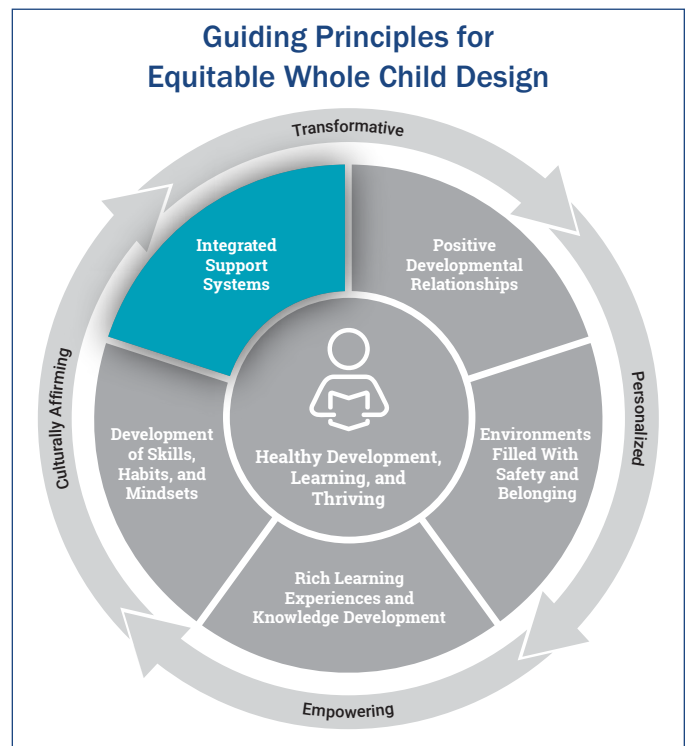


Key Takeaways: Integrated Support Systems

The Guiding Principles for Equitable Whole Child Design show how practitioners can integrate a range of structures and practices to maximize learning and development. Among its five elements are integrated support systems, which promote students' resilience, remove barriers, and embed protections that enable students to learn and develop.

A healthy context for learning and development requires attention to young people's safety; physical and mental health; social, emotional, and cognitive development; academic skills; and identities. Students have unique needs, interests, and assets to build upon, as well as areas of vulnerability to strengthen without stigma or shame. Schools with integrated support systems attend to these realities and create a coordinated web of structures that readily meet students' holistic needs, especially students from historically marginalized groups. They buffer excessive stress with secure relationships coupled with academic, health, mental health, and social service supports. They also provide opportunities to extend learning; build on interests and passions; and create ongoing opportunities for exploration, enrichment, and discovery.



All students will experience different needs at different times. It is therefore helpful to create **multi-tiered systems of support** (MTSS), which can provide a responsive continuum of supports to help remove barriers and advance student learning and well-being in collaborative ways. Even more important than the interventions themselves is how MTSS is operationalized to create genuinely helpful, readily accessible, and personalized supports that are asset-oriented and free of bias. To do this, MTSS can be enabled by processes for assessing student learning and well-being, which provide insights into:

- students' individual strengths and struggles;
- patterns for groups of students across grade levels and content areas; and
- school and community resources that should be accessed to meet individual and collective needs for programs and services.

With data like these, practitioners can better understand how to strengthen conditions in schools, adjust their practices, and integrate supports, particularly when school staff collaboratively analyze data and identify and monitor interventions in timely and consistent ways.

MTSS typically include the following three tiers that promote learning and development:

Universal Supports: Universal supports, also known as **Tier 1** interventions, are everyday classroom practices that make the core work of the school supportive for students. These include:

- **relationship-building structures**, such as advisories, teaching teams, and looping, that enable staff to know their students well;
- **collaboration structures** among staff and between staff and families that allow for regular communication, knowledge sharing, and discussions of how to best support students; and

- **shared understandings of development**, which help practitioners and parents think about students holistically and nurture them in consistent ways.

Universal supports are also made effective through the implementation of pedagogical practices based on the [Universal Design for Learning](#) framework, the creation of safe and inclusive school environments, and culturally responsive pedagogies that make content accessible to a wide range of learners.

Supplemental Supports: Supplemental supports help surface the additional interventions that may be needed for students’ academic, social, emotional, and cognitive development. These interventions, often termed **Tier 2** supports, can include:

- **dedicated personnel**, like learning specialists, counselors, or social workers, who are on-site and work as part of student support teams to provide students with extra help in classrooms or in established resource rooms;
- **additional time**, including flexible opportunities like open office hours or dedicated class periods during which students and educators can come together to work through course material or other learning challenges;
- **high-quality tutoring**, which is implemented by well-trained tutors who work consistently with individuals or small groups of students; and
- **extended learning time**, like after-school or summer learning programs and bridge programs held during school breaks, in which expert teachers work with small groups of students to accelerate or enrich their learning.

Supplemental supports are most impactful when they are consistently implemented by well-prepared staff and easily accessed in non-stigmatized ways. In addition, the practices used within these forums need to be informed by strong pedagogical knowledge; affirming relationships; and approaches that are focused on engagement, acceleration, and support for student agency.

Intensive Supports: An integrated support system should have individualized supports in place that can provide more intensive intervention for learners when needed. These supports, often known as **Tier 3** interventions, should orchestrate access to programs and services to provide these highly personalized services and supports for learning and well-being. Structures that support access to high-quality Tier 3 interventions include:

- **coordination of services**, which include structures, routines, and personnel that link students to a range of academic, health, and social services;
- **regular check-ins and meetings** across teams, roles, and stakeholders that can enhance communication and data exchange and ensure that students have access to what they need when they need it; and
- **partnerships** between schools and nonprofits that enhance a school’s capacity to provide access to services, youth programs, and academic and cultural enrichment.

Access to intensive supports should be supported by culturally responsive, personalized, and asset-based practices. In addition, schools must ensure that supports are organized in ways that make access easy and do not create tracking or segregated learning spaces. **Community schools**, which incorporate integrated support systems as a characteristic feature and often have dedicated staff who support service coordination, family engagement, and resource and needs assessments, are a promising school model that can support systematic and coherent multi-tiered systems of support.

To see the full playbook, visit <https://k12.designprinciples.org>.

