



Indicator: The school implements a reliable and valid system-wide screening process for academics and behavior that includes the assessment of all students multiple times per year and establishes decision rules to determine those students in need of targeted intervention. (5856)

Explanation: The evidence suggests that schools implementing a multi-tiered system of support for academics and behavior must conduct multiple rounds of school-wide screenings throughout the year. Screening all students not only allows teachers and administrators to track progress on class, school, and student levels, but it also allows for more accurate assignment of students to different tiers of supports. School-wide screening must be based on a system of established benchmarks and expectations, upon which instructional teams can measure student progress throughout the year.

Questions: How will the school assess student behaviors and academic progress throughout the year? Who will sit on the team to determine appropriate cut scores or benchmarks for each grade level? What will be the process for assignment to different tiers of supports? How will students be continually re-evaluated throughout the year and moved up or down tiers as needed?

How do school-wide support systems address both academics and behavior?

Targeted interventions often live within a system of multi-tiered supports for students, in which a school regularly collects data on all students, to best identify how students are performing and what the school can do to help them improve. School teams then use this data to stratify students into instructional groups with different levels of support; Tier 1 typically refers to services provided to all students, while Tier 3 represents the most intensive supports that either lead to or include special education services (Prewett, et al., 2012).

Data on student progress is collected throughout the year, and student placements are evaluated and adjusted as necessary – students can move up or down the tiers, as appropriate, towards the goal of succeeding with fewer intensive supports (Kansas Multi-Tier System of Supports). Different types of data can be collected to create a more comprehensive picture of a student’s strengths and needs. Prewett, et al. (2012) discuss how sources such as “screening scores, formative assessments, grade level standards, grades, [and] behavior indicators” can be used for decisions around the optimal class or group placement for a student (p. 144). Similarly, Gamm, et al. (2012) highlight the non-instructional data that can be used, including “levels of student engagement, disciplinary referrals, incident rates, attendance, tardiness, and suspensions/expulsions,” taking into consideration patterns of when and where incidents may occur (p. 13).

This strategy is typically called Response to Intervention (RTI), made popular by the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which “required a data-based decision making process for identifying and serving students who are referred for learning difficulties, including students who are English Language Learners” (Powers, et al., 2008, p. 41). RTI was used as a way of aligning the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and IDEA, making it beneficial for students in general and special education alike (Sugai and Horner, 2009).

RTI usually relates only to student academic performance, but an umbrella term, multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), encompasses both instructional and academic behavior (Gamm, et al., 2012). Vaillancourt, et al. (2013) note that providing social-emotional support for students as well as proactive services for their well-being also leads to improved academic outcomes. Similarly, Gamm, et al. (2012) write that, “the intentional shift in terminology to a multi-tiered system ... is meant to integrate both academics and behavior as uniformly critical to student success in our educational system” (p. 3).

Benefits of Universal Screening

When schools implement tiered intervention systems to provide students with the appropriate level of behavioral and academic support, it is critical that they first collect data on all students so that they are properly identifying those with special needs or those who could simply benefit from improved or different types of instruction (Hoover & Love, 2011). Powers, et al. (2008) write, “To provide timely assistance, academic achievement data on every student in a school must be collected and compared to identify students who are failing to profit from general education instruction and curriculum” (p. 49). While RTI methods can be a means for identifying students with learning disabilities, they can also provide early warning signals for students who may need additional supports in the general education setting (Duffy, n.d.).

Previous methods of identifying disabilities focused on what individual students could and could not do; MTSS instead focuses on how students perform in response to the instruction they receive (Powers, et al., 2008). Teachers are trained to look at underperformance first and foremost as an issue of instructional quality, as opposed to an issue with a particular child. This mindset shift also helps to reduce biases that are typically present in a model based on student deficits; as a result, the overrepresentation of racial and linguistic minorities in special education may be reduced through MTSS (Duffy, n.d.; Hoover & Love, 2011).

Professional development for school staff, emphasizing both a greater awareness of behavioral variation across cultures and the instructional strategies that best address those behaviors, is critical for the system to function as designed. This is also helpful for students whose

academic troubles may be masked by their behavioral challenges. Many students who are acting out and would typically be identified as needing additional supports may in fact be unmotivated or disengaged (Gamm, et al., 2012; Prewett, et al., 2012).

Universal screening also has benefits for the practice of teaching and learning throughout the school. If the vast majority of students are found to be struggling with a particular concept or within a particular year, the school team must look at the instruction occurring within those classrooms. Duffy (n.d.) writes that, “RTI takes the focus off individual student deficits and refocuses attention on the interaction between teaching and learning” (p. 3).

These considerations of context have implications for the identification of children for different tiers or special services. The unfortunate truth is that students of color and from different linguistic backgrounds have been disproportionately represented in special education classrooms; RTI and MTSS offer a systematic method of ensuring that only the students who need those supports will receive them. When schools faithfully executed this model and worked together as instructional teams, there was a significant difference in the number of minority students being referred to special education services, as RTI dissuaded referrals for students whose academic or behavioral struggles were for reasons other than a learning disability or challenge (Powers, et al., 2008). Shapiro & Clemens (2009) comment that, “RTI holds promise for improving the ‘accuracy’ of student referrals for special education evaluation (p. 3).

What is Needed to Make Decisions Based on Screening Data?

In order for schools to begin implementing a multi-tiered system of supports for its students, they must first shift their thinking about the needs for intervention. Instead of looking at student-level deficits, schools must “look at 1) comprehensive curricula and 2) specific teaching interventions in each classroom to see if it meets the needs of the kids” in those classrooms (Hoover & Love, 2011, p. 41). While students’ performance and ability levels are certainly important, school teams must instead “directly assess students’ responses to academic tasks, rather than assessing cognitive processes” (Powers, et al., 2008, p. 50). This puts the locus of control back with teacher, allowing for the adjustment of instructional practices before a referral or diagnosis of particular students.

Sugai and Horner (2009) have identified four steps of the process in a multi-tiered system, for both behaviors and academics: 1) collecting data, 2) establishing desired outcomes or objectives, 3) choosing instructional practices that have proven to be effective, and 4) putting systems and supports in place for the implementation phase. Steps 2 and 3 are especially important and often overlooked. Most schools collect data and use it to judge a student's performance based upon grade-level standards. However, it is critical for schools to align these scores and standards to their systems of proven interventions. Instead of a student simply being deemed below level and put at risk of special education identification, a MTSS would immediately assign that student to a corresponding level of intervention. If that student fails to respond to a series of interventions, then special education can be considered (Gamm, et al., 2012).

This is not a static process; it is necessarily iterative because data is collected at least three times each school year. Fuchs and Fuchs (2006) refer to progress monitoring as "a form of dynamic assessment because its metric is change in students' level or rate of learning" (p. 94). The Kansas MTSS (2013) consequently encourages leadership teams to continually review the objectives they put in place, whether they are in the form of cut scores, decision rules, or guidelines for how students move across groups. Student placements are expected to be fluid as teams assess how they do or do not respond to different levels of intervention. With these systems in place, the onus is on the instructional staff and leadership to make informed decisions and appropriate changes to practice to benefit each student academically and behaviorally.

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