

Provide Multiple Tiers of Support

Introduction

Using multiple tiers of support can benefit the mental health of all students. It acknowledges that students differ, while also making it feasible for educators to respond to these differences. A multi-tiered approach uses data to monitor indicators of student mental health—as well as contributing factors—and provides different tiers of evidence-based support based on this data. This drives toward more equitable resource distribution—students who need more get more. The tier of support each student receives is routinely reevaluated based on new information. Typically, a multi-tier approach utilizes three tiers:

Tier 1

Universal supports available to all students delivered either school-wide, grade-wide, or classroom-wide. Tier 1 mental health supports could include programs to develop social and emotional competencies; school-wide routines and structures to create a safe environment, build relationships and foster physical health; and more. Typically the goal is for Tier 1 support to be sufficient for 80% of the student population.

Tier 2

Targeted supports intended for some students, often around 15% of the overall student population, who were identified as needing additional resources and opportunities to foster mental health and well-being. These supports are often, but not always, provided in small groups. Examples of Tier 2 support for mental health are increased instruction and practice with social emotional skills like self-regulation or relationship skills, increased opportunities for positive reinforcement, and increased adult supervision.

Tier 3

Intensive supports for roughly 1–5% of students experiencing significant distress or diagnosable mental health challenges. These supports are often individualized. They may include access to specialized supports through wraparound services, a formal functional-based assessment to understand why a student is struggling, and individualized extrinsic reward systems.

Guidance to Get You Started

Using a multi-tiered system to support mental health is a school-wide strategy that entails multiple steps:

- **Develop a core team** to manage the development and implementation of multi-tiered support strategy. This team should meet regularly and should pull in other staff, parents, and students whenever the need arises.
- **Determine tiers of intervention** that will work for your community. Using three tiers in the most common approach: ~80% of students receive Tier 1 supports, ~15% also receive Tier 2, and ~5% also receive Tier 3.

A Look at Some Benefits

Environment Within and Beyond School

Helps identify the extent to which students are experiencing belonging and support within and beyond the school environment versus experiencing trauma, anxiety, bias, or other experiences that can impact mental health. This information can then be used to inform the supports students receive.

Individual Factors

Helps to identify the extent to which each student is developing critical factors such as self-awareness, self-confidence, motivation, and more and provides variable supports based on this.

Relationships with Others

Helps identify the extent to which each student has developmentally supportive relationships with family, teachers, and peers as well as provides interventions when students need additional relational support.

Research suggests providing multiple tiers of support for mental health through systems like Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), Response to Intervention (RTI), and Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) is related to:

- Decreased student internalized behavior challenges such as nervousness and worry, being withdrawn, seeming unhappy, etc.) and externalized (Cook et al., 2015 ; Bradshaw, Waasdorp, & Leaf, 2012)
- Decreased student externalized behavior challenges such as defiance of adults, fights or arguments with peers, bullying, etc. (Cook et al., 2015 ; Bradshaw, Waasdorp, & Leaf, 2012)
- Decreased student concentration problems (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, & Leaf, 2012)
- Improved student social-emotional functioning, and prosocial behavior (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, & Leaf, 2012)
- Improved student academic performance (Bradshaw et al. 2012)
- Improved teacher self-efficacy (Kelm & McIntosh, 2012; Bradshaw et al. 2012)

- **Create a menu of evidence-based practices** aligned to each tier. Keep in mind that the tiers are not either or—all students experience Tier 1 practices, a smaller group also experiences Tier 2 practices, and an even smaller group experiences all practices. In addition to identifying practices it is also important to consider who will be involved in implementing them and what time and resources will be needed.
- **Collect data on mental health and well-being.** There are a variety of screening tools you can use or modify to help with this. Strive for all data collection tools to be valid and reliable and for the tools to generate information that helps you compare how individual students are doing in relation to classmates, district peers, and/or the nation. Whenever possible, it is also helpful to consider and compare multiple sources of information including insights from teachers, parents, and students themselves.
- **Monitor data for every student.** Data should be reviewed in order to determine action plans. Before doing this, it is important to develop a data review protocol or set of questions. These questions should help you determine what percent of students are being supported by Tier 1 practices; if it is less than 80%, the practices need to be strengthened. Do a similar analysis of Tier 2 and 3. Also consider which students may need to shift between tiers.
- **Implement evidence-based practices** with all students, and monitor the fidelity of implementation so improvements can be made. Many of the same practices that high-quality instruction uses can also be used here including peer-observations, professional learning communities, etc.
- **Foster a conducive culture** that does not stigmatize students for experiencing different tiers of support. The tiered system should be normalized and whenever possible all students should experience different tiers at different points in time, even if it's for different reasons such as math or writing versus emotional regulation or low attendance. Avoid using a menu of Tier 2 and 3 practices that all isolate students from their peers—these can hinder a young person's sense of belonging and connection, which are important to mental health.

Additional Resources to Explore

A Comprehensive Guide to MTSS

A web-based guide to multi-tiered support systems that includes information on what MTSS is, how it works, examples in action, and additional detailed guidance on specific topics like How to Build a Tiered Intervention Menu, How to Embed SEL in MTSS, and What an Equity-Based MTSS is all about.

Selecting an MTSS Data System

A web-based guide to developing an MTSS data system. It includes guidance on various steps of the process and links to tools you could consider using.

When School Mental Health is Integrated Within a Multi-Tiered System of Support: What's Different

A short paper focused on how to set up a multi-tiered system of supports for mental health that goes through a number of key steps and provides helpful considerations and guiding questions.

Mental Health, Social-Emotional, and Behavioral Screening and Evaluation Compendium (2nd Ed)

This is an extensive 140-page compilation of Mental Health, Social-Emotional, and Behavioral Screening and Evaluation tools.

Tier 1 PBIS Supports

A web page explaining Tier 1 supports within a PBIS system with specific supports listed and briefly explained.

Tier 2 PBIS Supports

A web page explaining Tier 2 supports within a PBIS system with specific supports listed and briefly explained.

Tier 3 PBIS Supports

A web page explaining Tier 3 supports within a PBIS system with specific supports listed and briefly explained.

What Works Clearinghouse

Web-based resource that compiles existing research on programs and practices that support various outcomes like the success of students with disabilities, constructive behaviors, successful graduation, and more.