

Accelerated Learning with a Whole Child Perspective

Accelerated learning relies on the intersection between academic rigor and a whole child perspective that promotes the health, safety, and wellness of students. This will be especially important as we move from a worldwide pandemic to a new, better normal.

Conditions that enable accelerated learning include supportive relationships, safe environments, and culturally responsive activities. The combination of academic and non-academic content will support the pace, engagement, and rigor required for accelerated learning. Educators who adopt an accelerated learning mindset will promote conditions that make rigorous education possible: social and emotional learning (SEL), Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), and access to mental health services. These practices are sustained within a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) infrastructure and are critical supports that help children thrive.

School-based mental health services are most effective when enhanced with solid Tier 1 supports such as SEL and PBIS. Without care and deliberation, accelerated learning could result in the unintended consequences of hurrying the pace of lessons, abbreviating essential elements, or losing a core component of an instructional practice.

The actual work of building SEL skills and shaping positive behavior takes time. As with any attempt to deepen learning and build proficiency, it is an iterative process that entails practice and feedback as positive behaviors progress. Adults and students alike benefit from developing and using these SEL skills to maximize a culturally responsive and positive learning environment. Adult behavior plays an important role in ensuring SEL skills are not only modeled for students but supported and practiced in the classroom.

Non-academic strategies to boost instruction

Teach Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

Accelerated learning research makes explicit connections to the need for SEL. SEL can promote a student's sense of belonging, caring teacher relationships, and authentic partnerships with parents.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the alarming incidents of racial discriminations and violence have heightened the need for SEL. Through SEL in an MTSS Tier 1 approach, students develop skills to

What is Accelerated Learning?

Too often students with perceived academic gaps are put into remediation classes. Their access to grade-level content is delayed until all their academic gaps are filled. Research has shown again and again that this does not work (Rollins, 2014). Instead, learning should be accelerated. Accelerated learning keeps students moving forward on their intended grade-level trajectories by strategically preparing them for success in current grade-level content.

Acceleration prepares students for new learning combined with "just-in-time" teaching of missing key skills and concepts in the purposeful context of current lessons.

Opportunities to accelerate learning rely on robust Tier 1 instruction that includes grade-appropriate assignments, strong instruction, deep engagement, and teachers who hold high expectations for students. This robust instruction should be enhanced with supports targeted to the skills and services students need to stay on grade level.

identify feelings, manage emotions, build healthy relationships, and make responsible decisions. According to the Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), "Social and emotional learning (SEL) is an integral part of education and human development. SEL is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals. SEL instruction guides children to feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions." When SEL is implemented in schools systematically and with fidelity, children make learning gains. On average, both academic achievement and positive social behavior indicators improve by eleven percentage points. Conversely, conduct problems and emotional distress decrease by ten percentage points, on average.¹ These improvements are good news and indicate the potential to improve a child's emotional condition. Educators should focus on instilling, enabling, and improving a student's ability to become self-aware (recognize their emotions), self-manage (regulate their feelings), and make responsible decisions that can help support their mental well-being. Furthermore, SEL builds social awareness skills to engage in positive relationships, even with people who may be different than them. CASEL has updated its five SEL competencies to assure that social awareness skill building is culturally sustaining and supports a child's identity, belonging, and agency.

Implement Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS)

Accelerated learning research recommends safety, routines, cooperation between staff and students, and student engagement.

[PBIS is a research-based, multi-tiered framework](#) that, when implemented, allows educators to create effective educational environments that are positive, predictable, and safe. One of the main components of Tier 1 PBIS is the identification of positive behavior expectations. Students are taught these behaviors by using examples to illustrate the appropriate behavior and contrasting with non-examples to help students better understand what appropriate behavior does not look like (Carter & Pool, 2012).

Additionally, students are provided with specific feedback regarding these behavior expectations (Goodman & Peshak, George, 2020). There are more than 29,000 schools in the United States that are currently implementing PBIS; in Michigan, more than 915 schools are implementing PBIS.

Implementation of schoolwide positive behavior support leads to:

- Increased academic time and enhanced academic outcomes (Horner et al., 2009)
- Improved social skills (Barrett, Bradshaw, & Lewis-Palmer, 2008)
- Increased attendance (Freeman et al., 2016)
- Improved social-emotional skills for students (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, & Leaf, 2015)
- Improved academic outcomes (Gage et al., 2018)

Adopt a Mindset of Mental Health for All

Accelerated learning research recommends supporting student mental health.

School mental health services are essential to creating and sustaining safe school environments. Increased access to mental health services and supports in schools is vital to improving students' physical and psychological safety, as well as academic performance and problem-solving skills. School mental health supports that encompass social-emotional learning, mental wellness, resilience, and positive connections between students and adults are essential to creating a school culture in which students feel safe and empowered. In these supportive settings, students feel empowered to report safety concerns, which is proven to be among the most effective school safety strategies. Additionally, in the aftermath of a crisis, such as a global pandemic, school-employed mental health professionals provide supports that facilitate a return to normalcy, are sustainable, and help identify students who may have more intense or ongoing needs.

Collaboration between school staff and community providers is also critical to offering an entire continuum of mental health services. Typically, community providers offer supplementary and intensive services that go beyond school capacities. A Multi-Tiered System of Supports approach facilitates effective collaboration while ensuring that school services are suitable to the learning context.² Further, supports and services provided after school hours are appropriately linked to, and supported in, the school setting. Partnerships are most effective when coordinated by school-based mental health professionals, defined by clear memoranda of understanding, and supported with an appreciation for each group's unique contribution to create a seamless and comprehensive service delivery. This approach reduces gaps and redundancy and alleviates stress on families. These services support parents in their roles as primary caregivers and decision-makers regarding their child's development and well-being.

Build a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) that Integrates the Academic and Non-Academic Needs of Learners

Accelerated learning studies point to strong Tier 1 instruction, research-based interventions, ongoing formative assessment of learning gaps, and structures that help teachers verify learning.

The Michigan Department of Education (MDE) defines MTSS as "a comprehensive framework comprised of a collection of research-based strategies designed to meet the individual needs and assets of the whole child at all achievement levels. [MTSS intentionally interconnects the education, health, and human service systems in support of learners, schools, centers, and community outcomes.](#)" This framework helps to join these various initiatives into a comprehensive systemic approach for educators.

Resources to integrate academic and non-academic needs of learners in the implementation of MTSS can be found on the [MiMTSS TA Center website](#).

MTSS and SEL

CASEL states that academic and behavioral functioning are intertwined. MTSS is a systemic approach designed to identify and coordinate evidence-based interventions. [SEL programs and approaches are often seen as an essential component of universal approaches within MTSS because they promote positive academic and behavioral outcomes in all students.](#)

MTSS and PBIS

Research has demonstrated a strong link between social, emotional, and behavioral wellness and academics (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). This relationship increases during the student's schooling, and the connection appears most substantial between literacy and externalizing behaviors. Students who face both academic and behavior challenges tend to experience the most difficulties. Students with high levels of risk for externalizing behaviors are more likely to have lower reading scores, more nurse visits, and more days spent in in-school suspension than their peers (Lane et al., 2018).

MTSS and Children's Mental Health

According to the [National Association of School Psychologists](#), "MTSS provides a continuum of school mental health services critical to effectively addressing the breadth of students' emotional needs. Comprehensive mental health services are most effective when provided through an MTSS structure by school-employed mental health professionals. MTSS encompasses the continuum of need, enabling schools to promote mental wellness for all students, identify and address problems before they escalate or become chronic, and provide increasingly intensive, data-driven services for individual students as needed. Access to adequate staffing of school-employed mental health professionals is essential to these services' quality and effectiveness."

Putting it All Together

In their brief, [The Learning Contract Renewed, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development \(ASCD 2007\)](#) authors state, "If we concentrate solely on academics and on narrowly measured academic achievement, we fail to educate the whole child. We shortchange our young people and limit their future if we do not create places of learning that encourage and celebrate every aspect of each student's capacity for learning. We can do more, and we can do better." The Michigan MTSS Practice Profile provides a connection between academic and non-academic strategies through the core features of:

1. Team-Based Leadership
2. Tiered Delivery System
3. Selection and Implementation of Instruction, Interventions, and Supports
4. Comprehensive Screening & Assessment System
5. Continuous Data-Based Decision Making.

While the need for SEL for Michigan's children was important prior to the pandemic, it is now even more critical as children, teachers, and families recover from the interruption that resulted from COVID, racial and ethnic disparities, and social injustice. Rather than add new surface level features to learning plans, guidance from experts in the areas of SEL, PBIS, school-based mental health, and MTSS recommends strengthening the core features of what works. This deepening of proven strategies would mean beginning class with a check-in routine; monitoring for the fidelity of PBIS; reviewing closely requests for assistance, patterns of anxiety, and depression-type symptoms; and maintaining the core features of MTSS.

All the above practices mirror the acceleration literature suggestions. Resources for practical ways to embed these initiatives into the learning environment are available on the MDE website, and additional materials on integrating these practices are forthcoming.

Citations

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2. Mulcahy, C., Krezmien, M., & Travers, J. (2016). Improving mathematics performance among secondary students with EBD: A methodological review. *Remedial and Special Education, 37*, 113-128.

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