STUDENT SUCCESS SYSTEMS:
BUILDING ON MTSS AND EWS TO CREATE A UNIFIED SYSTEM

Across the nation there is often confusion about the use of, and alignment between, two frameworks aimed at supporting all students: Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) and Early Warning Systems (EWS). The goal of this guide is to provide a framing for how MTSS and EWS are related and how they align within a districtwide system of support. Effective student supports (including this alignment), can best be described through the next generation of student support frameworks, known as Student Success System (SSS).

The GRAD Partnership for Student Success, a collaborative effort involving nine organizations, came together to co-create a framework that defines an effective student success system. A strong unified system integrates, extends, and increases the capacity of existing student support efforts, while humanizing the data; focusing on partnerships at every level; and capturing students', teachers', and school staff members' needs.

In practical terms, implementing student success systems begins intentionally with existing school practices and frameworks, such as Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) and Early Warning Systems (EWS), and examines those practices against the essential elements of a student success system. The examination and integration ensures the people and processes are prepared to expand existing

practices so there is a single holistic system integrating supportive relationships that use actionable data with student-centered mindsets toward a process of analyzing and acting on data.

This guide will introduce how these frameworks and essential elements fit together within the student success systems to help district leaders ground practice and communicate across the organization. Each component of this toolkit is meant to stand on its own, so that you can choose and use the pieces that best fit your needs.

Introduction (this section) provides a brief overview of all three frameworks (MTSS, EWS, and student success systems).

Integrating Student Success Systems Into District Practices reflects on how student success systems sit within and interact with the district context.

Integrating Student Success Systems Into School Practices reflects on how, as a district, you can help schools understand the role of student success systems as they build on existing practices.

System Mapping Tool helps district teams consider how existing practices do and do not align with student success systems and changes to policy and practices toward expanded implementation.

The GRAD Partnership for Student Success partners with communities to use high-quality success systems so that schools are empowered to graduate all students ready for the future. The GRAD Partnership is currently working with over 60 schools across the nation.

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Multi-Tiered System of Supports

MTSS is a proactive and preventative framework that integrates data and instruction to maximize student achievement and support students' social, emotional, and behavior needs from a strengths-based perspective. The MTSS framework is composed of four essential components: screening, progress monitoring, multi-level prevention system, and data-based decision making (**Center on Multi-Tiered System of Supports, https://mtss4success.org/essential-components**). MTSS has gained widespread recognition at the elementary level as a validated approach to school and district continuous improvement and for improving learning outcomes for even the most at-risk students. Research and practice has generally focused on implementation in the earlier grades (**Wackerle-Hollman et al., 2021**; **Bailey, 2019**; **Leonard et al., 2019**) with sparse research at the secondary level (**Hollingsworth, 2019**; **Scott et al., 2019**). At the same time that MTSS has gained momentum in the early grades, another framework has been expanding at the secondary level.

EARLY WARNING SYSTEMS

In the past decades, secondary schools have used a system for identifying and intervening when students show early signs of disengagement or falling off track of progress toward graduation and (more recently) post-secondary success. Early warning systems (EWS) use research-based indicators that are predictive of student success (Balfanz, 2009; Allensworth, Gwynne, de la Torre, & Moore, 2014). These research-based early warning indicators focus on the areas of attendance, course performance, and behavior. EWS focuses on the structure for examining early warning indicator data to identify students who show elevated signs of risk so schools can develop and implement strategies and actions that improve the identified area of student need (attendance, course performance, or behavior). The research on EWS, as well as the practice, has typically focused on high schools and middle schools.

STUDENT SUCCESS SYSTEMS

Student Success Systems are a way of organizing a school community to support the progress and well-being of all students, connecting what has been learned from research and successful practice in the early grades with research and successful practice from the secondary grades. By focusing on relationships, actionable data, and evidence-based practices, student success systems

Figure 1.
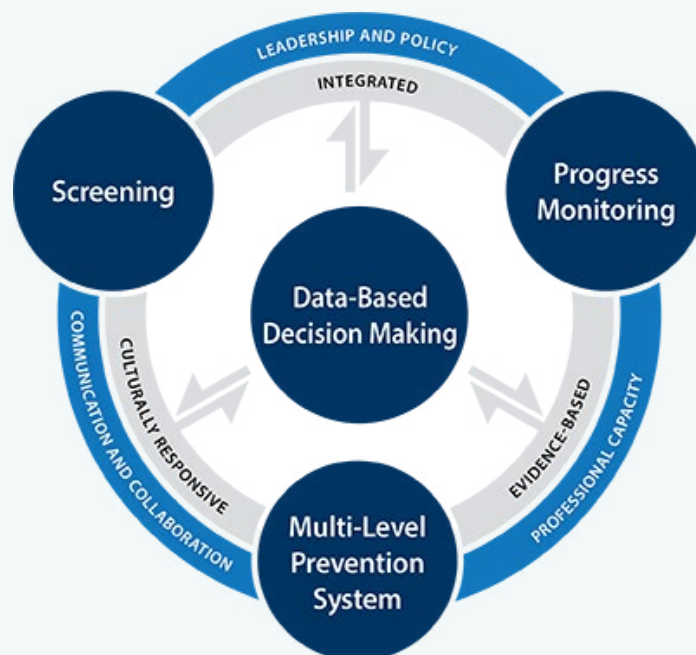
help educators and communities build a sense of belonging and school connection among students, address school-wide achievement patterns, and meeting individual student needs.

Many schools are already doing pieces of this work. However, existing student support systems (such as EWS and MTSS) are often fragmented, were developed in response to a specific problem, and usually don't consider student belonging and connectedness. Students and their needs are holistic and can best be addressed through a holistic system. Student success systems bring together the components of existing support systems by looking at what is strongest in these existing frameworks and what is missing to create a vision for implementation that addresses the whole picture of the challenges students and schools are facing. Schools and districts can use student success systems to address chronic absenteeism, reduce course failure rates, improve graduation rates, promote postsecondary success, and increase student well-being.
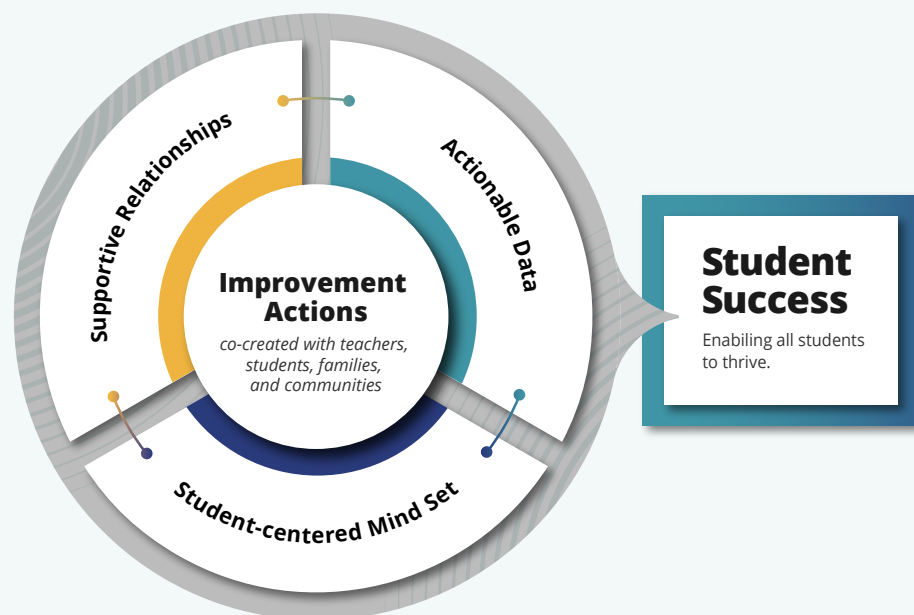
Student success systems can achieve these results through a single framework that combines supportive relationships, actionable data, and student-centered mindsets driven by actions for improvement (the essential elements of a student success system). The student success system moves beyond the structural definitions of previous frameworks (such as EWS, RTI, and MTSS) to acknowledge that *all change and implementation success rests with people* who enact the processes needed to use those structures. The supportive relationships and student-centered mindsets of student success systems embed student agency and their need to feel connected with their school community with students' and adults' sense of belonging to the school. This human-centered approach has to be embedded in the work of actionable data and actions for improvement.

Integrating Student Success Systems Into District Practices

Across the K–12 system, districts and schools are attempting to find effective practices to serve students and improve students' sense of agency in their own learning, their belonging within the school environment, and their connected relationships to other students and adults; districts are looking for ways to better identify students needing support and keep those students engaged in learning and help them continue to make progress toward graduation and post-secondary success.

Existing student support systems were not created to fit the scale, scope, or holistic system approach needed to meet the current needs of students. Each district is faced with the challenge of creating a cohesive system across the shifts in structure and need from primary to secondary buildings. No two systems face the same needs or address these changes in exactly the same way; there are changes in areas such as course structures, grading expectations, behavior and

Figure 2.

Supportive Relationships

Actionable Data

Student-centered Mind Set

Improvement Actions

co-created with teachers, students, families, and communities

Student Success

Enabling all students to thrive.

academic expectations, support structures, and student screening and testing, all of which interact with shifts in school climate, student agency, and school connectedness and belonging, impacting students and staff. As districts grapple with supporting students, the essential elements of the student success systems do not change, but the nuances of how those elements are spoken about and implemented do; these shifts include moving from universal screeners to early warning indicators, and from days absent to missed instructional time.

Student Success Systems are a way of organizing a school community to support the progress and well-being of all students. A student success system creates a holistic student support system through a single framework that combines supportive relationships, actionable data, and student-centered mindsets driven by actions for improvement. This new framework looks at what is strongest in existing support systems (such as EWS and MTSS) and what is missing to create

a vision for implementation that addresses the whole picture of the challenges students and schools are facing. The holistic approach behind student success systems can help districts understand and connect a continuum of support across buildings and grades.

A district implementing a student success system integrates Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS) and Early Warning Systems (EWS) practices from individual schools into a cohesive districtwide system. The essential elements of the student success system—strong relationships; student-centered mindsets; and actionable data, with actions for improvement—are what helps the district move beyond fragmented frameworks toward a holistic system. The schools within that system benefit from a more comprehensive and dynamic approach to meeting student needs. Districts implement student success systems by *developing district capacity* and *supporting school implementation*. Some of these capacities and support include:

Table 1.

District Capacities	
• Use shared language and definition of student success • Review policies and plans to remove barriers and strengthen structure for implementation, such as graduation policy/plan, graduation and career counseling, career and technical education policy/plan, PBIS and attendance policies • Champion work and importance to district and students • Clarify role of student success systems related to other district priorities and how they support existing school activities (such as MTSS and school improvement planning) • Review trends in data and implementation across schools	• Articulate supports available to schools to address school-level identified gaps and areas for growth • Hire or adjust roles and responsibilities for district and school staff (as needed) to support effective implementation • Inventory interventions and supports available across district • Adopt and model data practices and alignment of various data systems • Reflect on and develop practices and behaviors reflecting proactive and strengths-based mindsets among district staff

School Supports	
• Communicate and provide opportunities for feedback on purpose and implementation • Coordinate people and resources across schools • Support access to district interventions, supports, and people to complete school intervention inventories where gaps in current practice exist • Ensure data access and maintenance	• Create process for school-based teams to identify common challenges or successes with using district data, and make adjustments (at the district level) • Provide technical expertise and professional learning, including peer-to-peer opportunities • Conduct outreach and develop relationships with community organizations

Districts that implement Student Success Systems are able to develop more cohesive dynamic systems from the early grades through the secondary level. For example:

The Gresham-Barlow School District serves approximately 12,000 students in Oregon's fourth largest city. In an effort to improve students' postsecondary outcomes, the district launched a three-part plan: a new dashboard from Panorama Ed, expanded teacher teaming around early warning indicators, and a preK–12 career success framework for students and parents. The first component provides robust data on the early warning indicators and school climate, which enables teachers to log interventions and monitor their efficacy. The second component allows teacher teams to monitor early warning status, and develop and track interventions to support students showing signs; results demonstrate improved attendance and behavior. The last component is the PreK–12 career-focused framework. The framework begins with project-based learning and community engagement in Grades K–5, and career nights and elective courses for middle and high schools. Through implementation, the district learned a few key lessons. They learned to first take an equity view of student data at the system level, to find early adopters and people already doing the work, and to leverage resources while being realistic about the timeline.

Evansville Vanderburgh School Corporation is Indiana's third-largest school district. The district's efforts to ensure students graduate from high school resulted in a partnership with local businesses to create the OptIn program, integrating community relationships into the districts work. To earn the Indiana Governor's Work Ethic Certificate, students must exemplify six employability skills and four academic targets. To help students meet these standards, school staff monitor students' GPA, attendance, and discipline referral through their dashboard. The OptIn team regularly meets with school counselors and attendance staff. Through implementation, the district learned the importance of building relationships within the community and local businesses beyond the K–12 system.

Integrating Student Success Systems in School Practices

Across the K–12 system, districts and schools are attempting to find effective practices to serve students and improve students' sense of agency in their own learning, their belonging within the school environment, and their connected relationships to other students and adults in the school building. Educators and principals are stretched thin as they work to meet these learning and well-being needs. A new approach to supporting students—student success systems—helps educators and leaders identify and prioritize the areas where students most need support, and goes beyond the critical areas of student attendance, course performance, and behavior to consider the whole child; the approach integrates agency, connected relationships, and a sense of belonging. The student success systems then integrate partners inside the school and in the school community to help meet those needs, acknowledging that the scope of this work goes beyond any one person or team. Student success systems can help organize and monitor practices and strategies for schools faced with the challenge of creating a cohesive system, streamlining knowledge and data sharing and helping school leadership and staff stay on the same page so students get the support they need without overburdening individuals.

Student Success Systems create this cohesive system. The Student Success System is inclusive, fueled by strong relationships, guided by improvement science, and shaped by student-centered mindsets. It combines four essential elements (supportive community relationships, holistic real-time actionable data, a response and improvement system, and a shared set of mindsets) so that schools are empowered to graduate all students on a pathway to higher education and job training that lead to adult success. This new framework is built on what is strongest in existing support systems (such as EWS and MTSS) to ensure schools can use the effective practices already in place and looked critically at what is missing from those frameworks to create a vision for implementation that addresses the whole picture of the challenges students and schools are facing.

In practical terms, implementing a student success system within a school begins with intentionally looking at existing school practices and frameworks, such as Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) and Early Warning Systems (EWS), and examining those practices against the essential elements. This work doesn't just happen on its own, the school brings together (often with district sponsorship and assistance) a group of individuals invested in student success to

champion and carry out the work of coordinating a student success system. School teams can then build on what is learned to ensure the people and processes in the school are prepared to expand existing practices so there is a single holistic system. These teams reflect on and integrate school practices to include:

- Supportive community relationships
- Holistic, real-time, actionable data
- Adaptive analysis, response, and improvement system
- Shared set of student-centered mindsets

Implementing these elements is going to look different from school to school. In any context, implementing the student success system is going to be a schoolwide endeavor; school leaders, the school team, staff across the building, and parents or caregivers each play a role and there are some common activities or responsibilities that support effective student success systems. Figure 2 illustrates some common considerations for what each essential element of a student success system looks like for actively engaged roles.

It can be hard to know where to start when faced with the challenge of meeting student needs and addressing change implementation. Fortunately, a student success system isn't adding in a new process or framework. **School teams working to incorporate the elements of the student success**

system build on their existing strengths to become empowered to close learning gaps and graduate all students ready for the future. The GRAD Partnership has created a **Team Reflection Tool** to help school teams reflect on current capacity and practices and plan for future actions.

EXAMPLES OF STUDENT SUCCESS SYSTEMS AT THE SCHOOL LEVEL

Manzano High School. Manzano High School in Albuquerque, New Mexico, wanted to find a way to identify and support students who were struggling with attendance, course performance, and behavior. During the 2021–22 school year, staff from Manzano became certified as Early Warning System Coordinators and began implementing a process to engage the school staff and students with understanding and using data to identify students in need of support, connecting those students with needed interventions and people, and monitoring to make sure the students started succeeding. However, Manzano took their implementation beyond basic EWS practices to look at engagement in the whole school and supporting students more completely. For example, Manzano EWS Coordinators matched every student with an adult in the building as a mentor and decided those relationships should be focused on positive and strengths-based connections for the students.

Table 2.

STUDENT SUCCESS SYSTEM SCHOOL ROLES AND ACTIONS			
Administrators	School Team	School Staff	Parents and Caregivers
Supportive Community Relationships All roles contribute to a school culture with a sense of belonging. Leaders set direction, school team establishes routines and connections, school staff and parents and caregivers actively engage and support development of supportive relationships.			
Commit space and time for team activities Communicate support for proactive and strengths-based work focus	Commit space and time for team activities Proactively engage staff, students, and parents/guardians to understand individual student strengths and needs and create a positive nurturing environment	Approach colleagues and students as individuals with strengths and needs to ensure success Participate in collaborative discussions	Support student strengths and needs Commit to follow-up and actions, and communicating with school and student
Holistic, Real-Time Data Data are used to make informed decisions. Leaders remove obstacles and set expectations, school team systematically uses data to drive work, school staff support data use and respect decisions, parents and caregivers participate in data use and developing understanding of data.			
Support access and use of needed school data (early warning indicators, school culture, student information systems, etc.) Ensure access to screeners and progress monitoring	Include multiple school systems (such as attendance, course grades, and GPA) Include human feedback as data to understand students' well-being, school connectedness, family, and caregivers	Contribute data as requested	Actively engage in discussions on student performance and needs Know how to access student data and have resources to support data use and understanding
Analysis, Improvement, and Response System Data analysis and decision-making is a process embedded in school activities rather than an event. Leaders ensure alignment between data support and response systems; school team uses systems to provide student supports; school staff deliver interventions, support and modification; and parents and caregivers support students to set and achieve goals throughout process.			
Ensure alignment with school response systems (MTSS, PBIS, etc.) across the school Support needed changes to universal implementation, supports, and practices	Connect students with needed resources and supports Engage students and family in process to identify and understand root causes Coordinate with school teams and service providers, including community organizations	Implement practices and strategies across the school and in classrooms Contribute to schoolwide practices and strategies as relevant	Set goals with students and provide feedback and context on progress
Shared Set of Mindsets The school community exemplifies a culture of student-centered mindsets. Leaders create the vision and ensure the foundation across the school, school team keeps student need and strengths at the center of the work, and parents and caregivers are actively included and engaged in the community.			
Center school practices on equitable practices for student success Set vision and mission that includes authentic relationships with teachers, students, parents/caregivers	Act on evidence and research-based practices Approach work as proactive and asset based Engages in discussion and interactions with teachers, students, and parents/caregivers.	Approach student intervention and support as proactive and asset based Makes sure team has resources, including time (cultural shift of priority)	Advocate for students' needs and building on student strengths

DISTRICT SYSTEM MAPPING TOOL

The District System Mapping Tool provides a place to engage in this reflection at the district level, reflecting on the components and language of current and commonly used frameworks of EWS and MTSS, to unpack the alignment with the new elements of the student success system. This tool can help districts prepare and support their schools as they engage with the Team Self-Reflection Tool, created by the GRAD Partnership.

The system mapping tool helps educational leaders to map current system components as they relate to MTSS and Student Success Systems. The tool is meant to reflect on current practices and visualize how SSS and MTSS work together, and overlap, to compare and align current system strengths and areas for growth in moving toward a student success system.

Table 3.

Multi-Tiered System of Supports	Student Success Systems	Reflect on current practices and systems…	Intended outcome
Example	*Supportive community relationships*	*We encourage our schools to have 3 schoolwide teams working with student data: school leadership team, attendance team, behavior team. These teams do not work together or coordinate activities. There isn't a sense of connection or support among these teams and the rest of the school staff.*	
Data-based decision making	Holistic, real-time, and actionable data		Teams work collectively, on a planned cadence, to analyze and respond to data as supported by frameworks and/or protocols.
Progress monitoring, multi-level prevention system screening	An adaptive analysis, response, and improvement system		Teams have access to and make use of data (early warning indicator, school data systems, and human insights).
	Supportive community relationships		School has a culture of belonging, where everyone feels validated, accepted, affirmed, and treated fairly.
	A shared set of student-centered mindsets		Team and community approach student supports from a proactive and productive mindset, building on student strengths and positive relationships.

Districts can then use what is learned from this reflection to act on *district capacities* and *school supports* to ensure successful implementation of the student success system.

Table 4.

District Capacities	
We will address district planning and actions to create or further develop a student success system...	Add planned actions to help move district practices toward supporting a systemwide approach to a student success system.

School Supports	
We will provide clarity, coordination, and resources to individual schools that support implementation of their student success system...	Add planned actions to help support schools with the needed actions and resources to implement a student success system in their building.

THE GRAD PARTNERSHIP

Advancing Student Success Systems