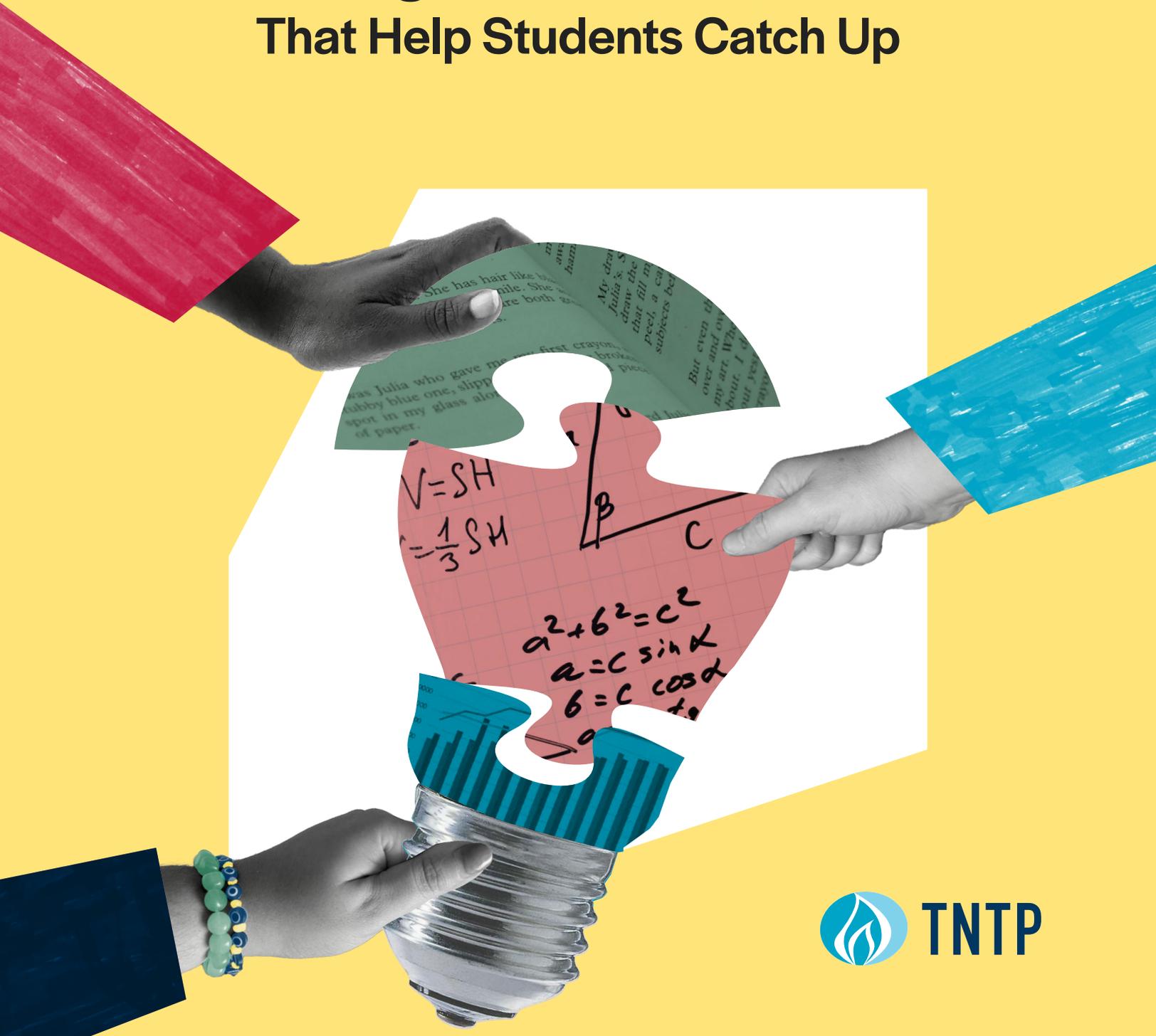


Coherence by Design

Building Instructional Systems
That Help Students Catch Up



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Executive Summary

In *Paths of Opportunity*, TNTP identified five interconnected factors that shape how young people can thrive now and in the future.¹ Students need a strong academic foundation, clear connections between their learning and real-world careers; access to social capital through relationships and networks that open doors and provide guidance; personalized support grounded in their aspirations; and a sense of civic identity and belonging that anchors them in their communities.

When these elements work together, they have transformative power. But today, they are too often fragmented, treated as add-ons or siloed programs rather than connected components of a student's day. That fragmentation makes it harder for students to benefit and harder for educators to deliver. The challenge is not a lack of promising programs or practices; it is a lack of coherence.

Instructional Coherence Builds Learning Intentionally Across Supports

This paper is a deep dive into instructional coherence, a first in our coherence series. Instructional coherence means aligning instruction, content, and goals across all learning spaces—from core instruction to intervention and other academic supports—to ensure that all students engage in and are actively prepared for grade-level learning.

Yet for many students, particularly those furthest below grade level, instructional coherence is rare. A typical school day for a low-performing student may include exposure to multiple curricula, conflicting instructional routines, and disconnected goals. A student might encounter one approach during core instruction, another during intervention, and

yet another through tutoring—often with little connection between them. By the end of a school week, students are left to reconcile these differences on their own, placing the greatest cognitive burden on those who are already struggling.

The consequences are significant. National data show widening achievement gaps, with the lowest-performing students losing ground even as higher-performing peers remain stable. In some cases, incoherent intervention systems can do more harm than good, slowing learning rather than accelerating it.

Instructional Coherence Requires Systems Coherence

While instructional coherence plays out in classrooms, it is shaped by decisions made far beyond them. Systems coherence—the alignment of policies, guidance, structures, and investments across state and district levels—is what enables coherent instruction to take root.

When systems are incoherent, even well-intentioned efforts can fragment instruction. District offices may launch competing initiatives. Schools may juggle multiple assessments. Intervention and core materials may follow entirely different scopes and sequences. Over time, these misalignments compound, leaving educators without clear priorities and students without a coherent learning experience.

Coherent systems, by contrast, create the conditions for clarity and focus. Policies reinforce instructional priorities. Materials across tiers align to the same content and progression. Data systems provide timely, actionable insight into what students need next. And educators are supported to collaborate around common goals.

A Case Study in Coherence: Knox County Schools

In our paper, we explore the experience of Knox County Schools (Knox County) in Tennessee to illustrate what becomes possible when districts intentionally design for coherence. Like many districts, Knox County had spent lots of time, money, and resources supporting their lowest performing students, but their students weren't making the growth they wanted.

However, beginning in 2024, with support from TNTP, Knox County redesigned its early literacy intervention system around three foundational shifts designed to promote coherence:

Shift 1: Diagnose and group students by need, not cutoffs.

Shift 2: Use aligned high-quality curriculum across all supports.

Shift 3: Track meaningful data in real time to inform collaboration and instruction.

The results were compelling. In the first year of implementation, students in the coherent intervention model grew substantially more than peers still receiving support under Knox County's previous model. Teachers also reported strong collaboration, greater confidence, and a clear preference for the new model.

From Shifts to Action: A Path Forward for Districts

Drawing on lessons from Knox County and TNTP's partnerships with more than 4,400 districts nationwide, this publication outlines the practical steps districts can take to build coherence by design. From reflecting on the experiences of their students to diagnosing and addressing the most critical barriers that commonly prevent coherence, this publication is designed to help systems make coherence the new norm in how we help our struggling learners catch up.



Two students are engaged in the day's math lesson.

Introduction

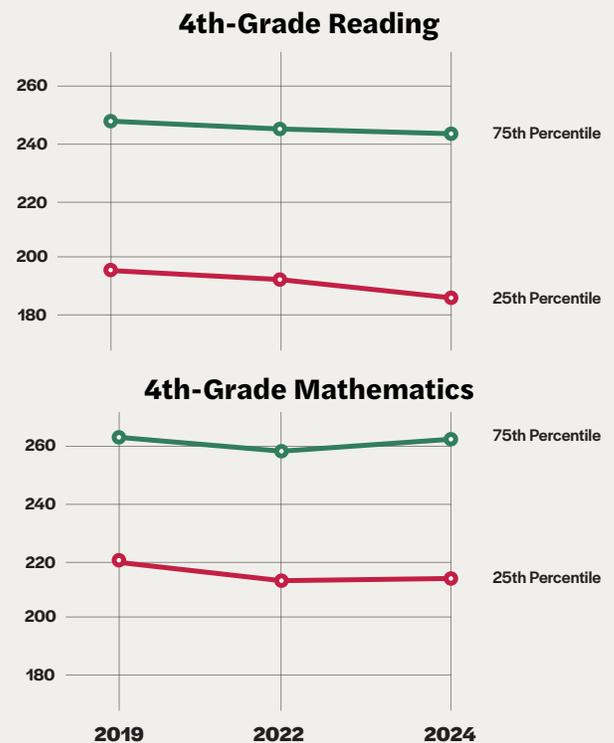
For more than a decade, the nation’s lowest-performing students have been steadily losing ground. While achievement at the top has remained relatively stable, performance at the bottom has continued to decline, stretching gaps that were already wide into chasms that are impossible to ignore.

The COVID-19 pandemic did not create this pattern, but it dramatically accelerated it. National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data from 2022, among the first assessments administered after pandemic disruptions, showed modest declines for higher-performing students and steep losses for students who were already furthest behind.² Two years later, the divide grew even sharper. By 2024, many higher-performing students had begun to recover their lost learning, but students below the 25th percentile had not. Their performance continued to fall.

The result is a sobering reality: Achievement gaps in this country are now larger than at any point in recent history. And for the students most affected, the consequences extend far beyond test scores, shaping their access to grade-level learning today and opportunity in the years ahead.

In our 2024 report, *The Opportunity Makers*, we found that these gaps can be exceptionally difficult to close.³ Most students who fall behind, stay behind. Among 28,000 schools where the average student was performing below grade level, only 5 percent of the schools were able to help students catch up. That means the vast majority of young people attend schools where recovery never materializes.

4th-Grade NAEP Scores Between 2019-2024



In some ways this is not surprising. In many districts, intervention systems—the supports designed for students performing below grade level—were not built to connect directly to grade-level learning. As a result, these supports often pull students further away from the instruction they need most. In many districts, the materials teachers use for core instruction and those used in intervention are not aligned. In fact, recent data from RAND revealed that teachers now average five different supplemental programs weekly to support differentiation and small-group instruction, each with its own approaches, routines, and language.⁴ This misalignment has a direct impact on students.

An Example of Incoherent Instruction in Action

Fifth-grade Literacy class (Tier I)

Ana reads *The Phantom Tollbooth*.

Intervention

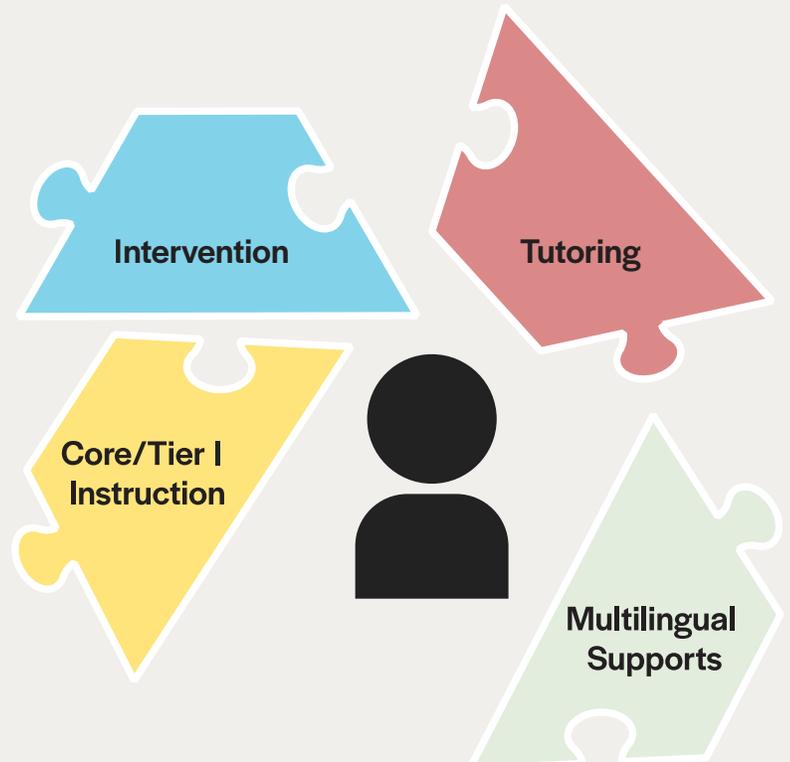
Ana works on an adaptive computer program where she reads a below-grade-level text about endangered species.

Tutoring

Ana practices identifying sight words from a list her tutor found online.

Multilingual Supports

Ana practices cause-and-effect in an article about the water cycle.



Consider what a common experience looks like for young people performing below grade-level:

A student begins their day in their core classroom, working with peers on the adopted curriculum. Later, they attend an intervention block where they engage with an entirely different curriculum, following a separate scope and sequence. If they participate in after-school tutoring, or receive special education or multilingual services they may work through yet other sets of materials, often unrelated to either their core class or the intervention block. Like many students, they may also use a digital learning platform that assigns content based on a pretest, and such content often prioritizes isolated skills that are disconnected from their grade-level learning.

On paper, this student receives hours of additional support each week. In practice, little of that time reinforces their core learning or addresses their specific grade-level gaps. Instead, their school day feels less like a coherent learning trajectory and more like a maze of disconnected experiences—particularly for those students furthest from opportunity, like those in special education, who may receive additional support on multiple fronts. By the end of the week, this student has been exposed to a patchwork of topics and instructional approaches within the same subject and is left to make sense of those inconsistencies on their own. As a result, learning slows and gaps persist.

A Different Kind of School Experience

Though our research showed that the vast majority of schools fail to catch up their lowest performing students, a small but powerful exception emerged. There were five percent of schools where low-performing students did consistently catch up. We refer to these schools as trajectory-changing schools because they did more than improve test scores—they fundamentally altered students' academic paths. In these schools something rare was happening: students had access to consistent instruction in which all supports worked together to advance kids toward grade-level success.

One student we highlighted, Ethan, was a fifth grader at one of the trajectory-changing schools we studied. Although he had fallen behind during the pandemic, Ethan was deeply engaged in his math class, where he was learning to add and subtract fractions with unlike denominators—challenging work that remained firmly anchored in grade-level expectations. During his intervention block, Ethan received targeted support that directly reinforced

this same fifth-grade content of adding and subtracting fractions. In tutoring, he worked on the specific prerequisite concepts he needed to succeed, ensuring that every additional support strengthened, rather than diverted from, his core learning.

This tightly linked approach helped Ethan engage with the work in his core math class, even when it was not easy. “A lot of times you see something [in intervention] before you learn it in class, and then it helps you understand the lesson,” Ethan explained.

Unlike most students, Ethan was having a coherent instructional experience at school. Every part of Ethan's experience, from his core math class to intervention, tutoring, and even his homework, reinforced his ability to engage with challenging grade-level content.

In trajectory changing schools like Ethan's, students gained more than 1.3 years of learning every year, even when beginning the year below grade-level. As a result, students who entered third grade a full year behind were able to close gaps over time and reach grade level by middle school.

An Example of Coherent Instruction in Action

Fifth-grade math class (Tier I)

Ethan adds and subtracts fractions with unlike denominators.

Intervention

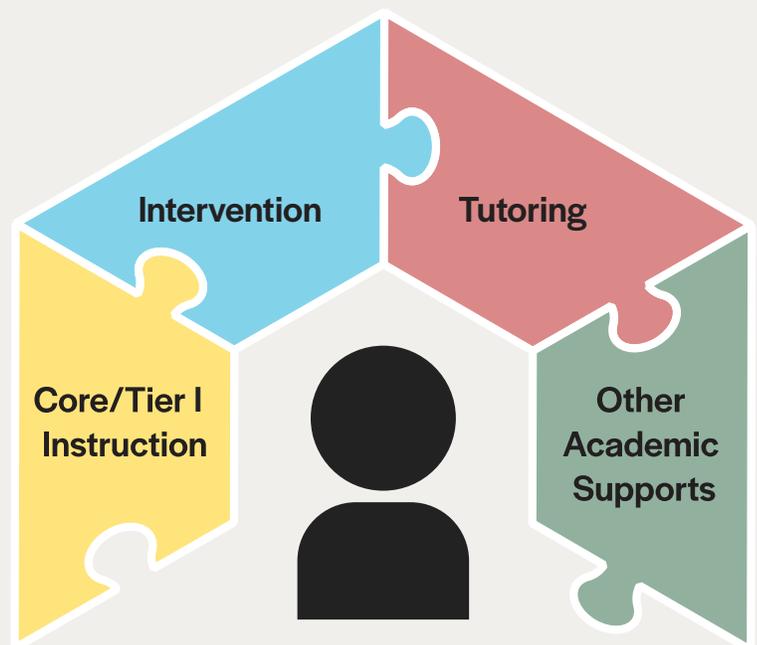
Ethan practices adding fractions with common denominators.

Tutoring

Ethan practices tape diagrams to build his conceptual understanding of fractions.

Homework

Ethan completes fluency practice adding common benchmark fractions.



The Cost of Incoherence

Ethan’s experience demonstrates what happens when instruction is coherent. In many school systems, however, the opposite is true, with struggling learners spending their days bouncing between disconnected supports that pull kids in different directions rather than working together in concert to advance toward grade-level expectations.

The consequences are not theoretical. A 2023 study across four Tennessee districts found that nearly half of students qualified for Tier II and Tier III intervention by falling into the bottom quartile nationally of grade-level proficiency.⁵ This scale of need reflects a fundamental inversion of the intended intervention pyramid.⁶ In a well-functioning system, strong Tier I instruction meets the needs of most students (the base of the pyramid), while more intensive supports are reserved for a smaller group with more specialized needs (the pinnacle). When nearly half of a district’s students require intervention—as is true in many systems today—the structure becomes unsustainable and strains both staffing and instructional capacity.

In the four Tennessee districts studied, that strain showed up clearly in practice. Many students who qualified for intervention did not receive it at all. Among those who did, relatively few made sufficient progress over the course of the school year to move to a less intensive tier or exit intervention entirely.

Most concerning, the lowest-performing students made less progress in Tier III intervention, the most intensive support available, than similarly low-performing peers who received no intervention at all. This means that these students would have been better off getting no additional support whatsoever than being sent to intervention.

These findings underscore a hard truth: When intervention systems lack coherence, they can unintentionally do harm.⁷

		Average Composite Score Percentile Growth from Beginning to End of Year		
Beginning of Year	Core Literacy	Tier II Intervention	Tier III	
1st-10th Percentile	8.6	11	5.7	
11th-25th Percentile	11.5	7.8	-1.2	
<p><i>One study shows that when supports are incoherent, students may be better off getting no additional support than being sent to Tier III intervention.</i></p>				

Source: [Tennessee SCORE. Piloting Instructionally Coherent Literacy Intervention in Knox County Schools.](#) May 7, 2025.

Understanding the System-Level Drivers of Incoherence

Schools and systems do not set out to create incoherent experiences for students. In response to real and urgent challenges, policymakers and educators adopt programs, tools, and initiatives designed to help. Over time, however, these well-intentioned efforts can accumulate into a complex web of mandates, policies, and resources that are not designed to work together.

This fragmentation is often rooted at the systems level. In many districts, teams within central offices operate in silos, each launching initiatives and issuing guidance independently. As these efforts multiply, they can contradict one another, blurring priorities and creating confusion about what matters most. Misalignment frequently extends to budgeting and purchasing decisions, where funds are earmarked for disconnected programs instead of reinforcing a shared instructional approach.

Similar dynamics play out at the state level, where policies, guidance, and resources—though well intended—are not always aligned across agencies or structured to support coherent implementation in districts. Without deliberate coordination across the system, teachers and leaders are left to navigate competing expectations, making it far harder to deliver consistent, connected learning experiences for students.

If we want to provide real access to the kind of learning that opens doors to long-term opportunities, systems and schools must be built around instruction that is far more coherent for students. While individual schools and educators can make meaningful progress on their own, lasting and scalable improvement depends on alignment across every level of the system, from state policy to district structures to classroom practice.

To move this work forward, we must first be clear about what coherence actually means. In the sections that follow, we define instructional coherence and systems coherence and ground those definitions in a real-world example—showing how coherence can transform students’ learning experiences and outcomes.

What We Mean By Instructional Coherence

Instructional coherence means aligning instruction, content, and goals across all learning spaces—from core instruction to intervention and other academic supports—to ensure that all students engage in and are actively prepared for grade-level learning.

In a coherent instructional system, all supports connect directly to core content, reinforcing the knowledge and skills students need to be successful with that content rather than introducing disconnected tasks or programs.

Students encounter consistent routines, strategies, and content structures across classrooms, which creates a sense of stability and belonging by making expectations clear.

Over time, all parts of the learning experience fit together, within a single day and across weeks, months, and years, so students experience a logical progression of concepts rather than fragmented or conflicting approaches.

Coherence is not just an instructional ideal. It is a prerequisite for sustained learning and meaningful acceleration. Put simply: When instruction is coherent, young people learn more.

Instructional Coherence

Aligning instruction, content, and goals across all learning spaces—from core instruction to intervention and other academic supports—to ensure all students engage in, and are actively prepared for, grade-level learning.

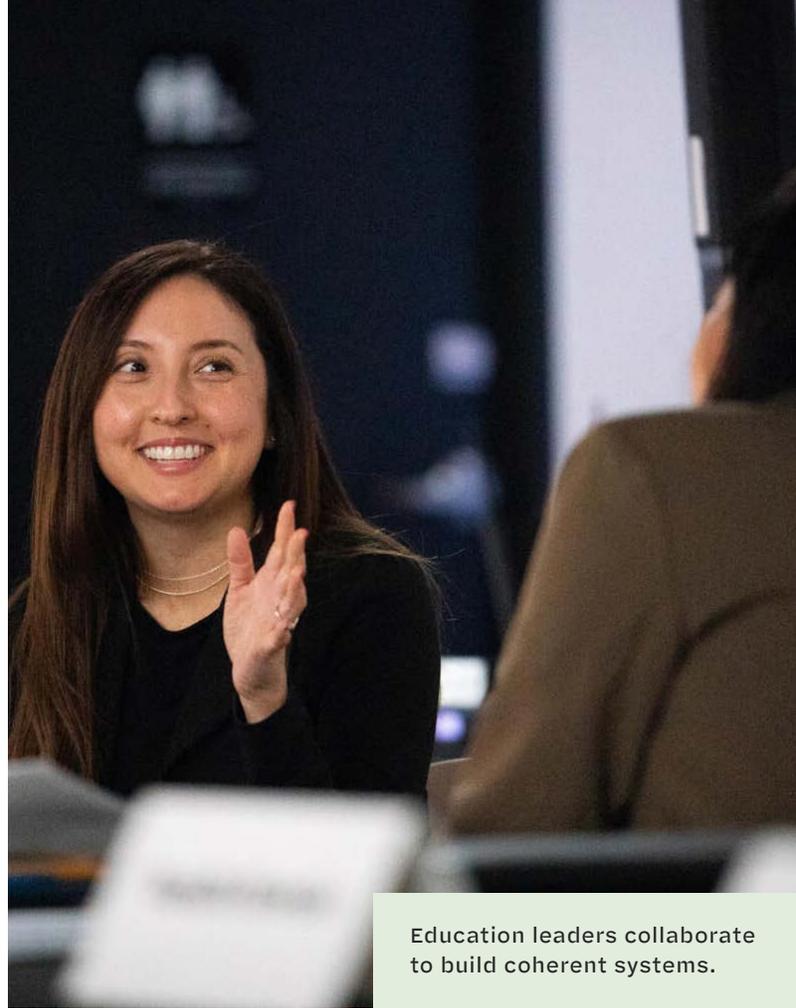


What We Mean By Systems Coherence

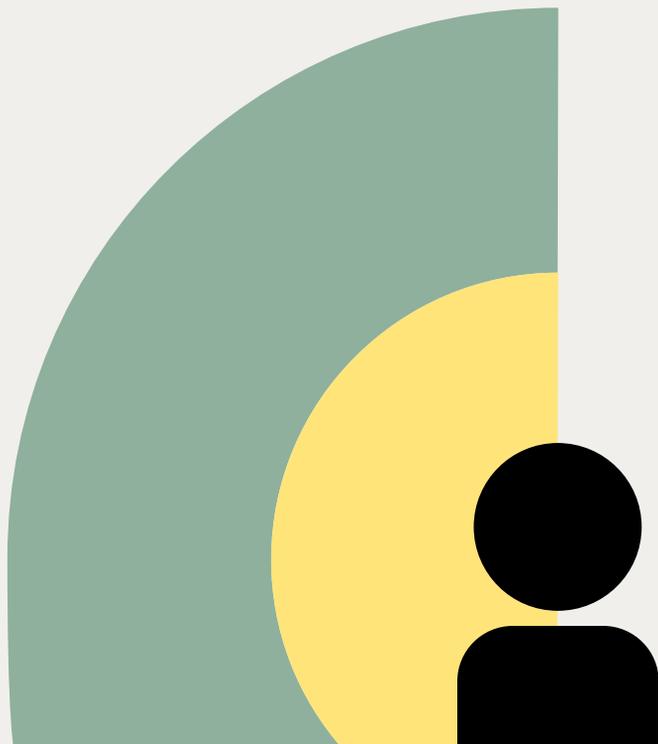
Systems coherence is the intentional alignment of policies, systems, and structures across teams within a district or state office and vertically from the state house to the classroom, so that educators are supported to create coherent instructional experiences for students.

While systems and instructional coherence are distinct concepts, they are inseparable in practice: Coherent systems create the conditions that allow coherent instruction to take root in schools and classrooms.

If we truly want to close achievement gaps, our systems must work together in concert to create coherent experiences for kids.



Education leaders collaborate to build coherent systems.



Systems Coherence

When systems, departments, and roles work together towards a common goal.

Instructional Coherence

Aligning instruction, content, and goals across all learning spaces.

Student Experience

Every experience at school prepares students to engage with grade-level content in their core classes. Coherence builds confidence and boosts learning.

How Policy and Practice Decisions Shape Instructional Coherence in Classrooms

	Incoherent	Coherent
System	State guidance discourages the use of core curricula in intervention.	State guidance encourages and/or incentivizes the use of core curricular materials in intervention settings.
	Districts purchase supplemental intervention materials that aren't aligned to their core curriculum.	Districts encourage the use of embedded scaffolds in core curricular materials.
Instructional Program	Schools juggle learning data from several unrelated tests and screeners.	Schools review unified, high-quality learning data aligned to core instruction.
	Teachers and specialists work in silos, plan separately, and get different training.	Teachers and specialists attend the same PLCs and plan lessons together.
Student Experience	Students are exposed to different content in classwork and interventions. Support materials aren't challenging enough and are unrelated to the core lesson.	Students start with core content in both classwork and interventions. Support helps kids engage with the core lesson.

This chart highlights just one way state policy and guidance shape school-level conditions, often making instructional coherence possible or, by contrast, harder to achieve. There are a wide variety of possible examples not detailed here that are playing out across states and districts.

When systems are aligned, instructional coherence becomes sustainable, student experiences become more unified, and learning accelerates, especially for students who need the most support. The results from Knox County Schools in Tennessee, highlighted below, are just one example of what this alignment looks like in action and how coherent instruction and approaches to intervention can translate into meaningful gains for students.

Coherent Intervention in Action: How Knox County Schools Rebuilt Early Literacy Support to Drive Stronger Outcomes

Across the United States, districts continue to grapple with the deepest early-literacy declines in a generation. The COVID-19 pandemic not only disrupted schooling but also erased nearly two decades of reading progress for young learners. Even as students have begun to rebound, the lowest-performing students have struggled to regain ground. In many states, achievement gaps are wider now than before the pandemic, with early-reading proficiency rates stagnating or continuing to decline for students furthest behind.⁸

Yet a larger long-standing challenge sits beneath the pandemic-era data. Many districts' intervention systems are not designed to accurately diagnose and address students' specific needs or to provide sustained, targeted support that helps struggling readers catch up over time.

In most K–3 classrooms, universal screeners—brief assessments designed to identify students who may be at risk—play an outsized role in determining who receives intervention and what kind they receive. While these tools are efficient and useful for flagging concern, they often do not diagnose why a student is struggling or identify the precise skills they need to master. As a result, students are often assigned to intervention based on percentile cutoffs alone,

without clarity about whether they need support with phonemic awareness, decoding, advanced phonics, fluency, or another foundational skill.

What follows often compounds the problem: Intervention classes rely on curricula that are disconnected from Tier I instruction—often computer-based programs with limited opportunities for direct, teacher-led learning. Rather than receiving instruction that builds on the foundation established in their core classroom, students are asked to learn new programs, routines, terminology, and entirely separate sequences of content.

Like many school systems, Knox County Schools' approach to K–3 literacy intervention once reflected these national patterns. However, in 2024, Knox County began taking a closer look at its own practices. As district leaders examined how students were identified, grouped, and taught, they began to recognize the limitations of their existing approach. The case study that follows explores what happened when TNTP supported Knox County to fundamentally redesign its literacy intervention system, and how building coherence across instructional tiers led to meaningful gains for struggling readers.

Knox County Before the Shift: A Familiar Pattern of Incoherence

Before Knox County Schools reimagined its literacy intervention approach, the district, like many others, relied heavily on universal screeners and did not yet have the level of coherence needed to consistently translate data into effective, targeted instruction. Even with a strong commitment to supporting young people who were struggling, the systems that were guiding learning acceleration and catch-up efforts often operated in the following ways.

Grouping by Cutoff, Not by Need

Students were placed into intervention tiers almost exclusively based on universal screeners, which—as mentioned—are effective tools for identifying students who are below grade-level but far less effective at identifying why students struggle and what supports they need. In fact, some screeners assess students for skills that have yet to be taught. Such data, when disconnected from districts’ curriculum, can send misleading signals about student readiness and who is in need of intervention.

Example Universal Screener

	Oral Reading Fluency National Percentile	Risk Level
Student A	9	Highest Risk
Student B	60	Low Risk
Student C	33	Some Risk
Student D	17	High Risk

Universal screeners are typically effective at identifying students who are most at risk but often don't provide enough information to be able to identify students' specific needs.

Like in many districts, Knox County’s prior model used screeners to group students for intervention based almost entirely on cutoff scores.

- **Tier III intervention:** Students performing in the bottom 10 percent were placed in the most intensive support, meeting five days per week for 45 minutes in small groups of three students.
- **Tier II intervention:** Students in the 11th–25th percentiles received Tier II support, typically five days per week for 30 to 45 minutes in small groups of five students
- **Tutoring:** Students above the 25th percentile who struggled with reading fluency participated in tutoring three days per week for 30 minutes in small groups of five students.

These groupings were simple to identify but disconnected from students’ underlying reading needs. A student with difficulty decoding consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) words and a student struggling with multisyllabic decoding could end up in the same group simply because they fell at similar percentile cutoff points. These two very different skills require different instructional approaches and supports.

Mismatched Instructional Materials

Across each tier of instruction, educators used different literacy curricula. Intervention programs, many of them computer-based, had entirely separate scope and sequences from the Tier I reading instruction. This meant:

- Intervention curricula often introduced literacy skills before they were introduced in Tier I, disrupting the learning progression students rely on.
- Intervention materials used different terms for the same concepts (e.g., “magic e” versus “silent e” or “final e”), requiring students to relearn new terms and routines rather than building upon what they already knew.
- Core instruction had established routines for decoding, blending, and segmenting, meanwhile intervention introduced different motions, cues, or text features that students had to navigate.

Together, these misalignments created unnecessary confusion and placed the greatest cognitive burden on students who most needed clarity and consistency, asking them to learn more, rather than building on the foundation already in place.

Tutoring added another layer of misalignment. While tutors used materials connected to Tier I, their work focused almost entirely on comprehension, even in early elementary grades, where most struggling readers primarily need support in foundational skills.

Limited Data and Limited Time

Teachers and interventionists had just 30 minutes every 4.5 weeks to meet and review student progress. Even when they were able to meet, the primary data available during these sessions was oral reading fluency rate, which could tell educators that students were still struggling with reading but provided them with little insight into the root cause.

The Turning Point: Rethinking Intervention

The breakthrough came in 2024 when Knox County joined SCORE Accelerate 2.0, a districtwide initiative supporting research-based improvements in early literacy. As part of this work, leaders recognized that closing learning gaps and accelerating learning required coherent structures, shared tools, and alignment across the district’s literacy system.

Over the following year, Knox County, with partnership from TNTP, began to reimagine its K–3 support model. The district ultimately implemented a series of foundational shifts that deeply changed how it identified and served struggling readers.

Three Shifts That Transformed Student Learning

Knox County made three intentional shifts that significantly strengthened coherence across instruction and intervention:

Shift 1

Diagnose and group students by need, not cutoffs.

Shift 2

Use aligned high-quality curriculum across all supports.

Shift 3

Track meaningful data in real time to inform collaboration and instruction.

These key shifts allowed Knox County Schools to better identify and group students by their specific needs, target those needs coherently by building on the foundation that had already been set for students in core instruction and adjust plans in real time to adapt to students’ specific and evolving needs. Below we go into greater detail about what each of these shifts looks like in Knox County.

Diagnose and Group Students by Need, Not Cutoffs

The district began using curriculum-based diagnostics alongside universal screeners to identify and group students by their specific needs. In this manner, instructors could both identify the students most at risk as well as the precise skills those students needed more support with.

For example, a teacher could now see whether a student needed support with:

- Letter-sound correspondence
- Blending consonant-vowel-consonant words
- Reading digraphs or vowel teams
- Decoding r-controlled vowels
- Working with multisyllabic words

Equipped with this information, teachers created intervention groups with students' actual skill needs as their primary consideration. This allowed for targeted, accelerated instruction aligned with where students were in the curriculum's skill progression.

Universal Screener

	Oral Reading Fluency National Percentile	Risk Level
Student A	9	Highest Risk
Student B	60	Low Risk
Student C	33	Some Risk
Student D	17	High Risk

Curriculum-Embedded Diagnostic

	Curriculum-Embedded Diagnostic Skills
1	Letter Names
2	Letter Sounds
3	VC and CVC Blending
4	Beginning and Ending Digraphs
5	CVCC and CCVC
6	Silent e
7	r-Controlled Vowels

By using curriculum-embedded diagnostics alongside universal screeners, Knox County could now identify the students most at risk as well as the specific needs those students had.

Considering Secondary Literacy

While Knox County focused its initial coherence efforts on foundational literacy in the early elementary grades, a lack of instructional incoherence often compounds as students move into middle and high school where reading demands increase and learning gaps become more complex.

At the secondary level, supporting struggling readers requires a more precise diagnosis of need. Comprehension challenges may stem from

limited background knowledge or academic vocabulary, insufficient fluency, or unresolved decoding gaps. Without clarity about the source of difficulty, intervention risks becoming and remaining unfocused and ineffective.

A sequenced diagnostic approach, examining comprehension, then fluency, and then foundational skills, can help schools identify students' specific needs and provide targeted, Tier I-aligned supports that puts them on the path to grade-level learning.

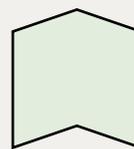
Coherence Shift 2

Use Aligned High-Quality Curriculum Across All Supports

Knox County eliminated the patchwork of programs previously used in Tiers I, II, and III, and tutoring. Instead, the district adopted Tier I-aligned curricula for all levels of support. This shift brought enormous consistency and instructional coherence to students' school day:

- Students encountered the same routines, terminology, and instructional structures regardless of tier.
- Intervention time reinforced, rather than contradicted, the foundational skills needed for Tier I reading instruction.
- Teachers already familiar with core materials felt more confident delivering aligned intervention content and could more easily collaborate across tiers.

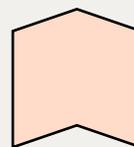
The move to curriculum alignment also dramatically improved the quality of intervention time, replacing computer-based programs with teacher-led, evidence-aligned instruction rooted in the [science of reading](#).



Tier I: Core Instruction



Tier II: Targeted Support Aligned to Tier I



Tier III: Intensive Support Aligned to Tier I

By using aligned instructional materials across all supports and tiers, intervention built on the foundation that had been set for students during core instruction rather than asking the highest need students to learn yet new programs.

Track Meaningful Data in Real Time to Inform Collaboration and Instruction

Finally, Knox County created shared skill trackers that allowed teachers to jointly monitor progress toward specific foundational skills in real time. Instead of waiting over a month to look at broad assessment data, teachers could see within days whether students were mastering targeted phonics patterns and could adjust instruction accordingly.



A teacher working through a lesson with students.

Impact: Coherent Instruction Leads to Stronger Growth

Taken together, these shifts established a coherent instructional system in which:

- Placement was driven by diagnostic data and based on students' specific needs.
- Materials were aligned with core instruction.
- Progress monitoring was frequent and meaningful.
- Instructional time was used more efficiently and effectively.

The results of the first year of implementation were encouraging. In the randomized-control trial:

Students in the coherent intervention model demonstrated greater percentile growth on universal screeners than peers who received intervention under the old model. In fact, students in the coherent intervention group demonstrated on average 1.3 additional months of learning over the school year. The gains were particularly striking for those who had historically struggled the most. Those in the lowest-performing group achieved an average of 1.8 months of additional learning over the school year, evidence that targeted support can dramatically help even the most challenged students catch up.

Students in coherent intervention groups averaged

1.3

additional months of learning

The lowest-performing students averaged

1.8

additional months of learning

Just as importantly, teachers overwhelmingly preferred the new model. Of the teachers surveyed, 79 percent preferred the new materials and model.

Teachers noted that when materials, routines, and data systems aligned across tiers, students appeared more confident and made quicker progress. Intervention felt purposeful, not disconnected, from the core literacy block.

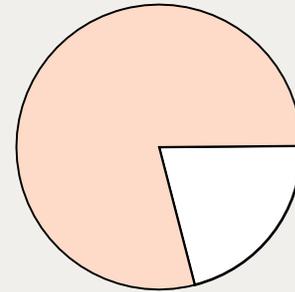
In addition, by adopting high-quality instructional materials across tiers and establishing a consistent, detailed set of data, the district enabled far more productive collaboration between core teachers and interventionists. With shared materials and a common understanding of student progress, educators were able to use their limited collaboration time to focus on diagnosing individual needs and planning targeted instruction, rather than sorting through disconnected data or scrambling to find appropriate materials.

District and school leaders were also more likely to recommend the new approach and curriculum due to the progress students were making. Overall, systems and instructional coherence have been embraced at every level within Knox County.

Which materials do you prefer?

79%

New (Coherent) Materials



21%

Previous Materials

Teachers' reflections highlight the power of supporting teachers to provide coherent instruction.

“Targeted skills-based intervention has made our efforts **more focused and effective.**”

“**I like how targeted the instruction is.** Students are given the [curriculum-embedded diagnostic] and then placed in the correct group based on their deficits on the assessment. I also love how it aligns with the reading program students use in Tier I.”

“**It ties so closely with whole-group Tier I instruction.** The students are familiar with the processes that are used and the vocabulary.”

“**I really appreciate that the materials are aligned with Tier I instruction and represent a significant improvement over the intervention resources we've used in the past.** They are grounded in the science of reading and are noticeably more engaging for students. Additionally, the ability to target specific skills through the administration of the [curriculum-embedded diagnostic] has made our intervention efforts more focused and effective.”



A third-grade teacher debriefs after a lesson.



Looking Ahead: A Model for Other Districts

Knox County Schools' journey illustrates that rebuilding an intervention system is not simply a matter of adding more minutes, adopting additional resources, or creating new tiers. It requires grounding supports in the shifts that promote coherence:

Shift 1

Diagnose and group students by need, not cutoffs.

Shift 2

Use aligned high-quality curriculum across all supports.

Shift 3

Track meaningful data in real time to inform collaboration and instruction.

Knox County Schools' success is replicable. Districts nationwide face similar challenges, often relying on screener-driven intervention systems that struggle to meet students' needs. Knox County made practical but transformative shifts, proving that struggling readers can make meaningful progress when supports are coherent and aligned.

Early results show that when teachers have unified tools and students receive targeted instruction, even the lowest-performing readers can make substantial gains. Knox County's story offers both hope and a roadmap for districts working to ensure every student becomes a confident, capable reader equipped to thrive in school and beyond.

Steps for Building a Coherent Student Experience

Knox County Schools is just one example of how school districts can reimagine their programs and approaches to get real learning results for young people. Their intervention system from before these shifts reflects a pattern we see in school systems across the country: well-intentioned supports, when fragmented and misaligned, ultimately limit their impact on student learning. How the district redesigned intervention highlights what becomes possible when school systems provide consistent coherent learning that accelerates progress for the students who need it most.

The shifts Knox County made describe *what* instructional coherence requires: diagnosing and grouping students by need rather than cut-offs, using core content across all supports, and tracking meaningful data in real-time to inform instruction. But ensuring these shifts have an impact in classrooms depends on *how* systems organize their

work. Translating coherence from concept to practice requires deliberate action at every level of the system, from understanding the student experience and diagnosing sources of fragmentation to addressing barriers and supporting implementation in schools.

The implementation steps below draw on lessons from Knox County and from TNTP's work with more than 4,400 districts serving 35,800 schools across 39 states. While our case study surfaced challenges with coherence in early literacy, these challenges are not unique to any single grade or content area. As with any change initiative, there are multiple entry points to begin this work, depending on context at the state, district and school levels. The guidance that follows offers one approach via concrete, actionable steps system leaders and educators can take to move toward a more instructionally coherent experience for the students they serve.



Second-grade students engage in their morning lesson.

Reflect on the Experiences and Outcomes of Your Students

Why it Matters: District and school leaders often have limited visibility into what students actually experience across the school day, from core instruction to intervention, tutoring, and specialized supports. Stepping back to examine this full instructional journey allows leaders to see whether students encounter an instructionally coherent experience or a fragmented mix of programs and expectations that makes grade-level success harder to achieve.

Actions

Understand the student experience in your district. Spend time in schools talking to students, teachers, and leaders about their experiences and the content they're engaging with across learning spaces. Attend a teacher planning meeting to better understand the data used to drive decisions and the gaps in support that may exist.

Shadow a student in your district for a day to see what they learn, the materials they engage with, and whether their experiences are coherent. How do students who receive intervention, special education or multilingual supports experience alignment (or misalignment) across their day?

Pay particular attention to core instruction: Strong core instruction remains the most powerful lever for improving student outcomes, because it is the one place where every student is reached every day. When districts get core instruction right, fewer students require intervention in the first place, and the supports that remain can be more targeted and effective.

Review outcomes for students receiving intervention and additional supports. Analyze growth across your student supports to see what sort of learning gains students make based on the type of support they receive. Examine the existence and efficacy of supports for all students, including supports for multilingual learners and special education. Notice when and why students are assigned to intervention, how often they exit, and whether they understand how supports connect to their grade-level goals.

Articulate and align around a student experience vision. Establish a clear vision for stakeholders for what coherent instruction should look like across all learning spaces, grounded in evidence-based instructional practice, and use it as the lens for cross-team collaboration within the district.

By grounding improvement efforts in the actual student experience, leaders can identify and address the root causes of incoherence and begin building a truly unified instructional program.

Diagnose Barriers to Coherence

Why it matters: Systems coherence—the intentional alignment of policies, systems, and structures across teams and levels—contributes to instructional coherence at the classroom level. When school leaders and teachers have clear priorities and resources and are empowered to execute those priorities, students are more likely to experience coherent instruction. Unfortunately, system leaders often unintentionally create fragmentation and misalignment, which imposes barriers to coherent instructional programs.

By understanding where systems are building barriers to coherent instruction, system leaders can work to remove those barriers and create aligned policies and programs for accelerated student learning.

Action

Review state-level policies and guidance to understand what is required versus what is recommended with an eye toward coherence.

In many states, past or current guidance has unintentionally contributed to incoherence by encouraging districts to use intervention materials that are disconnected from core curricula as well as universal screeners to diagnose intervention needs. While some states have begun revising this guidance, in others it remains in place as a recommendation rather than a requirement. Assess where state policies allow flexibility and translate recommendations and guidance into coherent, district-wide practice.

Assess curriculum and screening materials.

Catalog programs and materials across tiers to determine whether they align to core content, scope and sequences, terminology, and routines, and identify whether students receive high-quality, teacher-led instruction rather than only adaptive digitally driven asks that may diverge from core learning needs. AI and computer-based programs should be evaluated for alignment to core materials just like any other intervention curricula.

Review key assessments, screeners and diagnostics.

What data do they provide? Do they align to what students have been taught? Is the data detailed enough to identify students' specific needs (e.g. r-controlled vowels), or just general challenges (e.g. low oral reading fluency)?

Review school-level structures and routines.

Review school-level structures and routines to ensure they support coherence. Examine whether educators across tiers and support roles have regular, protected time to plan together, develop a shared understanding of the curriculum, and align their instructional approaches. Consider the data they use to identify student needs and guide decisions, determining whether it is common across roles, closely tied to the taught curriculum, and robust enough to inform meaningful instructional adjustments.

Engage cross-departmental teams in a self-assessment to identify system gaps.

Examine policies, initiatives, and operational structures to determine where they create, rather than reduce, fragmentation. All policies and initiatives from the office of instruction to the office of special populations, and school leadership should reinforce the same expectations and practices across the system. This diagnostic step creates a clear understanding of which system elements hinder coherent instruction.

Address Barriers to Strengthen Coherence at the District Level

Why it Matters: Identifying the sources of incoherence is only the beginning. Coherence improves when leaders act decisively on what the diagnostic reveals. When district leaders address structural gaps and become aligned on both on priorities and how they are implemented, they create the conditions for consistent, aligned instruction across classrooms and supports.

Actions

Prioritize the highest-leverage barrier. Use findings from your coherence assessment to identify the single-most significant obstacle to coherent instruction and develop a focused plan to address it. A good starting place is ensuring core instructional materials are high quality and aligned across all tiers of instruction (I, II, and III). Alignment means more than just covering similar standards. Are the scope and sequences the same? Are the terms and instructional routines the same? Are the texts and topics interconnected? In short, do the materials prepare students to be successful in their core instruction classrooms?

Address misalignment across district offices, policies, and approaches. Every role in every district department should understand and be aligned in how schools will pursue the district's student-centered vision of success. Acknowledge and take steps to address the change management that will need to occur for this type of cross-team collaboration to succeed.

Start small to build momentum for coherence. Districts should approach coherence as a change-management effort and plan accordingly. Rather than attempting to redesign every component at once, leaders can start with a focused set of changes in a small number of schools or grade levels. Early, visible proof points, where coherence leads to clearer instruction, stronger collaboration, and improved student outcomes, can build understanding, trust, and momentum, making it easier to sustain and scale this work across the district.

By addressing barriers systematically and intentionally, leaders move from diagnosing fragmentation to building the aligned structures and practices that make coherent instruction possible and sustainable at scale.

Support Coherent Implementation at the School Level

Why it Matters: Even the strongest system-level design will fail to produce coherent student experiences if schools do not have the support, tools, and guidance needed to bring it to life. School leaders, teachers, and interventionists must clearly understand how core instruction and intervention work together, how to use aligned materials effectively, and how to make informed decisions based on student needs and progress. Thoughtful implementation, paired with ongoing monitoring and support, ensures that coherence shows up where it matters most: in classrooms and instructional groups across the school day.

Actions

Introduce and communicate the vision for coherence. Clearly explain why instructional coherence matters and what it looks like in practice. Articulate how core instruction and intervention will work together and outline the components of the new intervention process. Ensure leaders, teachers, and specialized staff understand the purpose behind the shifts and how they will benefit students.

Train educators on new processes and tools. Provide all educators with practical, job-embedded training on how to use diagnostics to identify specific student needs, how to group students accordingly, and how to select and implement core-aligned materials during intervention. Ensure staff understand routines for monitoring progress, adjusting instruction, and regrouping students as their skills develop.

Monitor implementation, create space for collaborative planning, and provide responsive support. Observe intervention instruction, speak with teachers and leaders, and identify challenges early. Adjust processes, offer coaching, and refine supports to ensure alignment and consistency. Track student progress to determine whether the new structures lead to stronger gains and more coherent learning experiences. Gather feedback from educators and students to understand what is working and where additional help is needed.

Strengthen staffing and scheduling to support collaboration around instructional materials and student data. Resolve operational barriers that limit access to high-quality instruction. Ensure the highest-need students have access to high-quality instructors and that schedules allow for serving students in groups aligned to their specific needs. Create structures that maximize instructional time and minimize unnecessary transitions or fragmented support.

Sustain a strong focus on high-quality core instruction and materials. Coherence across tiers and supports cannot compensate for weak core instruction. Core instruction is the foundation of every student's experience, making access to, and consistent use of them, essential. Districts should ensure that all teachers implement these materials as intended and provide the professional learning and planning time needed to deeply understand the curriculum. By addressing barriers systematically and intentionally, leaders move from diagnosing fragmentation to building the aligned structures and practices that make coherent instruction possible and sustainable at scale.

By supporting implementation thoughtfully and responsively, leaders ensure that coherence moves from policy to practice, and that students experience a unified instructional journey each day.

Teachers give hands-on instruction during a math lesson.



Conclusion

Learning acceleration is not accidental—it is the result of coherent experiences that build, day after day, toward shared goals. When instruction is aligned, supports reinforce core learning, and systems are designed to sustain coherence, students who once struggled can regain confidence and make real academic progress.

This kind of experience should not be rare. To ensure more young people benefit from coherent learning experiences, instructional coherence must be intentionally built into the systems that shape instruction. When districts and states align policies, materials, data practices, and supports around a shared vision for student learning, they create the conditions for coherent instruction, and expanded opportunity, for every student.

To learn more about how Tntp partners with states and districts to diagnose incoherence, align systems, and strengthen instructional practice, visit tntp.org.

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Endnotes

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- 8 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress Long-Term Trend Assessment Report: <http://www.nationsreportcard.gov/highlights/ltt/2022/>

Key Terms

Tier I / Core Instruction

The instruction that all students receive in the general education classroom.

Intervention

Targeted instructional support provided to students who are not yet meeting grade-level expectations.

Tier II

Intervention provided to students who are below grade-level but not necessarily the lowest performing students, usually 30-45 minutes per day in small groups of five.

Tier III

The most intensive intervention for the lowest performing students, usually 45 minutes per day in small groups of three.

Universal Screener

Assessment given to all students to identify who may be at risk of falling behind academically and may need additional support; it signals who needs help but not necessarily why.

Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS)

A framework for organizing instruction, assessment, and intervention so that all students receive the level of academic and behavioral support they need—starting with strong core instruction and increasing in intensity based on student need. MTSS is often used interchangeably with **RTI (Response to Intervention)** to denote the different supports that are provided to meet students' different needs, though in many systems MTSS is a broader term that encompasses supports beyond purely academic ones.

About TNTP

TNTP has spent nearly 30 years building partnerships with schools, districts, and policymakers across the country. We don't just research what works—we implement it alongside educators and leaders, then use what we learn to shape policy. This cycle of research, hands-on work, and advocacy is how we've earned trust at every level of the system.



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