[Image description: Five racially diverse students wearing masks perceivably working on an assignment together.]

Equity by Design:

Students are Not Their Behavior: Returning to the Roots of Multitier Systems of Behavior Support

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To promote positive student behavior and school climate, schools increasingly adopt multitier frameworks of behavior support

KEY TERMS

Applied Behavior Analysis: a scientific approach that aims to leverage principles of behavioral science to solve problems related to behavior (Pierce & Cheney, 2013).

Evidence-based Interventions: interventions with empirical evidence that, when implemented with fidelity, are able to produce specific outcomes (Missouri EBI Network, n.d.). See the Council for Exceptional Children's standards for evidence-based practices (2014) for some evidence-based classifications.

Marginalization: a process through which people are relegated to the periphery of social groups due to their identities (e.g., race, gender, religion, political affiliation, disability), experiences, or associated groups (Hall et al., 1994).

Multitier Systems of Behavior Support: frameworks for addressing school-based problem behaviors via a continuum of increasingly intensive evidence-based interventions. Examples of two prominent frameworks include School-Wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (SWPBIS; Sugai & Horner, 2019) and the Pyramid Model (TPM; Fox et al., 2006).

(Sugai & Horner, 2019). Within these frameworks, student behaviors are addressed through a continuum of increasingly intensive evidence-based supports and interventions (Dunlap et al., 2009). Unfortunately, implementation appears to have drifted overtime from the original intent of classifying *behaviors* into tiers of support to classifying *students* into tiers of support despite explicit cautions against this practice by scholarly leaders (e.g., Sugai & Horner, 2010). The inappropriate focus on classifying students is problematic because it:

- suggests behavioral problems are caused by intraindividual (within the student) characteristics;
- ignores students' multifaceted strengths and needs when individuals are categorized by tiers;
- promotes the idea that behavioral concerns are static or beyond the influence of educational systems;
- furthers the marginalization and exclusion of students labeled with behavioral problems or disabilities;
- ignores the theoretical and empirical base for behavioral supports likely to be effective; and
- undermines adoption of effective behavioral intervention wherein the focus is on changing

environments not students (Baker, 2005; Sugai & Horner, 2010).

As such, the purposes of this *Equity by Design* brief are to provide a primer on the foundational literature on multitier systems of behavior support, highlight the benefits of classifying needs based on behavior, and provide illustrative examples of how schools can capitalize on multitier systems of behavior support without marginalizing students. This brief can be used in conjunction with others on nondiscriminatory tiered services (Sullivan et al., 2018) and student rights within universal supports (Weeks et al., 2019).

What are Multitier Systems of Behavior Support?

Multitier systems of behavior support are frameworks for organizing educational resources to enhance educators' capacity to provide high-quality and effective educational practices through the provision of increasingly intensive evidence-based supports and interventions (Sugai & Horner, 2019). The origins of multitier systems of behavior support in schools can be traced to the mid-1990s when scholars advocated leveraging public health models of service provision to address antisocial behavior (Walker et al., 1996). Rooted in behavioral science and applied behavior analysis (Sugai et al., 2000; Sugai & Horner, 2002), this approach emphasized that behavior is affected by a person's environment, can be sustained by learning opportunities (intentional or otherwise), and is amenable to change through instruction (Sugai & Horner, 2000). Within this framework, the

focus was on learned behaviors and the role of environmental factors (e.g., physical arrangement, adult behaviors) in shaping both desired and undesired behaviors as opposed to the individual students themselves. Although this distinction is subtle, it can have implications for the extent to which interventions are effective and educational equity is enhanced.

Shored up by federal legislation that prioritized prevention and intervention services (i.e., Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001), multitier systems of behavior support are common in a range of educational settings (Sugai & Horner, 2019). Two models predominate: School-Wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports implemented in tens of thousands of K12 settings in the US (SWPBIS; Sugai & Horner, 2019) and the Pyramid Model designed for early childhood settings (Fox et al., 2010). SWPBIS is typically

[Image description: A multi colored pyramid.]

conceptualized as three or more tiers of universal (tier 1), targeted (tier 2), and intensive (tier 3) supports to promote positive behavior and climate. Tier 1 is

generally formulated to clearly communicate the behavioral expectations across school environments (e.g., classroom, hallways, cafeteria), respond consistently and fairly to behaviors identified as both desired and undesired, and collection of data to monitor the effectiveness of systems in supporting behavioral, social, and emotional needs across school contexts. Tier 2 typically entails an intensification of services with scheduled data collection and behavior-specific instruction based on data collected through schoolwide procedures. Finally, behavior unaffected by the first two tiers of support is assessed and intervened on with a comprehensive, individualized support plan within Tier 3 (Sugai & Horner, 2019).

[Image description: Feminine-presenting teacher of Color working with a feminine-presenting student of Color.]

As an extension of SWPBIS, the Pyramid Model was designed as a 4-tiered framework for behavior support to meet the developmental needs of young children. As such, universal support within Tiers 1 and 2 focus on promoting nurturing caregiving relationships and fostering positive environments within home and community settings. Similar to SWPBIS, the final two tiers of the Pyramid Model feature direct

instruction and individualized intervention (Fox et al., 2010). See Figure 1 in the appendix for a comparison of core components of SWPBIS and the pyramid model.

> Categorization of individuals ignores students' multidimensional strengths and needs, reducing the likelihood of formulating and implementing effective supports.

Implementation of multitier systems of behavior support is associated with several positive student outcomes including improved self-regulation and prosocial behavior (Bradshaw et al., 2012), fewer office discipline referrals (Childs et al., 2010), and reduced truancy (Pas & Bradshaw, 2012) and school dropout (Dogget et al., 2008). Early evidence also indicates that multitier systems of behavior support may improve academic achievement in the areas of reading and mathematics (Kim et al., 2018). Beyond positive outcomes for students, schools implementing tiered behavior frameworks have evidenced improved school climate (Christofferson & Callahan, 2015), greater perceptions of school safety (Horner et al., 2009), more time dedicated to instruction (Muscott et al., 2008), and higher overall teacher self-efficacy (Kelm & McIntosh, 2012). That said, tiered behavior support frameworks are not a panacea for behavior problems as recent studies highlight limited effectiveness for problematic disciplinary practices such as exclusionary discipline disproportionality (Weeks & Sullivan, 2019), corporal punishments, and school arrests (Gage et al., 2018).

How Do Schools Confound Identifying Behaviors with Labeling Students?

As noted above, the focus of these frameworks should be on behaviors and associated environmental contributors. Yet it is not uncommon to hear or see discussion of 'tier 2 students' or 'high fliers' or other terms used to situate students—not behaviors—within the tiers. There are several reasons why conflation of students and behavior are widespread in professionals' conceptualization and implementation of multitier behavioral support. First, despite scholars discouraging categorization of students (Sugai & Horner, 2010), dissemination, including training materials, frequently depicts tier models (i.e., figures of pyramids) in ways that suggest placement of students within tiers. For example, this occurs when Tier 1 is described as the percentage of students responsive to universal supports and Tiers 2 and 3 as students who need more intense support (Baker, 2005) even where narratives emphasize the behavioral and environmental focus described above. Because research demonstrates the salience of images (Hockley, 2008), depictions of multitier models should avoid reference to students to instead emphasize behavioral supports.

Second, the focus on categorizing students in SWPBIS and related models is likely related to the pervasive educational practice of applying labels to students. This is a feature of many educational systems and practices despite widespread criticism and research indicating negative outcomes of labeling that include negative perceptions and lowered educational expectations among teachers of labeled students, decreased self-esteem and peer rejection among labeled students, and restricted opportunities to learn (e.g., Allday et al., 2011; Bianco & Leech, 2010; Guevremont & Dumas, 1994; Law et al., 2007; Levin et al., 1982). Rather than persisting with practices that apply labels to students, schools should recommit to engaging problem-solving to identify effective interventions that address the functions of behavior (Dunlap & Fox, 2011).

Third, the labeling of students versus behaviors may be at least partially attributable to conceptualizations of multitier models that equate the highest tier with special education. Although inconsistent with the spirit and language of special education law, special education services are often dependent on labeling of students. In turn, intensive supports are often equated with special education, or as a process for identifying disability, even though students with disabilities can and should be supported through all tiers of multitier systems behavioral supports. An unfortunate consequence of this approach to SWPBIS is that both students and educators involved in special education are frequently excluded from school-wide professional learning, leadership, and implementation (Loman et al., 2018; Walker et al., 2018).

How Can Behavior Support Systems Promote Equity?

Nondiscriminatory tiered supports are a potential means of promoting student civil rights (see Sullivan et al., 2018; Weeks et

al., 2019) and combating conditions that lead to discipline disproportionality (McIntosh et al., 2018), but research support is limited (Weeks & Sullivan, 2019). Perhaps one reason that tiered systems of behavior support have not evidenced clear effectiveness for disrupting patterns of inequity is that they do not attend to the root of the problem; specifically, that school-based discipline practices are racialized and not objective (Carter et al., 2017), and disparities cannot be attributed to behavior type, severity, student, classroom, and school features (Rocque et al., 2011; Skiba, 2015; Skiba et al., 2011). As such, attempting to address a racialized problem with racially-neutral interventions may inadvertently create another avenue for marginalization of students while ignoring environmental conditions that perpetuate disparate negative school climate, inadequate opportunities to learn, and biased educational decision-making that contribute to "problem" behavior and discipline disparities. Rather than attempting to solve a racialized problem with race-neutral policies (Carter et al., 2017), schools must begin to consider ways of explicitly implementing antiracist practices to prevent biased discipline (Pollock, 2006). Culturally responsive adaptations to SWPBIS have been offered elsewhere (e.g., Leverson et al., 2016).

Accordingly, schools should regularly engage in efforts to analyze disciplinary data to identify disparities (Gregory et al., 2016) and consider how patterns of discipline can help uncover root causes for inequity (e.g., continuously addressing questions like: What behaviors receive the most referrals? Where do these referrals occur? Which staff are involved?). For

example, if disciplinary data reveal that students of traditionally marginalized statuses receive disproportionate referrals across all school settings, then educators have some evidence suggesting a problem with pervasive explicit bias. Disproportionately high referrals in particular settings may indicate the presence of *vulnerable decision points* (i.e., incidents where educators' moods or other states such as overwhelm increase the likelihood of biased disciplinary actions) as an avenue for addressing bias in disciplinary decision-making (McIntosh et al., 2014). Resulting interventions may seek to establish a culture among educators in which open and authentic conversations about race and culture are possible (Skiba, 2015), embed culturally-responsive adaptations within existing behavior frameworks, and provide space for educators to consider whether their disciplinary decisions are constructing barriers between students of marginalized backgrounds and opportunities to learn within general education (Carter et al., 2017).

What Does a Focus on Behavior Look Like in Practice?

Although the conceptual difference between classifying behaviors and classifying students is subtle, the effect on practice and the provision of effective behavior support is meaningful. Categorization of individuals ignores students' multidimensional strengths and needs, reducing the likelihood of formulating and implementing effective supports. To illustrate, consider Figure 2 in

the appendix. Scenario A presents the commonplace depiction of multitier behavior support frameworks in which students are categorized into tiers. Schools that approach service provision in this manner may administer a social-emotional or behavioral screener to students and then categorize each student into a tier based on their individual scores. Within a single classroom, students' scores may place them in either Tier 1, 2, or 3, within increasingly intensified supports provided within each tier. However, within this framework, the services provided at each tier may not support students' multidimensional behavioral needs.

[Image description: Two street signs; one that reads old habits, one that reads new habits.]

Scenario B depicts how behavioral needs may be identified within a framework that adheres to the original intent of multitier behavioral supports. In this scenario, behaviors are the focus of identification, not individuals. Example focal behaviors that may impede academic progress are academic engagement, elopement, peer conflict, and prosocial skills. The hypothetical data show that students' behavior varied by the construct measured and it was generally inappropriate and insufficient to try to categorize students into tiers. If class-wide data clustered similarly, a

teacher could conclude that greater class-wide intervention to bolster prosocial skills were warranted, along with targeted supports in other areas. Notice that, within this scenario, practices within one tier provide sufficient behavioral support for only one student, whereas behavioral needs for remaining students span multiple tiers. This nuance of matching interventions to behaviors might have been lost if students were situated in tiers and provided support based on those labels rather than specific behavioral needs.

What Can Educators Do?

Given the commonplace conceptualization of tiered services as categorizing students, maintaining a focus on supporting behaviors without labeling individuals requires concerted effort from educators and administrators. To enhance effective support for students' multidimensional behavioral needs while avoiding marginalization, consider adhering to the following practices:

- Maintain phrasing and depictions that emphasize focal academic or social-emotional-behavioral outcomes. Avoid depictions or phrasing in written materials or verbal exchanges that explicitly or indirectly label students (e.g., do not refer to students by tiers). Instead, frame the narrative around *practices* and *behaviors* (e.g., how effectively does X practice support Y behavior at a given tier or level of need).
- Separate graphic depictions from decision rules or rules of thumb used to gauge the effectives of

- supports (e.g., effective tier 1 services will show positive outcomes for at least 80% of students).

- When utilizing visual heuristics to capture behavioral functioning (i.e., the widely depicted MTSS pyramid), eliminate fixed boundaries to avoid focusing on distinct, bounded tiers and their subsequent labels (Sugai & Horner, 2019).

- Seek to focus on behaviors and environmental contributors by centering definitions on observable action and not students. Involve members of the school community who represent all stakeholder groups, including students and families, in developing those definitions.

- Involve members of the school community who represent all stakeholder groups, including students and families, in articulating services and supports across tiers and analysis of corresponding data.

- To develop effective interventions, focus on both the focal behavior *and* how the behavior is shaped by the environment. Considering one without the other will be insufficient (Shriver et al., 2001).

- Engage in best practices when conducting functional behavior assessments as they are naturally focused on behavior (McIntosh et al., 2008).

- Rule out low-inference contributors to behavior (e.g., the

- environment does not support expected behavior) prior to high-inference contributors (e.g., the student has a behavior disorder or disability). Low-inference contributors are less likely to place the onus of the problem within students and more likely to support environmental changes that can be directly observed (Christ, 2008).

- Track and analyze treatment integrity/fidelity of the intervention selected to make sure that students are receiving support as intended *and* that it is beneficial (Anderson & Borgmeier, 2010). Interpreting student progress monitoring data is difficult without knowing if the intervention's suggested frequency, intensity, and duration were implemented well (Keller-Margulis, 2012).

- Involve *all* educators and related service providers in planning professional learning to support implementation of tiered behavior frameworks.

- Involve all students, regardless of disability, language status, or other dimensions of difference in Tier 1 services and supports.

- Although in the nascent stages of development, review technical documentation designed to enhance equity in the implementation of behavior support frameworks (McIntosh et al., 2018).

- Leverage data to identify disparities in discipline and implementation of supportive

practices, and to explore how biases influence those disparities, and then approach intervention development from a race-conscious perspective (Carter et al., 2017).

Conclusion

Multitier systems of behavior support are common frameworks used by schools to improve the uptake of prevention and intervention efforts (Sugai & Horner, 2019); however, the effectiveness of these frameworks will be hindered when schools confound behavior and students, which can, in turn perpetuate racialized and ableist discipline disparities. By focusing on identifying *students* in need of support rather than focal behaviors to be addressed through systematic prevention and intervention practices, schools risk marginalizing students, implementing ineffective interventions, and exacerbating educational inequities. In order to maximize the potential of multitier behavior support frameworks, schools must refocus efforts to consider the myriad of behaviors that are non-responsive to universal schools supports and address those behaviors through culturally-responsive evidence-based interventions that center on creating educational environments supportive of all learners.
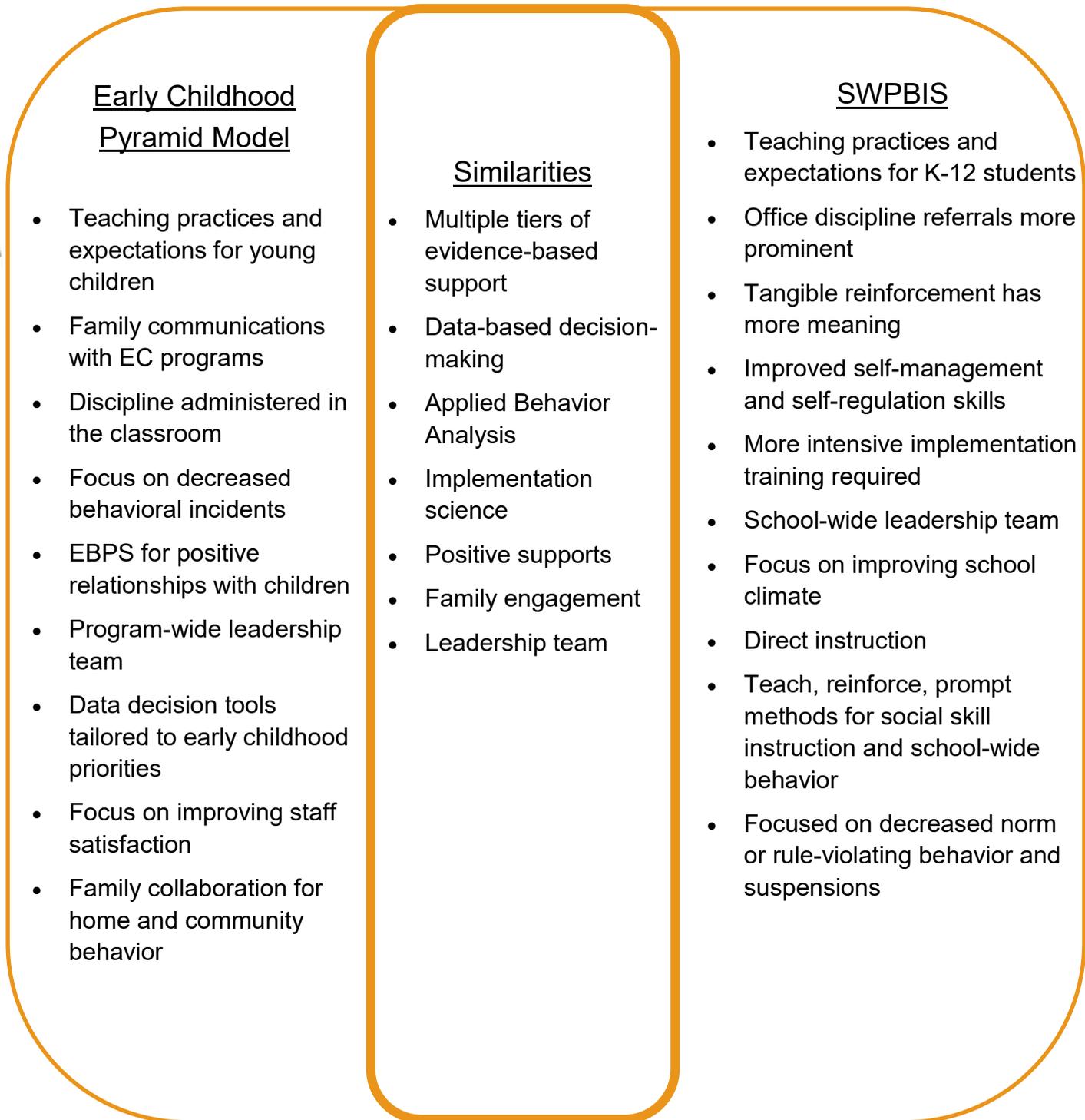
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Appendices

Figure 1: Comparison of the core features of SWPBIS and the Pyramid Model for Early Childhood. Adapted from: Dunlap & Fox (2015), and Fox et al. (2015).

Early Childhood Pyramid Model

- Teaching practices and expectations for young children
- Family communications with EC programs
- Discipline administered in the classroom
- Focus on decreased behavioral incidents
- EBPS for positive relationships with children
- Program-wide leadership team
- Data decision tools tailored to early childhood priorities
- Focus on improving staff satisfaction
- Family collaboration for home and community behavior

Similarities

- Multiple tiers of evidence-based support
- Data-based decision-making
- Applied Behavior Analysis
- Implementation science
- Positive supports
- Family engagement
- Leadership team

SWPBIS

- Teaching practices and expectations for K-12 students
- Office discipline referrals more prominent
- Tangible reinforcement has more meaning
- Improved self-management and self-regulation skills
- More intensive implementation training required
- School-wide leadership team
- Focus on improving school climate
- Direct instruction
- Teach, reinforce, prompt methods for social skill instruction and school-wide behavior
- Focused on decreased norm or rule-violating behavior and suspensions

Figure 2: Scenario A presents the common approach to multitier behavioral frameworks in which students are grouped within tiers and provided supplementary supports. Scenario B situates behaviors within tiers in order to provide a more nuanced and accurate picture of classroom behavioral functioning.
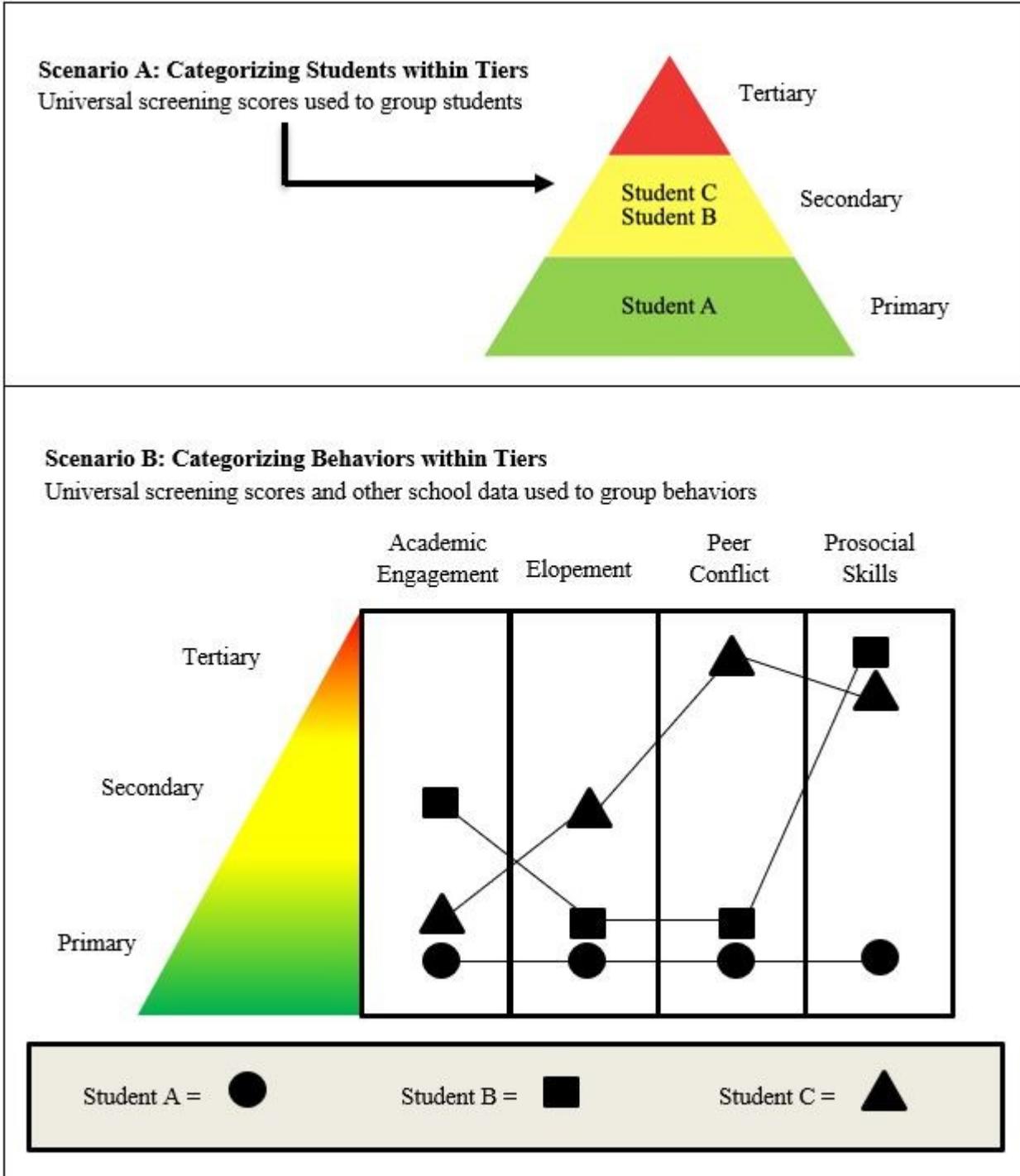
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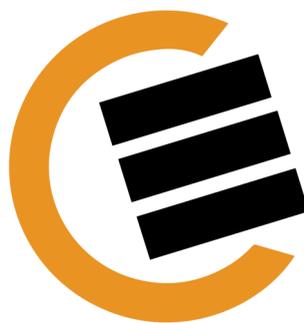
About the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center

The mission of the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is to ensure equity in student access to and participation in high quality, research-based education by expanding states' and school systems' capacity to provide robust, effective opportunities to learn for all students, regardless of and responsive to race, sex, and national origin, and to reduce disparities in educational outcomes among and between groups. The Equity by Design briefs series is intended to provide vital background information and action steps to support educators and other equity advocates as they work to create positive educational environments for all children. For more information, visit http://www.greatlakesequity.org.

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