



**Indicator:** The school implements a tiered instructional system that allows teachers to deliver evidence-based instruction aligned with the individual needs of students across all tiers. (5117)

**Explanation:** The evidence suggests that the locus of control in a multi-tiered system of support is on classroom instruction. Schools must ensure that each of its teachers is faithfully implementing effective teaching practices and aligning them to the same standards and skills as their peers teaching other tiers of intervention. With a focus on student response to instructional practices, as opposed to student deficits or failures, then schools improve the success rates of struggling students and the accuracy of identifying students who truly have disabilities.

**Questions:** How does the principal plan to have difficult conversations around instructional quality and necessary changes? What plans and structures are in place to ensure alignment of instructional strategies and approaches? What sources of training and professional development are available for teachers who may be struggling themselves?

*How does a tiered system of academic supports impact instruction for all students?*

Tiered supports are typically depicted in a pyramid – with the universal interventions forming the base and the select group of students needing the most support at the peak. This figure illustrates that Tier 1 interventions are provided to 100 percent of the population, “supplemental interventions” service 10-15 percent of students, and “intensive interventions” are provided to approximately 3-5 percent of students (Dulaney, et al., 2013). While this graphic is helpful for understanding the distribution of services, it assumes a separation between groups of students and service providers. There is also a misconception that Tier 3 is exclusively for students with identified special needs, but this is not always the case (Prewett, et al., 2012). A multi-tiered system of supports actually strives to better align those groups into a school-wide academic model (Dulaney, et al., 2013).

This system also establishes the general education classroom as a reference point for student performance (Ardoin, et al., 2005). The first step to intervention is to identify students who need supports and attempt to provide them within the general education setting, such as peer tutoring or small group instruction (Chard, 2012; Prewett, et al., 2012). Fuchs and Fuchs (2006) write that for students who are identified as needing additional services, it is their responsiveness to the general education curriculum that is monitored and used as a determinant of tier placement. The second and third tiers of support must be viewed as supplemental to, not in lieu of, the instruction of the general education classroom (Gamm, et al., 2012).

*Why is quality instruction such a critical factor?*

Chard (2012) highlights that a student’s success in a higher tier is largely dependent on the quality of services provided in Tier 1; consequently, the effectiveness of instruction is a primary focus when implementing a tiered system. Previous poor instruction can be the cause of student learning difficulties, often leading to misidentification for spe-

cial education services. The Kansas MTSS Guide (2013) notes:

Even outstanding supplemental and intensive interventions cannot serve to support students who are failing because of issues within the core curriculum. The issues with core instruction and curriculum should be addressed prior to focusing on new or additional interventions. (p. 7)

Hoover and Love (2011) note that educators must learn to distinguish between issues with the overall curriculum or the specific teaching practices within classrooms to determine which needs adjustment to better meet the needs of students. The strategies that they do employ must be based on evidence of effectiveness, and the curricular materials and design that they choose must be rooted in research (Duffy, n.d.; Stuart & Rinaldi, 2009; Hoover & Love, 2011; Kansas MTSS, 2013). Knowing which strategies and materials to use and how to adjust them when they are not meeting student needs, as well as ensuring that implementation is consistently high across classrooms, are crucial for the success of MTSS (Stuart & Rinaldi, 2009). Gamm (2012) refers to this as a problem-solving process of matching appropriate instructional resources to student needs.

The alignment of resources and practices with other providers is therefore a critical point of emphasis in a tiered system. Without this alignment, struggling students can sometimes receive different instructional approaches from their teachers in each tier, potentially causing more confusion and less progress for the students (Chard, 2012). Special educators and general educators must collaborate to understand and coordinate the instruction occurring within the other tiers to maximize their effectiveness for students (Hoover & Love, 2011).

*How do tiered interventions provide more equitable and effective services for students?*

Dulaney, et al. (2013) cite the guide for the Kansas model of Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) to explain the model's focus on instruction. The guide states:

The MTSS framework is broader than response to intervention or problem solving alone. It establishes a system intentionally focusing on leadership, professional development, and empowering culture within the context of assessment, curriculum, and instruction. (p. 32)

Because of their critical influence on student performance, this model seeks to frame student performance in terms of classroom practices, as opposed to student ability. Hoover and Love (2011) write that, "An in-depth understanding of the key components of an RTI model focuses the attention of educators on quality-of-instruction issues, rather than on learner deficits" (p. 44). This stands in sharp contrast to a common approach to student intervention, in which students must be referred for services based on low performance or challenges (Powers, et al., 2008). As Powers, et al. (2008), note, this requires "a focus on determining eligibility rather than identifying and monitoring instructional interventions" (p. 43). By choosing to focus on student responses to teachers' instructional practices, individual student deficits are only considered as factors for individualizing instructional interventions to meet their needs (Duffy, n.d.; Ardoin, et al., 2005; Fuchs and Fuchs, 2006).

In this way, tiered interventions are simply means of intensifying and tailoring instruction to support students with additional needs. They should not, as often is the case, become representations of groups of students or specific educational programs (Gamm, et al., 2012). The higher tiers of supports simply adapt the educational services being provided – students might have additional time, meet more frequently, or work in smaller groups of students as they receive more intensive supports (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). It is therefore important to intensify and customize interventions before changing or discontinuing them for students who are not demonstrating progress (Prewett, et al., 2012; Kansas MTSS, 2013). When students' academic achievement does not improve after these iterations, then a referral to special education may be appropriate (Powers, et al., 2008; Hoover & Love, 2011; Gamm, et al., 2012).

As a result, schools that have faithfully implemented the MTSS process have seen reductions in the disproportionality of special education referrals. Students from racial and linguistic minority groups were less likely to be referred to special education programs when their progress was monitored and their interventions were tailored (Powers, et al., 2008). The process allowed teachers to better determine if a student's academic challenges were due to other factors than a learning disability, such as motivation, cultural norms, or linguistic barriers (Ardoin, et al., 2005; Hoover & Love, 2011; Gamm, et al., 2012;

Prewett, et al., 2012). This process also allows students who do have a diagnosed learning disability to receive the appropriate special education services earlier in their academic careers and prevent patterns of failure and struggle (Chard, 2012; Gamm, et al., 2012).

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