

PRINCIPAL'S  
OFFICE

^  
v

SCHOOL  
COUNSELOR

# it takes two

Using your school's MTSS program to build a strong school counselor/principal relationship helps both parties meet their professional goals.

BY EMILY GOODMAN-SCOTT, PH.D.; CHRISTINA TILLERY; AND ERIN CRANE

Why did you become a school counselor? Many of us are in this profession to build relationships with students; make a difference for schools, students and families; and break down barriers students and families face. Principals often give a similar reason for their chosen field; they want to change lives through K-12 education. Given school counselors' and principals' overlapping passion, as well as their schoolwide leadership focusing on the school building as a whole, it's only natural that these two school leaders would work closely together.

A strong school counselor/principal relationship involves:

- » a friendly, mutually respectful working relationship
- » shared values and beliefs related to the purpose of education
- » open and honest communication and regular meetings
- » joint responsibility and planning to meet school goals

Let's take a look at some strategies for building a strong school counselor/principal

relationship through a multitiered system of supports (MTSS).

Imagine you're going to build a house. It doesn't all happen in a vacuum. You'll need multiple parties involved throughout the various building stages. Just like with a house, building an effective school counselor/principal collaboration involves more than one person and a number of steps, such as:

- » assessing your resources and tools
- » creating a strong foundation
- » adding plumbing and electricity
- » building walls and a roof
- » decorating

**Assessing resources and tools:** When contemplating building a house, we first look at our toolbelt and our wallets and ask if we have the tools and resources to get started. Similarly, you'll need to assess your readiness and timing to engage in a strong, effective school counselor/principal relationship. Ask yourself: What is the current culture and climate of my school and district? What are trends with funding, the use of time and priorities? What are school- and district-level supports for school

Decide when and how often you'll meet and how you'll communicate outside of those meetings. Many of these logistical aspects are included in the annual administrative conference, which you can download from [www.schoolcounselor.org/templates](http://www.schoolcounselor.org/templates).

counseling and MTSS? How does my school use data?

The answers to these questions may influence your efforts. For instance, if you notice a district priority on cultural competence and mental health, as well as new opportunities surrounding online learning, think about how you can use this information to guide your school counseling program, your relationship with your principal and your involvement in MTSS.

Also, look inward and examine your department, your bandwidth and where you are on the self-care continuum. Do you have the time and energy personally and professionally to start new efforts in your school counselor/principal relationship? How is this timing? If you are going through significant life events, this may not be the best time to begin new initiatives. These considerations are important to reflect on independently. Then, within your comfort level, sit down and talk it over with your building principal.

**Building a strong foundation:** When building a house, a strong foundation is the basis on which the rest of the house will rest. Thus, building a sturdy school counselor/principal relationship sets the tone for the remainder of your work together. In building a relational foundation, set up an uninterrupted time to talk with your

principal and learn more about each other. Address personal and cultural issues with your principal. Who are we? What do we value in our lives? What are our commonalities and interests out of school? Do we both like the local sports team? Are we both avid runners? Find those necessary connections to build rapport.

Relatedly, the school counselor/principal relationship could focus on professional interests and purpose. What motivates us at work? Why is our work important? Who is our student population, and what overarching needs and trends do we see within our school community? How does MTSS fit with our school?

Next, mutually educate each other on your professional role and responsibilities. Address how your roles fit within MTSS and how you can use your roles to work together within the MTSS framework. Last comes a discussion on logistics. Decide when and how often you'll meet and how you'll communicate outside of those meetings. Many of these logistical aspects are included in the annual administrative conference template, which you can download from [www.schoolcounselor.org/templates](http://www.schoolcounselor.org/templates).

**Adding plumbing and electricity:** Houses have inner workings that bring us water, heat and air conditioning, essentially keeping the house humming. Thus, the plumbing and electricity of the school counselor/principal relationship are the guidelines directing the inner workings of the school. Specifically, these are the policies, procedures, expectations, goals and practices directed by the MTSS team. As such, partnering with your principal is more than two professionals working together in isolation but rather working together as part of a schoolwide MTSS team. MTSS is truly a schoolwide initiative and should represent the voices of all stakeholders, including the unique culture of the school communities.

In preparation for each new school year, the MTSS team should meet during the summer to examine MTSS data and policies, as well as existing tiered practices.

Throughout the processes of the MTSS team examining the inner workings or plumbing of the school, you and your principal are meeting as part of the MTSS team, sharing your expertise as leaders who have a schoolwide perspective. However, the two of you should also continue to meet regularly, discussing your reactions to the MTSS meetings, maintaining open communication and reflecting on information to bring back to the MTSS team. As administrator support is crucial to the success of MTSS, you'll want to continue gauging the principal's support for MTSS and, when needed, solicit principal buy-in.

**Building the walls and roof:** The walls and roof of a house create structure and organization. Similarly, the MTSS team helps provide a framework for how students can receive support. Guided by the analyzed MTSS data, policies, tiered practices and stakeholder feedback, the MTSS team creates annual schoolwide MTSS goals, which may include changing school policies and procedures to be more equitable and socially just, providing staff and family training and increasing supports for students. Specific to students, the MTSS team facilitates interventions or supports for all students (Tier 1, e.g., an evidence-based SEL curriculum for classroom lessons), and gradually more intensive supports for small groups and individual students with higher needs (Tier 2 and 3; e.g., small reading groups, individual wraparound behavioral services). The MTSS team also constantly evaluates and re-evaluates the related data, policies and practices, making improvements and changes for the school community.

While the MTSS team orchestrates student services, you and the principal continue building the house's walls and roof by providing input as active members of the MTSS team, as well as meeting together independent of the MTSS team. Through these meetings, you'll discuss general tiered supports, as well as the school as a whole. These conversations may offer an avenue for confidential reflection, as well

as sharing content uniquely understood by the school counselor (e.g., school staff climate) and the school principal (e.g., district-level priorities). As the school finds greater success with tiered services, you

and the principal may consider discussing more advanced initiatives to bring to the MTSS team.

**Decorate:** After you've built your house, it's time to decorate and show the world your pizzazz. Consider sharing examples of your successful working relationship with other schools in your district or your professional associations.

Relatedly, you and the principal can work with the MTSS team to provide its own decorations, i.e., sharing progress and results with key stakeholders. For instance, presenting data in a digestible format such as charts and graphs can be a helpful visualization. Short, powerful quotes can also provide a personalized perspective. It's also important to present the data that matters most to each stakeholder group. For instance, if the principal shares insight that the school board prioritizes cultural competence and SEL,

the MTSS team may share the results of school initiatives focused on those topics to increase school board buy-in.

Through respect, rapport, collaboration, open communication and joint responsibility, you and your principal can work together to build a stronger, more meaningful relationship and involvement in the school's MTSS program, allowing both of you to meet your goals of making a difference in the lives of students, families and communities.**A**

Emily Goodman-Scott, Ph.D., is an associate professor at Old Dominion University and can be reached at [egscott@odu.edu](mailto:egscott@odu.edu). Christina Tillery is a school counselor at Highland Springs High School, Highland Springs, Va., and a doctoral student at Virginia Commonwealth University; she can be reached at [tilleryca@vcu.edu](mailto:tilleryca@vcu.edu). Erin Crane is the school counselor at King and Queen Central High School in King and Queen County, Va.; she can be reached at [craneer@vcu.edu](mailto:craneer@vcu.edu).

Consider sharing examples of your successful working relationship with other schools in your district or your professional associations.

## Making MTSS Work

As school counselors' responsibilities mount, we need the tools to work smarter, not harder. To work efficiently and maximize your efforts and outcomes, align your school counseling program with a multitiered system of supports (MTSS).

Learn the ins and outs of ASCA National Model/MTSS alignment in "Making MTSS Work," which provides a wealth of information, activities and sample charts for tying the two programs together.

With chapters addressing data usage, Tier 1, Tier 2 and Tier 3 alignment, "Making MTSS Work" helps you further enhance your school counseling program and ensure it's woven into the needs of the school and district.

**Members: \$19.95    Nonmembers: \$24.95**

Order from <https://members.schoolcounselor.org/publications>.

