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Tiered Systems of Support:
Practical Considerations for School Districts

Students learn or progress at their own paces. How can schools make sure that they get the help they need — and only the help they need? Many are turning to tiered systems of support, which are usually implemented in three levels:

- Tier 1 represents the strong foundation that all students need, the whole-school structures that undergird a good education.
- Tier 2 services are for students who need some additional help.
- Tier 3 is for students experiencing the greatest difficulty.

Most tutoring is considered a Tier 2 service, for example, while more intensive case management, discipline and behavior management, and mental health services fall into Tier 3. These services can take place during the school day or after school. Part of the idea is that Tier 3 services are costly, and by investing in prevention — Tier 1 and to a certain extent Tier 2 services — schools can limit the number of students who need them.

Yet there are few clear guidelines for schools seeking to implement tiered support systems. There are no standards regarding required services or practice quality, no national monitoring institution or single program developer. And under the Every Student Succeeds Act (the main federal education law, passed in 2015), states and districts are now fully responsible for implementing approaches that address students' needs. This brief provides some practical considerations for schools contemplating tiered approaches.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Schools need structures and systems in place to sustain a tiered approach without compromising quality. If a state or a district wants to consider promoting tiered approaches, it must keep in mind that these approaches may place additional short-term demands on schools. A tiered approach can allow schools to use their resources efficiently, expending the most time and effort on the students who need it the most. But to get there they may need to hire additional, specialized staff members, for example, or they may need to overhaul their daily schedules to allow time for intervention services. The higher the minimum requirements for services set by a state or district, the greater the additional demands on schools when they try to implement a tiered approach. Yet if those minimum requirements are too low, students may not receive enough of the services they need and the tiered approach may not help them. MDRC has observed that schools have had to make sometimes difficult decisions about resources in the following areas in particular.

1. Scheduling

If a school provides extra support for some students, when should that support take place? After school? After-school help in behavior or academics means a longer school day, which requires more staff time. Or should it take place during the school day? If so, what should other students do during that time? MDRC explored this issue in its Response to Intervention study. The Enhanced Reading Opportunities programs answered the question perhaps most directly, by replacing a high school elective class with an extra reading class. But all tiered strategies have to contend with issues of scheduling, and the problem can be especially knotty in high schools, where students may all have different individual schedules.

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2. Duration and Intensity

How much time each day should students spend in an intervention? How many days in the school year should they receive it? How many students should be in the group that receives it? All of these decisions have resource implications: a medium-sized group of students who receive an intervention for fifteen minutes, once a week, for nine weeks require less staff time than one-on-one tutoring for the same number of students, an hour a day, for an entire school year. The same decisions may also affect results: a program that serves students in a group for a short time may be expected to have smaller impacts than a program that serves students individually and intensively.

3. The Curriculum

A tiered academic intervention may require multiple curricula: one curriculum for most students and an additional curriculum for struggling students. A new intervention curriculum must be aligned with the existing core curriculum, so teachers and interventionists may need additional training to deliver both curricula properly. To be a valuable addition, a curriculum for struggling students must also be meaningfully different from the one delivered to mainstream students — which may require more resources in the form of additional materials and training.

4. Staffing

Some of the intervention approaches MDRC has evaluated use only certified and trained staff members to deliver services — the Response to Intervention framework, for example. Others, such as Reading Partners, rely on volunteers, or at least make some use of them (for example, Diplomas Now). Some interventions train staff members before a program launches, while others provide training followed by continuing coaching while the program is in progress. The latter tends to be more effective at shaping staff practices, but it also requires more resources.

5. Intervention Content

A system of screening may accurately identify students who need additional help, but policymakers must ensure that the model also includes clear guidance to help schools decide what types of services to deliver to those students. Of the approaches MDRC has evaluated, the Enhanced Reading Opportunities programs and the Content Literacy Curriculum model specified the most clearly what intervention students should receive. In contrast, Response to Intervention framework does not specify a curriculum. And in the case of Communities In Schools, case managers at different schools documented and tracked the services they coordinated differently, or to different degrees.

6. Balancing Tier 2 and Tier 3

In programs with a three-tiered structure, Tier 2 is usually meant for students with less severe needs than Tier 3. Tier 2 services are intended in part to prevent students from developing those severe needs. For Tier 2 to play that role, its services must be well differentiated from the services in Tier 3. Often, however, Tier 2 and Tier 3 services tend to blend, as scheduling challenges push students from both tiers into the same periods of the school day.

Tier 3 students have more needs and require more intervention time and services. Giving students that time and attention, however, can divert time and attention from the preventive work that could be done with Tier 2 students. It will only be possible for schools to direct the right amounts to each group if they can accurately identify which students really belong in which category and properly allocate staff time and resources to match. Students who are wrongly assigned to Tier 2 may receive too little, prolonging their stay in a high-needs service category, while students wrongly assigned to Tier 3 may receive too much, using their time and staff members' time unproductively.

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