes, we can put a link for people to sign up in the show notes.

Anna Geiger:

This will be coming out very soon after we give this interview, later in May, so there will be plenty of time to look into that and become part of that.

Thank you so much, and I look forward to talking to you again!

Stephanie Stollar:

Thanks, Anna.

Sarah Brown:

Thank you!

Anna Geiger:

You can find the show notes for this episode at reachallreaders.com/episode214. Talk to you next time!

Closing:

That's all for this episode of Triple R Teaching. For more educational resources, visit Anna at her home base, reachallreaders.com, and join our teaching community. We look forward to helping you reflect, refine, and recharge on the next episode of Triple R Teaching.