



Buyer's Guide: A Comprehensive Resource for Evaluating MTSS Solutions

Every school and student has unique challenges and needs when it comes to supporting mental health and wellbeing. Because of this, districts need a carefully selected mix of resources to provide the right level of support for every student, gather meaningful data to adequately monitor and evaluate needs, and develop an overall culture and climate that promotes wellness for all.

While school leaders recognize the urgent and growing need for tiered student support services, understanding the array of choices can be daunting. On top of that, schools face significant constraints due to limited staff and budgets.

Educators can use this buyer's guide to better understand the different types of student support resources and more easily identify solutions that address gaps, increase effectiveness, and maximize their use of available financial and human resources.



A Foundation for Learning

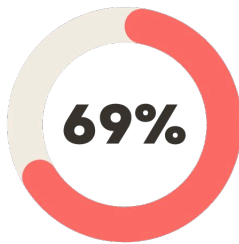
Student support is essential to academic success

There's a strong link between student well-being and academic achievement, and statistics show that middle and high school students continue to struggle with high rates of anxiety and depression, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's biennial Youth Risk Behavior Survey reports.

Schools typically serve as the first line of defense in providing student support services, however communities face significant shortages of qualified school counselors and other licensed professionals.

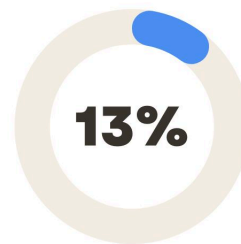
Growing Need

Public schools reporting an increase in demand for mental health services in 2022.



Inadequate Resources

Schools that "strongly agree" they currently can meet needs effectively.



- **69%** of public schools in 2022 reported an **increase in students seeking mental health services** from their school, while only 13% of schools strongly agreed they could meet those needs effectively. (NCES).
- Nearly 8 million students have no access to a school counselor and 3 million lack access to any school-based support staff, including psychologists and social workers.
- School counselors experience high turnover rates, often leaving after fewer than two years due to burnout, excessive caseloads and non-counseling duties.

We can't boost student learning if we don't address student well-being, and with data showing that the problems are growing increasingly severe, there is an urgent need for schools to take action. A systematic approach to evaluating current offerings will allow school leaders to identify gaps and implement new strategies that more effectively meet the needs of all students.

Understanding Tier 1, 2, and 3

Mapping Solutions to the MTSS Framework

Many schools and districts use the evidence-based multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) framework to address students' academic, behavioral, social, and emotional needs through three tiers of prevention and intervention. Using the MTSS model as a guide, educators can ensure they offer the right mix of solutions for their entire student population.

Among the programs and interventions available at each tier, there are advantages and challenges to consider. For example, standardized social and emotional curricula often require trained staff members and extra time during the school day. Student wellness screenings also require time and resources to implement with fidelity, including people who can interpret the data they collect, make actionable recommendations, and follow through on meaningful interventions.

What is Tier 1?

These primary prevention programs are typically implemented schoolwide and are meant to benefit the entire student body. Classroom teachers often implement programs, such as a standardized curriculum with lessons explicitly focused on developing social and emotional skills, or a series of topic-specific interventions addressing issues such as bullying, substance abuse, etc.

Tier 1 Challenges:

A challenge at this tier, and especially at the secondary level, is that many solutions are not responsive to students' individual needs, with content often falling flat because students cannot relate to it, or it is not delivered at the moment when students need support on the topics being covered.

Tier 1 Opportunities:

Some promising new solutions, such as tools that responsibly integrate AI, are able to provide all students with access to personalized coaching and skill building that is available to them 24/7 all year round.

Understanding Tier 1, 2, and 3

Tier 2 Challenges:

A challenge at this tier is that school counseling teams are often so consumed with meeting Tier 3 needs, that there is little time left to provide these much-needed Tier 2 supports.

Tier 2 Opportunities:

By reducing Tier 3 burden with more effective Tier 1 early intervention and prevention, counseling teams can dedicate more time and energy to Tier 2.

What is Tier 2?

Secondary prevention programs target students who might benefit from additional support, skills development, or early intervention. Tier 2 programs are often delivered in a small-group setting by educators or staff with specialized training, such as school counselors or other school behavior or mental health professionals.

What is Tier 3?

These interventions are typically individualized and described as “indicated” or “tertiary” prevention programs. Tier 3 programs typically involve a series of one-on-one sessions. They often address specific and sometimes more severe behavioral and mental health concerns. Tier 3 programs usually require parental consent and are sometimes part of students’ IEPs.

Tier 3 Challenges:

A shortage of qualified staff to provide high-quality individualized mental and behavioral health support plagues school districts across the country. Even without a scarcity of human resources, most schools lack funding required to provide adequate support for the growing number of students in crisis.

Tier 3 Opportunities:

A variety of tech-enabled solutions, such as teletherapy services designed for schools, are emerging to serve as force multipliers for counseling teams. Combining this approach with Tier 1 solutions that provide effective prevention and early intervention, can result in optimal outcomes to meet every student’s needs cost-effectively.

Understanding Tier 1, 2 and 3

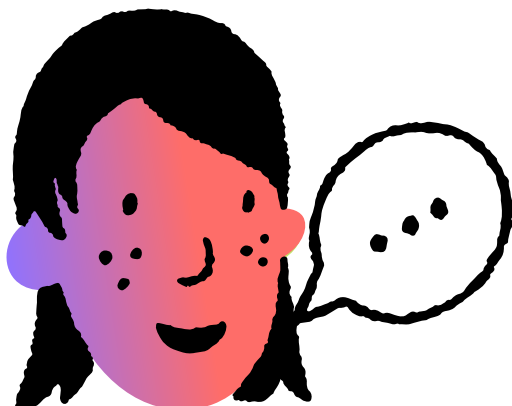
Assess Where You Can Improve & Innovate

Before investing in a particular tier or specific programs, leaders should first identify any gaps by mapping their current resources and interventions to the MTSS framework. This includes evaluating what's working at each tier and where programs fall short—by gathering data from students, teachers, and staff.

As part of this evaluation, it's important to carefully examine the effectiveness of current counseling and social work programs to determine where and with whom they're working well. It's critical to evaluate how successful these programs are with different demographic groups (such as gender or ethnicity of students) and by issue type (such as anxiety vs. bullying).

School staff play a major role in executing an MTSS-based student mental health model and need the right atmosphere and training to implement them well. Administrator buy-in and school leaders or "champions" can also help support successful adoption across your school or district.

The following pages provide an overview of solution categories that may be included in a comprehensive MTSS plan. It's ideal to provide resources to address multiple categories, however it's important to be realistic about whether the right conditions are in place for success with any given solution. School leaders can use this guide to select a mix of solutions that is tailored to students' needs, while maximizing use of limited financial and human resources.



**Innovative Tier 1
interventions that offer
tech-enabled
personalized support can
significantly reduce Tier 2
and 3 needs.**

Evaluating Options

MTSS Tier 1 – Universal Supports for All Students

Solution Category	Key Considerations
GENERALIZED Culture/Climate & Staff PD/Wellness Strategies Professional development and wellness practices to support school staff, combined with overarching common practices to promote a positive school culture/climate, give students and staff a common vision, language, and guidelines to co-create a safe and supportive environment. EXAMPLES: ClassroomWISE, RethinkEd	☐ Is staff on board and ready to make changes to current practices? ☐ Can we measure the results and effectiveness of the PD and new strategies we would deliver?
GENERALIZED Standardized SEL Curriculum & Topic-Specific Programming Social Emotional Learning (SEL) programs, along with topic-specific programs such as substance misuse and suicide prevention, help students develop skills vital for school, work, and life success. EXAMPLES: Second Step, Character Strong, STAR	☐ Will students find the content engaging and culturally relevant? ☐ Is there bandwidth to implement teacher training? ☐ Is there sufficient time to deliver the program with fidelity?
GENERALIZED Screening & Monitoring Tools to collect student behavior data, measure SEL efficacy, evaluate culture & climate, help schools identify correlations to incident referrals, absenteeism, and academic performance. Some tools also monitor online activity and flag warning signs of potentially risky behavior. EXAMPLES: Panorama, Bark, Gaggle	☐ Have we carved out adequate time to implement, analyze and take action? ☐ Will students feel comfortable providing honest answers? ☐ Will frequency of screening provide adequate insights?
PERSONALIZED (NEW!) AI Coaching w/ Severe Issue Screening Emerging solutions leverage AI to provide 24/7 access to personalized coaching for everyday challenges while screening for more severe problems, overcoming many of the limitations of SEL & screening/monitoring by empowering students to access real-time help in a safe space that they trust. EXAMPLE: Alongside 	☐ Is my team ready to roll out a new approach shown to have high-evidence of teen engagement? ☐ Are we comfortable being innovative and using an AI-based solution?

Evaluating Options

MTSS Tier 2 – Small Group & Targeted Interventions

Solution Category	Key Considerations
CUSTOMIZED FOR GROUP NEEDS Small-Group Skills Development & Support Customized sessions typically led by school counselors, social workers or special education teachers in a small-group setting provide support for students with a common set of needs. EXAMPLES: Social skills groups, Group mentoring programs, Executive function skills development classes	☐ What kind of staffing and training will bring the greatest benefit to students? ☐ Is the level of support adequate to meet student needs?
CUSTOMIZED FOR INDIVIDUAL NEEDS Brief Targeted Interventions Brief individual interventions typically delivered in the classroom to supplement Tier 1 instruction and provide additional targeted support on an identified skill. EXAMPLES: Check-in/check-out, Behavior contracts, Extra time/instruction on a specific skill, Peer mentoring	☐ What targeted interventions are working well and could be scaled to serve more students? ☐ What additional training is needed to ensure all teachers are able to deliver with fidelity?

MTSS Tier 3 – Individualized 1:1 Therapy/Counseling

Solution Category	Key Considerations
INDIVIDUAL – PROVIDED AT SCHOOL School/District psychologist, counselors, social workers While often in short supply, many schools/districts have at least a small team of mental health professionals on staff who are trained to provide individualized mental health support. EXAMPLES: Strengths-based counseling, Cognitive behavioral therapy	☐ What tools and practices could help school support teams work more efficiently? ☐ What students are we unable to adequately support due to staffing and budget constraints?
INDIVIDUAL – PROVIDED OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL Community Therapists & Teletherapy Services Many schools work with agencies to match students with external mental health partners who provide individualized support in a one-on-one setting (virtual or in-person). EXAMPLES: Hazel, ELuma	☐ What types of services will best meet the needs of your students and families? ☐ Will care be consistent, accessible and affordable/covered by insurance?

Strategic Planning

4 Steps for Selecting High-Quality Solutions:

Step 1

Before choosing specific solutions to map to your MTSS plan, it's **essential to understand their purposes, efficacy, and clinical model**. Newer solutions might not yet include data, but customer testimonials and clinician referrals can help you better understand their efficacy.

Step 2

Many student well-being screeners and tools collect protected student information. **Ensure you understand how that data will be analyzed—and who will be interpreting it**. It's critical that the resources you choose comply with student data and privacy laws.

Step 3

Confirm that the programs you consider comply with **FERPA and COPPA privacy standards**. Your school or district's legal team should work with you to ensure that all safeguards are in place to protect students' privacy and well-being.

Step 4

Consult students when making decisions about solutions. Today's students are interested in easy access to private and confidential guidance to help work through their daily challenges. **Consider forming a small group to test resources and provide feedback on usefulness.**



"Students want a safe and accessible space to get help with their daily challenges without judgment."

Ava
Student

[watch her video here](#)

Strategic Planning

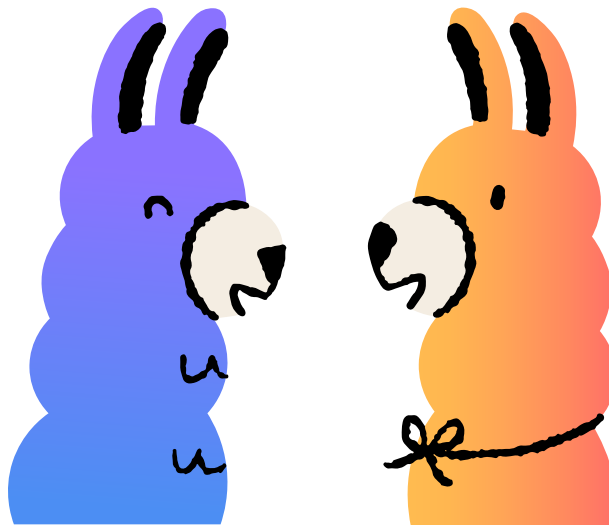
Creating a Plan

From year to year, it can be challenging to predict precisely what resources you'll need to address student support at each level of the MTSS framework. Schools and districts have many resources to choose from, and schools or districts can only anticipate some of the gaps.

Here are some tips:

- Conduct regular audits to identify your most significant gaps.
- Build an initial plan focusing on one or two categories, keeping your current staffing and program sustainability in mind.
- Be open to adapting your plan as you receive feedback from students, staff, caregivers, and the community.

Student well-being plays a critical role in your educational mission. When students struggle, it interferes with their ability to learn, affects their classroom behavior, and strains peer and teacher relationships. Using the information in this guide, district and school leaders can confidently select student well-being and mental health resources that result in positive outcomes.



Exploring Alongside



“That cut my time with him by 50% and freed up time to be able to do something else that needs to get done.”

Susan Sasso
Counselor

[watch her video here](#)

Personalized Coaching with Severe Issue Screening

While Tier 1 services are less intensive than Tier 2 or 3 supports, they can quickly take human resources away from the students who need them most. Alongside is a **personalized Tier 1 coaching tool** that augments the impact of school counseling teams. Alongside’s self-guided chat modules help students manage emotions, build resilience and develop executive function skills. By providing individualized support at scale, counselors are freed up to spend additional time with students who need more rigorous support.

Alongside also serves as a **bridge to Tier 2 and 3 support**, regardless of which solutions you have in place. It monitors for severe issues including suicidal ideation, abuse and thoughts of harm to self or others and immediately flags those students for human intervention per a safety protocol that is set up with each partnering district. Additionally, students have the option to share chat summaries and reach out to counselors via the app, which they voluntarily choose to do more than 40% of the time.



Exploring Alongside

Here's how Alongside works:

- Students log into Alongside with their school email and can chat, journal, or explore resources
- A student can chat about any topic and is matched with a relevant and personalized clinician-developed exercise
- Students set a small goal in the chat that focuses on taking one small step in real life to increase hope and self-efficacy, a key component of resilience
- Students can share their chat summary with their school counselor, and connect to school or community resources.
- Students receive encouraging reminders to reinforce following through on goals.

Kiwi

Warm, understanding, and supportive

“ I understand how challenging this feels. Let's work through it together, at your own pace.



Learn more at www.alongside.care

Founded in 2022, Alongside is a research-backed wellness platform for K-12 schools that provides personalized coaching for students and educators, resulting in better attendance, behavior, culture, and climate outcomes. Available 24/7 in 35+ languages, Alongside also offers accurate crisis detection and safety protocols for severe issues, universal screening, and direct on-ramps to human support. Alongside is a Tier 1 solution that reaches all students and provides confidential, evidence-based skill-building for everyday challenges with no extra staff, training, or resources required. The founders of Alongside previously founded Actively Learn, a K-12 digital curriculum company which was acquired by McGraw Hill in 2021.