

# The Professional Counselor

Fall  
2016

*Special Issue*

## School Counselors and a Multi-Tiered System of Supports:

Cultivating Systemic  
Change and Equitable  
Outcomes



NATIONAL BOARD FOR  
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*Digest*  
Volume 6, Issue 3



1

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



4

## Needs and Contradictions of a Changing Field: Evidence From a National Response to Intervention Implementation Study



10

## A Grant Project to Initiate School Counselors' Development of a Multi-Tier System of Supports Based on Social-Emotional Data

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## Table of Contents

Volume 6, Issue 3  
*Special Issue*

- 1 **Incorporating a Multi-Tiered System of Supports Into School Counselor Preparation**  
Christopher A. Sink
- 2 **Integrating a Multi-Tiered System of Supports With Comprehensive School Counseling Programs**  
Jolie Ziomek-Daigle, Emily Goodman-Scott, Jason Cavin, Peg Donohue
- 4 **Needs and Contradictions of a Changing Field: Evidence From a National Response to Intervention Implementation Study**  
Eva Patrikakou, Melissa S. Ockerman, Amy Feiker Hollenbeck
- 6 **The ASCA Model and a Multi-Tiered System of Supports: A Framework to Support Students of Color With Problem Behavior**  
Christopher T. Belser, M. Ann Shillingford, J. Richelle Joe
- 8 **Success For All? The Role of the School Counselor in Creating and Sustaining Culturally-Responsive Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports Programs**  
Jennifer Betters-Bubon, Todd Brunner, Avery Kansteiner
- 10 **A Grant Project to Initiate School Counselors' Development of a Multi-Tier System of Supports Based on Social-Emotional Data**  
Karen Harrington, Catherine Griffith, Katharine Gray, Scott Greenspan

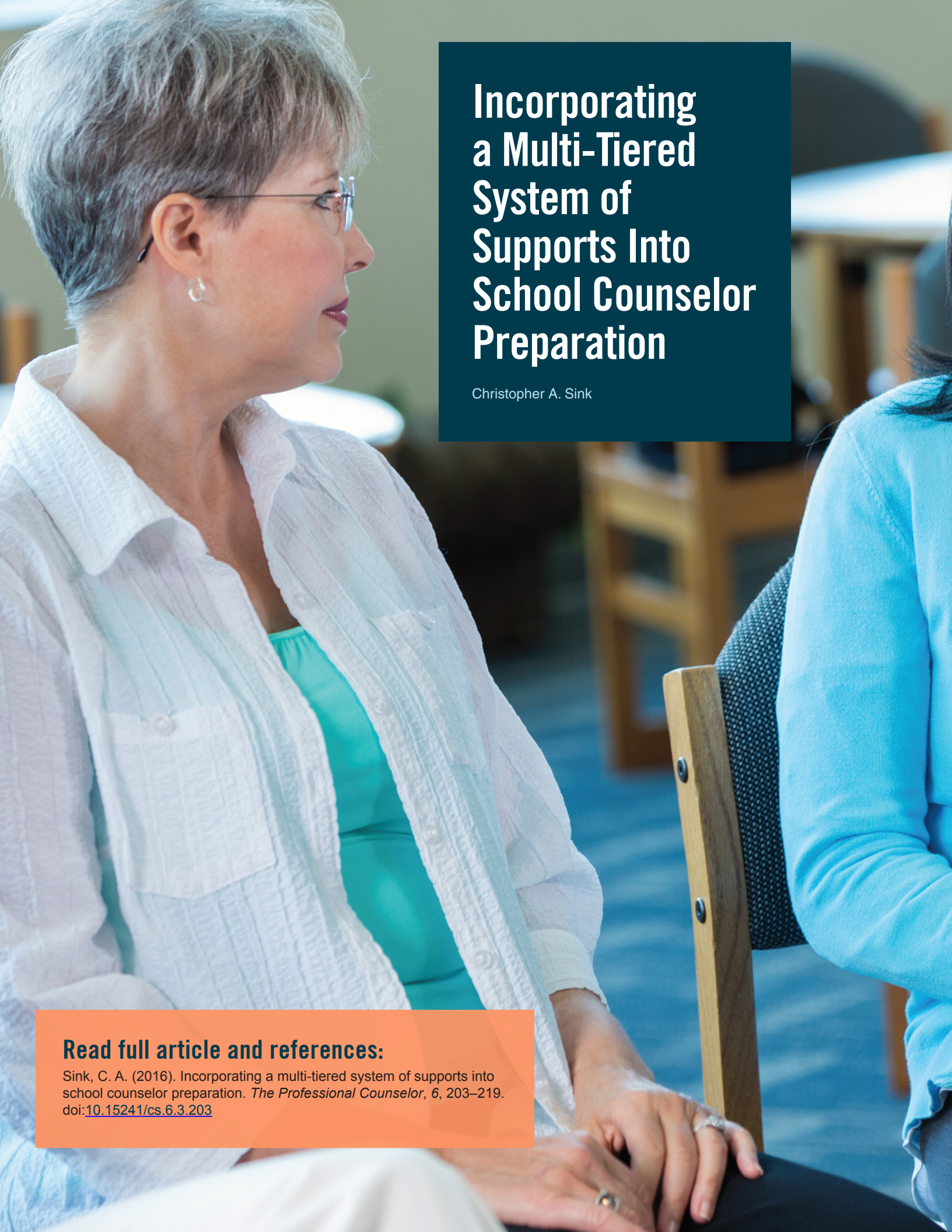


*the team*

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

Christopher A. Sink

## Read full article and references:

Sink, C. A. (2016). Incorporating a multi-tiered system of supports into school counselor preparation. *The Professional Counselor*, 6, 203–219. doi:[10.15241/cs.6.3.203](https://doi.org/10.15241/cs.6.3.203)





A multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) is now a pervasive educational program in American PreK–12 schools. In brief, these programs are holistic frameworks designed to more effectively serve all children and youth by improving their academic, behavioral and social-emotional functioning. Applied in a three tier system, MTSS models initially attempt to assist struggling students in their regular education classrooms (Tier 1). If these learners continue to exhibit substantial deficits following low-intensive interventions, students may then receive more concentrated services (Tier 2) in the regular education classroom and perhaps in special learning milieus. In most cases, only students with severe learning and behavioral challenges (high-risk students) are provided the most intensive Tier 3 interventions and services. Tier 3 programming tends to be conducted in special learning environments tailored to students' particular issues. Pupils at Tier 3 may also be referred to mental health clinics or other highly individualized programs better equipped to provide the requisite support services. MTSS programs are currently operationalized by two relatively similar research-based, systemic frameworks: Positive Behavioral Supports and Responses (PBIS) and Response to Intervention (RtI). Both use a three tier system of graduated interventions for students with learning or behavioral challenges.

School-based counselors are faced with an ever-increasing list of responsibilities. This inventory now includes MTSS collaboration with pertinent staff and faculty. In fact, the American School Counselor Association's School Counselor Competencies, the 2016 Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) Standards for School Counselors, and the American School Counselor Association National Model provide guidelines for doing so. Research suggests, however, that school-based counseling professionals are ill-equipped to successfully handle the complex responsibilities associated with this difficult work. It is therefore essential that graduate-level counselor education programs provide more intentional training on MTSS roles and functions. Pre-service counselors should be well-educated on MTSS theory, research and best practice.

Specific recommendations for school counselor preparation programs to retool their MTSS curriculum and pedagogy are summarized here. First, counselor educators should conduct a program audit, looking for MTSS curricular and instructional gaps in their current school counseling preparation courses. For example, a curriculum map could be used to uncover MTSS content deficiencies. Second, the various options for revising the educational program should be considered. Graduate programs could develop a separate counseling-based MTSS course or supplement existing classes and their content. Next, specific MTSS content and allied skills should be well understood. Fundamental MTSS content areas should be carefully aligned with current school counselor roles and functions. The final step requires counselor educators to update their course syllabi incorporating desired MTSS curricular modifications and use effective teaching methods to deliver the course material. It is recommended that counselor educators design their MTSS courses using a spiral curriculum and their pedagogy include a variety of efficacious methods (e.g., direct instruction for learning foundational materials and student-centered approaches for the application, including case studies and problem-based learning).

In conclusion, K–12 school counselors must continue to be responsive to societal changes and educational reforms. Such restructurings necessitate that university-level counselor preparation programs continue to be malleable and receptive to new research-based educational models, theories and practices. Because schools have instituted MTSS as a way to better serve all students with their academic and social and emotional problems, pre-service counselor education programs should in turn revise their curriculum and instruction to meet this growing need. A number of useful refinements are suggested.

*Christopher A. Sink, NCC, is a Professor at Old Dominion University. Correspondence can be addressed to Christopher Sink, Darden College of Education, 5115 Hampton Blvd, Norfolk, VA 23529, [csink@odu.edu](mailto:csink@odu.edu).*



# Integrating a Multi-Tiered System of Supports With Comprehensive School Counseling Programs

Jolie Ziomek-Daigle, Emily Goodman-Scott, Jason Cavin, Peg Donohue

A multi-tiered system of supports, including Response to Intervention (RTI) and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), has been embedded in many public schools for the last decade. Specifically, this data-driven framework promotes positive student academic and behavioral outcomes, as well as safe and favorable school climates. School counselors design and implement comprehensive school counseling programs that promote students' academic, career and social/emotional success, as well as equitable student outcomes and systemic changes. As school leaders, school counselors should understand a multi-tiered system of supports and play a leadership role in the development and implementation of such a framework.

School counseling interventions using tiered approaches, such as universal instruction via classroom guidance programming and subsequent small group follow-up, have increased student achievement and motivation. Positive behavior support strategies, which can be designed for students with behavioral issues in classrooms or at home, can be taught to teachers and parents for children who need more individualized support and monitoring. Additionally, school counselors have been identified as integral members to RTI teams by using behavioral observations to determine the effectiveness of responsive services. While in PBIS leadership roles, school counselors have demonstrated collaboration and consultation with stakeholders, contributed to a safe school environment and schoolwide systems of reinforcement, utilized student outcome data, implemented universal screening, facilitated PBIS-specific bullying prevention and conducted small group interventions.

Behavioral RTI and PBIS, although similar in their focus on schoolwide behaviors within a three-tiered framework, are remarkably different. First, all students are exposed to behavioral RTI, but only students who attend schools implementing PBIS receive the behavioral supports of the latter. On the other hand, PBIS, a manualized approach, requires a specific evaluation process and ongoing training. PBIS fidelity is necessary for successful implementation and requires ongoing data collection and analysis. The behavioral RTI approach allows schools to design and develop their own frameworks in a contextual manner to best support their students, and the method and training for implementation remains flexible. School counselors can be active in both RTI and PBIS implementation in their schools as several of these roles overlap with comprehensive school counseling programs.

School counselors are crucial in students' learning and social development and are invested in early intervention, which is at the root of any comprehensive school counseling program. A multi-tiered system of supports aligns with the ASCA National Model's chief inputs of advocacy, collaboration, systemic change, prevention, intervention and the use of data. Thus, both the ASCA National Model and a multi-tiered system are inherently connected given their overlapping foci.

Aligning both frameworks may be a strategy to advocate at local and national levels for the school counseling field and comprehensive school counseling program implementation. Presenting school counseling programs in this manner also can increase stakeholder involvement, access additional resources and increase job stability. Focusing on the overlap between a multi-tiered system of supports and comprehensive school counseling programs leads to a data-driven, evidence-based focus on improving school climate, as well as student equity, access, and academic and behavioral success, meeting the needs of students across all three tiers.

*Jolie Ziomek-Daigle is an Associate Professor at the University of Georgia. Emily Goodman-Scott, NCC, is an Assistant Professor at Old Dominion University. Jason Cavin is the Director of Behavior Support and Consultation at the School of Public Health at Georgia State University and a doctoral candidate at the University of Georgia. Peg Donohue is an Assistant Professor at Central Connecticut State University. Correspondence can be addressed to Jolie Ziomek-Daigle, 402 Aderhold Hall, Athens, GA 30602, [jdaigle@uga.edu](mailto:jdaigle@uga.edu).*





### Read full article and references:

Ziomek-Daigle, J., Goodman-Scott, E., Cavin, J., & Donohue, P. (2016). Integrating a multi-tiered system of supports with comprehensive school counseling programs. *The Professional Counselor*, 6, 220–232. doi:[10.15241/jzd.6.3.220](https://doi.org/10.15241/jzd.6.3.220)



# Needs and Contradictions of a Changing Field

## Evidence From a National Response to Intervention Implementation Study

Eva Patrikakou, Melissa S. Ockerman, Amy Feiker Hollenbeck





An increasing number of states have mandated the implementation of a multi-tiered system of supports, such as Response to Intervention (RTI), as a central or ancillary component in the identification of learning disabilities. However, little is known regarding school counselor preparedness and perceptions of RTI. The present study examined how school counselors across the nation perceived their training and knowledge of RTI, as well as their confidence in its implementation, guided by the following questions:

1. What are school counselors' beliefs regarding RTI?
2. How prepared do school counselors feel regarding their training on the various implementation aspects of RTI?
3. What roles and responsibilities of school counselors changed due to the RTI implementation?
4. Is attitude toward RTI predicted by factors including demographics, as well as perceived confidence with various aspects of RTI?

Members of the American School Counselors Association (ASCA) were randomly selected from states that implemented RTI fully or partly at the time of data collection. Participants in this study completed an online survey (N = 528), with the purpose of illuminating their participation in RTI, as well as underlying beliefs and attitudes. Survey items were comprised of five parts, including demographics; training; perceived preparedness; beliefs, responsibilities and practices in relation to RTI. The survey underwent a piloting phase to address construct and content validity prior to being utilized in research studies.

Results indicated that while the majority of school counselors reported positive beliefs about RTI (e.g., 75% of participants agreed/strongly agreed that RTI is the best option to support struggling learners), they had limited confidence in their preparedness to perform certain RTI-related responsibilities, including utilizing schoolwide data management systems, and collecting and analyzing data to determine effectiveness of interventions (36% and 42%, respectively, reported adequate or expert preparation). Furthermore, the top two roles and responsibilities for which respondents reported increased involvement included collaborating with colleagues as part of an RTI team (52%) and in data collection and/or data management in support of RTI (41%). School counselors were most likely to view RTI as a means of positively impacting academic and behavioral outcomes for all students when they (a) had leaders who were knowledgeable and positive about RTI; and (b) were clear about their own roles and responsibilities, as well as the anticipated benefits of the model.

Results of this study point to significant areas of opportunity for school counselors and counselor educators. The school counselor is uniquely poised to lead with a vision of creating culturally relevant and evidence-based interventions aimed at reducing the achievement gap. Thus, major educational reforms, such as RTI, can serve as a catalyst for improved practice and increased role clarification. To that end, additional pre-service and in-service education to assist school counselors in making informed, culturally responsive decisions to support academic, social and emotional learning for all students is recommended. Coursework and professional development should focus on fostering data management, leadership and team-building skills. Politically aware and comprehensively trained school counselors can leverage such educational mandates to access necessary resources and become the innovators and path-chartors of their profession.

*Eva Patrikakou is an Associate Professor at DePaul University. Melissa S. Ockerman is an Associate Professor at DePaul University. Amy Feiker Hollenbeck is an Associate Professor at DePaul University. Correspondence can be addressed to Eva Patrikakou, DePaul University, 2247 North Halsted Street, Chicago, IL 60614-3624, epatrika@depaul.edu.*

### **Read full article and references:**

Patrikakou, E., Ockerman, M. S., & Hollenbeck, A. F. (2016). Needs and contradictions of a changing field: Evidence from a national response to intervention implementation study. *The Professional Counselor*, 6, 233-250. doi:[10.15241/ep.6.3.233](https://doi.org/10.15241/ep.6.3.233)



# The ASCA Model and a Multi-Tiered System of Supports

## A Framework to Support Students of Color With Problem Behavior

Christopher T. Belser, M. Ann Shillingford, J. Richelle Joe

An analysis of recent education outcome data has shown that students of color in the United States have lower graduation rates, are overrepresented in exceptional education programming and face suspension and expulsion from school at higher rates. Many educators and researchers blame these outcomes on zero tolerance discipline policies that result in students of color being removed from class at a higher rate. A multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) and the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model have both been offered as strategies that can be used to make positive changes for these students. This article provides a description of how these two frameworks can be used in conjunction to support students of color with problem behavior.

Two primary commonalities add to the ease of linking MTSS programs and the ASCA National Model. With both, data drives the planning and decision-making process. Data is collected and analyzed in the beginning to identify strengths, areas for opportunity and at-risk students. The school counselor can periodically collect data throughout the school year to determine which students are benefitting and not benefitting from interventions. Using data provides a method of making decisions that accounts for all students and that is less subject to bias.

Another commonality is that both frameworks account for all students. MTSS programs begin with screening all students in order to place them in one of three tiers based on their level of need; the lowest tier provides more generalized prevention-oriented programming, whereas the most intensive tier involves individualized services targeting specific areas of need. Similarly, the ASCA National Model breaks school counselor programming into classroom lessons, small group interventions and individual student planning, which correlate to the three tiers of the MTSS framework. In both, all students can be served by at least one of the levels of care.

Synthesizing the two frameworks together is a systematic process. As with other programming in education, this process begins with developing a team who will be in charge of planning, carrying out and evaluating the services provided. The next step involves collecting data on all students in the school, which is referred to as universal screening. The planning team can use this data to determine which tier students fall in, which helps with planning services. The article provides a more detailed description of each tier, what services may be appropriate at that level and how the planning team can monitor progress. The final step is to evaluate the process and make plans for subsequent school years.

This process provides an avenue for school counselors to be advocates for students by providing services for students who need them and students who are at risk of negative educational outcomes. Additionally, school counselors can be leaders and agents of change within their schools. Enacting data-driven services that are sensitive to the needs of students of color can intervene with the common negative outcomes that these students face and provide a more objective and equitable strategy for educating all students.

*Christopher T. Belser, NCC, is a doctoral candidate at the University of Central Florida. M. Ann Shillingford is an Associate Professor at the University of Central Florida. J. Richelle Joe, NCC, is an Assistant Professor at the University of Central Florida. Correspondence can be addressed to Christopher Belser, 231B Mathematical Sciences Building, University of Central Florida, Orlando, FL 32816, [christopher.belser@ucf.edu](mailto:christopher.belser@ucf.edu).*

### Read full article and references:

Belser, C. T., Shillingford, M. A., & Joe, J. R. (2016). The ASCA model and a multi-tiered system of supports: A framework to support students of color with problem behavior. *The Professional Counselor*, 6, 251–262. doi:[10.15241/cb.6.3.251](https://doi.org/10.15241/cb.6.3.251)











# Success For All? The Role of the School Counselor in Creating and Sustaining Culturally-Responsive Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports Programs

Jennifer Betters-Bubon, Todd Brunner, Avery Kansteiner

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is an educational program initiative that has great promise in helping schools promote positive behavior and engaged students. Grounded in the theory of applied behavior analysis, PBIS includes the application of a tiered system of supports to change and improve behavior among students. The primary level (Tier 1) includes establishing preventative systems of support, including forming schoolwide expectations and monitoring student behavioral data. The secondary level (Tier 2) includes the use of systematic and intensive behavior strategies for at-risk students, while the tertiary level (Tier 3) incorporates wraparound interventions for youth and families in crisis. The question remains as to whether PBIS programs provide the same level of success for students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

School counselors with extensive training in data-informed student intervention and school-level systemic change can play integral roles in PBIS implementation and can serve as leaders in the process. With knowledge of cultural diversity and data-focused interventions to close the achievement gap, school counselors are poised to ensure that these programs are implemented in ways that combat disproportionality. This article extends existing research on culturally responsive PBIS by examining longitudinal data from one elementary school that intentionally engaged in cultural responsive practices within PBIS implementation, highlighting the leadership role of the school counselor.

This article uses a participatory action research framework and focuses on one elementary school (grades K–5) located in a suburb of a mid-sized Midwestern town from 2009–2014. Because action research includes a planning and reflective process that is linked to action, the article includes a description of PBIS planning and action stages along with the reflective process that was involved in culturally responsive PBIS implementation. The results reflect research that shows that PBIS is best implemented when considering the specific context of the school and needs of students and families. Staff found that the intentional work was needed to implement culturally responsive PBIS because, while implementation led to fewer behavioral reports for students from Hispanic backgrounds, a disproportionate number of African American students received behavioral reports, even after PBIS implementation. The case study discusses potential reasons and solutions related to these findings.

With much at stake at the national, district, school and individual levels, school counselors can play a critical role in ensuring PBIS programs are implemented with fidelity and in culturally responsive ways. School counselors can use their knowledge and recommendations to reduce this very real problem of disproportionality in discipline practices, including implementing culturally responsive PBIS, disaggregating data and implementing accountability policies focused on discipline equity. While it is important to note that culture and context must be considered when planning, developing and teaching important PBIS concepts, it is equally important to go beyond the examination of disaggregated data to include conversations around equity, access and success for all.

*Jennifer Betters-Bubon is an Assistant Professor at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. Todd Brunner is the Principal and Avery Kansteiner is a School Counselor at Sugar Creek Elementary School in Verona, WI. Correspondence can be addressed to Jennifer Betters-Bubon, 6039 Winther Hall, Whitewater, WI 53190, [bettersj@uww.edu](mailto:bettersj@uww.edu).*

## Read full article and references:

Betters-Bubon, J., Brunner, T., & Kansteiner, A. (2016). Success for all? The role of the school counselor in creating and sustaining culturally responsive positive behavior interventions and supports programs. *The Professional Counselor*, 6, 263–277. doi:[10.15241/jbb.6.3.263](https://doi.org/10.15241/jbb.6.3.263)



# A Grant Project to Initiate School Counselors' Development of a Multi-Tier System of Supports Based on Social-Emotional Data

Melissa J. Fickling



School counselors promote positive social-emotional, behavioral and academic skills for students. Their role has much promise in strengthening school-based data teams and, in turn, informing effective interventions. This article highlights this promise by providing an overview of the implementation of a 3-year grant-funded elementary school counseling project within an urban-suburban district in the Northeast region of the United States.

The project included four overarching initiatives: (1) hiring school counselors, (2) reducing the number of disciplinary infractions, (3) establishing an empirically-supported set of social-emotional indices, and (4) incorporating social-emotional data into the district's existing data collection mechanisms. Data-informed decision making, a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS), and a strong leadership team, which included school district leadership as well as outside consultants and grant experts, set a foundational backdrop to this program.

The leadership team developed a robust system of strengths-based measures grounded in research, which suggests that motivation, self-knowledge, self-direction and relationships are key constructs in promoting positive development. Strongly informed by these constructs, the authors developed *The Protective Factors Index (PFI)*, a standards-based modality of assessing students' social-emotional gains. PFI rankings were completed by teachers for students' tri-annual report cards and were recorded in the student information system alongside academic achievement data. To better understand the nature and frequency of behavioral issues in the building, the leadership team created enhanced office discipline referral (ODR) forms and also integrated these behavioral data into the student information system.

Incorporating social-emotional data into the school's established data collection infrastructure relieved counselors of the task of gathering their own data through needs assessments or pre- and posttests. The school counselors could easily access real-time data to identify gaps in social-emotional competencies, choose interventions to address the individual student or building-wide issues, and monitor subsequent PFI and behavioral data to continuously evaluate the impact of the interventions. To address universal needs, school counselors offered weekly classroom lessons guided by social-emotional domains in need of improvement. Secondary tier interventions included targeted group counseling sessions with membership and continued participation

determined by PFI data. Tertiary tier interventions included behavior improvement plans for students in need of intensive behavioral support in the classroom as well as coordination with special education and other mental health professionals when necessary.

Expanding the range of data collected in the school also broadened the scope of data team discussions. School counselors became members of these teams and introduced PFI data through colorful graphs illustrating such issues as students' level of motivation or ability to self-regulate. Data teams began to link PFI data with achievement data to examine the relationships between academic struggles and social emotional issues. A multi-tiered system of supports was established to determine which universal, targeted, or intensive intervention would promote the development of academic competencies as well as the protective factors to support school success for every student.

*Karen Harrington is the Assistant Director at the Center for Youth Engagement at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Catherine Griffith is Associate Director at the Ronald H. Fredrickson Center for School Counseling Outcome Research and Evaluation and Assistant Professor at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Katharine Gray is a leadership coach at Unique Potential Consulting and Leadership Coaching in Hopkinton, MA. Scott Greenspan is a doctoral student at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Correspondence can be addressed to Karen Harrington, Furcolo Hall, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA 01003, Karen.harrington07@gmail.com.*

## Read full article and references:

Harrington, K., Griffith, C., Gray, K., & Greenspan, S. (2016). A grant project to initiate school counselors' development of a multi-tiered system of supports based on social-emotional data. *The Professional Counselor, 6*, 278–294. doi:[10.15241/kh.6.3.278](https://doi.org/10.15241/kh.6.3.278)







# The Professional Counselor

Fall  
2016

*The Professional Counselor DIGEST* is an abbreviated version of the journal, *The Professional Counselor*, intended for the general public. The National Board for Certified Counselors, Inc. and Affiliates publishes *The Professional Counselor* and *The Professional Counselor DIGEST*.

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