Overview Document:
Teacher Quality for Multitiered Interventions

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Introduction

The critical goal of multitiered systems is improved academic and behavioral competencies for all students. Multitiered educational systems emphasize prevention, early identification–early intervention, and intense treatment of academic and behavior problems (see Figure 1). Highly qualified and effective teachers and support personnel (e.g., counselors, speech/language therapists) are crucial to the successful implementation of multitiered systems.

Figure 1. Multitiered System With Tiers Varying in Intervention Intensity and Measurement Precision

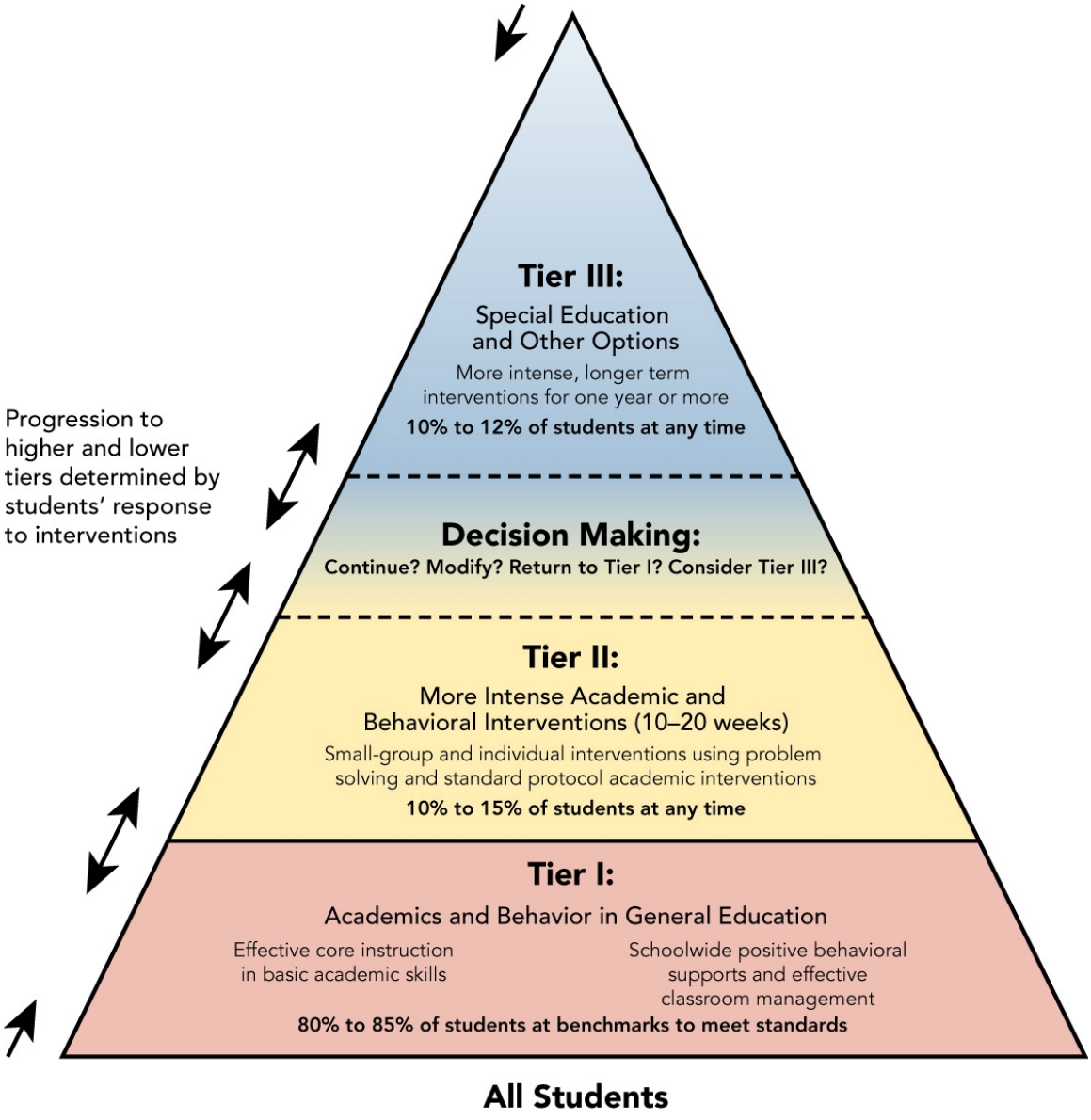

Figure developed by Daniel J. Reschly, Ph.D., Susan M. Smartt, Ph.D., and Regina M. Oliver, based on the work of Sugai, Horner, and Gresham (2002)

This document provides an overview of multitiered systems. It explains the characteristics of a multitiered education system, the decision-making processes involved in mutitiered systems, and the importance of having highly effective general and special education teachers and related services personnel who can successfully implement multitiered systems.

Subsequent key issues on the *TQ Source Tips and Tools: Emerging Strategies to Enhance Educator Quality* webpage (http://www.tqsource.org/strategies/) will focus on specific tiers and effective academic and behavioral interventions as well as on professional competencies essential to successful implementation. In these key issues, competencies will be described, implementation will be illustrated through examples, and student outcomes will be presented through graphs and other visual representations. Teacher and related services preparation and continuing education resources will be identified and summarized, utilizing to the extent possible readily available and inexpensive resources.

What Are the Tiers and How Do They Work?

Multitiered systems are organized around levels of instruction or intervention that are matched to the needs of students. The goal is the improved performance of all students. The basic principle is: the greater the needs of a student, the more intense the intervention. The tiers are prevention (Tier I), early identification–early intervention (Tier II), and intensive treatment (Tier III). Typically, Tier III is needed only for a small portion of students. If prevention does not work, early identification–early intervention is the next best alternative. Multitiered systems also promote improved performance for all students by organizing educational resources efficiently, rationally, and effectively.

Prevention and Early Identification–Early Intervention

Tiered systems subscribe to the old adage "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." In fact, prevention is the most economical and humane method known to educators. Prevention and early identification–early intervention reduce the prevalence and severity of significant achievement and behavior problems. When problems do emerge, interventions are implemented before these problems become too severe and too difficult to resolve. For example, multiple studies demonstrate the effectiveness of identifying potential reading problems as early as kindergarten and intervening at ages 5–7 before the problems become severe. A National Research Council Panel (Donovan & Cross, 2002) concluded:

> There is substantial evidence with regard to both behavior and achievement that early identification and intervention is more effective than later identification and intervention. (p. 6)

Multitiered education systems use early screening for potential problems and use progress monitoring against benchmarks (that is, goals for student performance established by state and local educational agencies). If students are achieving at or above trajectories toward meeting or exceeding benchmarks, it is an indication that the general education program is sufficient to help them meet those standards. If, however, students are achieving below trajectories toward meeting or exceeding benchmarks, increasingly intense interventions are applied to improve their academic performance.

Academic performance and behavior are inextricably connected: Academic success or failure both influences and is influenced by behavior. Effective, challenging instruction also influences and is influenced by behavior. Tiered systems promote early intervention into both the academic and behavior problems that students experience.

In fact, both prevention and early identification–early intervention are equally important to averting and resolving academic and to behavior problems. For example, Walker, Colvin, and Ramsey (1995) note that without intervention, aggressive and disruptive behavior can become a chronic issue:

> If antisocial behavior is not changed by the end of grade 3, it should be treated as a chronic condition much like diabetes. That is, it cannot be cured, but [can be] managed with the appropriate supports and continuing intervention. (p. 6)

Differences Across Tiers

Although the three tiers are linked to one another, they are different in several important ways. The primary differences are in the intensity of student needs, the intensity of instruction/ intervention, and the precision of measuring student progress.

Intensity of need—the first difference—is defined by how far below benchmark standards the student's current performance is and by the student's rate of progress. The greater the gap between performance and rate of progress, the greater the student's need.

Intensity of instruction—the second difference—is defined by conditions including the size of the instructional group, the amount of time devoted to instruction in a specific area, the degree to which instructional objectives are analyzed in terms of prerequisite skills and whether they are taught systematically, the frequency of feedback about performance, and the use of incentives to increase and sustain motivation. Generally, the greater the student's need, the greater the intensity required to achieve progress toward benchmark standards.

A third difference between the tiers is measurement frequency and precision. For example, all students initially are screened for academic and behavioral problems in Tier I (prevention). Progress toward meeting benchmark expectations is assessed perhaps three times per year. This amount of assessment is adequate for students who are performing academically and behaviorally at or above benchmarks. For students who are performing below benchmarks, however, the initial response is to provide more instructional opportunities in the general education classroom and to increase the measurement of progress to perhaps twice per month. If intensified instruction within the general education classroom is not sufficient to move the student to benchmark levels, then Tier II likely will be considered. In Tier II, progress monitoring typically is increased to once per week or more, depending on whether the student's issues are academic or behavioral and on the intervention goals and objectives.

In good multitier systems, there is symmetry between tiers, student needs, instructional/ intervention intensity, and measurement precision. Increases or decreases in any component produce increases or decreases in the others.

Of course, not all students need intensive instruction and increased measurement precision to meet educational and behavioral goals. In addition, resources are not available to deliver all tiers to all students. Data-based decision making in multitiered systems enhances efficient and effective resource utilization.

Multiple Tiers of Prevention and Intervention

In a multitiered system, the comprehensive evaluation emphasizes the need for screening for potential problems across 10 to 12 domains, with in-depth assessment in areas where significant educationally related deficits likely exist. Most comprehensive evaluations, however, do not require assessment of general intellectual functioning, hypothetical cognitive processes, or presumed underlying personality or emotional dynamics.

Tier I

Tier I involves all students. At Tier I, effective instruction in academics and behavior is expected, although it is not always achieved. The vast majority of students (80 percent to 85 percent) should be on course to meet state and local benchmark standards in an effective Tier I classroom, school, district, or state. If the Tier I instructional and behavior programs do not meet the 80 percent to 85 percent benchmark performance level, changes in the general education academic and behavior curriculum and instruction likely are needed.

Tier II

Some students may not respond sufficiently to even the most effective Tier I instruction and curricula. For perhaps 15 percent of students with greater needs, a second level of intense intervention is established. The second tier is delivered within the general education classroom and is part of early identification–early intervention with academic and behavior problems. Tier II interventions often are delivered in a variety of ways, depending on whether a student's needs are academic or behavioral and on the nature of the interventions. For example, some behavioral interventions may be implemented individually in classrooms. In contrast, some academic interventions are implemented outside the classroom in 30- to 40-minute pull-out sessions of small groups of students with similar academic or behavioral needs. Greater instructional/intervention intensity is achieved through a much lower student-to-teacher ratio, more systematic and focused instruction, and more frequent assessment of progress. Tier II interventions are temporary, typically lasting up to 20 weeks.

Tier III

Most, but not all, students respond sufficiently to Tier II so that they are on positive trajectories toward meeting state and local benchmark expectations. But if Tier II is insufficient, the third tier is then applied. Tier III may or may not involve special education services. If special education is involved, a comprehensive evaluation to determine special education needs and eligibility is required. Special education services are implemented with full observance of the procedural safeguards established in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Regardless of whether special education is involved, Tier III instruction/interventions are expected to extend over a period of one or more years. Tier III services involve the greatest amount of instructional/intervention intensity matched to significant individual student needs. Longer term interventions typically are implemented using additional resources from mental health or special education programs and often are governed by extensive federal and state regulations.

Decision Making for Student Movement Within Tiered Systems

Student academic and behavioral performance and needs drive the movement between tiers, both to higher and to lower tiers. We endorse the premise that all students are general education students, which is consistent with the 2002 report of the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education, *A New Era: Revitalizing Special Education for Children and Their*

Families. All students begin at Tier I and remain there unless educational achievement and/or behavior fall below benchmark levels despite additional efforts at making improvements within the general education classroom.

Students receiving services at Tier II spend all or nearly all of their school day in general education. Special education students also spend, on average, most of the day in general education classrooms. Increased integration of students with disabilities into the general education environment and curriculum is a key goal established by Congress in recent reauthorizations of IDEA (in 1997 and 2004).

Student performance relative to benchmarks and response to intervention determines the degree of educational need. *Response to intervention* refers to the learning rate and overall level of performance in relation to benchmarks during an intervention. More intensive interventions are reserved for students who have significant needs and who demonstrate an insufficient response to increasingly intense instruction. For example, most students respond adequately to sound classroom instruction but some do not. For those who do not, additional learning opportunities are established by the classroom teacher in general education. For some, however, this approach is not sufficient, leading to movement to Tier II whereupon additional professionals are involved. The student still is in general education full time. If Tier II is not sufficient, more intensive interventions are delivered at Tier III. At this level, the student may receive services across general and special education or in general education and some other system (e. g., mental health programs or court-run programs). Movement to higher and to lower tiers also is frequent—particularly from Tier II to Tier I and, less frequently, from Tier III to Tiers I and II.

Scientifically Based Instruction

Tiered systems nearly always endorse scientifically based instruction, which is a cardinal feature of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and IDEA. Although the terminology has evolved from "scientifically based" to "evidence-based," the same goal exists—namely, to implement academic instruction and behavioral interventions that have proven effective when matched to specific student needs. A wide range of evidence-based instruction/interventions are available, but some are not used as frequently or as well as they could be. Improving achievement and behavior and reducing gaps among groups depends on applying the most effective instruction/ interventions available. A critical factor is the preparation of education professionals.

Preparation of Teachers and Professionals in Related Services

Highly effective general and special education teachers and related services personnel (e.g., school psychologists and school social workers) are crucial to the successful implementation of a tiered system of prevention, early identification–early intervention, and intense treatment. Each tier in Figure 1 depends on teachers; in addition, higher tiers depend on both teachers and other personnel such as counselors, speech/language therapists, and psychologists. Expertise from multiple disciplines is required as student needs become more complex and intense. Expertise in evidence-based instructional and behavioral interventions is essential, along with competencies such as assessing progress, comparing current results to benchmark trajectories, and applying decision rules to determine changes in interventions and/or goals.

Preparation and continuing education for teachers and related services professionals vary significantly regarding competencies needed for the effective prevention, early identification–early intervention, and intense treatment components of a multitiered system. Some preparation and continuing education programs do a good job with the critical competencies while others fall well below what is needed. For example, most teachers today are not well prepared in scientifically based reading instruction, in effective classroom organization and behavior management, in critical competencies related to improved achievement, or in overcoming gaps among groups. Moreover, even fewer teachers and related services professionals are well prepared in monitoring progress against benchmark goals, graphing results, and conducting formative evaluation. In addition, few teachers and related services professionals have the critical skills required for delivering Tier II and Tier III academic and behavioral interventions.

In order to understand the preparation needs of teachers and related services professionals, it should be recognized that not all teachers and related services professionals need to be prepared in the competencies required at all levels. It is obvious, for example, that schools need more general than special education teachers and, for that matter, that schools need more general education teachers than Tier II teachers. Furthermore, other education professionals contribute to and, in some cases, implement interventions in Tiers I, II, and III. What may be less obvious is that to be effective, teachers and related services personnel working at different tiers need overlapping but different skill sets. For example, Tier III teachers need more thorough training in task analysis, effective individual behavior interventions, and measurement of small changes in academic and behavioral competencies. Tier I teachers need to know about some of these techniques but in less depth and in the context of applications to entire classrooms of students rather than to small groups or to individuals.

Summary

Teaching and related services personnel are critical to successful implementation of multitiered systems that apply important principles related to achieving improved results and closing performance gaps among groups. Student needs drive decisions regarding to what tier a student belongs and what level of intervention may be needed. Emphasis is placed on prevention and early identification–early intervention because treating problems as they emerge is more effective, less costly, and more humane than allowing small problems to become larger and more resistant to interventions.

Universal screening and assessment of the progress that students make toward achieving academic and behavioral goals establish the data used in decision making about student needs. Intervention intensity is matched to students' needs, which are defined by students' rate of learning and level of progress.

Multiple tiers are established to organize interventions matched to students' needs. Student results determine movement to lower or higher tiers that represent differing levels of intervention intensity. The effectiveness of multitiered systems depends on applying the most effective evidence-based interventions available to teachers and other education professionals.

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