Equity Dispatch

Using Multi-Tiered Systems of Support to Advance Educational Equity

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IMPACT: *Educate, Engage, Empower--For Equity*

Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance; you have to work at it.
--Margaret Atwood, The Handmaid's Tale

Educate

Meet the Authors:

The newsletter at Great Lakes Equity Center is written and edited by Kitty Chen, James Kigamwa, Erin Macey, Jada Phelps, Marsha Simon, Seena Skelton, and Kathleen King Thorius.

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Equity Spotlight

By stipulating students' participation in and responses to scientific, research-based interventions as among the criteria for identifying students with disabilities, the 2004 reauthorization of the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) ushered in renewed attention to multi-tiered frameworks for providing academic and socio-behavioral supports to students. *Response to Intervention* (RTI) has since gained traction as a model three-tiered framework which schools engage to address students' educational needs. Within the framework, school problem-solving teams target 80%, 15%, and 5% of students in tiers one (universal instruction and early intervention), two (secondary intervention), and three (tertiary intervention), respectively. RTI requires high-quality core curriculum and instruction for all students at tier one, and universal screenings in the form of curriculum-based measurements to identify students who would benefit from additional assistance. When students are identified as needing supports, teams implement tailored interventions at subsequent tiers with regular progress monitoring of responses to the intervention (Hopf, & Martinez, 2006). In spite of the good intentions underlying the use of multi-tiered systems of support (i.e., providing effective instruction and interventions to ensure student success), persistent equity issues remain. Among these issues is the disproportionate representation of particular student groups (e.g., racial minorities, English language learners) in

the second or third tiers of the system (Green et al., 2005; McKinney, Bartholomew, & Gray, 2010). Asking some key questions can help to ensure that multi-tiered systems of support guarantee all students access to high quality curriculum and instruction, regardless of individual levels of need.

Are multiple stakeholders included in decision making at all levels?

Equity entails engaging all stakeholders and empowering them in the decision-making process for children's education. Families, as partners in student learning, should be involved at *tier one* to help determine the goals of education, including what constitutes high-quality instruction; to collaborate in the development of instructional practices; and to provide ideas for culturally responsive materials (Pennsylvania Department of Education, n.d.). At tiers two and three, families should be involved in the evaluation of data and in the selection or design of intervention plans. School personnel should be intentional in helping to select supports to ensure that families are able to participate throughout the process. As an example, translators and/or interpreters should be retained to ensure that parents who speak a language other than English can participate fully in decision-making (Kristin & Grace, 2009). Additionally, a cultural broker —an individual who understands both the school system and the cultural background of the family—can help to foster shared understanding of family goals and expectations for their student (Gay, 1993). Cultural brokers can help to create a new space in which families can play a central role in assisting their children reach their highest potential. Schools are more likely to meet the needs of each student as family members become active members of the school's culture through shared decision-making and authentic engagement in day-to-day operations (Adams & Christenson, 2000).

Is the tier one curriculum & instruction universally designed for learning?

Theoretically, all students within a multi-tiered system are provided with accessible, standards-aligned core instruction in tier one (Pennsylvania Department of Education, n.d.; Schmidt, Cogan, & McKnight, 2010). Therefore, curricula and instruction that are universally designed for learning and which integrate culturally responsive practices are essential to promoting equity within a tiered system. This requires school personnel to recognize and use the knowledge, experiences, and motivations students bring with them, leveraging students' assets with the demands of schooling. Teachers also need to offer multiple ways of engaging in and assessing learning, customizing their approach based on the students' cultural backgrounds and abilities (Rose, 2000). Taking English language learners as an example, it is important to assess whether the curriculum and materials are appropriate for their language acquisition status. Not taking their language acquisition processes into consideration and placing ELLs directly into tiers two or three does not align with a major premise of RTI, that instruction at tier one is "responsive to the needs of students who vary on a number of dimensions" (Thorius & Sullivan, 2012, p. 68). Foundational to providing high-quality instructional programing, then, is attending to *recognition* (the "what" of learning), *strategic* (the "how" of learning), and *affective* (the "why" of learning) learning networks by presenting content in manifold ways as well as allowing students to express what they know and to engage with content in various ways (Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST), 2013; National Center on Universal Design for Learning, 2012). Green et al. (2005) suggest that with a strong first tier in place, fewer children will be referred for and placed in special education services.

How do we identify students requiring targeted/intensive supports?

Alicia Lateer-Huhn is currently an educational consultant at Hamilton County Educational Service Center in Ohio and is a member of the State Support Team for Region 13. She has been an educational consultant for a four-county region in Southwest Ohio for eleven years. Her current role involves providing professional development and technical assistance to schools in need of improvement. This year, Alicia has served on a State Positive Behavior Intervention & Support (PBIS) Committee to assist Ohio with the scale-up of PBIS.

Throughout her educational career, Alicia has been an advocate for equitable educational practices by assisting districts and buildings as they implement and sustain multi-tiered systems of support for academics and behavior. Through this challenging systems change work, districts and buildings have been able to improve their school culture, reduce office discipline incidents, and increase academic achievement by engaging teaming structures that use universal screening and progress monitoring data to guide instruction across all three tiers. To Alicia, this process begins with ensuring that educators provide culturally responsive core instruction to address both academics and behavior. Alicia adds, "to ensure that all students are successful, it is critical to help educators examine current instructional practices and have difficult conversations when the data indicates we have achievement gaps or disproportionality."

Prior to working as an educational consultant, Alicia was a school psychologist in public schools for eleven years. She received her bachelor's in psychology and Spanish from the University of Northern Iowa, her master's in school psychology from the University of Cincinnati, and a specialist license in curriculum, instruction, and professional development from Miami University. As an equity assistance center we would like to formally recognize the tremendous work that Alicia has done in advancing equity.

Ensuring equity while identifying students who perform below grade level expectations requires educators to be reflective and strategic. Typically, curriculum based measurements (CBMs) are used within multi-tiered systems to assess and monitor students' academic progress in basic areas (e.g., reading fluency) (Hintze, Christ, & Methe, 2006). However, before moving students to tiers two or three based on progress monitoring results, we need to understand to what extent assessments measure what students are being taught (Newell & Kratochwill, 2007). As reported in a recent review of literature, one practitioner stated that 50% of the students in a particular classroom received tier two interventions, and the majority of them were English Language Learners (ELLs) (Thorius & Sullivan, 2012). This runs counter to the expectation that approximately 15% of the students will be involved in interventions at tier two (Berkeley, Bender, Peaster, & Saunders, 2009). Large numbers of students and/or disproportionate representation of traditionally marginalized students at tier two should first draw our attention back to tier one and prompt us to ask: to what degree are students receiving a rigorous and relevant education (Thorius & Sullivan, 2012)?

In other words, educators must examine their teaching practice as part of implementing a multi-tiered intervention system. For instance, educators should examine whether they provided in-depth coverage of content. Did they challenge students to think critically and solve problems based on their former experiences? Did they use high-interest, multicultural experiences and establish high expectations for long-term outcomes for all students (National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems, 2008)? These questions are not exhaustive, but represent the kinds of reflections that will ensure high quality tier one instruction. CBM results that are aligned with high quality instruction in tier one are more valid for use in moving students to subsequent tiers.

Furthermore, making decisions based on comparisons of student scores to national norms without accounting for tier one instruction and local contexts would be to risk misinterpreting student outcomes (Thorius & Sullivan, 2012). In addition to examining tier one instruction, teachers should disaggregate student performance and provide an ecosystemic assessment that considers the local context and similarly situated students when examining an individual child's achievement (Green et al., 2005). Cultural brokers can be instrumental in helping to surface sociocultural variables that may impact students' academic and behavioral performance in school, therefore serving as cultural advocates— facilitating critical conversations and interactions between families and schools so that teachers gain deeper insight into students' experiences, as well as these students' potential, hopes, and goals for their own futures (Green et al., 2005).

Are appropriate, culturally responsive interventions being delivered with fidelity?

The extent to which research-based, culturally responsive, and linguistically appropriate interventions are selected and delivered should be regularly assessed (Klinger & Edwards, 2006). By research-based, we mean asking what works, with whom, by whom, and in what contexts (Cunningham & Fitzgerald, 1996), recognizing that evidence-based practices that work for students in some settings may not work well in others. Tracking and making sense of data is also critically important at this stage, given that in many schools implementation is not monitored or is only monitored using self-reports (Reynolds & Shaywitz, 2009). Using multiple means of collecting data – narratives, tracking logs, student feedback, and assessments – will provide a richer understanding of the intervention, its use, and its effect. When making sense of these data, it is essential to scrutinize the teaching environment and the selected support strategies in addition to the student's performance

(Klingner & Edwards, 2006). If a student did not respond as hoped, examine the reasons and make sure that referral for psycho-educational evaluation is chosen as an option only after support strategies have been exhausted.

Conclusion

Tiered systems of support create opportunities for all stakeholders to think and act strategically to ensure that all students are educated. To promote equity when using these types of systems, it is essential that tier one instruction is culturally responsive, universally designed, and rigorous. Tiered systems of support should also integrate ample opportunities to learn for all students. At tiers two and three, students' responses should be carefully evaluated alongside considerations about the nature of the classroom instruction and the interventions themselves. Finally, families should be central throughout the process, with explicit effort by administrators, teachers, and staff to ensure their full participation. When these features are in place, tiered systems can truly serve the goal of supporting all students.
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Engage
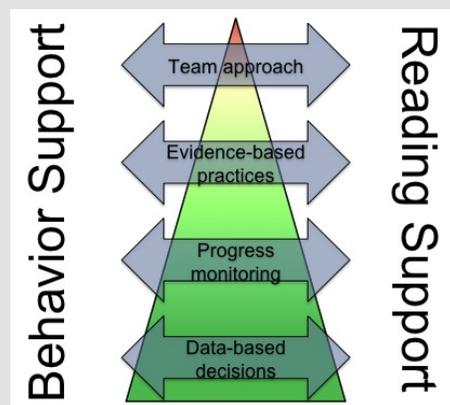
Michigan's Integrated Behavior and Learning Support Initiative (MiBLSi), funded and supported by the Michigan Department of Education (MDE), Office of Special Education and the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs assists schools in developing their own, integrated school-wide support systems for reading and behavior, recognizing that high quality instruction and positive behavior are mutually reinforcing (Michigan Department of Education, n.d.). To do this work, MiBLSi enters into long-term partnerships with schools, committing to each partner for a period of at least three years in order to ensure program implementation with fidelity through ongoing technical assistance and authentic feedback and evaluation. Through these long-term partnerships, MiBLSi helps develop and guide the human talent within school walls through coaching and facilitation. At the core of this assistance is the idea of a team approach to data-based decision making, progress monitoring, and use of evidence-based practices.

In order to ensure that the existing or revised functions lead to more equitable practices, MiBLSi creates spaces within districts for strategy sharing and feedback loops. When setting up various support systems (e.g., RTI and PBIS), MiBLSi assesses the extent to which the program makes a difference for students over time and across settings. Asking these kinds of critical and reflective questions feeds data back into the system, helping to focus attention on the degree of equity achieved. In summary, MiBLSi works to strengthen schools' capacity to support all learners in school-wide reading and behavior systems through integrated systems combining principles and practices within RtI and PBIS.

Empower

Something to Use!

In this *What Matters* brief, the authors explore the critical role of school staff and families in addressing and supporting behavior and socialization in school settings. This brief first describes the features of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and then presents a framework for culturally responsive school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports (CRPBIS) to address persistent educational equity issues, such as disproportionality in school discipline and academic outcome disparities. Ultimately, this framework promotes the construction of safe, inclusive, and supportive school climates.

Something to Read!

This worksheet is designed for schools seeking to self-appraise their use of RtI. The rubric and worksheet are intended to be used together, and are aligned with the *Essential Components of RTI: A Closer Look at Response to Intervention (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2010).* With these tools in hand, school staff can critically reflect on how they are implementing RtI, using interviews with school personnel, observations, and review of existing documents to increase their understanding.

Something to Watch!

RtI Stories

This series of four videos from the Wisconsin Educational Communications Board and Wisconsin Media Lab explores three essential features of RtI: collaboration, high quality instruction, and balanced assessment. Watch as school teams that have committed to this collaborative model learn to enact culturally reponsive teaching practices and create new opportunities to learn as a result of their engagement in a multi-tiered framework.

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