



ADVANCING EQUITY

Policy Brief:

Year 1 Findings

Introduction

The goal of the Advancing Equity (AE) project is to develop a training and coaching intervention to center equity in the design and implementation of Tier 1 multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) for social-emotional-behavioral (SEB) health and support scaling within the Boston Public Schools and in other districts. The 4-year project is funded by the Institute for Education Sciences National Center for Special Education Research (NCSER) within the U.S. Department of Education. This policy brief summarizes the activities conducted during the first year of the AE project during the 2023-2024 academic year with the goal of identifying and summarizing tier 1 classroom practices that support creation of inclusive classroom communities.



Year 1 Research Question:
What tier 1 classroom practices support the creation of inclusive classroom communities?

Summary of Literature

Data from the U.S. Department of Education (2002) indicate Black, Hispanic, and American Indian students have been overrepresented in high-incidence disability classifications including emotional disturbance (ED). Also, Black students with disabilities are more likely than their White peers to be placed in restrictive special education settings (Green et al., 2020). Although inclusive learning environments have the potential to reduce disproportionality in special education and increase access to effective instruction (Sullivan & Bal, 2013), education systems continue to fall short of meeting the needs of racially and ethnically minoritized (REM) youth with or at risk for disabilities (Tefera & Fischman, 2020).



In addition to overrepresentation in special education, rates of school discipline show racial disproportionality (Nguyen et al., 2019). Black boys receive both in-school and out-of-school suspensions at rates more than three times their share of total student enrollment (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2021). Hispanic students are four times more likely to be suspended than White students (La Salle et al., 2020), and students with disabilities are up to seven times more likely to receive office discipline referrals (Sullivan et al., 2014). REM students are also more likely to receive disciplinary consequences for non-violent behaviors (e.g., defiance and disrespect) than their peers (McIntosh et al., 2018, Smolkowski et al., 2016) even though research has not demonstrated that REM students display higher rates of challenging behavior (McDaniel et al., 2021; McIntosh et al., 2015). School-based programs designed to reduce discipline disparities that lead to special education referrals rarely focus on the intersecting forms of oppressive practices, exclusion, and erasure that has led REM students to experience harmful disciplinary outcomes at higher rates (Cruz et al., 2021).

Understanding and valuing the cultural, contextual, and interpersonal factors that contribute to student success and working with students to sustain their individuality are key to creating and maintaining educational environments that can meet the needs of all students.



Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) has evolved as a proactive, systemic framework to (a) decrease referral to special education (Berkeley, et al., 2020), (b) respond to the overuse of exclusionary discipline in schools (Sugai & Horner, 2020), and (c) support SEB health (Arora et al., 2019; Collins et al., 2019). MTSS frameworks such as Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) focus on prevention by teaching, promoting, and acknowledging prosocial behavior through implementation of universal (Tier 1) prevention for all students and supplemental supports (Tiers 2, 3) for students determined to need more to achieve positive outcomes (Sugai & Horner, 2020).





However, higher levels of MTSS implementation have not been associated with fewer incidences of exclusionary discipline for REM students (Heidelberg et al., 2022) because equity has not been intentionally centered in the design and implementation of MTSS. Therefore, equity and cultural responsiveness should be a foundational component of MTSS (Heidelberg et al., 2022; McIntosh et al., 2018).

AE was developed to meet the needs of educators in diverse urban school systems by centering equity in the implementation of Tier 1 systems within MTSS by leveraging principles of implementation science that emphasize educator training (knowledge) and coaching (implementation support) to promote high-quality, sustainable practice that will reduce use of exclusionary discipline and inappropriate referrals to special education for emotional disturbance (ED).



Key Definitions

MTSS:

Multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) frameworks are founded in an ecological-behavioral model informed by research in public health and prevention science (Arora et al., 2019). A problem-solving team typically leads MTSS efforts to collaboratively coordinate the implementation of universal (Tier 1) prevention to all students and supplemental supports (Tiers 2, 3) to students determined to need additional assistance to achieve positive outcomes (Sugai & Horner, 2020). Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and the Comprehensive Behavioral Health Model (CBHM) are both examples of MTSS frameworks.

Tier 1:

Tier 1 refers to the universal supports that are delivered to students and/or staff for various needs (e.g., academic, social-emotional, physical wellness). Tier 1 practices should involve proactive supports for students and/or staff in order to prevent more intensive academic, behavioral, or social emotional issues. Within MTSS frameworks to support behavior (MTSS-B), tier 1 practices include establishing, modeling, and practicing group behavior norms, acknowledging positive behavioral/ social skills, and building strong connections with school community members.

Inclusive:

Inclusive refers to approaches, strategies, and policies designed to ensure that all students, regardless of their abilities, backgrounds, identities, or needs, have equitable access to learning opportunities in a supportive and welcoming environment that allows them to thrive together and achieve their full potential without segregation or discrimination.

Equity

Equity work refers to intentional policies and practices that help each student reach their full potential, academically, socially, and behaviorally. This requires actively disrupting systems of oppression rooted in deficit ideologies, addressing barriers to accessing high quality education, and creating culturally inclusive school environments.



Methods

Systematic Literature Review

Six educational and social science databases (PsycINFO, Academic Search Complete, ERIC, SocINDEX with Full Text, PsycARTICLES, and ProQuest Dissertation Abstracts) were searched. Articles and dissertations were screened and evaluated using the online platform Covidence (2021) against the following inclusion criteria: (a) included coaching in a K-12 educational context, (b) that was provided to educators, (c) was equity-intentional (i.e., addressed inequities explicitly to change participants' attitudes, beliefs, or actions), (d) involved tier 1 or universal intervention, and (e) evaluated outcomes of the coaching. Those articles and dissertations that met inclusion criteria were coded to record the (a) type of training/coaching provided, (b) topics and foci addressed via coaching, (c) participants, (d) outcomes, and (e) whether the coaching resulted in a change/impact.

Teacher Training Modules

Eight modules were developed during Year 1 in the Articulate platform to train teachers in equitable classroom practices. A 12-member Advisory Board that includes school psychologists from Boston Public Schools as well as university researchers and practitioners from across the country reviewed the modules and provided feedback which was subsequently used to make revisions. Module 2: Supportive Relationships and Module 3: Classroom Community specifically focus on training teachers to implement universal, tier 1, classroom practices which create inclusive communities and will therefore be the primary focus of this policy brief.



Focus Groups with School Community Members

Three student focus groups, with a total of eight participants were conducted in Fall 2024. Two caregiver focus groups were also conducted in Fall 2024 with a total of three participants.

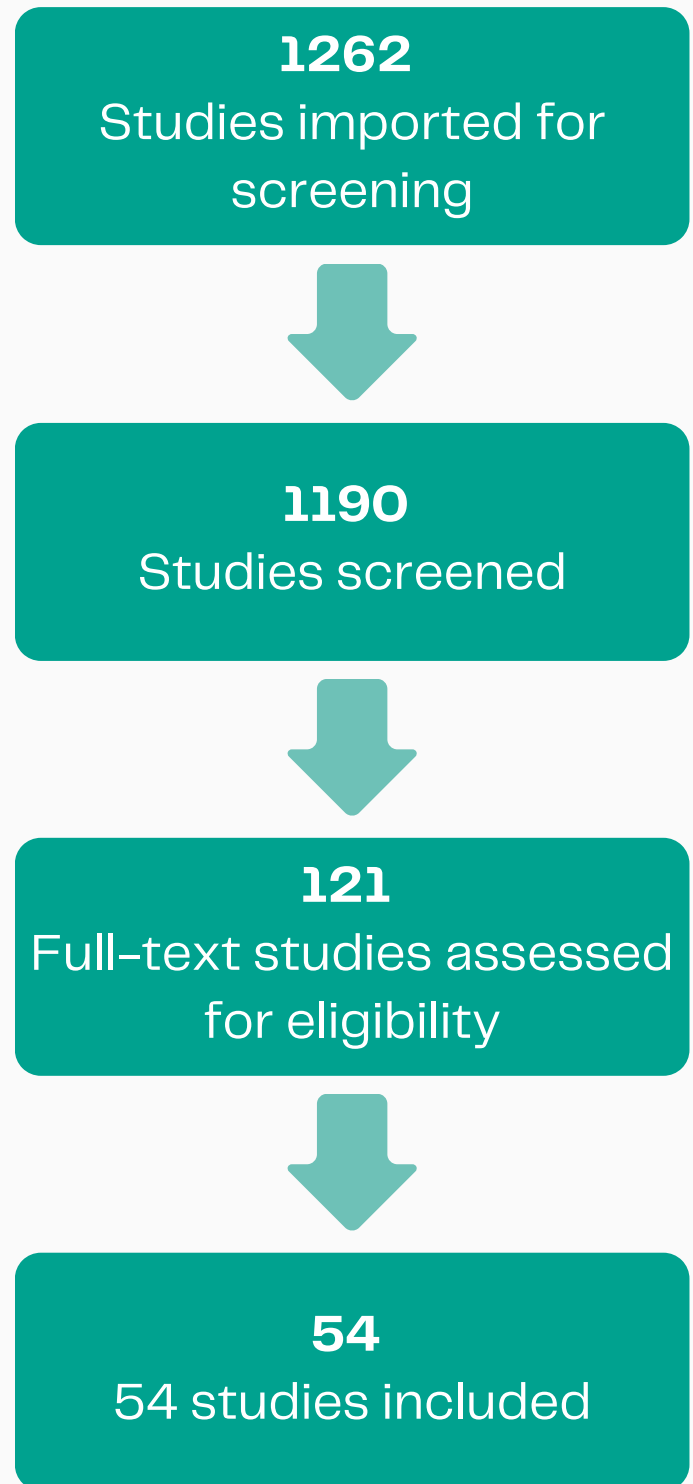
A semi-structured interview protocol was used to ask about Tier 1 practices that advance equity. Specific questions prompted participants to reflect on the most effective, relevant, and supportive practices related to behavioral supports. A reflexive thematic analysis (TA) was used to identify, analyze, and report repeated patterns (Braun and Clarke 2006).



Results

Systematic Literature Review

The search yielded 1190 unique hits, and a total of 52 articles were reviewed; however, 16 articles did not meet criteria and were screened out. A total of 36 studies met inclusion criteria and were coded. Results indicated the coaching most frequently took the form of in-person professional development (single or multiple sessions) plus coaching (individual or group). Additionally, coaching/training focused on social, emotional, and behavioral functioning, academics, or both, and activities included some combination of instruction, discussion, observation, role play, and/or performance feedback. Finally, coaching resulted in several positive outcomes. First, educators reported improved self-efficacy, knowledge, and confidence when working with culturally diverse students, as well as engaging in deeper, more inclusive discussions about sensitive topics (Baldinger, 2019; Bradshaw et al., 2018; Green et al., 2018; Longhitano, 2022; McKenney et al., 2017). Additionally, educators reported lower rates of stress, as well as improvements in their teaching performance, ability to structure the learning environment to be more inclusive, and engage students (Bradshaw et al., 2018; Nagourney, 2023). Finally, teachers found culturally responsive interventions to be acceptable; although, some teachers reported the interventions were feasible with existing resources and system-level support (Barrasso, 2020; Gion et al., 2022), whereas others indicated the interventions would be challenging to implement given their other responsibilities (Green, 2017; Longhitano, 2022).





Teacher Training Modules

Module 2 illustrates that strong equity-focused student-teacher relationships are built on reciprocal self-awareness, mutual understanding, respect, and trust. Strategies to develop these essential relationship components are also included in Module 2, and a representative example accompanies each relationship component.

Mutual Understanding

is reached when teachers and students acknowledge each other's perspectives, needs, and feelings and share empathy and respect.

Example:

Teachers set aside time each day to connect with students before diving into academic content to understand students' current emotions and what they need in order to be present and available to learn.

Respect...

is demonstrated by valuing and honoring the dignity, opinions, and boundaries of others.

Example:

Teachers provide opportunities for students to co-create classroom norms/expectations, identify their pronouns or cultural identifiers, and share their preferred communication styles.

Reciprocal Self-Awareness...

is achieved when teachers and students consciously understand their own thoughts, feelings, strengths, weaknesses, values, culture, beliefs, and motivations and explicitly acknowledge how these aspects may converge or diverge with those of others.

Example:

Teachers reflect upon how their values and culture may impact their teaching style, and in turn how that teaching style affects student learning.

Trust...

is built over time through consistent practice of self-awareness, mutual understanding, and respect and realized when teachers and students place confidence and reliance in each other based on their integrity, competence, and consistency.

Example:

Teachers consistently respond with openness and humility to student feedback or concerns and respect student boundaries and needs.



Module 3 shows that traditional “top-down” methods used to create and communicate rules/expectations are imposed by educators on students without their input. This approach often fails to consider students’ perspectives or be reflective of the cultural and contextual values/norms within a given community. Empowering students by giving them voice and choice in developing classroom routines and expectations may increase their motivation (St. John & Briel, 2017); therefore, teachers are encouraged to adjust their practice from imposing rules to co-creating community agreements.

Community agreements are developed when all school community members (students, teachers, support staff, school leaders, and families) come together to identify what the community needs to create a safe, supportive learning environment. Key considerations for developing community agreements include the following:

- Honor individual’s cultural backgrounds, values, and what they need to feel safe/supported in order to achieve their goals.
- Model transparency by reflecting on and sharing goals out loud together, in a circle, or a class discussion without judgment, and normalize voicing needs and opinions to the classroom community.
- Teachers should be flexible and negotiate to find common ground when honoring individuals’ cultural differences in developing agreements that work for everyone.
- Prepare for teachers to relinquish some control of the process and outcomes in their classroom (e.g., allow students to take the lead in mediating conflicting rather than making an executive decision as the teacher).
- Common agreements (including related routines, practices, and rewards/consequence structures) should be clear to all community members, and students should know what they are agreeing to as well as the process for practicing agreements and responding to violated agreements.
- Revisit and revise community agreements to adapt to changing needs as classroom communities evolve.



Focus Groups with School Community Members

Focus groups are in the final stages of thematic analysis. From the student and family responses, eight themes were identified. Themes and features are presented in the following table.



Theme	Features	Endorsed by
Favoritism/ Unequal Treatment	Favoritism: Teachers displaying preference for certain students in relationships or behavior responses. Unequal treatment: Teachers treating students differently based on various factors, such as race or relationship.	Students & Families
Singling Student Out	Over-response: Teachers responding more harshly to students who often don't behave. Yelling/Humiliating: Teachers yelling at or calling out students for various behaviors.	Students
Diversity/ Inclusive Community	Diverse & Inclusive: School is diverse and students all work together to include each other School Events: School events celebrate diversity and student cultures. Falling short: Staff having good intentions but not always knowing the best way to support students or create inclusive environments.	Students & Families
Reinforcements	Token economies: Students are rewarded for positive behaviors with various tokens. Awards/Honors: High achieving/well-behaved students given awards/honors.	Students
Understanding/ Supportive Teachers	Understanding: Teachers getting to know, wanting to understand students, and understanding age-appropriate behaviors. Taking the time: Teachers taking the time to help students understand, ask questions, <u>feel</u> heard.	Students & Families
Accessing/ Communicating with Teachers	Less accessible with age: Teachers get less communicative/accessible as students move from elementary to secondary school. Open communication: Parents want open lines of communication with teachers that focus on positives and addressing barriers.	Families
Social Emotional Supports in School	SEL programs: Schools have SEL programs for students. Improved skills: Parents report improved SEL skills in their children.	Families
Sharing Feedback	Formal methods: Student and family surveys Informal methods: Daily opportunities for students to share thoughts/feelings about lessons. Parents call school staff they have relationships with to share feedback.	Students & Families

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CONTACT:

Lindsay Fallon

lindsay.fallon@umb.edu

Department of Counseling, School
Psychology, & Sport
University of Massachusetts Boston