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# Making a Difference When Faced With Disproportionality

How Branching Minds Supports Equity-Focused MTSS

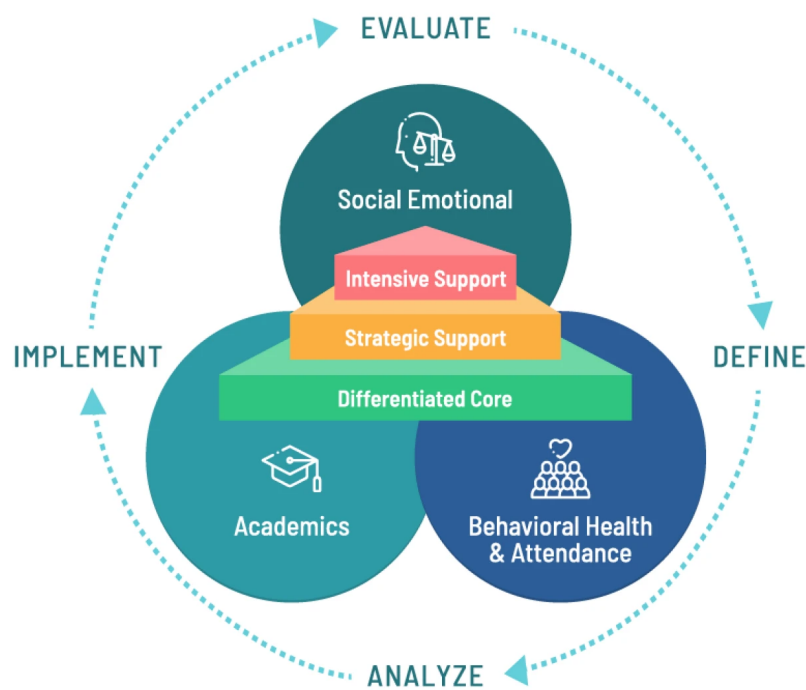
April 01, 2023

Decades of research point to broad and deep inequities for students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and students with disabilities. School disruption due to Covid made the disparities worse—early data reveals that these groups had the steepest declines in academic achievement over the past several years. At the same time, many local education agencies may face sanctions for significant disproportionality as the new Equity in IDEA regulations enter their third full year of implementation.

For education leaders, there is a clear and pressing imperative to address significant disproportionality and close school equity gaps. A systematic approach is required to address disparities in how some groups are identified for special education, placed in more restrictive educational settings, and disciplined at markedly higher rates than their peers.

## Reducing Significant Disproportionality Requires a System-Level Change

To improve academic outcomes and reduce disproportionality, many districts across the country have adopted a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework. The Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) is a collaborative, systematic, evidence-based approach to differentiating and personalizing instruction and intervention across academics, social-emotional learning, and behavior for all students—so that every student can achieve academic and life success.



### The MTSS Process

MTSS aims to provide an equitable educational experience by leveraging collective knowledge and expertise to help teachers understand their learners' needs and make informed, strategic decisions that best support them.

**MTSS helps address significant disproportionality by providing early intervention and support for *all students who need it*.** By providing early intervention across all groups of students, and then carefully monitoring and making adjustments in the type and intensity of the support provided, educators can often prevent unnecessary special education referrals and discipline problems. When a disability is suspected, early intervention data provides a rich source of information for identifying and planning around special educational needs. This is why Comprehensive Coordinated Early Intervening Services (CCEIS) are indicated in response to significant disproportionality, and why expenses related to tiered intervention supports are allowable within both comprehensive and voluntary Coordinated Early Intervening Services.

# Utilizing an MTSS Platform To Reduce Disproportionality

Effective MTSS hinges on educators' ability to see the whole child and to leverage all of the necessary data to know who needs support, what to do to support them, and whether or not the support provided has helped. Utilizing a robust MTSS platform to support the data-sharing, communication, and collaboration that are hallmarks of equitable practice is a critical asset in this work at a system level.

For district leadership to meaningfully identify trends that could lead to significant disproportionality, they need to have visibility into student performance and outcomes across all of the schools they serve. This is especially critical in large districts, where there can be significant variations in student needs and demographics across schools. Access to student performance and growth data reports easily disaggregated by race, ethnicity, special education status, and English language proficiency allows district and school leadership to identify potentially negative trends and address them immediately. These data insights also support stakeholders in making informed decisions about the allocation of resources to equitably support students and teachers.



We were really good in terms of small group or individual student needs, but we weren't really as solid as we needed to be in terms of our system-level work. I would say that really took off with the adoption of Branching Minds and having the access to the different system-level reports. We quickly were able to see just how predictable our data is and how there are certain trends within our data.

Trisha Senne, Coordinator of Assessment and MTSS, Community Consolidated School District 59, Elk Grove Village, IL

Having access to comprehensive data insights is necessary—but insufficient—to reduce disproportionality at the system level. Districts and schools need tools that connect data with actionable steps to address practice gaps and potential disparities.

# How Branching Minds Supports Vertical Equity Across Districts and Schools

The Branching Minds platform supports schools and districts to more effectively, efficiently, and equitably meet the needs of ALL learners, and empowers educators with the tools they need to connect data to action in order to reduce disproportionality.

## *Automatic Data-Based Tier Identification*

One of the best ways to equitably identify and refer students for intervention is to apply consistent cut scores to universal screeners that are used to identify recommended tier levels of support. When these types of data-based decisions are implemented consistently across a district, it removes the potential for biases to drive decision-making and resource allocation.

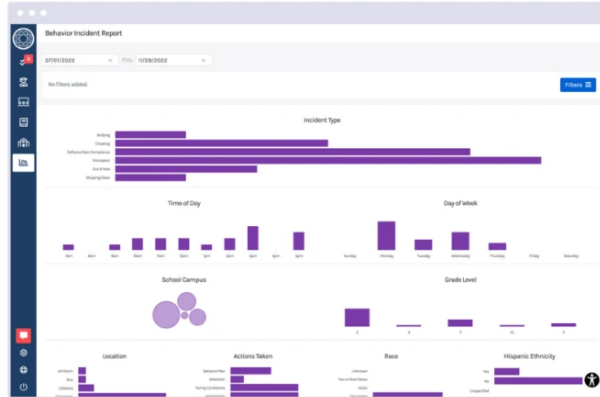
On the Branching Minds platform, district and school leaders can identify consistent cut scores, and the platform will apply these to automatically identify the level of support needed.

## *Tier Health Reporting*

Branching Minds also enables leaders to quickly and easily see the proportion of students being identified at each tier level for each topic area, as well as whether there are disparities across different demographic groups in any particular tier of support. This visibility enables leaders to immediately flag disproportionality and better understand why these disparities are showing up and how to address them in practice.

## *Behavior Incident Report*

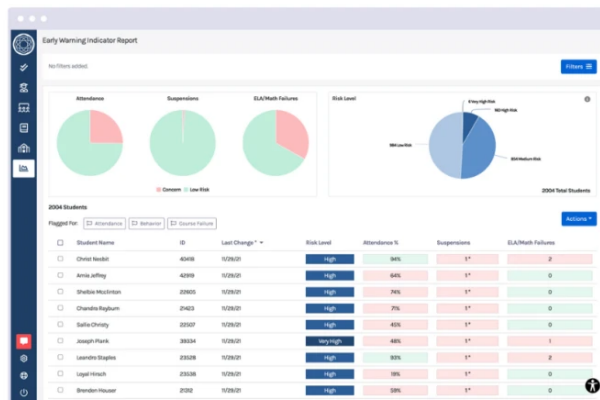
Given the long history of disproportionality in disciplinary practices, it is essential for districts to track behavioral patterns in the schools that they serve. The Branching Minds behavior incident report displays the frequency of different types of behavior incidents across campuses, teachers, and locations, as well as the actions that are taken to resolve these incidents. These data can also be broken down by student demographic characteristics to shed light on disproportionate behavioral needs, practices, actions, and consequences, again giving leaders the insight and opportunity to address issues immediately.



Behavior Incident Report

### Early Warning Indicator (EWI) Report

The Branching Minds EWI system uses indicators shown through research to accurately identify students at risk of not graduating. Based on attendance, suspensions, and course failure data, Branching Minds assigns each middle and high-school student a “risk level.” Administrators can easily generate an EWI report at any time to gain a comprehensive view of how many students are at risk of not graduating, and whether there are significant differences based on demographics.



Early Warning Indicator Report

## How Branching Minds Supports Equitable Intervention and Support for All Learners

Having visibility into issues related to disproportionality can help educators see where things may be going wrong, but to actually address the root causes of inequitable academic or behavioral outcomes, leaders need to be able to support practice change.

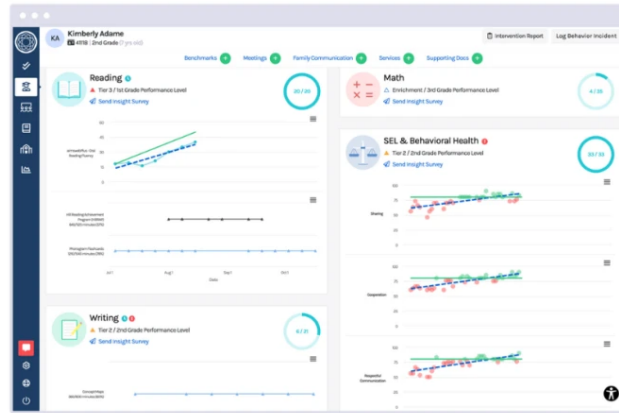
Using Branching Minds, campus and district leaders can easily see individual student plans in order to identify the practice gaps that need to be addressed. They can see whether the plans are aligned with best practice, whether they are being implemented, and whether student progress is being monitored. In this way, leaders can see both the macro trends that may indicate disproportionality, and the microdata at the individual student or teacher level so that changes can be made immediately to ensure that biases are not impacting outcomes .

### *Student Overview and Plan Creation*

Branching Minds scaffolds educators through the step-by-step creation of student intervention plans with all of the essential components for success: a SMART goal, a progress monitoring assessment, an aligned evidence-based program, strategy, or other support, along with who will provide the intervention, when, and for how long.

The Branching Minds platform also alerts educators to:

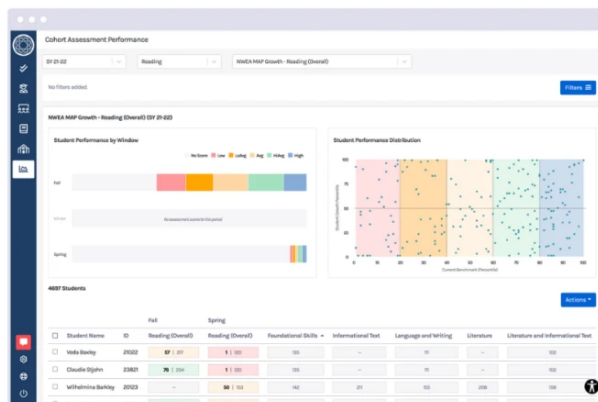
- Students who are identified as needing support but don't have an active intervention plan, ensuring that no struggling student falls through the cracks unnoticed.
- Students who have a plan but that plan has not been implemented or is not being monitored, ensuring that the intervention is actually taking place and leading to improvement in student performance. And if not, necessary changes can be made immediately, not after months of wasted time.



Student Overview

### *Cohort Assessment Performance Report*

Once educators have an understanding of who needs support, they require data to make determinations regarding what kind of support would be most beneficial. This report allows educators to easily see which students from a selected cohort have the same needs and thus could benefit from a group intervention plan targeting the same skill areas. Students can be selected and an Actions button scaffolds a set of next steps that can be taken by educators to address their needs. This again ensures that plan creation is developed based on need and cuts across student demographics.



Cohort Assessment Performance Report

## **Leveraging Technology To Support Systemic Change**

Addressing significant disproportionality is a critical issue for education leaders. Implementing a Multi-Tiered System of Supports framework is a recommended strategy for improving academic and behavioral outcomes for all learners. It reduces significant disproportionality by bringing a comprehensive data-driven approach to identifying students who need intervention and support. Utilizing a robust MTSS platform, like Branching Minds, is critical to successfully implementing system-level changes that reduce biases, improve student outcomes, support teachers and administrators, and create sustainable changes.

To learn more about how Branching Minds supports districts across the country to improve outcomes and reduce inequities, visit [branchingminds.com](https://branchingminds.com).

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