

Tier 2 Solutions for Student Well-being: Advice from Tier 3 Specialists

You've invested staff time, energy and building budget to implement universal Tier 1 strategies. You look around your school and see consistent routines and school-wide expectations are being taught by staff; however, the school counselor and social worker are telling you their waitlist is full and your assistant principal is recommending suspensions for the group of boys waiting in your office (again). How do you know which Tier 2 interventions to choose and how to initiate them?

As Tier 3 behavioral health consultants for a large school district, we regularly visited schools with solid Tier 1 implementation who still had concerning clusters of discipline referrals and students presenting with social-emotional needs. We found that too often the response was to jump to Tier 3 interventions (which are individualized, complex, and time intensive) without trialing more resource-efficient Tier 2 strategies first. Under an MTSS model, Tier 2 utilizes data to target quicker and less complex support to the students who need it most, allowing for better use of time, personnel, and funding.

Why is Tier 2 often overlooked? As educators, we may misidentify problems as 'everybody' problems or 'one person' problems, when what the data shows us we have are clusters of children experiencing similar issues that can be approached in similar ways. For example: A middle school AP is concerned that multiple 6th grade students are struggling with the demands of middle school due to executive functioning issues. Do you implement individual student-based instruction and motivation systems for each student or does the 6th grade team reteach routines and collaborate with the school social worker to offer a recurring executive functioning skills group with rolling enrollment based on student need?

Here are a few steps we recommend staff teams take to get the best student outcomes for resource investments with Tier 2 interventions:

- **Take time to examine what is already in place for Tier 2 supports at your school.** MTSS Implementation Teams should survey and compile the resources and Tier 2 supports currently accessible. If available, it is beneficial to work with an outside coach that can help teams discover over-looked resources. Often, teams may find that Tier 2 supports are already being provided but without uniformity or that with minimal formalization, those supports would be considered evidence-based Tier 2 interventions.
- **If you see gaps in Tier 2 services, then make a plan to grow staff skills in these areas in order to expand your menu of supports you can offer when needed.** For example, if you are noticing clusters of students exhibiting anxiety symptoms, then consider creating capacity and professional development if needed for social workers and counselors to provide brief group intervention. If you notice that students can benefit from brief relationship-enhancement style interventions, then invest in training in check-and-connect.
- **Utilize a data-driven process through MTSS to match students in need with nimble Tier 2 supports.** Tier 2 is not about creating something totally new that is time/labor intensive for just a few students. It is about taking what is already available with some slight customizations and making it easily accessible to



students when they need the support. For example, shifting from social emotional instruction being provided on an individual basis to a recurring social emotional skills group model that can be deployed multiple times serving groups of students as needed.

Taking the time to see what Tier 2 interventions are available already and utilizing a data-driven process to match students with available supports will reduce the need for more time-intensive Tier 3 supports and reserve those supports for students most at need, improving outcomes for all students. As schools continue to feel the reverberations of COVID and our youth mental health crisis, now is the time to invest in timely, quality supports across all tiers.

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