

Building Trauma-Responsive Schools

Through Compassionate Systems Change

*A Field Guide for Transforming Multi-Tiered Systems from
Compliance to Care*

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WISE SOUL

STAND FIRM. BE EPIC.

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Executive Summary

52%

of K–12 teachers said they feel burned out ‘always’ or ‘very often’

48%

of school principals reported ongoing job stress and experiencing burnout

Wise Souls LLC: Building Trauma-Responsive Schools Through Compassionate Systems Change is a district-facing field guide for making MTSS a coherent, sustainable system of support instead of a compliance routine.

Here is the implementation truth most districts are living: MTSS does not fail because we lack interventions. It breaks because we keep building tiered systems on **depleted adults, fragmented routines, and meeting cultures that drift into blame.**

I have watched this pattern up close across high-stress communities. When adults are stretched thin, Tier 1 gets inconsistent, Tier 2 becomes messy, Tier 3 becomes chaotic, and “data use” can quietly turn into pressure instead of support.

The Wise-Compassionate Framework (WCF) adds a **non-negotiable Foundation** beneath student tiers.

This Foundation is not a wellness slogan. It is **operational infrastructure**: protected time, workload realism, nervous system literacy, and relational safety in staff culture. This is how we stop asking dysregulated adults to regulate dysregulated students.

This matters because educator burnout is not rare; it is widespread. In Gallup’s reporting, **52 percent of K–12 teachers said they feel burned out ‘always’ or ‘very often’** (Marken & Agrawal, 2022). Similarly, **48 percent of school principals reported ongoing job stress and experiencing burnout** (Steiner et al., 2022).

What makes this different

- **Foundation first, with metrics and a decision rule** so districts do not expand interventions while staff capacity is collapsing.
- **Clean decision rules** that reduce overload: clear entry and exit logic so Tier 2 does not become random, reactive, or personality-based.
- **Dignity safeguards** so supports feel supportive, not punitive, to students, families, and staff.
- **Humane data use:** *Data without compassion is surveillance, not care.*
- **Monday-ready tools:** standardized routines, meeting norms, team ownership, and one decision matrix that keeps implementation coherent across sites.

What districts get when implemented with integrity

- A steadier Tier 1 climate and fewer predictable escalations.
- Cleaner Tier 2 entry and exit decisions with progress monitoring teams can actually sustain.
- Stronger Tier 3 coordination through clear ownership, routines, and humane documentation.
- Reduced implementation drift because adults have the conditions to deliver care consistently.
- A system that boards and funders can trust because it is measurable, coherent, and aligned with implementation science.

How districts start

Most districts begin with the **WCF Readiness Review (60 minutes)** to map current teaming, identify Tier 1 gaps driving Tier 2 overload, audit referral and monitoring flow, name Foundation stress points, and leave with a 30-day sprint plan plus a right-sized metrics menu.



This is not “another initiative.” It is the missing Foundation that makes existing MTSS models work. When adults are resourced and regulated, the tiers hold. When the Foundation is weak, everything else becomes “compliance theater.”

We can do better. We must do better.

How to Use This Guide

- **Superintendent / Cabinet:** Executive Summary + Foundation + Invitation
- **MTSS Lead / District Coordinator:** Foundation + Tier 1–3 “Done Right” + The One Matrix
- **Principal / AP:** Tier 1 “Done Right” + Meeting Norms + 10-Day Micro-Action Launch
- **Counselor / BHC / Psych / SST Lead:** Tier 2–3 tools + progress monitoring + dignity safeguards
- **Teachers/Paraeducators:** Foundation basics + Tier 1 “Done Right” (daily routines, language, Calm Corner standard, regulation rituals)

The Crisis We Keep Avoiding

In districts across California's Central Valley, teachers arrive at school already exhausted. By lunch, behavior referrals pile up. By dismissal, counselors are triaging crises with no time for the prevention work that would make tomorrow different. This isn't an anomaly; it's the predictable outcome of implementing Multi-Tiered Systems of Support without the foundational infrastructure that makes them sustainable.

Doug Fuchs, the Nicholas Hobbs Chair of Special Education and Human Development at Vanderbilt University, told Education Week that although he supports MTSS in principle, he has watched it "fail more often than it succeeds," largely because most schools lack the time, staffing, and resources needed to implement Tier 2 and Tier 3 with integrity (Pendharkar, 2023). I spent 15 years as a school social worker, counselor, and elementary principal in California's Central Valley learning that the failure point is rarely the tiered model itself. It's the conditions we ask people to carry it in.

Most districts implement MTSS with technical routines while exhausting the adults responsible for delivery. Teachers get binders full of protocols but little support for nervous system regulation. Administrators track Tier 2 minutes but struggle to name the adult conditions that make consistent implementation possible. Students move between tiers based on data points, while the relational ground underneath them stays unstable.

I did the opposite. I treated adult wellness as foundational infrastructure, not a perk. In my

leadership work, when adult capacity was strengthened through nervous system literacy, relational consistency, and protected space to recover, discipline escalation decreased and instructional steadiness improved over time. The interventions did not change. The adults delivering them did.

The research confirms what I learned in practice: implementation breakdowns persist not because we lack evidence-based interventions, but because we ignore the infrastructure that makes fidelity sustainable (Fixsen et al., 2005; Region 6 Comprehensive Center, 2022). This guide integrates the Wise-Compassionate Framework (WCF), introduced comprehensively in Rethinking Education Together (Mercado, 2025a), with MTSS architecture to close that gap and not add to the work.

This framework is built on research and relationships, not compliance and control. The question is not whether MTSS exists in your district. The question is whether it is felt as care in classrooms, meetings, and family conversations. If it isn't, sustainability will be fragile and fidelity will drift.

The failure point is clear: we've been building multi-tiered systems on unstable ground. What follows is not another MTSS model, it's the missing foundation that makes existing models work. Before examining screening tools or intervention menus, district leaders must understand the four-level architecture that transforms compliance routines into coherent care.

The Non-Negotiable Foundation

Educator well-being and workplace conditions are consistently linked with implementation quality and sustainability in schools.

MTSS is not three programs. It's one system with four levels of intensity.

Before you audit screening tools or design intervention menus, your leadership team must be able to answer four questions consistently:

- 1 *What is the need?* (assessment)
- 2 *What support matches the need?* (intervention alignment)
- 3 *How will we know if it's working?* (progress monitoring)
- 4 *What will we do if it's not?* (data-driven adjustment)

Most districts answer these questions technically. The WCF enhancement ensures we answer them humanely.

This matters because implementation research is consistently associated: **Educator well-being and workplace conditions are consistently linked with implementation quality and sustainability in schools** (State et al., 2024). Surveilled, overwhelmed, or unsupported educators implement interventions mechanically. The intervention might be evidence-based, but the delivery conditions undermine its effectiveness.

THE WCF OPERATING PRINCIPLE:

Structure and soul are not competing priorities. Soul is what makes structure sustainable.

Claim Discipline for foundational work: What We Will Not Do Here

- We will not demand “fidelity” from exhausted people and then blame them when the system breaks.
- We will not interpret student outcomes without naming adult conditions that shape those outcomes.
- We will not mistake monitoring for support. If it feels like surveillance, it is not care.
- We will not stack interventions on a weak Foundation. We stabilize adults and Tier 1 first, then build.

The Foundation: Adult Wellness First

The Missing Piece That Makes Everything Else Possible

Here's where traditional MTSS gets it wrong from the start. Every framework begins with Tier 1 universal support for students. That's the field's first and most critical error.



With all the research and insights from neuroscience we know that it might be impossible to regulate students when the adults are dysregulated.



This is why we can't keep delivering trauma-informed interventions when teachers themselves are running on compassion fatigue. We have to stop pretending we can build healing-centered systems with wounded builders, especially when the conditions around them keep reproducing the same status quo that burned people out in the first place.

The Foundation represents a paradigm shift: **adult wellness is not self-care. It's infrastructure.** State, Ouellette, Zaheer, and Zahn (2024) proposed educator MTSS with three tiers. Practitioners discuss the "foundational tier" for staff wellness informally. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2017) identifies Secondary Traumatic Stress in educators as a systemic concern. While educator MTSS and trauma-informed frameworks emphasize staff wellness, most MTSS guidance treats staff wellness as an enabling condition rather than a formalized, decision-ruled foundation.

Until now. The WCF formalizes what everyone knows but nobody builds: you have to support the adults first. Not as an afterthought. Not as "self-care." As foundational infrastructure.

The Research Base

Gallup's 2022 Panel Workforce Study reported that 44% of K–12 education employees and 52% of K–12 teachers reported feeling burned out "always" or "very often," the highest burnout rate of any U.S. industry (Marken & Agrawal, 2022). A meta-analysis focused on the pandemic period estimated pooled teacher burnout prevalence at **about 52%**, with individual studies ranging widely by methods and context. In parallel, Education Resource Strategies documented substantial year-to-year teacher churn during 2022–23, with especially high losses in higher-poverty contexts. (Education Resource Strategies, 2024).

This isn't an individual weakness. This is a predictable system failure.

The Burnout Crisis Is a Systems Crisis

44%

of K–12 education employees and

52%

of K–12 teachers reported feeling burned out "always" or "very often"

The Direct Link to Student Outcomes: Teacher Well-Being

Jennings and Greenberg's (2009) Prosocial Classroom Model established something we should have known intuitively: teachers' social-emotional competence critically determines supportive relationships, effective classroom management, and SEL program implementation quality. They documented the "burnout cascade" where teacher stress reduces effectiveness, increases student behavioral problems, and generates more teacher stress. It's a vicious cycle that undermines any tiered support system.

High levels of stress are affecting teacher health and well-being, causing burnout, disengagement, job dissatisfaction, and high turnover (Greenberg et al., 2016). Forty-six percent of teachers report high daily stress during the school year, tied with nurses for the highest rate among all occupational groups (Greenberg et al., 2016). Teacher stress produces both educational and fiscal consequences. Ronfeldt et al. (2013) examined longitudinal turnover patterns in New York City schools and found that students in grades with higher teacher turnover scored lower in both math and ELA. When comparing schools with minimal turnover (0%) to those with very high turnover (100%), the modeled effect sizes ranged from 8.2% to 10.2% of a

standard deviation in math and 4.9% to 6.0% of a standard deviation in ELA.

Separately, the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF, 2007) estimated the national cost of teacher turnover at \$7.3 billion annually. This is why I keep saying it plainly: when the adult system is depleted, student outcomes and district budgets pay the price.

Schonert-Reichl (2017) synthesizes research linking educator well-being with classroom climate and student outcomes. The CARE Program (Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education), developed by Patricia Jennings, provides rigorous evidence that mindfulness training improves teacher well-being and classroom emotional climate. Jennings and colleagues (2017) conducted a randomized controlled trial in NYC with 224 teachers across 36 schools. CARE classrooms were more emotionally positive, with teachers demonstrating greater sensitivity to student needs. Subsequent qualitative research by Schussler and colleagues (2018, 2019) examined how teachers' adoption of mindfulness practice led to improved emotional awareness and more supportive classroom interactions.

This isn't soft science. This is the foundation that makes everything else work.

The Foundation "Done Right" Looks Like

Universal Supports for ALL Staff

- 1 Protected Wellness Time** (*not "if you have time"*)
 - 30 minutes weekly for contemplative practice, embedded in paid work time
 - Wellness rooms with sensory tools, meditation space, regulation resources
 - No meetings scheduled during designated wellness blocks
- 2 Evidence-based adult capacity-building** (*choose one and implement with integrity*):
 - **CARE for Teachers** (Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education): is a mindfulness-based professional development program with robust randomized trial evidence. Jennings and colleagues (2017) conducted a large cluster randomized controlled trial with 224 elementary teachers and found statistically significant improvements in teachers' adaptive emotion regulation, mindfulness, and classroom emotional climate.

- **Compassion cultivation training:** a related but distinct approach that strengthens compassion, self-compassion, and relational steadiness through sustained practice and applied reflection.

**The core point is not the brand name. The point is that adult capacity must be trained deliberately, not assumed.*

3 Nervous System Literacy

- Professional development on polyvagal theory and trauma responses
- Co-regulation skill-building before expecting teachers to co-regulate students
- Somatic practices integrated into staff meetings (we model what we teach)

4 Sustainable Workload Design

- Audit of time demands with explicit reduction targets
- Protected planning periods that are actually protected (not “coverage”)
- Intervention facilitation counts as teaching load, not addition to it

5 Relational Safety in Staff Culture

- Psychological safety protocols in team meetings
- Conflict resolution processes that model what we expect in classrooms
- Leadership practices that demonstrate regulation under pressure

WCF Integration: The Three Continua Apply to Adults First

In Rethinking Education Together (Mercado, 2025), I describe the Wise-Compassionate Framework as a way to organize how schools build conditions for learning and healing. The core move is simple: **we apply the continua to adults first**, because the adult system is the student system.

Foundation is not another “program.” It’s the conditions that make every tier work: time, trust, emotional safety, shared language, and protected capacity.

When Foundation is strong, the three practice continua become implementable.

Behavioral Continuum (*Staff Culture*)

- Clear relational norms for how adults speak to each other when things are hard
- Conflict repair practices, not avoidance or gossip
- Predictable support when a staff member is struggling If we want classrooms grounded in dignity, we have to practice dignity in the staff room first.

Academic Continuum (*Adult Learning and Implementation*)

- Professional learning that honors teacher expertise and context
- Skill-building that is usable tomorrow, not performative compliance
- A growth stance toward implementation: practice, feedback, refine Adults deserve to be treated like learners, not like machines.

SEL Continuum (*Adult Regulation and Belonging*)

- Psychological safety and belonging on teams
- Tools for regulation, self-compassion, and meaning-making
- Space to metabolize stress so it doesn't spill onto kids We cannot build healing-centered systems with dysregulated builders.

Foundation Metrics

If we're not measuring it, we're not protecting it. I track Foundation in two simple buckets: adult well-being and adult system readiness.

Adult well-being indicators (*leading indicators*)

- Brief staff wellness pulse (weekly or biweekly, 5 items max)
- Burnout indicators (MBI-informed emotional exhaustion items or district tool)
- Sick leave patterns and coverage strain (trend, not punishment)
- Retention and turnover (by site/role, paired with context)

Adult system readiness indicators (*implementation capacity*)

- Protected time actually used as intended (minutes protected per week)
- Participation in wellness or support structures (not as compliance, as access)
- Staff climate pulse: "I feel safe, supported, and valued" (trend over time)
- Tier 1 routines consistency check (quick look-fors, 2–3 items)

THE KEY RULE

Do not interpret Tier 1–3 fidelity without Foundation data.

Because data without compassion is surveillance, not care. When staff are depleted, "fidelity problems" are often capacity problems wearing a different outfit.

FOUNDATION DECISION RULE

If staff wellness metrics decline, pause expansion of student interventions and return to Foundation strengthening.

Systems and leaders cannot Tier 1/2/3 your way out of a Foundation problem. Implementation research and classroom studies keep pointing to the same truth: when educators' social-emotional competence and well-being are strong, classroom climate stabilizes, instruction improves, and social-emotional and behavioral supports are far more likely to be implemented as intended (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

But when burnout climbs to levels seen in high-stress educational environments, including the COVID-19 period where pooled prevalence was estimated at 52% with individual studies ranging from 33% to 71% depending on methodology (Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2023), the Foundation is already under strain. The same is true when annual teacher turnover exceeds the national average of roughly 16%, especially in high-need contexts where it often reaches 30% or more (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Holme et al., 2018). At that point, MTSS is no longer just an implementation challenge. It becomes a capacity challenge.

And when participation in staff wellness support drops far below what's typically associated with effective workplace wellness efforts, leaders should treat that as a guardrail,

not a footnote. These indicators are leadership decision thresholds meant to prevent system overload. They are not clinical or diagnostic cut scores.

This is why tier work fails in most districts: we ask dysregulated adults to regulate dysregulated students. You cannot give what you do not have.

When facilitators are operating in survival mode, students do not experience support. They experience surveillance. And no matter how evidence-based the intervention is, the body knows the difference between care and control.

The data system can track fidelity. The nervous system tracks safety. When those two are misaligned, implementation breaks. In the worst cases, it becomes retraumatizing, even when every checkbox is marked.

The most effective district leaders do not respond by adding more programs. They strengthen the Foundation: adult capacity, relational trust, role clarity, and the conditions for regulation. When the Foundation is strong, tiered supports stop feeling like a compliance demand and start functioning as a coordinated system of care.

Tier 1: Prevention as Relational Architecture



Purpose

Prevent predictable harm, teach skills explicitly, and build conditions where most students can thrive.



Who It Serves

All students and all staff, all day, across classrooms and common areas.



The Research Base

When Tier 1 is implemented with fidelity, districts typically see substantial reductions in escalations that require more intensive support, because predictable routines, explicit instruction, and relational consistency prevent predictable harm before it compounds. The problem is that many districts attempt to expand Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports while Tier 1 remains unstable, creating what I call the intervention trap: more programs layered on top of weak core conditions (Horner & Sugai, 2015; Zhang & Xin, 2024).

The evidence for effective Tier 1 is clear:

Explicit teaching of behavioral expectations (Horner & Sugai, 2015)

- High rates of positive reinforcement are commonly described as aiming for ratios like 3:1 to 4:1 praise to reprimands— associated with higher levels of on-task behavior and lower disruption (Caldarella et al., 2020)
- Predictable routines and well-scaffolded transitions reduce students' cognitive load, allowing them to devote more attention to instruction rather than constantly decoding expectations (Horner & Sugai, 2015)
- Universal screening two to three times per year to identify emerging academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs early, before they escalate (Taylor et al., 2023)

What the research rarely names explicitly: **these practices require regulated adults.** Educators can not co-regulate a dysregulated classroom if your own nervous system is in threat mode. This is why The Foundation must come first.

Tier 1 “Done Right” Looks Like

Structural Components:

- Clear routines, predictable transitions, consistent relational responses
- Explicit teaching of behavior and regulation skills (we don't assume compliance)
- Universal screening + classroom data used for support, not punishment
- Calm, coherent adult presence across campus

WCF Enhancements That Make It Work:

- **Relational discipline as default:** “What happened?” before “What's the consequence?”
- **Co-regulation practices as core instruction:** 2-minute regulation routines aren't “nice to have.” They're academic scaffolding. When students are regulated, they can learn. This is foundational, not fluffy.
- **Staff nervous system care as part of the Tier 1 plan:** Adult regulation is prevention, not self-care. This loops back to The Foundation. Regulated adults create regulating classrooms.

Tier 1 Tools You Should Standardize

The hospital system doesn't debate whether to sterilize instruments. They standardize the essential practices. Do the same:

1 **2-Minute Regulation Routine** (start of class, after lunch/recess)

- Breath awareness or grounding practice
- Consistent across all classrooms
- Modeled by adults, not demanded of students (we go first)

2 **Calm Corner Protocol**

- Not a punishment chair (this is critical)
- Contains: sensory tools, regulation visuals, reflection prompts
- Students can self-refer without asking permission.

3 **Common Language Stems** for redirection and repair

- "I notice..." (observation without judgment)
- "What do you need right now?" (agency, not compliance)
- "Let's try this together" (partnership, not power struggle)

4 **Classroom Routines Checklist**

- 5 core routines (entry, transitions, attention signals, collaboration, exit)
- 5 key transitions (inside/outside, whole/small group, focus/movement)
- 5 relational responses (acknowledgment, redirection, repair, celebration, goodbye)

Tier 1 Metrics

Traditional MTSS Metrics:

- Attendance and chronic absenteeism rates
- Classroom-managed vs. office-managed behavior referrals
- Universal screener trends (DESSA, SAEBRS, BASC-3 BESS depending on district tools)

WCF-Enhanced Metrics:

- School climate pulse checks (students AND staff report feeling safe/supported)
- Calm Corner utilization patterns (increasing use means students learning self-regulation, not punishment avoidance)
- Student voice data about classroom safety and belonging

Tier 1 Decision Rule

If more than 20% of students need "extra" support, Tier 1 isn't strong enough yet.

Do not Tier 2 your way out of a Tier 1 problem. When screening data shows high numbers of at-risk students, the intervention isn't more small groups. It's strengthening core instruction and relational climate.

This is where most districts get stuck. They see 30% of students flagged on screeners and immediately create more Tier 2 groups. This exhausts staff and fragments student schedules. The WCF approach asks: **What conditions are we creating that make thriving difficult?** Fix those first.

As I write in *Rethinking Education Together* (Mercado, 2025a), the Behavioral Continuum at the universal level focuses on creating predictable, safe environments where students know what's expected and feel supported in meeting those expectations. That's Tier 1. Build that first.

Tier 2: Targeted Support as Healing Practice



Purpose

Provide targeted, efficient, short-term support for students who need more than Tier 1, but not intensive individualized planning.



Who It Serves

Students with emerging or recurring needs. Not “the worst kids.” The ones showing early signals.



The Research Base

High-quality Tier 2 supports can **significantly reduce** the number of students who escalate into intensive Tier 3 planning, but only when groups are correctly matched, delivered with adequate dosage, and monitored consistently over time (Collins, 2025; Renaissance Learning, 2019). Effective Tier 2 includes:

- Small groups (3-5 students) with clear entry/exit criteria
- Typically delivered 2–5 times per week for 20–30 minutes over 6–12 weeks, depending on the intervention and schedule.
- Progress monitoring every 2 weeks using reliable measures
- Dignity preservation: Students are supported, not labeled

Implementation research reveals that **inadequate intervention time** is the most cited barrier (Zhang & Xin, 2024). Schools schedule 30-minute blocks but lose 5-7 minutes to transitions. That's insufficient dosage. Teachers also report feeling unprepared to facilitate groups, leading to mechanical delivery that students experience as punitive rather than supportive.

Here's what nobody talks about: Tier 2 work drains facilitators fast if they don't have co-regulation support. This loops back to The Foundation. Depleted adults cannot sustain healing-centered groups.

Tier 2 “Done Right” Looks Like

Structural Components:

- Small groups with clear entry/exit criteria
- Standard menu of interventions matched to function/need
- Progress monitoring weekly or biweekly
- Dignity preserved (students are not labeled or shamed)

WCF Enhancements That Prevent Burnout:

- **Groups that include:** regulation, belonging, identity safety, coping, meaning-making. We’re not just “fixing behaviors.” We’re building capacity for students to thrive.
- **“Healing circles” tone, not compliance groups:** As Shawn Ginwright (2018) articulates in his Healing-Centered Engagement framework, we shift from “What’s wrong with you?” to “What’s right with you?” We’re building capacity, not fixing deficits.
- **Staff supported to avoid burnout and resentment:** This loops back to The Foundation. Facilitators need their own regulation support, co-planning time, and recognition that this work is demanding.

Tier 2 Tools You Should Standardize

1 Referral Decision Tree

Clear criteria for what qualifies for Tier 2 (and what doesn’t):

- Tier 1 data shows gap despite high-quality core instruction
- Student would benefit from small-group skill building
- Need is emerging/recurring, not intensive/crisis-level
- No indication of trauma symptoms requiring wraparound (Tier 3)

2 Tier 2 Menu (evidence-based interventions by function)

Behavioral/Attendance:

- Check-In/Check-Out (CICO): targeted intervention with robust research showing significant reductions in problem behavior and office discipline referrals when implemented with fidelity (Hawken & Horner, 2003; Filter et al., 2007)
- Attendance mentoring partnerships
- Self-monitoring with goal setting

Social-Emotional:

- Skills groups (emotion regulation, social problem-solving, friendship skills)
- Grief/loss support circles
- Anxiety management strategies

Academic:

- Reading fluency groups (Wilson Reading, SPIRE, reciprocal teaching)
- Math intervention groups (number sense, computation, problem-solving schemas)
- Study skills/executive function coaching

3 Group Session Micro-Structure (10-minute model)

- **Minutes 0-2:** Arrival ritual + regulation practice
- **Minutes 2-8:** Skill instruction + guided practice
- **Minutes 8-9:** Reflection (“What did you notice?”)
- **Minutes 9-10:** Action planning (“What will you try this week?”)

This structure ensures every session includes embodiment, skill-building, and agency. It’s the Academic Continuum from *Rethinking Education Together* (Mercado, 2025a) applied to intervention design: we build on strengths, we practice explicitly, we reflect on learning.

4 Progress Monitoring Tool (simple and consistent)

Choose ONE method per intervention type:)

- Goal rating scales (1-10 self-assessment)
- Behavior frequency counts
- Teacher quick-ratings (weekly check-ins)
- Screener subscale re-administration

Tier 1 Metrics

Intervention Quality:

- Participation and dosage (are students actually attending?)
- Weekly progress monitoring trendlines (moving toward goal?)

Student Outcomes:

- Reduction in office referrals or classroom escalations for participating students
- Improved attendance for attendance-focused supports
- Screener subscale improvements (DESSA competencies, SAEBRS risk indicators)

Tier 2 Decision Rule

If a student isn’t improving after reasonable dosage, do not blame the student or the facilitator.

Instead, examine three possibilities:

1 Intervention mismatch:
The intervention doesn’t address the actual need

2 Insufficient intensity:
Student needs Tier 3, not more Tier 2

3 Tier 1 undermining: Core conditions are sabotaging the intervention work

The WCF approach adds a fourth question: **Is the student experiencing this intervention as caring or controlling?** If it feels punitive, it won’t work regardless of evidence base. This is the SEL Continuum from *Rethinking Education Together* (Mercado, 2025a) in action: we attend to the student’s subjective experience, not just their behavioral compliance.

Tier 3: Intensive Support as Relational Commitment



Purpose

Intensive, individualized, wraparound planning for high-need students with complex barriers.



Who It Serves

Students with significant, persistent needs, often involving trauma exposure, mental health concerns, disability considerations, safety concerns, or high-risk patterns.



The Research Base

Tier 3 effectiveness depends on **coordinated wraparound** services that address multiple systems simultaneously (school + family + community). Research is clear:

Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) leading to Behavior Intervention Plans (BIP) that address root causes is more effective than consequence-based approaches (Horner & Sugai, 2015; Crone et al., 2015)

Mental health integration with community providers improves outcomes for students with trauma histories. Family partnership (quality engagement, not just frequency of contact) predicts Tier 3 success.

Implementation barriers include **lack of trained personnel** to deliver intensive interventions. Schools often assign paraprofessionals without adequate training, reducing effectiveness. Research shows Tier 3 requires certified specialists or highly trained interventionists (Zhang & Xin, 2024). Overall MTSS effectiveness was examined as an outcome variable in only 10% of studies, with most research focusing narrowly on student behavioral outcomes such as office discipline referrals rather than examining the functioning of the system as a whole.

Tier 3 “Done Right” Looks Like

Structural Components:

- Individual plan based on hypothesis of need (not just consequences)
- Wraparound supports with coordinated roles (school + family + community)
- Higher frequency progress monitoring (weekly)
- Strong documentation, consistency, follow-through

WCF Enhancements That Center Humanity:

- **The student story is part of the plan**, not an afterthought. As Sullivan, Nguyen, and Shaver (2022) emphasize in their “Equity by Design” framework, we must center students’ lived experiences, not just their deficits.

- **Cultural context and family dignity are protected.** Culturally responsive PBIS research consistently documents severe disproportionality in discipline, with African American students removed from instruction at significantly higher rates than their peers, even in schools implementing SWPBIS (Johnson et al., 2017; Skiba et al., 2011a, 2011b). We address these disparities by building plans that honor cultural context, not erase it.
- **Restoration partnerships over compliance contracts:** “We’re on your team” not “You’re on probation”
- **Co-regulation and relationship repair built into intervention,** not just behavioral goals. This is the heart of the Wise-Compassionate Framework: structure and soul together.

Tier 3 Tools You Should Standardize

Tier 3 Student Support Plan Template (comprehensive yet humane):

Strengths and Protective Factors:

- What is this student good at?
- Who are their people?
- What brings them joy/meaning?

We start here. Not with problems. With strengths. As articulated in the MT4S (Multi-Tiered System for Success) strengths-based framework, we shift from deficit to asset orientation, directly addressing persistent equity gaps in traditional MTSS (Grow Beyond Grades, 2024).

Triggers and Early Warning Signs:

- Environmental triggers (sensory, relational, situational)
- Escalation pattern (what does dysregulation look like for THIS student?)

Regulation Plan:

- Proactive strategies (environment, schedule, relationships)
- In-the-moment tools (sensory, movement, connection)
- De-escalation protocol (what adults do, step-by-step)

Adult Response Plan (critical for consistency):

- **First response:** “I see you’re struggling. What do you need?”
- **Second response:** Offer regulation tools/space
- **Third response:** Connect with designated support person
- **Never:** Shame, power struggle, public confrontation

Skill Goals and Replacement Behaviors:

- What skill are we teaching? (Not just “stop doing X”)
- How will we teach it? (Instruction + practice + feedback)
- How will we know they’re learning it?

Family Partnership Steps:

- How will we communicate? (frequency, method, tone)
- What decision-making role does family have?
- What support does family need to support students?

Community Resource Coordination:

- Mental health services
- Medical/basic needs
- Cultural supports
- Mentoring/belonging opportunities

Safety Considerations (when relevant):

- Suicide risk assessment and monitoring
- Threat assessment protocol
- Mandated reporting requirements
- Crisis response plan

Case Coordination Routine:

- Weekly review: What's working? What's not?
- Action steps with role clarity (who does what by when?)
- Communication log (all touchpoints documented)

Documentation Protocol (humane AND defensible):

- Behavior described objectively, not judgmentally
- Intervention efforts detailed with specificity
- Progress noted even if incremental
- Cultural context included where relevant

Tier 3 Metrics

Plan Fidelity:

- Did we do what we said we'd do?
- Were adults consistent in their responses?
- Did coordination happen as planned?

Student Outcomes:

- Individual goal progress (weekly data)
- Attendance, behavior incidents, course performance
- Student self-assessment of support quality

Relational Quality:

- Family engagement touchpoints (documented conversations, not just contacts)
- Student voice in plan revisions
- Staff perception of support adequacy

Tier 3 Decision Rule

If the plan reads like a surveillance document, it will fail. If it reads like a vague hope letter, it will fail. It must be specific, relational, and measurable.

The WCF standard: **Would you want this plan for your own child? If not, revise it.**

This question cuts through bureaucratic distance and returns us to what matters: treating every student with the dignity and care we'd demand for our own children.

The Integration System: Making It Coherent

The One Matrix You Need to Carry

Every tier, every intervention, every decision must answer four questions:

QUESTION	EXAMPLE (TIER 2 ANXIETY GROUP)
What skill are we teaching?	Identifying body signals of anxiety, using breath to regulate
What condition are we improving?	Safe space to practice regulation, peer normalization of anxiety
What relationship are we protecting or repairing?	Connection to group facilitator, peer belonging
What data will we review and when?	Weekly self-rating scale, biweekly teacher observation

***Dignity check (always):** Does this support feel like care or control to the student and family?

This matrix keeps your work **accurate and defensible** while ensuring you never lose sight of the human being inside the intervention.

This is the integration of all three continua from *Rethinking Education Together* (Mercado, 2025a):

- **Behavioral:** What are we teaching and supporting?
- **Academic:** How are we building competence?
- **SEL:** What relationships and conditions enable growth?

The Team Architecture

Required Teams and What Each One Owns

Foundation Team (Staff Wellness):

- Adult wellness programming and compassion training
- Staff climate monitoring and intervention
- Workload audits and sustainability planning
- **Meeting cadence:** Monthly (plus crisis response as needed)

Tier 1 Team (Schoolwide PBIS/Climate):

- Universal routines, climate initiatives
- Universal screening review and trends analysis
- Teacher support systems and PD needs
- **Meeting cadence:** Monthly (plus quick pulse checks)

Tier 2 Team (Intervention Coordination):

- Intervention menu development and fidelity
- Entry/exit criteria and placement decisions
- Group staffing and facilitator support
- Progress monitoring data review
- **Meeting cadence:** Biweekly

Tier 3 Team (Student Support/SST):

- Individualized planning and case management
- Wraparound coordination with families and community
- Safety planning and crisis response
- **Meeting cadence:** Weekly (for active cases)

Administrator Role (the coherence-keeper):

- Protects time for intervention delivery (schedule it first, not last)
- Reduces initiative overload (says NO to conflicting priorities)
- Enforces coherence (ensures tiers work together, not in silos)
- Models relational practice (you can't expect what you don't embody)

Meeting Norms That Prevent Toxic Team Culture

Before you discuss a single student, establish these norms:

- 1 Curiosity over certainty:** “I wonder...” not “Obviously this kid...”
- 2 Strengths before needs:** Name what's working before what's not
- 3 Systems before individuals:** When patterns emerge across students, examine Tier 1 (or The Foundation)
- 4 Action-oriented:** Every meeting ends with “Who does what by when?”
- 5 Confidentiality with purpose:** We protect student dignity while seeking support

These norms come directly from the Wise-Compassionate Framework's emphasis on approaching data with compassionate inquiry, not deficit thinking.

The 10-Day Micro-Action Launch

A start-Monday rollout that builds momentum without chaos. This is not “add more.” This standardizes the essentials so MTSS starts feeling like care.

Non-negotiables before you start

- 1 Name the owners**
 - Site Lead (principal or assistant principal): protects time, removes barriers, ensures consistency
 - District Lead (MTSS director or designee): aligns tools, decision rules, meeting rhythm
 - Tier 2 Lead (counselor/BHC/psych lead): menu, referral gates, progress monitoring
 - Coach Lead (if available): supports walkthroughs and modeling, not evaluation
- 2 Pause nonessential launches for 10 days.** No new committees, programs, or rollouts during this sprint. We are building coherence.
- 3 Safety boundary, upfront.** This launch does not replace crisis protocols. When safety concerns arise, follow district policy and mandated reporting requirements immediately.
- 4 Coaching-only posture for 30 days.** Walkthroughs and feedback are supportive and developmental, not evaluative.

ONE AIM

Stabilize adult capacity and Tier 1 coherence so Tier 2 is cleaner and Tier 3 is lighter.

Days 1–2: Foundation First



Goal: establish adult capacity as infrastructure and get a real baseline.



DO:

- Run a 10-minute anonymous staff wellness pulse (capacity, belonging, overwhelm, perceived support).
- Announce a protected weekly wellness block (paid time, scheduled, no meetings over it).
- Teach one shared concept: regulated adults create regulating classrooms.
- Anchor the ethic in one line: Data without compassion is surveillance, not care.

Deliverables by end of Day 2:

- Foundation baseline snapshot (one page: what staff are saying, what that means, what we will protect)
- Wellness block on the schedule
- A shared definition of “Foundation” every leader can repeat in one sentence

Owner: District Lead and Site Lead.

Days 3–4: Tier 1 Language and Calm Corner Minimum Standard



Goal: make Tier 1 feel consistent across rooms.



DO:

- Train and rehearse three campus-wide language stems
 - I notice...
 - What do you need right now?
 - Let's try this together.
- Install a Calm Corner minimum standard in every room
 - sensory tool, visual, timer, reflection prompt
 - clear rule: not punishment, not exclusion
 - re-entry plan: how students return to learning
- Run a 15-minute walkthrough focused on support, not compliance
 - What's in place
 - What's missing
 - What barriers leaders must remove

Deliverables by end of Day 4:

- Calm Corner minimum standard checklist plus do/don't dignity guardrails
- Common language one-pager for every staff member
- Barrier removal list (supplies, space, schedule, transitions)

Owner: Site Lead and Coach Lead.

Days 5–6: The 2-Minute Regulation Routine



Goal: a universal ritual that reduces escalation and increases readiness to learn.



DO:

- Choose one routine and standardize it
 - breathe (30 seconds)
 - orient (30 seconds: feet, chair, room)
 - name your state (30 seconds: calm, unsettled, stressed)
 - set one intention (30 seconds)
- Implement it in two predictable moments
 - start of class
 - after lunch or recess
- Adults model first. Students are invited, not coerced

Deliverables by end of Day 6:

- A simple script for the 2-minute routine posted in every room
- Two routine moments embedded in daily flow
- Three-question teacher feedback loop
 - What felt doable
 - What got in the way
 - What support do you need

Owner: Coach Lead and Site Lead.

Days 7–8: Tier 2 Menu and Referral Decision Tree



Goal: stop Tier 2 from becoming random, reactive, or personality-based.



DO:

- Select 3–5 Tier 2 options per domain (behavior, attendance, SEL, academics)
- Create a one-page referral decision tree with gates
 - Tier 1 check first: is the core routine in place and consistent
 - Entry criteria: clear, observable, time-bound
 - Dignity safeguards: no labeling language, no public referrals, strengths noted first
- Assign facilitators and schedule intervention blocks like they are sacred
- Confirm facilitator support
 - brief co-planning time
 - access to tools
 - a quick check-in rhythm to prevent burnout

Deliverables by end of Day 8:

- Tier 2 menu one-pager
- Referral decision tree one-pager
- Intervention schedule and staffing map

Owner: District Lead and Tier 2 Lead

Days 9–10: Progress Monitoring and Data Review Rhythm



Goal: make data usable, light, and humane.



DO:

- Pick one progress monitoring method per intervention type
 - goal rating scale, brief teacher rating, frequency count, screener subscale
- Train facilitators to record and interpret trends in under 5 minutes
- Set the decision rhythm
 - Tier 2 review biweekly
 - Tier 3 review weekly for active cases
- Use one decision question in every meeting
 - Keep, adjust, intensify, or exit
- Add one dignity check
 - Does this support feel like care or control to the student and family

Deliverables by end of Day 10:

- Progress monitoring templates ready to print
- Calendar invites for team meetings (Foundation, Tier 1, Tier 2, Tier 3)
- First data review agenda with roles and the single decision question

Owner: Tier 2 Lead and District Lead.

The promise of this 10-day launch

By Day 10, your district has:

- a real Foundation baseline
- a consistent Tier 1 relational routine
- a clean Tier 2 entry system
- progress monitoring that is doable
- meeting rhythms that prevent drift
- and a clear safety boundary so care never becomes improvisation

Most important: the system starts to feel like care, not compliance.

Addressing Implementation Gaps the Field Hasn't Solved

Traditional MTSS frameworks falter in four critical contexts where a WCF approach proves more resilient. The issue is not that districts lack interventions. The issue is that the conditions required to deliver them with consistency and dignity are often missing.

Central Valley Reality Check: When Community Trauma Becomes School Conditions

California's Central Valley is not an outlier. It is a microcosm of what high-stress communities across the United States are navigating.

In communities like West Fresno, Parlier, Orange Cove, Mendota, Firebaugh, and Huron, schools face the full stack at once: rural resource constraints, concentrated poverty and racial disproportionality, high percentages of multilingual learners, and the added complexity of secondary systems. Adults carry community trauma while coordinating Tier 3 plans across multiple sites. Counselors support newcomer students and English learners while navigating discipline data shaped by systemic inequity, not individual defiance. Tier 2 groups get scheduled, then canceled for coverage. Tier 3 coordination fractures under turnover. Screeners flag students quickly, but teams lack the time and capacity to interpret results with cultural and linguistic context.

And the same pattern shows up far beyond California. You can find it in rural districts with shared counselors, in urban neighborhoods shaped by concentrated disinvestment, in border communities supporting newcomer families, and in pockets of need inside otherwise high-performing suburbs. Different geographies. Similar pressures. Similar outcomes.

This is not a Central Valley problem. It is the MTSS implementation crisis at full volume.

The Valley shows what happens when multiple implementation gaps converge: rural constraints, racial disproportionality, multilingual complexity, and secondary fragmentation. Many districts face one or two of these pressures. High-stress communities face several at once. When the Foundation is weak, those pressures do not simply add up. They compound.

The pattern holds across contexts. When adults are stretched thin, every tier becomes brittle. When culturally responsive capacity is underdeveloped, dysregulation gets mislabeled as defiance. When teams cannot slow down to interpret screeners with linguistic context, multilingual learners are overidentified. When no one has bandwidth to coordinate across departments, students disappear between classes. Different contexts. Same root cause.

The implementation crisis is not primarily about interventions. It is about asking people to build healing systems while they are barely surviving. When the Foundation is compromised, every tier becomes fragile. When adults are resourced and regulated, the same interventions can land differently. The difference is rarely the intervention menu. It is whether adults have the capacity, support, and permission to deliver the work with wisdom and compassion.

This is what turns compliance into care. This is what makes MTSS work.

1 Rural and Resource-Constrained Districts

Rural schools often abandon multi-tiered approaches due to excessive expense, complexity, and burden, especially in regions where federally designated mental health professional shortage areas are concentrated (Kearney et al., 2025). WCF addresses this by prioritizing Foundation work, which does not require new staff or a new budget line. It stabilizes adult capacity first, then builds internal leadership so the system can function without ongoing consultant dependency.

How this shows up on the ground

- Counselors and school psychologists are shared across sites or pulled into constant crisis response.
- Tier 2 groups are scheduled but repeatedly canceled for testing, coverage, and supervision needs.
- Tier 3 plans exist on paper, but coordination collapses under staffing churn.
- Adults carry secondary trauma while being asked to increase “fidelity.”

How WCF responds

- Foundation work first so adult capacity becomes infrastructure, not heroics
- Streamlined menus and decision rules so “less, done well” replaces “more, done poorly”
- Teacher leader development to grow internal coaching and facilitation capacity
- Protected intervention time scheduled first, not last

2 Schools Serving Predominantly Students of Color

Persistent racial discipline disproportionality continues despite MTSS-B implementation (Fallon et al., 2021). Researchers have argued MTSS must be explicitly antiracist, naming race and racism rather than remaining race-neutral (Fallon et al., 2021). WCF strengthens this by embedding *Equity by Design principles* (Sullivan et al., 2022) into meeting norms, decision rules, and dignity safeguards across tiers.

How this shows up on the ground

- Behavior data becomes a referral pipeline when relationships are thin and stress is high.
- Dysregulation gets mislabeled as defiance, especially for students carrying community stress.
- Family partnership becomes performative: contacts are logged, trust is not built.

How WCF responds

- Equity by Design principles embedded into decision rules and meeting norms (Sullivan et al., 2022)
- Culturally responsive practices required at every tier, not optional
- Family partnership measured by quality, not frequency of contact
- Student voice built into Tier 2 and Tier 3 planning so supports feel like care, not control

3 Districts Serving Multilingual Learners

Multilingual learners are at elevated risk of being misinterpreted when assessment tools carry cultural and linguistic bias and when screeners are treated as definitive instead of preliminary. This can contribute to disproportionate special education referrals and inappropriate tier movement (Rodríguez Robles et al., 2025). WCF addresses this by requiring cultural and linguistic context in Tier 3 planning and by using multiple gating procedures so teams do not escalate decisions based on one data point.

How this shows up on the ground

- Newcomer students get flagged quickly because screeners do not separate language acquisition from skill deficits.
- Tier movement happens without shared language development understanding across staff.
- Families disengage when communication is not in their language of choice or feels punitive.

How WCF responds

- Cultural and linguistic context required in Tier 3 plans
- Multiple-gate screening and referral: brief screeners followed by appropriate comprehensive tools before escalation
- Family partnership conducted in the family's language of choice, with dignity-protecting communication norms

4 Secondary School Complexity

Secondary schools do not struggle with Tier 1 because adolescents are “more defiant.” They struggle because the structure of the secondary day repeatedly breaks the very conditions Tier 1 depends on: relational continuity, predictable routines, and time for repair. Every bell transition resets the learning environment, hallway conflict competes with instructional minutes, and emergent crises steadily steal the protected time Tier 1 requires for fidelity (Region 6 Comprehensive Center, 2022). Research on secondary MTSS highlights these distinctive barriers, departmental silos, fragmented student schedules, and limited intervention time, which elementary models do not face with the same intensity (Collins, 2025). In systems that run in threat mode, Tier 1 can quietly shift from prevention to enforcement, not because educators lack skill, but because the schedule collapses the temporal and spatial stability that consistent implementation requires (Region 6 Comprehensive Center, 2022).

The Wise-Compassionate Framework responds by scaling Foundation work across departmental realities, organizing Tier 1–3 ownership through content-area teams, and protecting intervention time through advisory, “What I Need” blocks, or dedicated learning periods (Region 6 Comprehensive Center, 2022). This moves the work out of heroic individual effort and into design choices that can actually hold systematic care.

How this shows up on the ground

- Trauma presents as avoidance, shutdown, vaping/substance use, fighting, or chronic absenteeism.
- Relationship continuity is harder when teachers rotate students all day.
- Students fall through cracks because no one owns the whole picture.

How WCF responds

- Foundation work scales to any campus size or structure
- Department-based MTSS teams so each content area owns Tier 1 and Tier 2 routines
- Flexible scheduling structures like advisory or “What I Need” time
- Clear Tier 2 entry and exit rules so students are supported without being labeled

The Pattern Across Contexts

Across the four contexts where MTSS most often breaks down, the failure points look different on the surface but follow the same pattern.

In Central Valley communities, adults are stretched thin and every tier becomes brittle. In rural districts, Tier 2 groups get canceled and coordination collapses under staffing churn. In schools serving predominantly students of color, dysregulation is mislabeled as defiance when relationships are thin and stress is high. In districts serving multilingual learners, screeners are misinterpreted when teams lack the time and capacity for culturally and linguistically responsive interpretation. In secondary schools, students fall through cracks when no one has bandwidth to hold the whole picture across departmental silos.

Different contexts. Same root cause.

Most implementation gaps trace back to the same fracture: we are asking people to build healing systems while they are barely surviving. When the Foundation is compromised, every tier becomes fragile. When adults are resourced and regulated, the same interventions produce dramatically different outcomes. The difference is rarely the intervention menu. The difference is whether adults have the capacity, support, and permission to deliver the work with wisdom and compassion.

What High-Stress Communities Require From MTSS

This is the page districts screenshot and share:

- **Regulated adults** before escalated systems
- **Predictable routines** that reduce cognitive load and conflict
- **Dignity language** that protects identity while correcting behavior
- **Protected time** for Tier 2 delivery and Tier 3 coordination
- **Clean decision rules** so teams stop arguing and start acting

In districts with strong foundational infrastructure and relationship-centered leadership, these gaps narrow significantly. The research is unequivocal: when educators are well-supported and have the capacity to implement with consistency, the same interventions produce dramatically different outcomes (State et al., 2024). The difference is rarely the intervention menu. The difference is whether adults have the capacity, support, and permission to deliver the work with wisdom and compassion.

*This is what transforms compliance into care.
This is what makes MTSS work.*

Conclusion: The Missing Link That Changes Everything

Why MTSS Fails (And How WCF Fixes It)

Here's the truth nobody wants to say out loud: MTSS was supposed to end the special education referral pipeline, close achievement gaps, and prevent behavioral escalation. Instead, Doug Fuchs at Vanderbilt told Education Week that although he supports MTSS in principle, he has watched it “fail more often than it succeeds,” largely because most schools lack the time, staffing, and resources needed to implement Tier 2 and Tier 3 with integrity (Pendharkar, 2023).

Zhang and Xin (2024) call for more research on implementation fidelity. Nitz and colleagues (2023) found that parents were actually included in only 28% of elementary school MTSS studies examined, exposing the disconnect between theory and practice. Practitioners report MTSS has become “compliance theater”: more paperwork, more meetings, more hoops to jump through than actual support or outcomes.

The critiques go deeper than implementation gaps. Dr. David Kirkland argues that deficit-oriented frameworks and data narratives often reinforce the very racial hierarchies they claim to disrupt, especially when problems are located in individual Black and Brown students rather than in inequitable systems. Shawn Ginwright (2018) asks why trauma-informed approaches still lead with “What’s wrong with you?” or “What happened to you?” instead of “What’s right with you?”

The field responds with better screeners, tighter fidelity protocols, and more data systems. None of it works because none of it addresses the actual failure point.

● ————— ●
The failure point isn't the tiers. It's the missing foundation.
● ————— ●

The Innovation That Fills the Gap

State and colleagues (2024) proposed educator MTSS. Practitioners discuss the “foundational tier” for staff wellness informally. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2017) identifies Secondary Traumatic Stress in educators as a systemic concern. While many frameworks name staff wellness as important, far fewer operationalize it as a formal foundational tier with clear tools, metrics, and decision rules.

The WCF makes that foundation explicit and measurable.

Adult capacity is the prerequisite for fidelity, relationship quality, and sustainability. This framework accomplishes five things no existing MTSS model does:

1 **Formalizes Adult Wellness as Non-Negotiable Foundation**

Not self-care. Not nice-to-have. Infrastructure. You don't ask surgeons to operate in unstable conditions. Stop asking teachers to regulate students while dysregulating themselves.

2 **Integrates Wisdom and Compassion as Explicit Framework Elements**

Current frameworks focus on data, interventions, and fidelity. The WCF adds the dimension that makes those work: wise compassion in decision-making, implementation, and relationships. It sets clear standards for how teams interpret data and make decisions so supports feel like care, not control.

3 **Shifts from Deficit-Based to Strengths-Based Orientation**

While Kirkland's MT4S proposes adding a strengths tier, WCF embeds strengths-based thinking throughout all tiers. Every decision matrix asks: "What strengths does the student show that we can build on?" Every Tier 3 plan starts with protective factors, not problems.

4 **Centers Relationships Over Compliance**

The field acknowledges the compliance trap but hasn't escaped it. WCF makes the decisive question at every tier: "Is the student experiencing this intervention as caring or controlling?" If it feels punitive, it won't work, regardless of evidence base.

5 **Provides Healing-Centered Integration Throughout**

Ginwright's (2018) Healing-Centered Engagement principles are being adopted piecemeal. WCF integrates them comprehensively across all tiers:

- From individual to collective: Community healing, not just personal therapy
- From symptoms to root causes: What conditions create harm?
- From "what's wrong" to "what's right": Asset-based approaches
- From episodic to sustained: Healing as cultural practice, not crisis response

Why This Changes Implementation Outcomes

Because it addresses the root cause of implementation failure: trying to build healing systems with depleted builders.

Federal estimates from the 2021–22 Teacher Follow-up Survey describe teacher attrition and mobility patterns using a nationally representative design (Taie & Lewis, 2024), and 52% of teachers report burnout (Ozamiz et al., 2023). Yet we keep demanding higher fidelity to evidence-based interventions while ignoring that stressed adults cannot deliver relationally.

The WCF breaks this cycle by making adult capacity the foundation, not an afterthought.

When the Foundation is strong:

- Tier 1 fidelity improves because regulated adults create regulating classrooms
- Tier 2 groups feel healing-centered because facilitators aren't depleted
- Tier 3 wraparound works because team members have capacity for coordination

When the Foundation is weak, everything else collapses. The difference is rarely the intervention menu. The difference is whether adults have the capacity, support, and permission to deliver the work with wisdom and compassion.

The Standard You're Holding

This isn't aspirational. This is the new baseline.

- **Traditional MTSS:** Tiers 1-3 for students, with staff wellness as personal responsibility
- **WCF:** The Foundation for adults as infrastructure, Tiers 1-3 for students delivered by regulated, compassion-trained educators

Districts adopting this framework can reasonably expect improved coherence and implementation conditions, which are associated in the research with stronger delivery and sustainability when leadership protects time, reduces overload, and builds adult capacity (State et al., 2024). This can lead to:

- Reduced staff turnover (because wellness is infrastructure)
- Improved intervention fidelity (because implementers have capacity)
- Better student outcomes (because supports feel relational, not transactional)
- Sustainable systems (because we're not burning out the implementers)

The Invitation

MTSS done right prevents the special education referral pipeline from swallowing students who just needed consistent Tier 1. It reduces suspensions, closes opportunity gaps, and keeps effective teachers in classrooms. MTSS done poorly does the opposite: it layers compliance on exhausted adults, fragments student schedules with poorly coordinated interventions, and turns "support" into surveillance.

The difference isn't more data, better screeners, or stricter fidelity monitoring. The difference is whether your system is designed to sustain the people delivering it.

Before you invest in another screening platform, another intervention curriculum, or another professional development series, answer four questions:

1 What is the need?

Not just what the screener flagged. What is this student experiencing? What is this adult carrying? When you answer this question with data alone, you miss half the picture. When you answer it with wise compassion, you see the whole child and the conditions shaping their behavior.

2 What support matches the need?

Not just what's evidence-based. What can be delivered with consistency by the facilitators you have, in the time you actually have, without burning them out? Evidence-based interventions fail when facilitators are dysregulated, under-resourced, or overwhelmed. The intervention manual doesn't account for that. This framework does.

3 How will we know if it's working?

Not just whether the data point moved. Does the student feel supported or controlled? Does the family trust the process? Can the staff sustain this pace? Progress monitoring tracks behavior change. Wise compassion tracks whether the system is healing or harming.

4 What will we do if it's not working?

Not just “increase intensity” or “refer to Tier 3.” Examine the conditions. Is Tier 1 unstable? Is The Foundation compromised? Are adults implementing mechanically because they're surviving, not thriving? Most districts escalate interventions when the real problem is the system can't hold what it's trying to deliver.

This framework gives you three things traditional MTSS cannot:

1 Structure that district leaders can defend to boards, funders, and state monitors because it's measurable, research-backed, and coherent.

2 Soul that practitioners can sustain because it doesn't ask dysregulated adults to regulate students, doesn't fragment care, and doesn't treat humans like data points.

3 Credibility to lead systems change at scale because you're not adding another initiative—you're fixing the fatal flaw that makes everything else fail.

The implementation crisis is not primarily about interventions. It is about asking people to build healing systems while they are barely surviving.

In California's Central Valley, the South Bronx, rural Appalachian districts, Detroit's east side, the Mississippi Delta, and concentrated pockets of need inside otherwise high-achieving suburbs, the pattern is the same: adults carry the weight of the communities they serve while being asked to deliver and document tiered supports at scale. Counselors coordinate wraparound plans for students navigating housing instability, immigration-related fear, and neighborhood violence while managing caseloads that would overwhelm a team. Teachers implement behavior supports for students whose distress is rooted in poverty and food insecurity while their own capacity is depleted. Screeners flag students quickly, but exhausted teams lack the time to interpret results with cultural and linguistic context. Students move between tiers based on data points, yet no adult has the bandwidth to sustain relational continuity across departments and schedules.

When adults hit survival mode, support becomes control. Referrals spike. Removals accelerate. Documentation replaces relationship. Students know the difference immediately.

The data system tracks fidelity. The nervous system tracks safety.

When those two are misaligned, interventions don't just fail—they harm. No matter how evidence-based the protocol, no matter how complete the checklist, the body knows when care has turned into surveillance.

So the question is not whether MTSS can work. It can. The question is whether we will keep blaming staff for what the system refused to build.

Build the Foundation.

Give educators the conditions to show up regulated, resourced, and relational. Protect adult wellness time even when crisis response pressures threaten to erase it. Streamline decision rules so less, done well replaces more, done poorly. Resource culturally responsive practice with time, coaching, and protected planning, not just professional development slides. Interpret screeners with cultural and linguistic context in partnership with families. Structure coordination and ownership so students do not disappear between departments and data systems.

When the Foundation is strong, the tiers hold. When adults are well, students thrive.

EVERYTHING ELSE FOLLOWS.



Next Step: WCF Readiness Review (60 minutes)

Districts ready to strengthen their MTSS foundation often begin with a WCF Readiness Review.

What we do in 60 minutes

- Review your current MTSS teaming structure and meeting cadence
- Identify Tier 1 gaps that are driving Tier 2 overload
- Audit intervention flow: referral criteria, entry/exit, progress monitoring
- Identify “Foundation” stress points undermining fidelity (adult capacity, time, culture)
- Choose 3 high-leverage moves for the next 30 days

What you receive

- A one-page Readiness Snapshot (strengths, gaps, immediate priorities)
- A 30-day implementation sprint plan (who does what by when)
- A draft metrics menu aligned to your district’s tools (right-sized, sustainable)

To schedule

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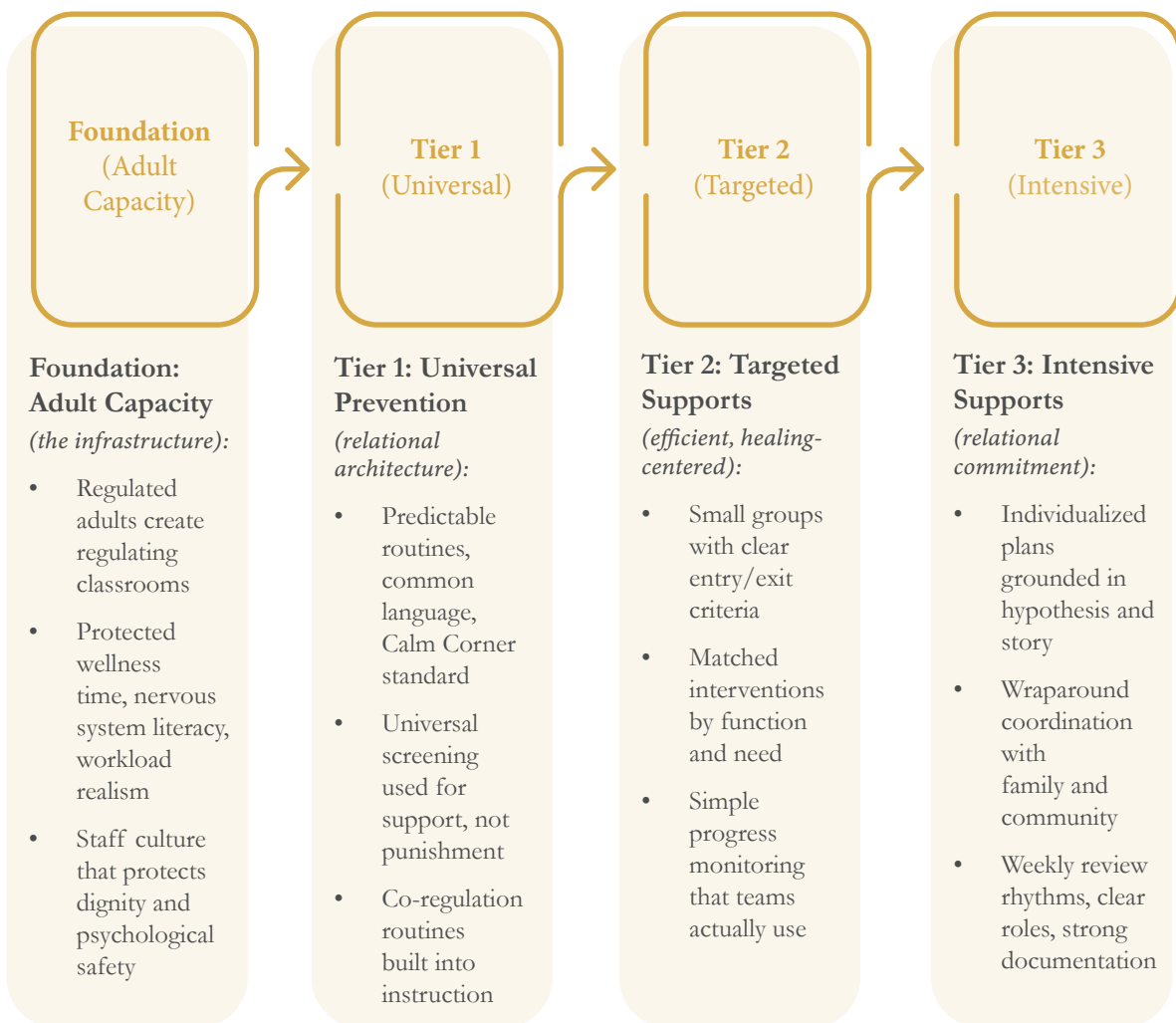
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WCF at a Glance

The system in one page. Screenshot this, post it, share it.



The System Flow



10-Day Micro-Action Launch Timeline

A start-Monday rollout that builds momentum without chaos.

Days 1–2: Foundation First

- 10-minute anonymous staff wellness pulse
- Protected wellness block placed on the schedule
- Shared concept: regulated adults create regulating classrooms

Days 3–4: Tier 1 Language + Calm Corner

- Train 3 common language stems
- Calm Corner minimum standard in every room
- 15-minute walkthrough to remove barriers

Days 5–6: 2-Minute Regulation Routine

- Standard routine taught and modeled by adults
- Implement at start of class and after lunch/recess
- 3-question teacher feedback loop

Days 7–8: Tier 2 Menu + Referral Decision Tree

- Select 3–5 Tier 2 options per domain
- One-page decision tree with dignity safeguards
- Intervention blocks scheduled and protected

Days 9–10: Progress Monitoring + Data Review Rhythm

- One monitoring method per intervention type
- Facilitators trained to interpret trends in under 5 minutes
- Decision question: keep, adjust, intensify, or exit



WISE SOUL

STAND FIRM. BE EPIC.