

Prevention Over Remediation: Strengthening Tier 1 Instruction to Reduce Learning Gaps



A practical guide to building a stronger, more sustainable MTSS foundation through high-quality core instruction.

Every benchmark cycle reveals the same pattern: intervention lists grow longer, specialists' caseloads become unmanageable, and remediation budgets stretch further than planned.

When 30–40% of students consistently fall below proficiency benchmarks, that's not dozens of individual learning gaps. It's a Tier 1 instruction signal. And addressing it at the source is both the most effective and most cost-efficient decision district leaders can make.

This guide explores how strengthening your [Multi-Tiered System of Supports](#) (MTSS) starts with core instruction: the foundation that determines whether 80% of students thrive or whether your intervention pipeline remains perpetually overwhelmed.

Inside, you'll discover:

- **Five warning signs** that Tier 1 instruction needs strengthening and the research-based solutions district leaders are using to address them.
- **How to transform benchmark data** from a student-sorting mechanism into a strategic tool for improving core instruction across classrooms.
- **Why investing in Tier 1** delivers the highest return in both student outcomes and sustainable use of limited resources.

Strong Tier 1 instruction is the smartest investment you can make to close learning gaps before they form, reduce reliance on costly interventions, and build an equitable system where every student has access to excellent teaching from day one.



Chapter 1: 5 Signs Your Tier 1 Instruction Isn't Working – And How To Fix It

Why do intervention lists keep growing instead of shrinking?

You've invested in reading specialists, extended learning time, and purchased programs – yet every benchmark assessment reveals another cohort of students who need support.

The truth is, this isn't an intervention problem: it's a Tier 1 instruction problem. And fixing it is the single most powerful lever district leaders have to close learning gaps before they form.

When core instruction is strong, intervention becomes targeted support for the few who need it, not a revolving door for students who should have succeeded the first time.

This chapter explores five signs your Tier 1 foundation needs strengthening, and the proven solutions district leaders are using to turn things around.



Understanding Tier 1 within your MTSS framework

Before we dive into the roadblocks, let's ground this in what you're already doing. Your Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework is designed to meet students' academic, behavioral, and social needs through three tiers:

Tier 1 delivers high-quality, school-wide instruction designed to meet the needs of 80% or more of students. **Tier 2** provides targeted support for students who need additional help. **Tier 3** offers intensive, individualized interventions for students with significant learning gaps.

When district leaders ask us about improving outcomes, they often focus on Tiers 2 and 3. **But here's the reality: if Tier 1 isn't strong, you're spending intervention dollars to fix what could have been prevented.** The most cost-effective investment you can make is getting core instruction right from the start.

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Prioritize evidence-based programs with explicit, systematic instruction and scaffolded practice. This isn't just good pedagogy – it's smart resource allocation.

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Bring the same strategic focus to numeracy that you've brought to literacy. Both domains deserve evidence-based instruction at Tier 1.

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Sign #1: Your curriculum covers content, but overwhelms working memory

District curriculum maps often check all the standards boxes, but scope isn't the same as instructional design. When lessons introduce too much new information at once without adequate scaffolding, even capable students can't retain what they're learning. This isn't a student capacity issue: it's a cognitive load issue.

Cognitive load theory tells us that working memory has limits. Students can only process a finite amount of new information before they become overwhelmed. Without explicit instruction, systematic practice and careful sequencing, your well-intentioned curriculum can actually work against learning.

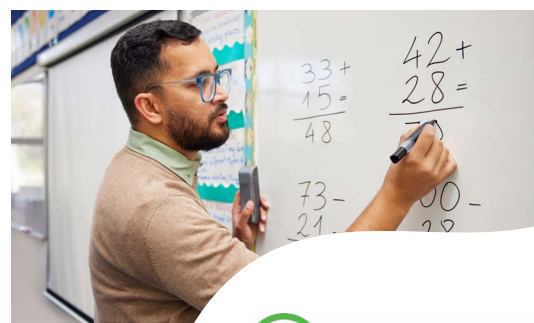
What this means for district leaders: When reviewing curriculum adoption, leaders should assess how materials manage cognitive load. Instruction should be explicit and systematic, with cumulative practice built in – not left to individual teacher discretion. Ask vendors: How does this program manage cognitive load? Is instruction explicit and systematic? Are practice opportunities scaffolded and cumulative? Programs with these principles embedded reduce the burden on teachers to reinvent research-based instructional design.

Sign #2: Your literacy focus is strong, but math gets less strategic attention

In recent years, reading instruction has undergone a revolution. Thanks to Science of Reading initiatives and state mandates, teachers have received extensive professional development on structured literacy, phonics progression, and evidence-based practices. District leaders have invested in high-quality materials and curriculum audits.

But here's the gap: numeracy hasn't received the same intentional focus. While teachers can now articulate the Science of Reading, far fewer can explain the research behind early numeracy development – number sense, subitizing, magnitude comparison, or how mathematical reasoning connects to executive function. The result? Students are leaving early grades with stronger reading foundations than math understanding. Recent NAEP data shows fourth-grade math proficiency dropped 7 points since 2019, confirming this growing imbalance. If we want equitable outcomes, we need to apply the same rigor and investment to early math that we've brought to literacy.

What this means for district leaders: State your commitment to evidence-based instruction in both domains. Just as you evaluate literacy programs against Science of Reading principles, evaluate math programs for explicit instruction in foundational concepts like number sense and problem-solving. When districts implement complementary programs – they're building interconnected foundations, not creating competing priorities.



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Choose instructional materials that connect assessment data to actionable next steps and provide transparent, standards-based reporting, so your investment in testing translates directly to better Tier 1 teaching.

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Sign #3: You have high-quality assessment data, but it's not driving Tier 1 decisions

Many districts invest in benchmark assessments like NWEA MAP Growth, Renaissance Star, or i-Ready. You have dashboards full of data – RIT scores, Lexile levels, percentile rankings. But here's the question: is that data actually informing your Tier 1 instructional decisions, or is it just identifying who needs intervention?

Assessment data is most powerful when it tells teachers what students are ready to learn next, not just what they've missed. RIT scores, for example, place students on a continuous scale that extends from kindergarten through high school. When you connect those scores to instructional starting points, teachers can differentiate Tier 1 instruction to meet students where they are.

What this means for district leaders: When evaluating instructional programs, ask whether they align with your assessment system. Can teachers use MAP scores, Lexile bands, or other data to place students at the right instructional level? Beyond placement, look for programs that provide reports allowing teachers to track progress against state benchmarks.



Sign #4: You're investing in intervention, but Tier 1 gaps keep refilling your Tier 2 pipeline

This is the most costly sign of weak Tier 1 instruction. You hire reading specialists, purchase intervention programs, and extend the school day but every benchmark assessment reveals a new cohort of students who need support.

The issue isn't that intervention doesn't work. It's that Tier 1 isn't preventing the need for intervention in the first place. When core instruction is inconsistent, under-resourced, or not aligned to research, you end up perpetually treating symptoms rather than addressing root causes.

What this means for district leaders: Audit your intervention spending against your Tier 1 investment. Districts often spend five times more on remediation than prevention. If that ratio sounds familiar, you have an opportunity to reallocate resources strategically. Strengthening Tier 1 redirects those dollars to where they have the greatest long-term impact – it won't eliminate the need for intervention entirely, but it should significantly reduce how many students require it.

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Rebalance your investment. Strong Tier 1 instruction is the highest-leverage, most cost-effective decision you can make.

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Sign #5: Teachers have autonomy, but no shared definition of high-quality Tier 1 instruction

Teacher autonomy is valuable until it becomes instructional inconsistency. When every classroom operates differently, students experience vastly different levels of instructional quality depending on which teacher they're assigned. That's not equitable, and it undermines your MTSS framework.

District leaders often hesitate to define Tier 1 too prescriptively, worried about affecting teacher morale or stifling creativity. But clarity isn't rigidity. Teachers need a shared understanding of what evidence-based instruction looks like, and access to high-quality materials that embody those principles.

What this means for district leaders: Establishing curriculum coherence doesn't mean eliminating teacher voice. It means ensuring every student (regardless of classroom assignment) receives research-based instruction. When you adopt programs aligned to ESSA evidence standards, you're giving teachers a strong foundation while freeing them to focus on responsive teaching.

The case for Tier 1 investment

When core instruction is strong, fewer students need intervention and every dollar spent on support services goes further.

Research shows that literacy and numeracy develop hand in hand, particularly in the critical PreK–2 years. Strengthening both foundations together with evidence-based programs creates classrooms where every student has the chance to thrive.

Recognizing the warning signs is the first step. The next question is: how do you use the data you already have to make targeted, strategic improvements?

Your benchmark assessments hold the answers if you know where to look.

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Define your non-negotiables for Tier 1 instruction and provide high-quality, ESSA-aligned materials to support implementation.

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Chapter 2: What To Do After Benchmark Results: Your Action Plan For Stronger Tier 1 Instruction

As benchmark results roll in this season, the real work begins: turning data into instructional decisions that drive growth.

For many district leaders, the challenge isn't collecting the data, it's interpreting what matters most and deciding where to focus limited time and resources.

When 30–40 percent of students fall below proficiency, the instinct may be to expand intervention programs or adjust pacing guides. But often, those numbers point to something deeper – a Tier 1 instruction issue, not dozens of individual student problems.

Here's how to use your benchmark data to strengthen core instruction, reduce remediation, and make smarter, system-level decisions for the rest of the year.



Understanding what your benchmarks really reveal

Benchmark assessments are now standard practice. Ninety-nine percent of K–12 public schools administer at least one benchmark assessment across the school year.

Tools like NWEA MAP, i-Ready, Acadience, and DIBELS play an essential role within your Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework: they identify which students may be at risk and need additional support. But benchmark data tells a story that extends beyond individual student performance. Patterns across classrooms and grade levels reveal the strength of your Tier 1 instruction.

Recent [NAEP data](#) shows that 40% of fourth graders are reading below the basic level, the highest percentage in over 20 years, while only 31% are at or above proficient. If your district's benchmark data reflects similar proportions, it's not dozens of isolated learning gaps: it's a Tier 1 signal.

This broader view transforms benchmark assessments from a student-sorting mechanism into a strategic leadership tool: one that helps you pinpoint instructional priorities, strengthen Tier 1 teaching, and drive sustainable improvement across classrooms over time.

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Before sorting students into intervention, step back and examine system-level trends: consistent weaknesses across schools, year-over-year growth patterns, and standards underperforming district-wide.

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Districts that strengthen Tier 1 reduce their intervention pipeline – not by adding more programs, but by ensuring high-quality instruction from the start.

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Universal screeners identify who might need support. Diagnostic assessments reveal exactly what support they need.

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Strengthen Tier 1 first to prevent intervention overload

When benchmark data reveals widespread gaps, the instinct is often to expand Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports: more intervention blocks, more specialists, more extended learning time. But if Tier 1 instruction isn't rigorous and consistent, you're treating symptoms while the root cause persists.

Effective Tier 1 instruction has three non-negotiables:

1. **Clear, assessable learning outcomes.** Teachers need to know exactly what students should master and how progress will be measured. Vague or overly broad objectives lead to inconsistent instruction and make it impossible to pinpoint whether gaps stem from curriculum design or student understanding.
2. **Consistency across classrooms and grade levels.** Every student deserves access to the same high-quality instruction. When Tier 1 varies dramatically, benchmark data will reflect instructional inconsistency, not differences in student ability.
3. **High-impact, research-based practices.** Research from the National Reading Panel, NAEP, and NWEA consistently shows that explicit, systematic instruction delivered at Tier 1 has the greatest impact on long-term student outcomes.

Districts achieving sustained growth start by ensuring their Tier 1 programs integrate seamlessly with the assessments they already use – whether that's NWEA MAP Growth, i-Ready, or another universal screener.

Using diagnostic assessments to target Tier 2 and Tier 3 support

Once you've analyzed trends and reinforced Tier 1, benchmark data becomes a roadmap for decision-making in Tier 2 and Tier 3.

Benchmarks show who is below proficiency: diagnostic assessments reveal why. They pinpoint the specific skill deficits – phonological awareness, reading fluency, comprehension, number sense, algebraic thinking or measurement concepts – that drive students' struggles.

This level of precision matters. Effective intervention isn't just 'more instruction'. It's more explicit, more intensive, and deliberately scaffolded to close the right gaps at the right time.



Tier 2 typically serves 5–15% of students needing supplemental instruction to reach proficiency. If your data suggests a much larger percentage, that’s another signal to revisit Tier 1 quality before expanding intervention. When core instruction is strong, Tier 2 truly supplements (rather than repeats) Tier 1 teaching.

For the small percentage of students requiring Tier 3 support, use diagnostic data to design individualized, short-term intervention plans and to monitor progress frequently. Tier 3 should be intensive and time-limited, accelerating learning so students can transition successfully back to Tier 1 instruction.

Ultimately, the goal isn’t to build larger intervention pipelines: it’s to ensure each tier functions efficiently so every student spends the majority of their time engaged in strong, grade-level instruction.



Turning data into progress by monitoring what works

Benchmarks provide valuable snapshots in time, but continuous progress monitoring is what transforms data into sustained growth. This is where digital instructional tools become strategic assets, not just curriculum add-ons.

Digital programs like [Reading Eggs](#) and [Mathseeds](#) include built-in, [standards-based reporting](#) that helps educators monitor growth week by week, turning everyday instruction into actionable data.

These tools align data directly to state academic standards, giving teachers and administrators clear visibility into which standards students have mastered and where additional support is needed – at the district, classroom, and individual student levels.

This real-time data allows for rapid instructional adjustments. If a student isn’t responding to Tier 1 instruction, teachers can intervene earlier with targeted support on specific skills. If a Tier 2 student is making accelerated progress, they can transition back to core instruction sooner.

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The goal isn’t just to respond to benchmark data. It’s to create a continuous cycle of assessment, instruction, and adjustment that keeps students moving forward.

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When districts combine universal screening (benchmarks), diagnostic assessments (targeted skill analysis), and ongoing progress monitoring within a standards-aligned system, they build an MTSS framework that's proactive, data-driven, and designed to accelerate learning for every student.

You've identified the gaps. You've used your data strategically to strengthen Tier 1 and target intervention where it's truly needed. Now comes the question: how do we sustain this work when budgets are tight and resources are stretched?

The answer lies in understanding the true return on investment of prevention-focused instruction at scale.



Chapter 3: From MTSS to ROI: Why Tier 1 Is the Smartest Investment

Schools today face a difficult equation: raise student achievement, close widening learning gaps, and do it all while navigating teacher shortages and tight budgets.

If that sounds familiar, you're not alone. Districts across the country are being asked to do more with less.

But the answer isn't always doing more: it's investing smarter.

That's where **MTSS** ([Multi-Tiered System of Supports](#)) comes in, particularly the often-undervalued power of **Tier 1 instruction**.

While many districts direct most of their resources toward intervention, they're overlooking the most cost-effective lever for change: strengthening the core instruction every student receives, every day.

Here's why investing in Tier 1 pays off - in both improved student outcomes and better use of school budgets.



When functioning effectively, Tier 1 instruction should meet the needs of approximately 80% of students.



Why Tier 1 Is foundational

If Tier 1 is unstable, everything built on top of it becomes exponentially more expensive.

MTSS organizes student support into three tiers, creating a cohesive, whole-child approach that supports:

Tier 1: High-quality, evidence-based core instruction for all students.

Tier 2: Targeted interventions for students who need additional support.

Tier 3: Intensive, individualized interventions for students with significant needs.

When core instruction falters, the system feels it immediately: intervention teams become overwhelmed, specialists are pulled in too many directions, and budgets absorb the cost of escalating support.

The foundation matters. Without strong Tier 1 instruction, your MTSS framework becomes top-heavy, inefficient, and ultimately unsustainable.

When Tier 1 instruction falters, everything gets more expensive

When Tier 1 isn't meeting student needs, the entire MTSS system becomes more costly, more reactive, and harder to sustain.

Districts typically experience a predictable cascade of challenges:

Escalating staffing needs: More students are pushed into Tier 2 and Tier 3, requiring additional specialists, aides, and service providers—at a time when qualified staff are both scarce and expensive.

Rising program and licensing costs: Each intervention layer brings its own materials, training requirements, professional learning, and ongoing licensing fees. Tier 3 supports cost significantly more per student yet serve far fewer learners.

Lost instructional time: When remediation dominates classroom time, students ready for enrichment or acceleration disengage. Instruction slows for all learners as teachers work to backfill gaps.

Gaps that widen over time: Without strong early instruction, small misunderstandings grow into long-term learning challenges—requiring progressively intensive (and increasingly costly) intervention services.

Human and cultural costs: Teachers burn out when they spend most of their day reacting to gaps instead of teaching proactively. These “unbudgeted” costs impact morale, retention, and overall school culture. When districts strengthen Tier 1 instruction, the impact is immediate and far-reaching.





The ROI of strong Tier 1 – early investment = long-term savings

When districts strengthen Tier 1 instruction, the impact is immediate and far-reaching.

Rather than operating in constant remediation mode, the system shifts from reactive to proactive—improving outcomes while reducing long-term costs.

As fewer students require Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports, specialists can focus deeply on the learners who truly need intensive intervention. Caseloads become manageable, interventions become more effective, and support aligns more closely to actual need.

The economics are equally compelling. High-quality core instruction enables one teacher to effectively reach an entire class through whole-group instruction, productive discourse, and embedded differentiation.

This efficiency - serving 25 students well instead of remediating 10 individually - fundamentally shifts the cost-per-outcome equation.

Strong Tier 1 also prevents the early accumulation of learning gaps, that become increasingly expensive to address over time.

The benefits reverberate across the district:

- **Teachers experience renewed efficacy and reduced burnout.**
- **Students build confidence and achieve more independently.**
- **Families gain trust in the system.**
- **Leaders move from crisis response to strategic planning.**

The ROI extends well beyond budgets - it's instructional, cultural, and long-term. Investing in Tier 1 is transformational for every layer of the MTSS framework.

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Strong Tier 1 creates equity through excellence. Every student receives high-quality instruction, not just those identified for special programs.

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When foundational skills are secured early, students approach new material with confidence, reducing the need for repeated reteaching and costly interventions later on.

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Instruction that prevents misconceptions is far less costly than interventions that must correct them later on.

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What effective Tier 1 instruction looks like

Not all Tier 1 instruction delivers the same results. High-impact, research-based core teaching follows consistent principles across subjects - and these principles determine whether a district sees real ROI.

Literacy that is explicit and evidence-based: Effective literacy instruction follows the Science of Reading, moving students through clear, systematic progressions in phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. This structured approach creates a dependable roadmap for skill development, while built-in formative checks help teachers identify needs early—without adding layers of testing. The balance of structure and flexibility ensures all learners receive the right support at the right time.

Mathematics that builds deep understanding: Strong Tier 1 math instruction goes beyond memorizing facts. It helps students understand why mathematical ideas work, not just how to compute. High-quality programs integrate conceptual understanding with procedural fluency and use multiple representations so all students can access grade-level content. Frequent checks for understanding allow teachers to address misconceptions quickly, preventing the downstream cost of intensive reteaching and intervention.

Technology that amplifies teachers' impact: Technology should enhance Tier 1 instruction, not compete with it. Tools should support teachers by providing real-time data, automatic differentiation, and seamless progress monitoring. When digital tools manage routine tasks, teachers gain more time for modelling, feedback, and the high-impact interactions that drive the greatest learning gains.

Together, these elements create the Tier 1 foundation every district needs: rigorous, supportive, and adaptable - meeting students where they are while moving them toward grade-level mastery.



Strengthen Tier 1 without blowing the budget

Districts don't need more programs—they need better coherence. Strengthening Tier 1 is achievable without a system overhaul or major new spending. Strategic decisions can make existing resources work harder.

Evaluate before investing: Many districts lack a clear picture of how many students Tier 1 is currently serving—or how much they are spending on interventions that could be prevented. Use your data to determine whether roughly 80% of students are being supported through Tier 1 and to calculate the true cost of current interventions. This establishes a baseline and reveals potential ROI. Clear metrics help leaders diagnose gaps, measure improvement, and justify strategic investment in core instruction.

Think systems, not silos: Adding “one more intervention program” is tempting, but it often fragments instruction and complicates implementation. Prioritize tools that work across multiple tiers, integrate with existing curricula, and require minimal additional training. Coherent systems reduce workload, improve fidelity, and ensure every investment strengthens the foundation instead of patching isolated gaps.

Bundle strategically: Teachers lose valuable time when juggling multiple platforms with different logins, dashboards, and pedagogical approaches. Adopt comprehensive solutions that address both literacy and numeracy with aligned pedagogy, shared data, and unified interfaces. When teachers learn one system deeply, implementation becomes more consistent and more effective.

Align with funding opportunities: Districts often overlook funding streams that prioritize high-quality core instruction. Explore ESSER funds, Title grants, state literacy initiatives, district bond measures, and other sources that support evidence-based foundational learning. Many states now prioritize funding for Science of Reading-aligned instruction. Positioning Tier 1 investment as prevention - rather than “more intervention” - opens the door to sustainable funding and stronger outcomes.

Your Next Step Toward Sustainable Success

The numbers tell a clear story: when Tier 1 instruction is strong, fewer students need intervention, teachers experience renewed efficacy, and limited resources stretch further.

But the most compelling reason to invest in Tier 1 isn't about efficiency: it's about equity. Every student deserves access to excellent core instruction from day one.

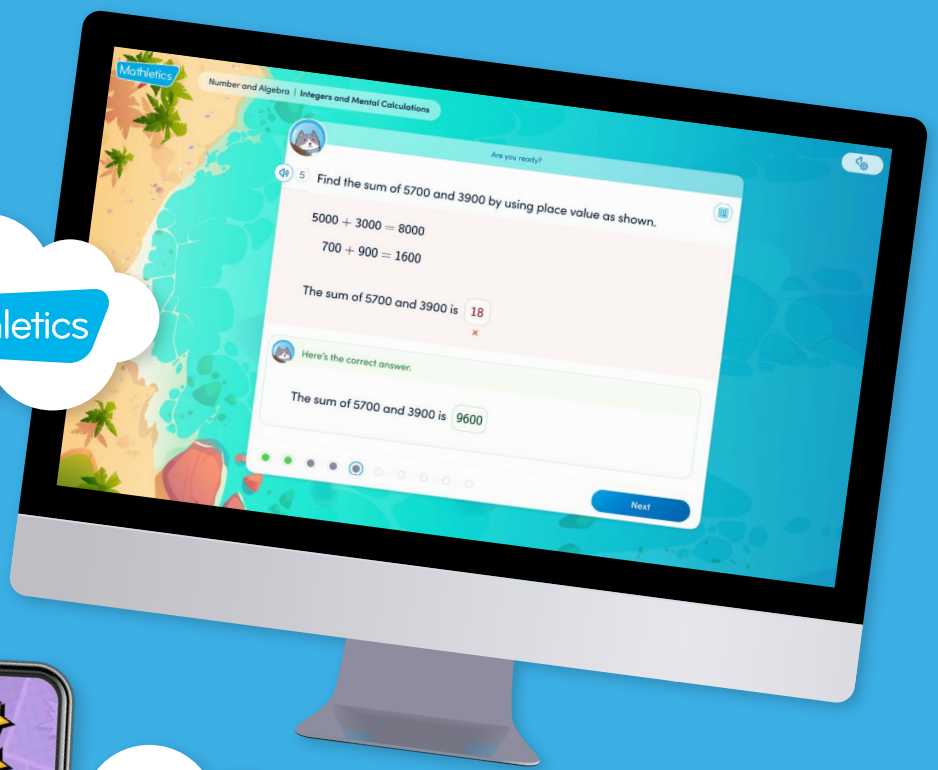
Strong Tier 1 creates that foundation. It ensures consistent, research-based teaching, prevents learning gaps before they form, and positions your MTSS framework to provide the right support, at the right time, for all students.

See how districts are aligning literacy and numeracy instruction to reduce intervention demand and improve system-wide outcomes.

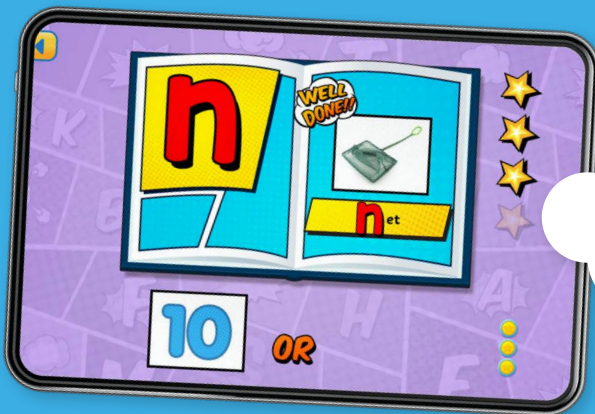
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