Component V: Expertise (Well-designed Professional Learning)

Expertise and professional learning are the "fuel that drives the RtII Engine" (Batsche, n.d.). The four critical components of MTSS-RtII already described in this Field Guide require significant expertise. The development and refinement of this expertise must be supported by well-designed opportunities for professional learning. In this final section, we describe the significance of expertise and professional learning and offer guidance for how to plan for and tailor professional learning in a multi-tiered system of RtII.

Operating Assumptions: Specifically refer to Guiding Principles 5, 7 9, and 10.
Key Definitions: Refer to the Glossary for the following terms:
Professional Learning (Professional Development)
Job-embedded Professional Learning

The Significance of Expertise and Professional Learning

Expertise matters. Research has shown that teaching quality and effective school leadership are the most important factors in raising student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Fullan, 2009). In fact, the expertise of the teacher has been distinguished as the most important factor in improving students' learning (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1999). Variations in teachers' expertise may account for about 40 percent of the variance in students' reading and mathematics achievement at grades 1 through 11--more than any other single factor, even after controlling for socioeconomic status (Darling-Hammond, 1997). Excellent instruction provided by an expert teacher and effective school leadership are keys to school improvement and the success of a multi-tiered system of RtII (Costello et al., 2010; Lose, 2007).

How does expertise make a difference? Research suggests that students of expert teachers learn more, and that expert teachers make more sophisticated, integrated judgments about students' performances and teach with more fluency, automaticity, and efficiency than novices (Gallant & Schwartz, 2010; Garmston, 1998; Sternberg & Horvath, 1995). As teachers move along a continuum from novice to expert, they develop increasingly detailed, complex, and interrelated knowledge about their disciplines, pedagogy, and students (Sternberg & Horvath, 1995; Shulman, 1987). The novice stage of teaching might last for the first year and most teachers develop a state of competence within three or four years. Only a modest proportion of teachers, however, move to the expert stage (Berliner, 1988).

Well-designed professional learning supports the acquisition or refinement of expertise. For teachers and school leaders to be as effective as possible, they must continually expand their knowledge and skills and develop their abilities to implement best practices in the classroom (Mizell, 2010; Reed, Wexler, & Vaughn, 2012). Educators who experience effective professional learning during pre-service preparation and then throughout their careers are more likely to improve their skills in ways that impact student learning (Darling-Hammond, 1997). To be effective, learning opportunities need to be intentionally planned, practical, and systemic. Initial learning opportunities should be followed by embedded experiences.

While good professional learning is important in all contexts, it is essential in some. A recent publication by the National Staff Development Council/Learning Forward (2011) identified schoolwide collaborative professional learning as a critical factor in increasing student achievement in high-poverty schools. Teacher expertise is critical to MTSS-RtII because there is a strong need for teachers to make good decisions in differentiating instruction, conferring with colleagues, and recommending placements (Dorn & Henderson, 2010; Lose, 2007; International Reading Association, 2010). Some of these roles and responsibilities may be new to educators and administrators, increasing the need for effective professional learning and support.

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Essential Elements of Expertise and Professional Learning within MTSS-RtII

Well-designed professional learning for MTSS-RtII honors research-based characteristics of well-designed professional learning and provides specific support for the development of expertise in the four critical components detailed in this Field Guide (systematic and comprehensive approach; effective collaboration; comprehensive, balanced assessment system; high quality instruction and intervention).

In this section, we identify essential elements of expertise and professional learning for each component of MTSS-RtII and conclude with research-based characteristics of effective, well-designed professional learning. While these elements are not all-inclusive, they can provide a good starting point.

Systemic and comprehensive approach

Professional learning for MTSS-RtII includes all educators in a school system and addresses the learning and skill needs at each level of the system. Purposes and processes of multi-tiered RtII and its implications for curriculum, instruction, assessment practices, and ongoing monitoring of schoolwide progress need to be understood by all within the system. At times, it may involve family and community members.

A school-based needs assessment of the current level and types of all educators' (teachers, specialists, administrators) expertise and an analysis of student performance data are essential components of a systemic and comprehensive approach to RtII. The results of this assessment can serve as the foundation for a professional learning action plan, which will be implemented and continually monitored and evaluated. Leadership ensures that the school's professional learning plan aligns with the school's improvement plan and includes:

- all educators within the system,
- understandings about roles and responsibilities,
- differentiation for professional learning needs,
- the four components of MTSS-RtII,
- sufficient time for professional learning activities and collaboration on aspects of multi-tiered instruction,
- job-embedded professional learning models,
- the use of experts and highly qualified professionals to provide targeted professional learning opportunities,
- a growth-oriented supervision model, and
- well-designed evaluations that determine whether the goals targeted by the professional learning opportunities have been achieved.

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Effective collaboration

Skills and strategies for effective collaborating, teaming, and communicating among professionals, parents, and communities are essential in a multi-tiered system of support that emphasizes distributed leadership and a team approach. Well-designed professional learning that supports effective collaboration within a MTSS-RtII:

- develops and maintains shared values and vision for MTSS-RtII;
- creates common language/understanding of terms;
- teaches skills and strategies for how to work as a professional team and effectively use collaboration time (i.e., decision-making protocols, meeting norms, procedures for resolving conflicts and achieving consensus); and
- engages parents and communities.

Comprehensive and balanced assessment system

Educators participating in MTSS-RtII need to be able to collect, interpret, and discuss data from multiple sources for specific purposes. In order to establish and maintain a purpose-driven comprehensive and balanced assessment system, they need to be knowledgeable about:

- the purposes of each component of the school's balanced assessment system;
- assessment tools used to identify students who require a closer look (screening), investigate and analyze learning difficulties (diagnostics), inform instruction (formative progress monitoring); monitor progress (benchmark progress monitoring; and verify learning (outcomes or summative assessment);
- protocols for collection, synthesis, and analysis of student performance data across a variety of assessments;
- how to assess students' progress by looking at student work and observing learning;
- effective use of student performance data for decisions about techniques for differentiating instruction and positive behavior supports; and
- techniques for discussing data with colleagues.

High-quality instruction and intervention that is responsive and differentiated

Research on effective teaching identifies six areas of knowledge critical for expertise in teaching (Garmston, 1998). Because RtII begins in the classroom, each of these knowledge areas is implicated in the success of a multi-tiered system. We have annotated them below to demonstrate the connection of these knowledge areas to MTSS/RtII:

1. **Content.** Expert teachers have deep knowledge about the disciplines they teach. *MTSS/RtII*: Teachers must know the progression of content development so that they differentiate instruction based on students' knowledge and possible misconceptions related to their understanding of the content. The CCSS expectation that the English Language Arts will be developed throughout the curriculum at middle and high school, means that some discipline teachers will need to acquire additional expertise.

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2.   **Pedagogy**. Expert teachers have complex understandings of teaching strategies and know which teaching strategies are most appropriate for the content being taught. (This is in addition to the more generalized teaching knowledge such as managing classroom routines, setting expectations, etc.). *MTSS/RtII*: Responsive and flexible decision-making about instruction is critical in a multi-tiered system. Teachers need a repertoire of high-utility, effective teaching strategies from which to draw for instruction and interventions.

3.   **Students and how they learn**. Expert teachers are sensitive to progressions of content learning, child/adolescent development, cultural factors, gender differences, and style preferences. *MTSS/RtII*: Understanding the developmental continuum of learning is essential to making good decisions about next instructional steps for all students, and especially those who struggle with learning. In addition, learning differences related to cultural norms or linguistic factors impact students' learning, especially if teachers are not aware of ways to respond instructionally. These factors need to be understood and addressed in research-based ways, and not mistaken for learning disabilities.

4.   **Self-knowledge**. Expert teachers use knowledge of their own patterns, preferences, values, standards and beliefs to support informed decision-making about what and how to teach. *MTSS/RtII:* Recognition of one's own knowledge, beliefs and preferences is an essential first step to recognizing that there may be other ways of knowing and learning. Self-knowledge permits teachers to organize for instruction and assessment in ways that support diverse student strengths.

5.   **Cognitive processes of instruction.** Expert teachers have higher conceptual levels and are more adaptive and flexible. Their students learn more, are more cooperative, and are more involved in their work than students of lower conceptual teachers. *MTSS/RtII*: Teachers need to be able to continue developing their knowledge and expertise and to apply it to new or unfamiliar contexts in order for students to experience success.

6.   **Collegial interaction**. Expert teachers learn from each other and shape the action planning activities. School-based professional communities hold the potential to support teacher learning and improve student learning in powerful ways. *MTSS/RtII*: Teachers must be able to collaborate with colleagues and parents across multiple settings to ensure that students are receiving the best possible instruction and intervention from each member of the team.

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Over the course of an educator's career, effective professional learning supports and develops each of these 6 areas, and each of these has an analog in the components of MTSS-RtII (see above).

Specific (new) learning that may be required for a multi-tiered system of support for RtII includes:

- unique needs of student populations: students with disabilities, ELs, students of poverty, and students representing all ethnicities;
- research-based responsive, differentiated instructional practices for individual learning needs;
- research based intensive intervention strategies for acceleration of learning;
- positive behavioral supports; and
- tools and strategies for evaluating and using a variety of instructional materials, including core instructional and intervention programs within their schools.

Attributes of Well-Designed Professional Learning for MTSS-RtII

Learning Forward (formerly known as the National Staff Development Council) defines effective professional learning as "that which causes teachers to improve their instruction and/or causes administrators to become better school leaders" (2011, p. 43). This organization proposes seven research-based standards for professional learning that can also be useful for schools to overlay as a lens when designing quality MTSS-RtII professional learning programs. They establish that professional learning to increase educator effectiveness and results for all students:

1. occurs within *learning communities*, committed to continuous improvement, collective responsibility and goal alignment;
2. requires *skillful leaders* who develop capacity, advocate, and create support systems for professional learning;
3. requires prioritizing, monitoring, and *coordinating resources* for educator learning;
4. uses a variety of sources and types of student, educator, and system *data* to plan, assess, and evaluate professional learning;
5. *integrates* theories, research, and models of human learning to achieve its intended outcomes;
6. applies research on change and sustains support for implementation of professional learning for *long term change*; and
7. *aligns* its outcomes with educator performance and student curriculum standards (Learning Forward, 2011).

With these standards in mind, what does well-designed professional learning for MTSS-RtII look like? A wide range of professional learning experiences are available to educators outside of the school setting, such as online or university courses, workshops, and conferences. While these decontextualized professional learning opportunities can provide significant benefit to many professionals, however, they are too often ineffective because the new learning often does not transfer to practice (Learning Forward, 2011).

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Job-embedded models of professional learning have the best chance of improving and sustaining professional prac-tice (Biancarosa, Bryk & Dexter, 2010; Saunders, Goldenberg & Gallimore, 2009). Job-embedded learning occurs while teachers and administrators engage in their daily work and simultaneously reflect on their experiences and share new insights with each other. In fact, the most recent research suggests that even job-embedded professional learning is only effective when there is sufficient infrastructure in place to support it (National Institute for Excellence in Teaching [NIET], 2012).

For job-embedded professional learning, educators may work with a knowledgeable person from inside or outside the school. There are many types, ranging from coaching and individual/group study to action research and peer observation. Professional Learning Communities (Dufour & Eaker, 1998) that support problem-solving teams have been shown to be an especially effective approach to professional learning (see Effective Collaboration section of this document).

In an effective multi-tiered system of support, teachers and school leaders take collective responsibility for the suc-cess of all students and work together to use data to understand what students are and are not learning, to identify instructional gaps, and determine what teachers need to learn to improve instruction to help close those gaps. Team members ask questions such as: What worked well? What did not? What evidence exists that students are perform-ing better in response to educators' new skills? In this process, professional learning is immediately relevant, as teachers analyze and discuss with team members what they are learning and their experiences in using what they learned. This process supports a cycle of continuous improvement and ensures that educators continually become more effective in addressing students' learning.