The Missing Tier: Empowering Student-Led Support Systems in MTSS & SEL

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Session Objectives

- **Identify Gaps**: Reflect on gaps in their current MTSS and SEL systems and explore how student voice and leadership can fill those gaps.

- **Explore Student Roles**: Understand the various ways students can actively lead and shape MTSS practices at Tier I, II, and III.

- **Design Student-Led Systems**: Collaboratively design a student-led MTSS initiative aligned to one tier of support, centering student agency and equity.

Agenda

- **Welcome & Framing the Session**

  - Introduction to the concept of "The Missing Tier" as student voice

- **Why Student-Led Interventions Matter**

  - Research and rationale for embedding student leadership

  - Culturally responsive and equitable practices

- **Student Roles by Tier**

  - Breakdown of student-led roles and strategies for Tier I, II, and III

- **Family Engagement with Student Voice**

  - How students can lead or co-facilitate meaningful family engagement

- **Overcoming Barriers**

  - Ecological systems theory and reflection activity

- **Designing a Student-Led Initiative**

  - Small group activity: Create a student-led practice/intervention

- **Closing Reflection & Resources**

Small group discussion & share-out:

- What current gap do you see in your MTSS system?

- How do you/have you envision(ed) students helping to fill this gap?

Why Student-Led Interventions?

- Many MTSS and SEL frameworks focus on adult-driven interventions but miss the mark by not including student voice and choice to create sustainable and culturally responsive systems.
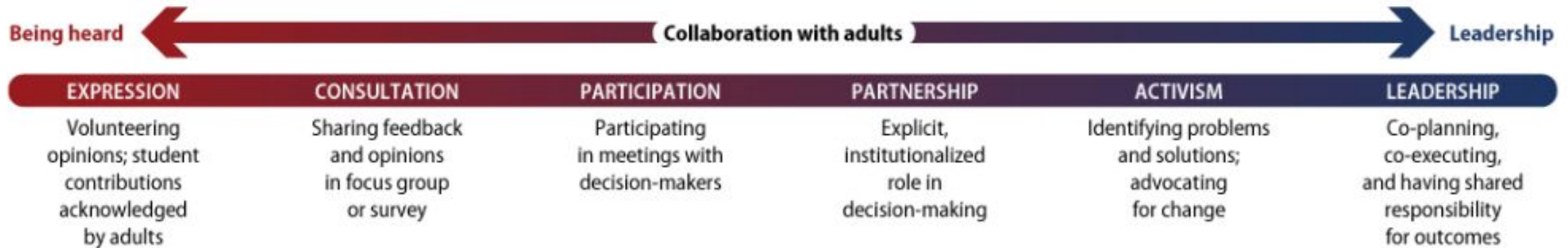
Key Statistics

Indicator	Statistic	Source
Academic Motivation	7x more likely when students feel heard	Quaglia Institute (2014)
School Belonging	3.4x higher when student voice is prioritized	Search Institute (2018)
SEL Gains	+11 percentile points in academics	Durlak et al., 2011 (CASEL)
Suicide Risk Reduction	54% less likely to attempt suicide if connected to school	CDC, 2021
MTSS Success	More effective and equitable when students co-design interventions	McCart & Miller, 2021

FIGURE 1

Types of student voice

Adapted version of Toshalis and Nakkula's "The Spectrum of Student Voice Oriented Activity" and Mitra and Gross' "Pyramid of student voice"

Being heard ←————— **Collaboration with adults** ————→ **Leadership**

EXPRESSION	CONSULTATION	PARTICIPATION	PARTNERSHIP	ACTIVISM	LEADERSHIP
Volunteering opinions; student contributions acknowledged by adults	Sharing feedback and opinions in focus group or survey	Participating in meetings with decision-makers	Explicit, institutionalized role in decision-making	Identifying problems and solutions; advocating for change	Co-planning, co-executing, and having shared responsibility for outcomes

Sources: This graph is adapted from Eric Toshalis and Michael J. Nakkula, "Motivation, Engagement, and Student Voice" (Boston: Jobs for the Future, 2012), available at https://jfforg-prod-prime.s3.amazonaws.com/media/documents/Motivation_Engagement_Student_Voice_0.pdf; Dana L. Mitra and Steven Jay Gross, "Increasing Student Voice in High School Reform: Building Partnerships, Improving Outcomes," Educational Management Administration & Leadership 37 (4) (2009): 522–543, available at http://www.buildingpublicunderstanding.org/assets/files/increasingstudentvoiceinhighschoolreform.pdf.

CAP

5 ESSENTIAL STEPS FOR IMPLEMENTING MTSS IN K-12 SCHOOLS

CRUCIAL FOR ENHANCING STUDENT SUCCESS

BUILD A STRONG LEADERSHIP TEAM AND SHARED VISION

- Assemble a dedicated MTSS leadership team: Include teachers, administrators, special education, and support staff.

- Develop a shared vision and goals: Clearly articulate the school's MTSS philosophy and desired outcomes.

- Provide ongoing professional development: Equip the leadership team with the knowledge and skills to lead MTSS implementation effectively.

ESTABLISH A ROBUST DATA SYSTEM

- Implement a comprehensive data collection system: Gather student data on academics, behavior, and social-emotional learning.

- Utilize data to inform decision-making: Analyze data regularly to identify student needs and adjust.

- Create a culture of data-driven instruction: Empower teachers to use data to inform their teaching practices.

DEVELOP HIGH-QUALITY CORE INSTRUCTION AND INTERVENTIONS

- Implement evidence-based core instruction: Ensure all students receive rigorous and engaging instruction.

- Tiered interventions: Develop a continuum of interventions to address varying student needs.

- Progress monitoring: Regularly assess student progress to determine the effectiveness of interventions.

FOSTER A POSITIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE AND CULTURE

- Promote a supportive and inclusive school climate: Create a safe and welcoming environment for all students.

- Build strong relationships: Develop positive relationships with students, families, and staff.

- Empower students: Provide opportunities for student voice and leadership.

ENGAGE FAMILIES AND THE COMMUNITY

- Build strong partnerships with families: Communicate regularly and effectively with families.

- Involve families in the MTSS process: Seek their input and collaboration.

- Collaborate with community organizations: Leverage community resources to support student success.

Educational Innovation 360

Building a Strong Leadership Team

- Building a strong MTSS (Multi-Tiered System of Supports) leadership team with students is a powerful way to create a culture of shared responsibility, voice, and belonging.

Establish a Robust System

- To establish a robust MTSS system *with* students, you need to intentionally embed student voice, leadership, and co-creation into every layer of the framework.

Elementary

- **Student Roles:**

- Serve as classroom ambassadors or "helpers" who model expected behaviors and support peers.

- Participate in student voice circles where they share what helps them feel safe, focused, and successful.

- Provide feedback on classroom norms and schoolwide expectations (e.g., posters, common area rules).

Elementary

- **Leadership Opportunities:**
- MTSS Student Ambassadors or "Kindness Crew" selected from upper elementary grades.
- Help identify rewards or recognition systems that are meaningful for students.
- Participate in small group leadership meetings with a staff mentor monthly.

Middle School

- **Student Roles:**

- Serve on a student MTSS advisory panel that meets regularly with staff.

- Analyze behavior, attendance, or SEL data (presented in accessible ways) and propose student-led solutions.

- Co-design schoolwide initiatives (e.g., anti-bullying week, peer mentorships).

Middle School

- **Leadership Opportunities:**

- Peer mediators or restorative justice circle keepers.

- Co-facilitators of school climate walks with staff.

- Feedback leaders: conducting peer interviews or surveys to bring student voice into MTSS improvement

High School

Student Roles:

- Full participation on MTSS Leadership Teams—attending meetings, reviewing interventions, and co-developing systems.

- Leading schoolwide initiatives related to Tier 1 culture (e.g., "rethink detention" campaign, mentoring freshmen).

- Serving as cultural brokers or equity leaders to surface barriers to support and inclusion.

High School

- **Leadership Opportunities:**
- Student-led restorative practice teams.
- Tier 2 peer mentoring or tutoring programs.
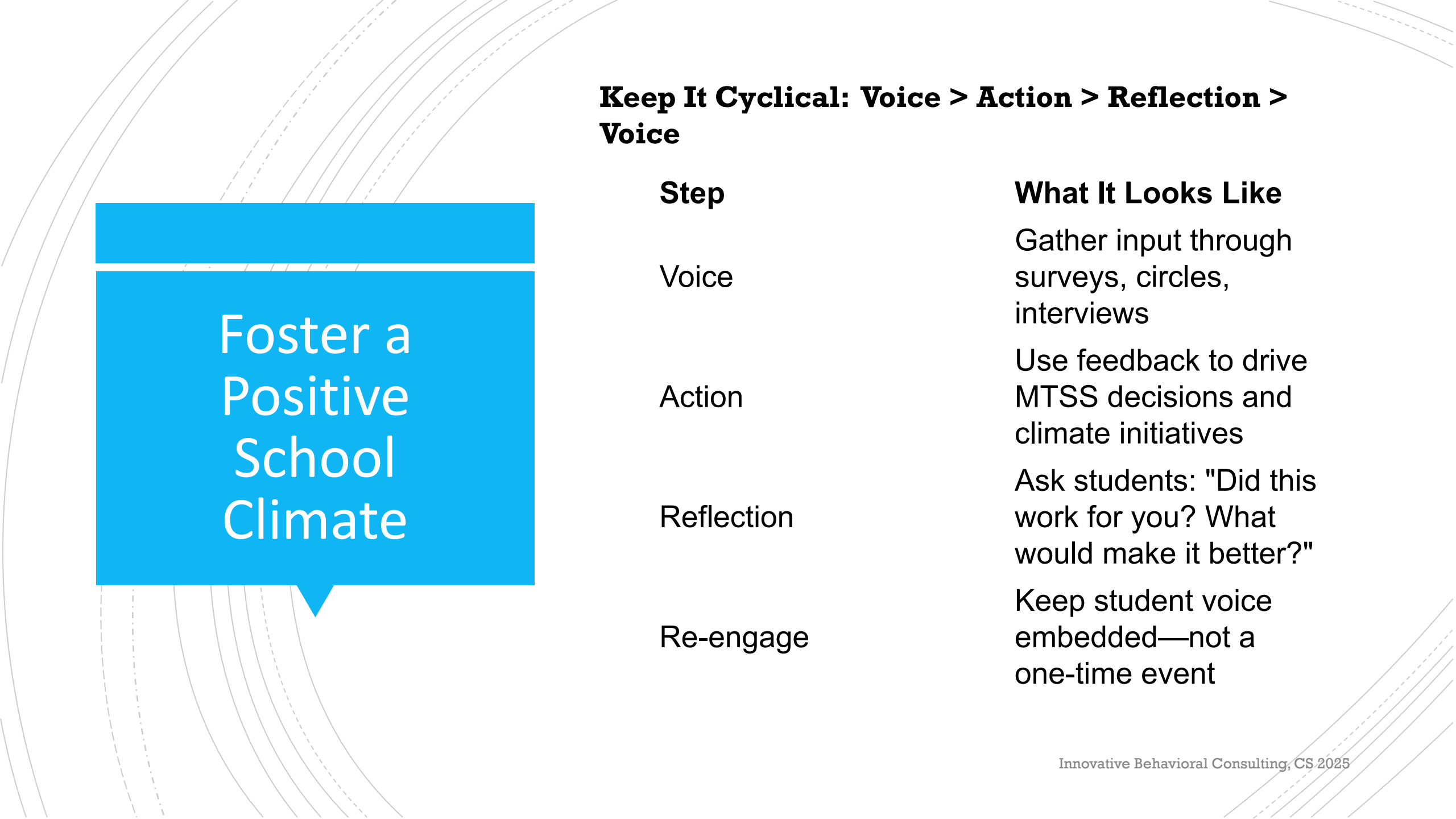- Student-led SEL or wellness committees (e.g., mental health awareness weeks).

Think-Pair-Share

- Which of these roles could you start implementing tomorrow?

- Which would require more planning?

Develop High Quality Instructional Interventions

Practice	What It Looks Like
Co-Goal Setting	"What do you want to be able to do by the end of this week?"
Feedback-Driven Instruction	Mini check-ins: "What's helping you learn this best?"
Student Self-Monitoring	Self-rating scales, progress journals, choice boards
Peer-to-Peer Support	Peer tutors, small group leaders, buddy systems
Celebration and Visibility	Growth portfolios, shout-outs, wall of wins

Foster a Positive School Climate

Keep It Cyclical: Voice > Action > Reflection > Voice

Step	What It Looks Like
Voice	Gather input through surveys, circles, interviews
Action	Use feedback to drive MTSS decisions and climate initiatives
Reflection	Ask students: "Did this work for you? What would make it better?"
Re-engage	Keep student voice embedded—not a one-time event

Engage Families

- Engaging families in MTSS with student voice means creating a three-way partnership where students, families, and educators all contribute to building supportive systems.

- This goes beyond family *involvement* to family empowerment, especially when student perspectives help shape the strategies and communication methods used.

Elementary

- Student-led goal sharing at family conferences using visuals or simple "I can" statements.

- Home connection journals where students reflect on classroom supports and ask for feedback from caregivers.

- Upper elementary students help lead "family walkthroughs" of positive behavior systems.

Family Engagement Ideas:

- Invite families to add to or customize home versions of tools

- Share short video clips of students demonstrating classroom supports for families to watch and reinforce at home.

Middle School

- Student-led conferences where youth explain their goals, progress, and what supports work for them.

- Family nights designed by students.

- Student-created newsletters that explain MTSS.

- Students on the MTSS team design feedback questions for families to share insights about behavior or SEL supports.

Family Engagement Ideas:

- Share family/student-created toolkits

- Host "Family + Student Voice Circles" for families and youth to co-reflect on what's working in Tier 1 supports.

High School

- Students present data and self-reflection in meetings.

- Co-hosted family engagement events with student leaders.

- Youth lead workshops for families on navigating mental health supports, goal-setting, or digital learning tools.

- Student advisory groups help revise family engagement practices based on what's meaningful for *them*.

Family Engagement Ideas

- Invite youth to share their goals with families during home visits or check-ins.

- Create student-curated resource lists for families (in multiple languages) based on needs students see in their community.
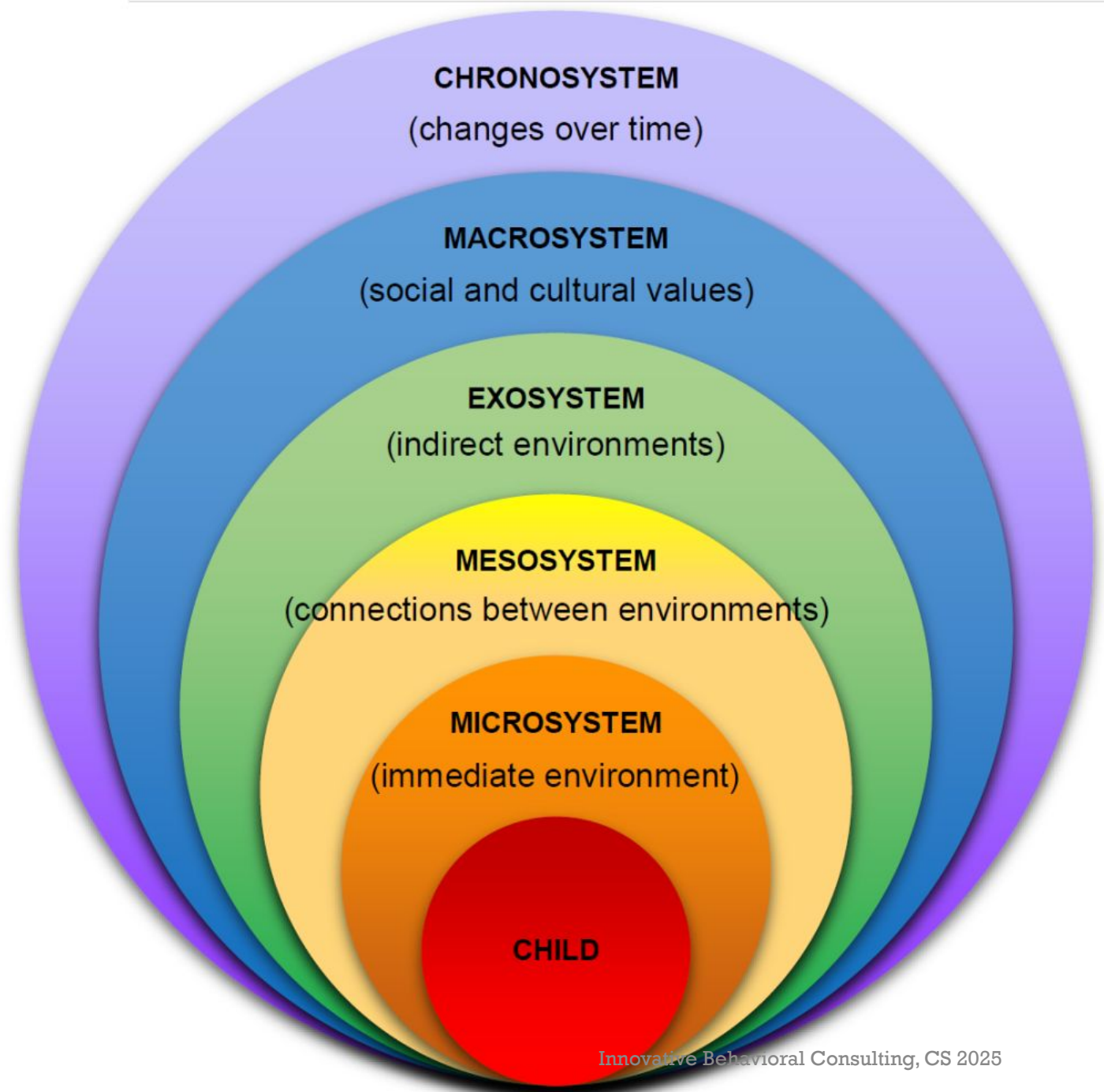
Overcoming Barriers

- **Turn and Talk- Be Ready to Share:**
  - What's Stopping You?
  - Concerns/Problems/Fears etc.

Ecological Theory, developed by psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner, explains that human development is shaped by various environmental systems we interact with throughout life.

These include the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem, which influence our behavior differently depending on the context.

According to the theory, we actively shape these environments just as they shape us, highlighting the mutual influence between our surroundings.
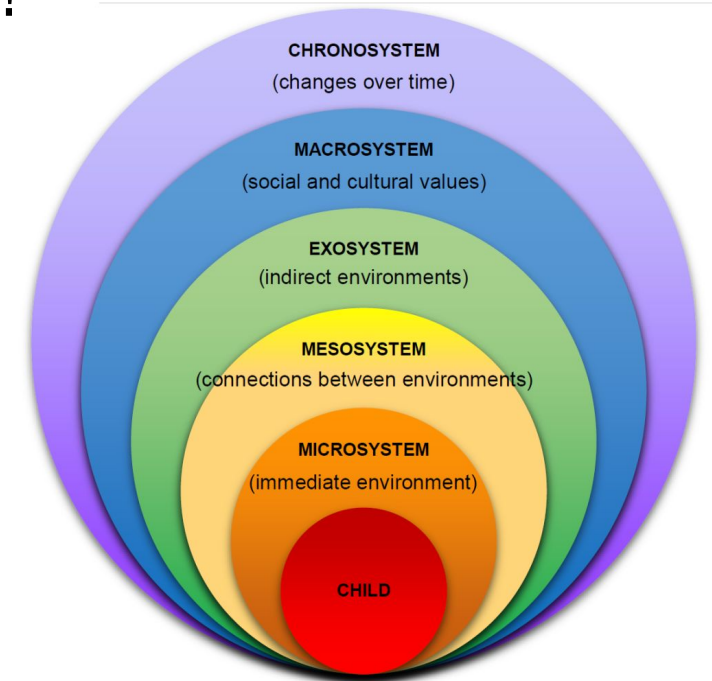
CHRONOSYSTEM
(changes over time)

MACROSYSTEM
(social and cultural values)

EXOSYSTEM
(indirect environments)

MESOSYSTEM
(connections between environments)

MICROSYSTEM
(immediate environment)

CHILD

Our relationships with youth don't just shape their lives—they transform ours too.

▼

The impact we have on each other is mutual, powerful, and enduring.

Think-Pair-Share

- Which system (micro/meso/exo) do you think your students are most impacted by in your school setting?

- Share an example.

CHRONOSYSTEM
(changes over time)

MACROSYSTEM
(social and cultural values)

EXOSYSTEM
(indirect environments)

MESOSYSTEM
(connections between environments)

MICROSYSTEM
(immediate environment)

CHILD

School Voice Data
Percentage in Agreement

When students have a voice they are...

GRADES 6-12

48% of students believe that adults at their school listen to students' suggestions.

54% of students feel that adults and students work together to make their school better.

51% of students agree that students work with adults to find solutions to school problems.

46% of students feel that they have a voice in decision making at school.

48% of students agree that students develop programs that improve the whole school.

GRADES 3-5

42% of students see themselves as leaders.

31% of students believe that other students listen to their ideas.

43% of students believe that teachers learn from students.

94% of students believe that it is important to follow rules.

39% of students agree that students help make classroom rules.

3X more likely to experience self-worth in school.

5X more likely to be engaged in school.

5X more likely to have a sense of purpose in school.

▪Data from half a million students who took the Quaglia Student Voice Survey

Student-Led Support Frameworks

Tier 1: Peer-led SEL lessons & community-building activities

Tier 2: Peer tutoring, mentoring, and mediation

Tier 3: Student-led de-escalation & support teams

Student Led Systems Frameworks

- **Tier I**
- Integrating student leadership into Tier I ensures systems are inclusive, responsive, and culturally relevant—because students help shape what works for them and their peers.

Student-Led Support Frameworks Tier I

- **Student Voice in Rule-Making and Expectations:**
  - Co-create schoolwide behavior expectations (e.g., "Be Safe, Be Respectful, Be Responsible") with student input to enhance relevance and buy-in.
  - Use student-led focus groups or equity teams to revise norms through a culturally responsive lens.

- **Peer Ambassadors or Tier I Leadership Teams:**
  - Train students to serve as school climate ambassadors who model expectations, lead tours, and gather feedback from peers.
  - These students can sit on Tier I teams (with adult mentorship) to inform decisions about schoolwide supports and activities.

- **Student Feedback and Data Collection:**
  - Use student-led surveys, listening circles, or restorative circles to gather Tier I data on belonging, safety, and engagement.
  - Include student-designed questions to reflect authentic concerns (e.g., "When do you feel heard by adults?").

Student-Led Support Frameworks Tier I

- **Peer-Led SEL and Restorative Practices:**
  - Empower students to co-lead SEL activities or classroom morning meetings.
  - Facilitate peer mediation or restorative conversations to strengthen community norms.

- **Universal Recognition Systems Designed with Students:**
  - Collaboratively design schoolwide incentives that are meaningful across diverse groups.
  - Create recognition systems where students nominate peers for acts of kindness, inclusion, and leadership.

- **Service-Learning and Community Building Projects:**
  - Integrate student-led service projects as a universal behavior support strategy, promoting responsibility and social-emotional growth.
  - Projects should align with school values and encourage collective responsibility.

Student-Led Support Frameworks

- **Tier II**

- When students themselves are involved in shaping, delivering, or co-facilitating these supports, interventions become more responsive, relational, and effective.

- A student-led Tier II framework builds on peer relationships, culturally responsive practices, and strengths-based approaches.

Student-Led Support Frameworks Tier II

•**Peer Mentoring & Coaching:**

•Train upper-grade or same-age students to serve as peer mentors for those identified for Tier II support (e.g., through Check-In/Check-Out). Mentors can assist.

•**Student-Led Support Groups:**

•Facilitate small-group sessions co-led by trained student facilitators focused on SEL. These groups create safer spaces for peers to connect, normalize challenges, and share strategies.

•**Collaborative Behavior Planning:**

•Include students in co-developing their own behavior or goal plans. Use youth-centered planning tools (visuals, values mapping, strength-based reflection) to promote ownership and motivation.

Student-Led Support Frameworks Tier II

- **Peer-Led Restorative Processes:**
- Implement student-led restorative circles or peer mediation as Tier II supports for students struggling with relationships or behavior.

- **Targeted Service-Learning & Engagement:**
- Design service-learning projects for students needing Tier II supports that align with their interests and promote self-efficacy. Youth lead aspects of planning and implementation to build leadership and connection.

- **Youth Feedback & Tier II Systems Monitoring:**
- Regularly gather input from students receiving Tier II supports to refine the intervention system. Use student advisors to reflect on how Tier II is working, what needs adjustment, and how it feels to participate.

Student-Led Support Frameworks

- **Tier 3**

- At this level, student-led systems are not about delegation of services, but about restoring power, voice, and ownership in their own healing and growth process. Students are active participants—not passive recipients—of their support plans.

- **Youth-Centered Planning Teams:**
- Students help lead their own support meetings (e.g., wraparound, IEP/504, behavior intervention planning).
- Invite them to set personal goals and identify which adults they trust to support them.

- **Personalized, Strength-Based Interventions:**
- Students co-design supports such as break plans, check-in systems, calming strategies, or academic accommodations.

- **Trauma-Informed Storytelling & Narrative Work:**
- Offer structured opportunities for students to tell their stories (verbally, artistically, in writing) as a form of agency and healing.
- Use narrative reflection to foster resilience and reframe behavior through a lens of unmet needs and survival skills.

- **Mentorship and Peer Co-Design:**
- Pair students with trusted peer mentors who have "been there" and can walk with them through their Tier III plan. Engage students who have previously exited Tier III successfully in co-designing improvement strategies for current systems.

- **Flexible Learning Pathways with Student Input:**
- For students whose needs are deeply interconnected with academic disengagement, co-create alternative schedules, project-based learning plans, or modified instructional supports.

- **Feedback Loops & Empowered Accountability:**
- Implement weekly reflection tools where students rate their plan's effectiveness, note challenges, and suggest adjustments. Allow students to co-determine how success is measured—moving beyond compliance to include relational and emotional growth.

Student Led Support Frameworks Tier III

MTSS Tier	Co-Design	Student Leadership	Peer Supports	Culturally Responsive Voice	Narrative & Reflection	Shared Accountability
Tier I	Students co-create expectations, school norms, and climate initiatives	School climate ambassadors, student councils, and equity teams	Peer-led SEL activities, morning meetings, schoolwide campaigns	Feedback loops through surveys, focus groups, and student panels	Student storytelling, class meetings, reflective activities	Students help monitor climate goals, track peer recognition
Tier II	Students help shape small-group supports and peer mentor roles	Peer mentors, group co-facilitators, student voice in Tier II teams	Mentoring, peer check-ins, restorative peer groups	Affinity-based groups and voice in support group design	Shared reflections during group check-ins and mentoring sessions	Students evaluate impact of peer supports and suggest adjustments
Tier III	Students co-design individualized plans and supports with trusted adults	Students lead own planning meetings and goal-setting sessions	Trusted peer partnerships, one-on-one support, re-entry circles	Narrative work honoring identity, trauma-informed storytelling	Personal journaling, values mapping, trauma-informed narrative tools	Students define success, reflect on progress, suggest refinements

Designing a Student-Led Initiative

Example: Student-Led MTSS Initiative Planning

This completed example demonstrates how to use the design template to create a student-led initiative aligned with the MTSS framework. The sample shown is aligned with Tier II.

| Student Role(s)	Description of Practice/Intervention	How It Centers Student Voice/Agency	Equity Considerations	How Success Will Be Measured	Timeline Completion
Peer Mentors; Student SEL Group Co-Facilitators	A small group SEL support initiative where trained peer mentors co-facilitate sessions focused on stress management, relationship skills, and problem-solving.	Students help design the group agenda, lead weekly check-ins, and create a safe space for peers to share challenges and strengths. They provide feedback to improve the group format.	Group materials are culturally inclusive. Students choose topics that reflect their lived experiences. Multilingual resources are offered when needed.	Attendance and participation rates, pre/post SEL self-assessments, and qualitative feedback from students about the group's impact.	By October 2025, 8 students w be chosen t begin train as peer mentors. By the 2nd semester, a students w be leading groups.

- Small group activity: Create an initiative for one MTSS tier

Resources

- [Incorporate Student Voice, Choice & SEL in the Classroom](#)

- [Elevating Student Voice in Education - Center for American Progress](#)

- [How Student Voice Fits Into Your District's MTSS](#)
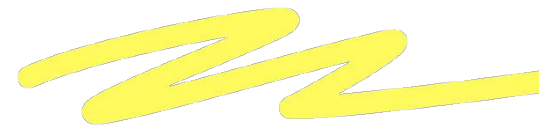
Thank You!

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