

Using assessments to support an MTSS framework

May 2024



The Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) recommends the use of a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) to better support Years 7 to 9 students struggling with foundational literacy and numeracy skills. If you're unfamiliar with the MTSS framework, we recommend starting with AERO's [Introduction to a Multi-Tiered System of Supports](#) explainer.

This practice guide is an introductory document aimed at helping secondary school leaders understand the different assessments needed in an MTSS framework. It draws on a [review of evidence-based approaches for supporting students who are struggling](#) conducted by Monash University, as well as [guidance developed in partnership with the Dyslexia-SPELD Foundation \(DSF\)](#). With the support of experts, [including teachers and leaders](#), we have collated and extrapolated from the most rigorous and relevant evidence available, to identify the best strategies for supporting secondary school students struggling with foundational literacy and numeracy skills.

The importance of assessments in an MTSS framework

Using assessments to make decisions is an essential component of the MTSS model.

Three main sources of assessment data inform instruction and intervention within an MTSS framework:

- **universal screening** (domain-specific assessments delivered to a whole cohort)
- **diagnostic assessment** (more targeted assessments used to identify skill gaps)
- **progress monitoring** (short evaluations of student response to instruction and intervention).

Administering **universal screening** early (and at regular intervals throughout schooling) enables identification of students who need additional support. Following this up with **diagnostic assessments** for students who need additional support helps to align intervention to the skill gaps identified. **Monitoring progress** helps to evaluate if interventions are effective and provides evidence to determine whether the intervention should continue, be modified, be gradually faded out or be removed.

It's important for school leaders to consider the validity, reliability and overall technical adequacy of screening and progress monitoring tools before using them in their school. To explore the types of assessments used specifically for reading, look at:

- [Choosing Reading Assessments in MTSS](#)
- [Example Reading Assessment Tools in MTSS](#).

Universal screening

Universal screening assessments provide objective data about the reading skills of a student population. They're usually administered at the beginning of the school year or upon entry to a school as a new student. Universal screening assessments compare a student's results to the level expected for their age and grade.

Using robust universal screening assessments at Tier 1 provides teachers with a clear indication of which students across a whole cohort may need additional literacy and numeracy intervention. This type of screening differs from an ad hoc approach, which may delay the identification of students who need help, risking them falling further behind and disengaging from their schooling.

'A team of teachers and leaders conducts screening twice yearly, and the information is then shared and analysed through a whole-school approach to professional learning communities.'

—Megan Landbeck, Deputy Principal, Woodridge State High School (QLD)

Universal screening assessment for all students on entry to secondary school is an efficient way to identify students who need support for a domain such as reading, writing or mathematics. Screening assessments are designed to identify students whose skill attainments fall below a minimum benchmark defined by a test or by a school. Individual students' results are compared to cohort-wide data collected from a large group of students of the same age or grade. If a student meets the minimum level expected for their age or grade then they probably don't need intervention. If they don't reach this level, then they would likely benefit from a diagnostic assessment to inform targeted intervention. Periodic (annual or biannual) screening assessments should be used to identify students in need of support after entry.

Universal screening assessments are ideally administered over a short period of time and can be conducted individually or in a group, in-person or online. Administration and scoring should be easy (possibly automated) and not require advanced qualifications. However, specialist guidance (such as from speech pathologists or psychologists) can support the effective interpretation of specific screening assessments to ensure validity and reliability.

AERO doesn't recommend staff develop their own universal screening assessments as they may not be accurate in identifying a student's reading skills relative to the average level expected for their age and grade. Other data (including prior NAPLAN results, results from other system-developed assessments, teacher judgements, and information from feeder primary schools) can also be used to triangulate and make more informed decisions on which students require further support. AERO has captured videos of [schools across Australia using screening tools](#). For information on screening tools for reading intervention, see AERO's practice resource on [Example Reading Assessment Tools in MTSS](#).

'To help with the screening of incoming Year 7 students, we ask for information from primary schools. This includes a writing sample and the completion of a quick and validated screening assessment tool. We try to minimise what we're asking of primary schools – we realise they are dealing with a lot as well. We can also just explicitly ask schools: 'Who do you think would benefit from an intervention for literacy?' From the list of students, I do a background information check, using the Department for Education's [sic] support services database to see if students have any existing language disorders, disabilities or anything else that I can find.

'Between all that information, we identify which students look like they might benefit from a Tier 2 or 3 intervention. I then reach out again to primary schools, give them that list of names. We work together to confirm who I will actually go out and see to conduct further diagnostic assessments. Typically, we see 30 to 40 students in the incoming cohort of usually around 230 students.'

–Melissa Saliba, Senior Speech Pathologist, Craigmore High School (SA)



Diagnostic assessments

Diagnostic assessments should be conducted with students who fall below the defined benchmark in reading, writing or mathematics – as measured by universal screening tools – to identify the specific skills that may require intervention. This enables interventions to be appropriately targeted (for example, focusing on strengthening phonemic awareness) rather than applying the same intervention for all students who struggle in each domain. A student lacking more foundational skills or a wide range of skills will likely require the highest intensity of instruction possible, which is best addressed through Tier 3 interventions.

Diagnostic assessments focus on specific skills within a domain, such as word reading and decoding (within the broader domain of reading), so students may need to complete a suite ('battery') of diagnostic assessments for their learning needs to be understood. Diagnostic assessments often take longer to administer than universal screening assessments and are typically administered in a one-to-one or small group setting.

Like universal screening assessments, diagnostic assessments compare a student's results to the average level expected for their age and grade. Ideally, assessments should be specifically designed or adapted for secondary school students. However, some diagnostic assessments designed for upper primary school students may be suitable. For example, if a secondary student scores below the mean level expected for Year 6 students on a word reading test, then their word reading is below that required for secondary school.

If a student has received any prior interventions, the experience and results of these should be investigated. Understanding why previous interventions didn't work can help inform intervention planning so that delivery can be adjusted to meet the needs of the student more effectively.

While universal screening can typically be deployed by any staff member, diagnostic assessments are more specific and, depending on the assessment, may require more specialist expertise to administer and interpret. For diagnostic assessments, schools may draw on specialist staff such as a speech pathologist or psychologist, or a teacher who has received additional training in administering and interpreting the results of an assessment. This can be beneficial in strengthening the accuracy of data analysis.

‘Our tiered interventions team work together in a very consultative and disciplined style. We meet very regularly. We’ll have very collaborative discussions about data to understand the progress that students are making, and plan accordingly.’

–Mileva Tubbs, Head of Learning Support Program, Como Secondary College (WA)

Progress monitoring

Monitoring students receiving Tier 2 and 3 interventions is central to MTSS. This allows you to:

- evaluate how students are responding to the intervention
- determine whether you should continue the intervention, modify it, fade it out or remove it.

At Tier 2, monitoring should occur at least monthly. Monitoring should be more frequent at Tier 3.

Progress monitoring tools can include staff-evaluated formative assessments embedded in each lesson, as well as weekly (Tier 3) or fortnightly (Tier 2) curriculum-based measures (CBMs). CBMs are brief assessments of foundational skills that typically take between one and 5 minutes to administer and can be used frequently. It’s not recommended that schools develop their own CBMs – not only because the process is time-consuming, but also because it’s difficult to maintain quality and consistency. Many off-the-shelf programs come with their own progress monitoring tools. AERO has captured videos of [schools across Australia using progress monitoring tools](#). For information on progress monitoring tools for reading intervention, see AERO’s practice resource on [Example Reading Assessment Tools in MTSS](#).

To achieve a full understanding of a student’s learning progress, progress monitoring tools can be combined with other sources of data, such as teacher observations within intervention lessons, feedback from a subject-specialist teacher, observations from parents and the students themselves, and other assessment data (such as school examinations).

For students who don’t make expected progress, additional work (such as more sensitive assessments or referrals to specialists) can be undertaken to ensure the intervention appropriately targets skills gaps, and that these gaps have been correctly identified. Staff with appropriate expertise can also observe interventions to explore ways of improving fidelity of implementation.

Increasing the intensity of intervention (that is moving from Tier 2 to Tier 3) may be another appropriate response. Where sufficient progress is observed, the focus of intervention can shift to other skill gaps, or the student can return to receiving only Tier 1 instruction.

More information

AERO's MTSS resources provide further information about using MTSS to support students:

- how to [support secondary students who struggle with reading using an MTSS decision tree](#)
- how to [assess these students to identify reading skills](#) in need of improvement
- how to [choose interventions](#) that target these gaps.

Acknowledgement

AERO would like to acknowledge the contribution of DSF in developing content for this practice guide. AERO would also like to acknowledge Dr Russ Fox and Melanie Henry for providing expert reviews of this content.