

Identifying and Supporting Students Through Early Intervention



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Introduction

Early intervention is one of the most powerful tools schools have to improve student outcomes. When educators recognize concerns early and respond with timely, targeted supports, they can alter academic trajectories, strengthen engagement, and prevent long-term difficulties. Rather than waiting for students to fail before intervening, modern educational frameworks emphasize proactive identification, structured support systems, and equitable data use to ensure that every learner has the opportunity to succeed. This course explores how early intervention functions within K–12 educational settings through frameworks such as Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS) and Response to Intervention (RTI). Participants will examine the foundations of tiered systems, the distinction between prevention, remediation, and special education, and the essential components that drive effective implementation. The course also addresses how to recognize warning signs of risk, use Early Warning Systems (EWS), provide intentional supports for at-risk students, and interpret student data responsibly through an equity-centered lens. By the end of this course, educators will be equipped with the knowledge and practical strategies needed to identify students early, respond through the framework of a multi-tiered system of support, and use data thoughtfully and ethically to promote equitable outcomes for all learners.

Section 1: Foundations of Early Intervention in Educational Settings

Early intervention in schools is rooted in a simple but powerful belief: students are more likely to succeed when educators identify and address learning or behavioral concerns early rather than waiting for significant failure to occur. In recent decades, schools have shifted from reactive models of support to proactive, data-driven systems designed to catch warning signs early and provide timely

instruction and intervention. Frameworks such as Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS) and Response to Intervention (RTI) reflect this shift by organizing academic and behavioral supports into structured, tiered systems that respond to student needs. This section establishes the foundational knowledge necessary to understand how early intervention functions within K–12 educational settings. It clarifies key terminology, distinguishes early intervention from special education, explains how tiered systems operate, and outlines the essential components that make MTSS effective.

1.1 Defining Early Intervention in Schools

In K–12 educational settings, *early intervention* refers to systematic, proactive strategies and supports designed to identify students at risk of academic, behavioral, or social-emotional difficulties and provide supplemental instruction or resources before challenges become entrenched (Morin, n.d.). This approach is commonly implemented through Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) and related frameworks like Response to Intervention (RTI). These systems integrate high-quality instruction, universal screening, progress monitoring, and tiered instructional supports to ensure students receive the right level of support when concerns first emerge rather than waiting for severe failure (Pendharkar, 2023). MTSS and RTI will be discussed in more detail in Section 1.2: *Tiered Systems of Support*. School-based early intervention discussed in this course differs from the Early Intervention (EI) services defined under Part C of the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which serve infants and toddlers (birth–age 3) with developmental delays or disabilities (CDC, 2025). While Part C EI and school-based early intervention share the goal of supporting development and addressing risk factors, the K–12 frameworks focus on academic and behavioral learning within educational settings rather than birth-to-3 developmental service systems.

Distinction Between Prevention, Remediation, and Special Education

Although prevention, remediation, and special education are related, educators do not always clearly differentiate among these distinct concepts in practice. The following explanation clarifies how each differs in purpose and application:

- **Prevention** refers to early actions taken before a student experiences significant difficulty. MTSS and RTI are preventive frameworks that use universal screening and early supports to reduce the likelihood of severe learning or behavior challenges (Woodley, 2025).
- **Remediation** refers to instructional efforts designed to *correct established learning gaps* or skill deficits (Woodley). Remediation tends to occur *after* a student has struggled for some time, whereas early intervention focuses on identifying and supporting needs *as soon as warning signs appear*.
- **Special Education** is a federally defined set of services for students with identified disabilities under IDEA (Part B for school-aged children); special education includes individualized instruction and supports based on an Individualized Education Program (IEP) (Reber, 2025). In contrast, early intervention implemented through MTSS or RTI occurs *within general education* and supports all students, not only those with disabilities. It can reduce unnecessary referrals to special education by meeting student needs early through high-quality instruction and supplemental supports (Reber).

Moving from “Wait to Fail” to Proactive Identification

Traditionally, schools often relied on a “wait to fail” approach: waiting until students demonstrate pronounced failure before intervening or referring them for special education assessment (Woodley, 2025). A major goal of early intervention frameworks like MTSS and RTI is to shift schools away from this reactive mindset by using universal screening, progress monitoring, and data-based decision-

making to identify concerns early and provide support immediately. This proactive approach aims to prevent knowledge gaps from widening and reduce long-term academic and behavioral challenges (Woodley). In practice, early identification means collecting data on all students' performance, analyzing that data to detect risk early, and intervening with appropriate instructional supports—often before a student experiences significant decline in achievement or engagement (Pendarkar, 2023).

1.2 Tiered Systems of Support

Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS) is a comprehensive, schoolwide framework designed to improve students' academic, behavioral, and social-emotional outcomes through structured levels of support (Pendharkar, 2023). Rather than relying on a single approach to instruction, MTSS organizes support into multiple tiers that vary in intensity. All students receive high-quality core instruction, while those who demonstrate additional needs receive increasingly targeted or individualized interventions. Within this framework, student progress is regularly monitored to determine whether supports are effective. Ideally, the tiered structure allows schools to address the full range of learner needs within general education settings. When data indicate that a student is not responding adequately to tiered interventions, MTSS also serves as a systematic process for identifying students who may require a referral for special education evaluation (Pendharkar).

Essential Components of MTSS

The Multi-Tiered System of Supports framework is built on four core components that work together to ensure students receive timely, appropriate, and effective support (AIR, 2026). These components create a structured process for identifying needs, delivering interventions, and evaluating outcomes.

- 1. Universal Screening:** Universal screening is conducted with all students, typically three times per year, to identify those who may be at risk for academic or behavioral challenges (AIR). Universal screening tools provide early indicators of students who might need additional support beyond core instruction. For teachers, this means screening is not reserved for students who are already visibly struggling. Instead, it is a proactive process designed to catch concerns early so that interventions can begin before difficulties intensify.
- 2. Multi-Level Prevention System:** The multi-level prevention system refers to the structured organization of supports across three tiers of increasing intensity (AIR).
 - **Tier 1** includes high-quality core instruction provided to all students.
 - **Tier 2** provides targeted, supplemental interventions for students who require additional support.
 - **Tier 3** delivers intensive, individualized interventions for students with the most significant needs.

This tiered system ensures that instruction and interventions are matched to student need, rather than applying a one-size-fits-all approach.

- 3. Progress Monitoring:** Progress monitoring involves using valid and reliable assessment tools to regularly measure student performance and growth (AIR). It allows educators to determine whether students are responding to instruction and intervention. Through consistent monitoring, teachers can evaluate the effectiveness of instructional strategies and adjust supports when students are not making adequate progress.

4. Data-Based Decision Making: Data-based decision making is the structured use of screening and progress monitoring data to guide instructional choices (AIR). This includes decisions about:

- Adjusting instruction
- Moving students between tiers
- Intensifying or fading interventions
- Allocating resources
- Supporting disability identification when appropriate under state law

Rather than relying on subjective data, MTSS emphasizes systematic use of evidence to inform next steps.

Together, these four components create a continuous cycle of identifying needs, delivering support, monitoring outcomes, and refining instruction.

MTSS Tiers Explained

Tier 1: High-Quality Core Instruction

Tier 1 represents the foundation of MTSS and consists of high-quality, evidence-based instruction delivered to all students in the general education classroom (National Center on Intensive Intervention [NCII], 2023). Strong Tier 1 instruction includes differentiated teaching practices, clear behavioral expectations, culturally responsive strategies, and frequent formative assessment to monitor student understanding. Effective Tier 1 instruction is essential because research consistently shows that when core instruction is strong, the majority of students (often cited as 80–85%) are successful without additional intervention (AIR, 2026). Key features of Tier 1 include:

- Standards-aligned curriculum
- Evidence-based instructional practices
- Universal behavior expectations
- Ongoing formative assessment
- Classroom differentiation

Classroom Examples of Tier 1:

- Academic:
 - High quality, evidence-based instruction
 - Differentiated instruction during lessons
 - Universal screening and progress monitoring
- Social-Emotional:
 - Implementation of schoolwide social-emotional learning (SEL) curriculum and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) system
 - Classroom expectations, matrices, rules, and structures (St. Mary's County Public Schools, n.d.)
 - Reinforcement of appropriate behaviors (St. Mary's County Public Schools)

Tier 2: Targeted Small-Group Intervention

Tier 2 provides supplemental, targeted interventions for students who do not make adequate progress with Tier 1 instruction alone. These supports are prioritized for approximately 15 to 20 percent of the student population who require additional support beyond Tier 1 (AIR, 2026). These supports are typically

delivered in small groups and focus on specific skill deficits, such as reading fluency, math reasoning, or behavioral regulation (NCII, 2023). Tier 2 interventions are more explicit and provided in addition to tier 1 instruction, delivered with greater frequency or duration, and closely monitored (AIR). Some of the essential features of tier 2 instruction include the following (AIR):

- Uses evidence-based interventions or practices, implemented with fidelity.
- Includes increased opportunities for practice and feedback.
- Follows standardized processes to identify students, match interventions to needs, and ensure consistent delivery.
- Delivered by adequately trained staff who understand the intervention program and implementation requirements.
- Promotes increased family engagement and communication compared to Tier 1 supports.

Progress is reviewed regularly to determine whether students are responding to intervention or require adjustments.

Classroom Examples of Tier 2:

- Academic:
 - Small-group skill-focused instruction (for example, reading groups targeting specific comprehension skills) in addition to Tier 1 core teaching (PowerSchool, 2025).
- Social-Emotional:
 - “Lunch bunch” social group: A small lunch group for students needing support with social skills (REL Northeast & Islands, 2024)

- Check-In/Check-Out systems where students meet briefly with a staff member each day to set goals and review progress (Woodley, 2025)

Tier 3: Intensive Individualized Support

Tier 3 provides intensive, individualized intervention for students with significant or persistent academic or behavioral needs, typically prioritized for 3-5% of the population identified as most at-risk (AIR, 2026). Supports at this level are highly individualized, may involve specialists, and often increase in frequency, duration, and instructional intensity (National Center on Intensive Intervention, 2023). Tier 3 interventions typically involve (AIR):

- Individualized intervention plans
- Diagnostic assessments to identify precise skill gaps
- Increased instructional time
- Weekly progress monitoring

If students continue to show limited responsiveness despite high-fidelity Tier 3 intervention, the MTSS process may inform decisions regarding referral for special education evaluation under IDEA (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

Classroom Examples of Tier 3:

- Academic:
 - Highly individualized instruction tailored to specific students' assessed needs (for example one-to-one tutoring) (Reading Rockets, n.d.)
 - Daily intensive interventions with a specialist to address persistent skill gaps (Reading Rockets)

- Social-Emotional:
 - Individualized behavior intervention plans developed after assessment (such as a Functional Behavioral Assessment informing specific goals) (St. Mary's County Public Schools, n.d.)
 - Wrap-around supports involving counseling, mental health services, or collaboration with families and outside providers (REL Northeast & Islands, 2024)

What Is RTI and How Does It Differ from MTSS?

Response to Intervention, or RTI, is a structured, multi-tiered framework designed to identify and support students who are experiencing academic difficulty (Lexia, 2025). RTI emphasizes delivering high-quality classroom instruction to all students while systematically identifying those who need additional support. In an RTI framework, all students receive strong core instruction and universal screening within Tier 1. Approximately 80 percent of students are expected to meet grade-level benchmarks with Tier 1 instruction alone (Lexia). Students who are identified through screening data as struggling receive targeted, small-group interventions in Tier 2, which typically serves about 15 percent of students. A smaller group, approximately 5 percent, may require intensive, individualized support in Tier 3 (Lexia). RTI includes four essential components:

- A multi-tiered structure of supports
- Universal screening to identify students at risk
- Ongoing progress monitoring
- Data-driven decision-making to select and adjust evidence-based interventions

The primary purpose of RTI is to provide academic intervention early and systematically so that students receive the support they need before gaps widen (Lexia).

How RTI Differs from MTSS

While RTI and MTSS share important similarities, they are not identical models. Both frameworks use tiered supports, emphasize high-quality instruction, and rely on progress monitoring and data to guide decision-making (Lexia, 2025). However, their scope differs significantly. RTI is primarily focused on identifying and addressing academic needs of struggling students. In contrast, MTSS has a broader, schoolwide focus. MTSS addresses both academic and non-academic areas, including behavior, attendance, social-emotional development, school culture, professional learning, and family engagement (Lexia). MTSS can be understood as an umbrella framework that may include RTI as one component. It incorporates multiple systems and approaches such as curriculum design, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), teacher collaboration, and partnerships between schools and families. Because of its broader scope, MTSS often requires system-level changes at the school or district level, supported by leadership, coordinated communication, and collaborative problem-solving (Lexia).

Integration of Academic and Behavioral Frameworks

Modern MTSS frameworks integrate both academic supports (often associated with RTI) and behavioral supports (often associated with Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, or PBIS) (AIR, 2026). The Center on PBIS (2023) explains that integrating PBIS within MTSS strengthens schoolwide prevention by aligning academic instruction with consistent behavioral expectations and data systems. This integrated approach ensures that schools address the “whole child”

by supporting learning, behavior, and social-emotional development within a unified system rather than separate initiatives (The Center on PBIS).

1.3 Benefits of Early Intervention and MTSS

School-based early intervention frameworks such as MTSS and RTI are designed not only to address immediate learning needs but also to produce measurable improvements in long-term academic, behavioral, and social-emotional outcomes. Research and federal guidance published in recent years emphasize that early, systematic support can significantly alter student trajectories when implemented with fidelity and data-based decision making (NCII, 2023). Clark (2026) highlights several key advantages that demonstrate why MTSS is both a preventive and improvement-focused model.

1. **A Strong Emphasis on Prevention:** MTSS prioritizes prevention by identifying academic and behavioral gaps early and delivering structured support before challenges become long-term difficulties (Clark, 2026). Tier 1 instruction is universal and preventive, designed to strengthen curriculum, instruction, and behavioral expectations for all students. When students need more support, Tier 2 and Tier 3 provide increasingly intensive interventions. This graduated structure helps prevent students from falling significantly behind.
2. **Data-Driven Decision-Making:** A core strength of MTSS is its reliance on data. Built-in screening tools, progress monitoring systems, and growth reports allow educators to evaluate student performance and adjust instruction quickly (Clark). Rather than waiting for failure, educators use real-time evidence to guide intervention decisions, ensuring supports remain responsive and effective.

3. **Increased Individualization:** MTSS encourages instructional flexibility. Small-group interventions, personalized learning paths, and one-on-one support allow educators to tailor instruction to specific skill gaps (Clark). The intensity of support varies based on student need, but the goal remains consistent: meeting each learner where they are and providing the right level of assistance.
4. **Earlier Identification of Academic and Behavioral Needs:** Through universal screening and ongoing monitoring, MTSS enables schools to identify learning and behavioral concerns earlier than traditional referral models (Clark). Early identification allows for timely intervention, which significantly improves long-term outcomes. Immediate supports can be implemented when performance data indicates emerging challenges.
5. **Improved Student Behavior:** By aligning academic supports with behavioral strategies, MTSS contributes to improved student engagement and behavior (Clark). Targeted interventions increase student confidence and reduce frustration, which can positively influence classroom conduct. Additionally, consistent expectations and positive reinforcement strategies help create a predictable and supportive school environment.
6. **Greater Equity and Inclusion:** MTSS promotes equitable access to research-based instruction and interventions for all learners, including multilingual learners and students with learning differences (Clark). Because supports are tiered and responsive, all students have access to high-quality instruction and the opportunity to succeed, whether they require additional support or enrichment.
7. **Increased Student Achievement:** When schools implement evidence-based interventions and continuously monitor progress, student achievement improves (Clark). MTSS supports growth and gap closure by focusing on

early intervention, differentiated instruction, and the ability to respond quickly when student performance changes.

- 8. A Structured and Coordinated System:** MTSS provides a structured, coordinated approach to identifying students who may need additional support or special education services (Clark). The system ensures that interventions are delivered at appropriate intensity levels and adjusted based on data, rather than relying on delayed referrals.

Section 1 Conclusion

Early intervention frameworks such as MTSS and RTI represent a significant departure from traditional “wait to fail” models. Instead of responding only after students experience pronounced academic or behavioral difficulty, these systems emphasize universal screening, tiered instruction, progress monitoring, and data-based decision-making to ensure students receive support as soon as concerns emerge. When implemented effectively, early intervention promotes prevention, strengthens equity, improves behavior and engagement, and increases the likelihood of long-term academic success. Understanding the structure and purpose of these frameworks is only the first step. For early intervention to be effective in practice, educators must also be able to identify when a student may be showing early indicators of difficulty. The next section will focus on recognizing warning signs in academic, behavioral, and social-emotional domains, equipping educators with practical tools to identify at-risk students and respond appropriately.

Section 1 Key Terms

Academic Intervention - Targeted instructional support provided to students who are struggling academically in order to address skill gaps and improve performance.

Data-Based Decision Making - The structured use of screening and progress monitoring data to guide instructional adjustments, intervention placement, resource allocation, and support decisions.

Differentiated Instruction - An instructional approach in which teachers modify content, process, or learning products to meet the diverse needs of students within the classroom.

Early Identification - The proactive process of recognizing academic, behavioral, or social-emotional concerns in students before significant failure occurs.

Early Intervention - Systematic, proactive strategies and supports designed to identify and assist students at risk of academic, behavioral, or social-emotional difficulties before challenges become severe.

Evidence-Based Instruction - Teaching practices and interventions that have been proven effective through rigorous research studies.

Individualized Education Program (IEP) - A legally required plan under IDEA that outlines specialized instruction and services for a student identified with a disability.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) - A federal law that ensures students with disabilities receive a free and appropriate public education, including special education services.

Multi-Level Prevention System - The tiered structure within MTSS that organizes supports into increasing levels of intensity (Tier 1, Tier 2, Tier 3).

Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS) - A comprehensive, schoolwide framework that uses tiered instruction, universal screening, progress monitoring, and data-based decision making to support academic, behavioral, and social-emotional success.

Prevention - Early actions taken to reduce the likelihood that students will experience significant academic or behavioral difficulties.

Progress Monitoring - The ongoing use of valid and reliable assessment tools to measure student growth and determine responsiveness to instruction or intervention.

Remediation - Instructional efforts designed to correct established learning gaps or skill deficits after difficulties have already emerged.

Response to Intervention (RTI) - A structured, multi-tiered framework focused primarily on identifying and addressing students' academic difficulties through early screening, targeted intervention, and progress monitoring.

Special Education - Federally mandated individualized instruction and services provided to students identified with disabilities under IDEA.

Tier 1 Instruction - High-quality, evidence-based core instruction delivered to all students in the general education classroom.

Tier 2 Intervention - Targeted, small-group supplemental instruction provided in addition to Tier 1 for students who require additional support.

Tier 3 Intervention - Intensive, individualized instruction provided to students with significant or persistent academic or behavioral needs.

Universal Screening - The process of assessing all students, typically multiple times per year, to identify those who may be at risk for academic or behavioral challenges.

“Wait to Fail” Model - A reactive approach in which schools delay intervention until students demonstrate significant academic failure before providing support.

Section 1 Reflection Questions

1. Reflect on your school’s current approach to supporting struggling students. Would you describe it as proactive or reactive? What evidence supports your perspective?
2. How consistently does your school implement universal screening? What strengths and gaps do you notice in how screening data are used?
3. Consider the four essential components of MTSS (screening, progress monitoring, multi-level prevention, and data-based decision making). Which component is strongest in your context? Which needs strengthening?
4. Reflect on a student who required intensive support (Tier 3). How did your school determine that level of intervention was necessary?
5. If you were tasked with improving one aspect of your school’s early intervention system, what would you prioritize and why?

Section 1 Activities

1. **Universal Screening Review:** Examine your most recent screening data. Identify patterns across students and note which learners may require closer monitoring or Tier 2 consideration.
2. **Tiered Support Mapping:** Create a visual map of Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 supports currently available in your school. Note any gaps or redundancies.

3. **Intervention Fidelity Check:** Review a Tier 2 intervention used in your classroom or school. Compare implementation practices to the program's intended design and identify areas for improved fidelity.
4. **Behavior and Academic Integration Review:** Analyze how behavioral supports (such as PBIS strategies) are integrated into your academic instruction.
5. **“Wait to Fail” Identification Exercise:** Reflect on your school's referral process. Identify steps that may unintentionally delay intervention and propose one improvement.

Section 2: Recognizing Warning Signs and Identifying At-Risk Students

Early intervention begins with awareness, but it also requires thoughtful interpretation. Before schools can provide effective support, educators must be able to recognize early warning signs, understand the broader factors influencing student performance, and interpret data in ways that promote equity rather than reinforce assumptions. Students rarely become disengaged overnight. Patterns of risk often develop gradually through shifts in attendance, course performance, behavior, or engagement. Recognizing these trends early allows educators to respond proactively instead of reactively. This section explores who may be considered at risk, why early identification is essential, and how warning signs can be identified through structured systems such as Early Warning Systems (EWS). It also examines intentional supports, relationship-building practices, and the critical role of interpreting data responsibly. By centering equity, adopting asset-oriented thinking, and focusing on systems rather than deficits, educators can ensure that data use leads to meaningful and supportive action.

2.1 Understanding At-Risk Students

An at-risk student is generally defined as a student who is at risk of not meeting academic or social expectations or of not graduating from high school (Reflex, 2026). Importantly, students considered at risk do not fit into a single category. Risk factors vary widely, and many students experience multiple overlapping challenges that influence their performance and engagement in school. There is no single profile of an at-risk student. Instead, risk often emerges from circumstances largely outside a student or school's control (Reflex). Some groups commonly identified as potentially at risk include (Winton, 2023):

- **Students experiencing academic difficulties**, including those performing below grade level or demonstrating persistent course failure.
- **Students from low-income families** or those facing financial instability that may limit access to educational resources.
- **Students with learning or physical disabilities**, who may require accommodations or specialized supports.
- **Students struggling with social or emotional concerns**, including challenges with regulation, peer relationships, or mental health.
- **English language learners** or students from non-English-speaking households who may face language-related barriers to academic success.
- **Students who have experienced trauma** or who live in unstable home environments.

Importantly, Winton emphasizes that any student can be at risk under certain circumstances. At-risk students come from all backgrounds and often require targeted supports, additional resources, and coordinated interventions to help them thrive in school. In the classroom, these challenges may surface in ways that

are sometimes misunderstood. Students may appear disengaged, uninterested, or defiant. Attendance issues such as frequent tardiness or absences may become more common. Grades may decline due to incomplete assignments or a lack of participation. At times, behaviors may be interpreted as laziness or a lack of motivation. However, Reflex emphasizes the importance of looking beyond surface behaviors to understand the underlying causes and to identify appropriate supports.

2.2 The Importance of Early Identification of At-Risk Students

Early identification of at-risk students is critical because small warning signs can quickly escalate into more serious academic and behavioral challenges. Amendola (2026) explains that early indicators such as declining grades, attendance concerns, or disengagement can eventually lead to credit loss, course failure, withdrawal, and increased behavioral issues if not addressed promptly. When risk factors are identified early, schools have a greater opportunity to intervene before patterns become entrenched. Attendance data underscores the urgency of early identification. During the 2022–23 school year, chronic absenteeism reached 28 percent nationwide, according to the U.S. Department of Education, a rate that continues to negatively impact academic performance (Amendola). Although attendance improvements have been observed at the elementary level, high school students continue to face persistent challenges. In fact, grades 10 through 12 showed regression during the first half of the 2024–25 school year (Amendola).

These trends reinforce the importance of proactive monitoring systems within MTSS frameworks. Early identification allows educators to recognize attendance patterns, academic decline, or behavioral shifts before they result in long-term consequences such as credit deficiency or disengagement from school. Amendola (2026) emphasizes that early intervention can produce measurable positive

outcomes. Districts that successfully implement early identification practices at the elementary and middle school levels must extend those same proactive strategies into high school to sustain momentum and prevent regression. In practice, early identification means consistently analyzing attendance data, course performance, behavioral indicators, and student engagement metrics (Amendola). When schools act quickly and provide timely, targeted supports, they increase the likelihood that at-risk students remain on track for graduation and long-term success.

2.3 Recognizing Warning Signs

Early identification depends on educators recognizing patterns that signal a student may be at risk. Amendola (2026) highlights several common indicators that schools, teachers and counselors should monitor closely. While these warning signs do not automatically mean a student will experience long-term difficulty, they often signal the need for closer observation or timely intervention. Key warning signs include:

- **Course failures or missing credits**, which may indicate emerging academic gaps or disengagement.
- **Chronic absenteeism or frequent tardiness**, both of which significantly increase the likelihood of academic decline.
- **Low engagement during the first 30 days of a semester**, such as limited participation, incomplete assignments, or withdrawal from classroom activities.
- **Behavioral concerns or social-emotional flags**, including increased referrals, noticeable mood changes, or difficulty regulating emotions.

- **Work or family responsibilities that interfere with school hours**, which can create attendance and performance challenges.
- **Students returning after extended absences or transferring midyear**, who may need additional academic and social supports to re-integrate successfully.

Amendola emphasizes that identifying these patterns early allows educators to intervene before challenges escalate into course failure, withdrawal, or significant behavioral concerns. By consistently monitoring these indicators, teachers play a critical role in supporting at-risk students and connecting them to appropriate tiered supports within MTSS.

2.4 Early Warning Systems

On-Track or Early Warning Systems (EWS), are structured data systems designed to systematically identify students who may be at risk of not graduating on time or failing to meet postsecondary goals (Colorado Department of Education [CDE], 2021). Rather than relying on isolated data points, EWS use local and historical data combined with research-based indicators to detect early signs of risk and connect students to targeted supports. An effective EWS does more than flag concerns. It helps schools understand the patterns that lead to elevated risk and ensures that interventions are aligned with student needs. Importantly, early warning indicator data are used alongside additional information and insights from educators, families, and students themselves to provide a more comprehensive understanding of each learner's situation (CDE).

The ABCs of Early Warning Data

Most Early Warning Systems focus on three highly predictive indicators, often called the “ABCs” of early warning data (CDE, 2021):

- **Attendance**
 - Middle school example: Missing 9 days per quarter or 36 days per year
 - High school example: Missing 10 percent or more of instructional time
- **Behavior**
 - Two or more mild or serious behavioral infractions
- **Course Performance**
 - Grades 6–8 example: Failure in English or math or a GPA below 2.0
 - Grades 9–12 example: Any course failure or failure to be promoted from ninth grade

Research consistently shows that these indicators are more predictive of graduation outcomes than demographic or socioeconomic factors alone (CDE).

Still, an Early Warning System is only as effective as the people and processes that bring it to life. The Colorado Department of Education (2021) emphasizes that EWS depends on individuals, collaborative teams, and entire school communities to understand, interpret, and act on early warning indicator data. Data alone does not improve outcomes. Educators must build strong human systems, shared mindsets, and structured decision-making processes that translate data into meaningful support for students.

Looking Beyond the Data

Early warning indicator data help schools identify students who may be at risk, but numbers alone rarely tell the full story (CDE 2021). For example, knowing that a

student failed mathematics is not sufficient to determine the appropriate intervention. School teams must examine additional information, including attendance records, performance in other classes, and insights from teachers, families, and the student. A deeper review may reveal that absences during key instructional periods contributed to the course failure (CDE). This holistic investigation helps teams understand root causes rather than simply responding to surface-level indicators. Effective EWS implementation requires structured, data-based decision-making protocols that guide teams in examining multiple data sources and stakeholder perspectives before assigning interventions (CDE).

Connecting Data to Action

An EWS is most effective when it is directly connected to a multi-level intervention framework, such as MTSS. The goal is not simply to identify risk but to act on it. Regular review of early warning data allows schools to intervene quickly, reducing the likelihood that students will require intensive credit recovery or dropout prevention efforts later (CDE, 2021). Some districts expand their systems to include whole-child indicators, such as belonging, connectedness, participation in advanced coursework, internships, or other postsecondary readiness benchmarks. The strength of an EWS lies in its ability to translate predictive data into proactive supports that help students stay on track for graduation and long-term success. For EWS to function effectively, stakeholders must have timely access to accurate data and user-friendly tools or dashboards that support ongoing monitoring and collaborative decision-making (CDE).

Students identified through predictive indicators should be matched to interventions that directly address their underlying needs (CDE, 2021). Schools are encouraged to maintain a comprehensive catalog of available interventions and to ensure that supports are responsive, coordinated, and consistent across grade levels and departments. Furthermore, early warning data should inform not only

individual student interventions but also schoolwide improvements. Patterns in attendance, behavior, or course performance may signal the need to adjust instructional practices, policies, or adult behaviors (CDE). Districts play a critical role in facilitating shared learning across schools, reducing redundancies, identifying gaps in available supports, and providing necessary infrastructure and training.

Promoting Equitable Implementation

CDE (2021) also stresses the importance of equitable implementation. A data-based systemic approach using research-based predictive indicators is more accurate and equitable than relying on demographic characteristics or subjective referrals. By focusing on attendance, behavior, and course performance indicators, schools can allocate resources more fairly and ensure that supports are responsive to actual student needs (CDE). Equitable implementation requires explicit attention to access, representation, and quality. Schools must consider the languages, cultures, histories, and assets of the communities they serve when developing and applying EWS processes.

2.5 Intentional Supports for At-Risk Students

Winton (2023) emphasizes that at-risk students often require intentional, coordinated supports to address both academic and non-academic barriers to success. Because risk factors vary, supports should be individualized and responsive to student needs. Common supports include (Winton):

- **Academic support:** Additional instructional assistance such as tutoring, small-group intervention, extended time on assignments, and accommodations for identified learning needs can help close skill gaps and improve performance.

- **Social and emotional support:** Counseling services, mentoring, and structured social-emotional supports can help students manage stress, trauma, or behavioral challenges that interfere with learning.
- **A safe and supportive learning environment:** Classrooms that are structured, predictable, and free from negative influences create stability and allow students to focus on learning.
- **Access to essential resources:** Textbooks, technology, school supplies, and other instructional materials are critical for ensuring equitable access to learning opportunities.
- **Positive role models and mentoring relationships:** Supportive adults who provide guidance, encouragement, and goal-setting assistance can strengthen students' sense of direction and belonging.
- **Flexibility in scheduling and expectations:** Adjustments such as flexible deadlines or alternative scheduling options may help students balance academic responsibilities with work or family commitments.

Winton (2023) underscores that providing these supports increases the likelihood that at-risk students remain engaged, build resilience, and achieve academic success.

Building Trusting Relationships with At-Risk Students

Strong teacher-student relationships are a critical protective factor for students who may be at risk. Winton (2023) emphasizes that intentional relationship-building practices can significantly increase student engagement, motivation, and persistence. Teachers play a central role in creating connection, belonging, and trust within the classroom. Specific strategies teachers can use include: (Winton)

- **Show genuine interest and concern.** Students are more likely to engage when they feel seen and valued. Teachers can ask about students' interests, experiences, and goals outside of school and make time to listen without judgment. Demonstrating authentic care helps strengthen connection.
- **Be approachable and accessible.** Students are more likely to seek help when teachers create low-barrier opportunities for communication. This may include being available before or after class, offering structured check-in times, or inviting students to share concerns privately.
- **Build trust through consistency and fairness.** Trust develops when students experience predictable, fair treatment. Following through on commitments, maintaining clear expectations, and responding consistently to behavior and academic concerns helps establish reliability.
- **Encourage open communication.** Creating space for honest dialogue fosters psychological safety. Teachers can invite feedback, validate student concerns, and model respectful communication, reinforcing that student voices matter.
- **Respect individual differences.** At-risk students may bring diverse cultural backgrounds, lived experiences, and learning needs to the classroom. Practicing inclusivity, cultural responsiveness, and empathy communicates respect and promotes belonging.

Winton (2023) highlights that when teachers intentionally cultivate trust, approachability, and inclusivity, they create a supportive environment that can buffer against risk factors and promote long-term student success.

2.6 Interpreting Data Responsibly

Data are powerful tools for identifying trends, monitoring progress, and guiding intervention decisions. However, data-driven decision making does not automatically lead to equitable outcomes. REL Northeast & Islands (2021) cautions that when student data are disaggregated by demographic groups, educators may unintentionally interpret patterns through deficit-oriented thinking. In these cases, the focus shifts to perceived shortcomings in students or families rather than examining instructional practices, policies, and systems that shape outcomes. When this happens, the potential of data to drive meaningful improvement is diminished. Research suggests that data interpretation is influenced by existing mental models, social context, and confirmation bias (REL). Educators may unconsciously seek evidence that confirms prior beliefs and overlook information that challenges those assumptions (REL). Without intentional reflection, data conversations can reinforce low expectations for students who are underperforming. Responsible data use therefore requires structured processes that encourage deeper inquiry and equitable interpretation.

Acknowledging and Disrupting Implicit Bias

REL Northeast & Islands (2021) emphasizes the importance of recognizing implicit bias in data discussions. Implicit bias refers to unconscious associations or attitudes that influence how information is interpreted. When reviewing student data, educators should pause to examine assumptions, question automatic interpretations, and consider alternative explanations. Teams can intentionally (REL):

- Acknowledge biases without judgment.
- Ask clarifying questions about underlying assumptions.
- Refocus conversations on systemic factors rather than individual blame.

- Examine how policies, procedures, and practices may contribute to inequitable outcomes.

This reflective approach helps disrupt biased thinking and promotes more accurate and equitable conclusions.

Adopting an Asset-Oriented Perspective

A responsible approach to interpreting data also requires shifting from deficit-oriented thinking to an asset-oriented mindset. Rather than attributing lower performance to student limitations, educators can identify and build upon students' strengths, cultural knowledge, and growth potential (REL Northeast & Islands, 2021). An asset orientation does not ignore areas of need; instead, it balances discussions of improvement with recognition of strengths and opportunities for growth. Educators can support asset-oriented data use by:

- Beginning data discussions with student strengths before identifying areas for growth.
- Listening to student and family perspectives through empathy interviews or advisory groups.
- Recognizing students as whole individuals with aspirations and resilience.

Focusing on Systems, Not Individuals

Responsible data interpretation shifts the locus of control from individuals to systems. REL Northeast & Islands (2021) highlight the importance of examining systemic structures, norms, and instructional practices that produce the outcomes reflected in the data. Instead of asking, "What is wrong with this student?" educators might ask, "What about our system contributed to this result?" A systems-focused perspective aligns with continuous improvement principles. It

encourages educators to analyze opportunity-to-learn data, access to advanced coursework, instructional practices, and resource allocation. By concentrating on factors within their sphere of influence, educators can identify actionable changes that improve student experiences and outcomes.

Centering Equity in Data Conversations

To interpret data responsibly, schools can adopt intentional equity practices in professional learning communities, data teams, and faculty meetings. REL Northeast & Islands (2021) recommend:

- Explicitly naming equity as a goal in data conversations.
- Including student and family voices when interpreting data.
- Examining multiple data sources, including qualitative data and opportunity indicators.
- Questioning stereotypes or deficit-based comments when they arise.
- Engaging in continuous improvement cycles to refine systems and practices.

Ultimately, interpreting data responsibly means using evidence not to confirm assumptions, but to deepen understanding and guide equitable action. When educators combine data with reflection, empathy, and a systems-oriented mindset, they increase the likelihood that data use will lead to meaningful improvements for all students (REL Northeast & Islands, 2021).

Section 2 Conclusion

Recognizing and responding to warning signs is a shared responsibility across schools, and doing so effectively requires more than simply collecting data. As this section has demonstrated, at-risk students represent a diverse group with varied

strengths and challenges. Early identification through attendance patterns, course performance, behavioral indicators, and Early Warning Systems provides schools with the opportunity to intervene before concerns escalate into long-term academic failure or disengagement. At the same time, how educators interpret that data matters. Responsible data use requires reflection, awareness of implicit bias, an asset-oriented mindset, and a focus on systemic factors that shape student outcomes. Identification alone is not enough. Effective support depends on coordinated systems, intentional instructional strategies, strong teacher-student relationships, and equitable implementation practices that translate insight into action.

Section 2 Key Terms

Asset Orientation - An approach to interpreting student performance that focuses on students' strengths, cultural knowledge, resilience, and growth potential rather than perceived deficits.

At-Risk Student - A student who may be in danger of not meeting academic or social expectations or of not graduating on time due to academic, behavioral, social-emotional, or environmental factors.

Behavioral Indicator - Observable patterns of behavior—such as referrals, mood changes, or infractions—that may signal emerging risk.

Chronic Absenteeism - A pattern of missing a significant percentage of school days (commonly defined as 10% or more), which strongly predicts academic decline and graduation risk.

Confirmation Bias - The tendency to interpret data in ways that confirm preexisting beliefs while overlooking contradictory evidence.

Continuous Improvement - An ongoing process of examining data, reflecting on systems and practices, and making iterative changes to improve student outcomes.

Credit Deficiency - A condition in which a student has failed courses or earned insufficient credits to remain on track for promotion or graduation.

Deficit-Oriented Thinking - A perspective that attributes lower student performance to perceived shortcomings in students or families rather than examining systemic factors.

Disaggregated Data - Student performance data broken down by demographic or subgroup characteristics to examine patterns and disparities.

Early Warning Systems (EWS) - Structured data systems designed to identify students who may be at risk of not graduating on time by monitoring predictive indicators.

Engagement Metrics - Measures used to assess student participation, involvement, and connection to learning, such as assignment completion, participation, and attendance.

Equitable Implementation - The intentional and fair application of systems and supports to ensure all students have access to resources and opportunities based on need.

Implicit Bias - Unconscious beliefs or associations that influence how individuals interpret information and make decisions.

Intentional Supports - Deliberate, coordinated academic or non-academic strategies designed to address identified student needs.

Opportunity-to-Learn Data - Information related to students' access to instructional resources, advanced coursework, supports, and learning conditions.

Predictive Indicators - Research-based data points—such as attendance, behavior, and course performance—that reliably signal potential future risk.

Protective Factor - A condition or relationship, such as a strong teacher-student connection, that helps buffer students against risk.

Root Cause Analysis - A structured process used to examine underlying reasons for student performance challenges rather than responding only to surface symptoms.

Systemic Factors - School- or district-level structures, policies, and practices that influence student outcomes.

Whole-Child Indicators - Measures that extend beyond academics to include belonging, connectedness, social-emotional development, and postsecondary readiness benchmarks.

Section 2 Reflection Questions

1. Think about a student you have taught who struggled academically or behaviorally. In hindsight, what early warning signs were present, and how might earlier identification have changed the outcome?
2. When a student begins to disengage early in the school year, how do you typically respond? What proactive strategies could you implement earlier?
3. Consider the ABC indicators (attendance, behavior, course performance). Which of these do you feel most confident interpreting? Which require deeper understanding?
4. If you were to conduct a root cause analysis on a recent student performance concern, what data sources would you examine beyond grades?

Section 2 Activities

1. **Attendance Pattern Audit:** Review your class attendance data from the past grading period. Identify students with emerging patterns of tardiness or absence and reflect on possible contributing factors.
2. **Relationship-Building Inventory:** Reflect on which students you have built strong connections with and which you have not. Develop a plan to intentionally check in with at least three students weekly.
3. **Intervention Catalog Review:** Research and compile a short list of academic and social-emotional supports available in your school or district that you can refer students to.
4. **Collaborative Consultation:** Schedule a conversation with a counselor, interventionist, or colleague to discuss one student concern and explore additional perspectives.
5. **Action Plan Development:** Create a brief personal action plan outlining two changes you will implement to strengthen early identification and responsible data interpretation in your classroom.

Course Conclusion

Early intervention is not a single program or initiative; it is a mindset and a system of practice grounded in prevention, responsiveness, and equity. Throughout this course, we have examined how MTSS provides structured frameworks for delivering tiered supports, how educators can recognize warning signs of risk, and how Early Warning Systems help schools act before challenges become entrenched. We have also explored the importance of intentional supports, relationship-building, and interpreting data responsibly to avoid deficit thinking

and focus on systemic improvement. Effective early intervention requires more than screening tools and tiered structures. It depends on collaborative teams, strong instructional practices, meaningful family engagement, and a commitment to continuous improvement. Most importantly, it requires educators to view students through an asset-oriented lens, recognizing strengths while addressing needs. When schools combine proactive identification, evidence-based interventions, and equitable data practices, they create environments where students are supported early, consistently, and effectively. By applying the principles and strategies explored in this course, educators can play a critical role in ensuring that all students remain engaged, supported, and on track for long-term success.

Classroom Example

Mr. Summers teaches fourth grade at a public elementary school in a mid-sized district. His classroom includes students with a wide range of academic abilities, learning styles, and social-emotional needs. Mr. Summers is committed to creating a proactive learning environment where all students can succeed, and he strongly believes in identifying and addressing concerns early rather than waiting for students to fall significantly behind. At the start of the school year, Mr. Summers carefully reviews universal screening data in reading and math, as well as behavior and attendance reports. He notices that while most students are responding well to core instruction, a small group is showing early signs of difficulty. One student struggles with reading fluency and avoids independent reading tasks. Another frequently calls out and has difficulty staying on task during transitions. A third student has become increasingly withdrawn and hesitant to participate in group discussions.

Rather than assuming these concerns will resolve on their own, Mr. Summers begins documenting patterns through structured observation and formative assessments. He collaborates with his grade-level team and uses the school's MTSS framework to determine appropriate next steps. His goal is to strengthen support within the general education classroom while ensuring that any additional interventions are timely, targeted, and data-informed.

Challenges

- **Identifying Concerns Early Without Overreacting:** Mr. Summers wants to respond quickly to early warning signs, but he also recognizes that students develop at different rates. He must determine whether a pattern of behavior or academic difficulty reflects a temporary adjustment or a need for targeted intervention.
- **Strengthening Tier 1 Instruction:** Although Mr. Summers provides differentiated instruction, he wonders whether there are adjustments he can make to his core teaching practices that would better support struggling students before moving to Tier 2 interventions.
- **Balancing Academic and Behavioral Supports:** Some students who struggle academically also demonstrate off-task behavior or frustration. Mr. Summers wants to ensure he is addressing the root cause of challenges rather than focusing only on surface-level behaviors.
- **Collecting and Using Data Effectively:** While he gathers observational notes and assessment data, Mr. Summers is unsure how much data is enough to make informed decisions. He wants to ensure his documentation is objective and aligned with school procedures.

Considerations for Support and Improvement

- How can Mr. Summers strengthen Tier 1 instruction so that more students are successful without requiring additional intervention?
- What data sources, such as work samples, progress monitoring tools, and structured observations, would provide a clearer picture of each student's needs?
- When should he initiate Tier 2 small-group interventions, and how can he monitor whether those supports are effective?
- How can he integrate executive functioning supports, such as visual schedules or goal-setting routines, to prevent escalation of behavioral concerns?
- What language and strategies can he use when meeting with families to ensure collaboration and shared problem-solving?



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