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Kent McIntosh
University of Oregon

Hank Bohanon
Loyola University Chicago, hbohano@luc.edu

Steve Goodman
MiBLIsi

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Toward True Integration of Academic and Behavior Response to Intervention Systems

Part Two: Tier 2 Support

BY KENT MCINTOSH, HANK BOHANON, & STEVE GOODMAN

In the previous article in this series, we provided a rationale for integrating academic and behavior response to intervention (RTI) systems (McIntosh, Goodman, & Bohanon, 2010). Our rationale included (a) research showing that challenges in academic and social behavior are linked, (b) a description of the common features that both RTI systems share, and (c) the understanding that implementing two parallel major systems-change initiatives presents significant challenges to sustaining either one. We then provided examples of areas where integrating RTI systems at the Tier 1 level of support would be beneficial and concluded with state-level data demonstrating enhanced outcomes in both areas through integrated systems. This article will describe how to integrate academic and behavior RTI systems effectively at Tier 2.

Tier 2 support (also known as targeted, secondary, or strategic support) is considered the next level of support in terms of RTI—students who do not respond to Tier 1 academic or behavior support are provided one or more Tier 2 interventions, and if students are not successful with this combination of Tier 1 and Tier 2 level of support, it signals the need for more intensive, individualized treatments (Hawken, Adolphson, MacLeod, & Schumann, 2009). According to the public health model, the theoretical proportion of students in a school that are provided Tier 2 support is approximately 15% (Walker et al., 1996), though this number is dependent on the quality of the Tier 1 support provided and the fidelity and effectiveness of the Tier 2 interventions used (McIntosh, Reinke, & Herman, 2009). We contend that support at Tier 2 can be both more effective and efficient when it is strategically integrated.

SHARED FEATURES OF TIER 2 SUPPORT

Like Tier 1 systems, Tier 2 academic and behavior systems share a surprising number of critical features. Tier 2 support is often overseen by a team charged with prereferral consultation, screening, and progress monitoring, in addition to actual intervention (Lewis-Palmer, Bounds, & Sugai, 2004). Strategies used in Tier 2 academic and behavior interventions usually include (a) additional instruction and practice, including increased feedback on student performance, and (b) increased structure or explicitness to increase the probability of success. Additional instruction may include reteaching of critical skills (“double-dosing” an academic or social behavior lesson) or teaching lessons at the student’s instructional level, with ample opportunities for practice and feedback. Examples include repeated reading (Chard, Ketterlin-Geller, Baker, Doabler, & Apichatabutra, 2009), math fluency timings (Rathvon, 2003), and teaching or reteaching school-wide expectations or social-emotional skills lessons (Langland, Lewis-Palmer, & Sugai, 1998).

Increasing structure and explicitness provides students opportunities with high probability for success (Fuchs, 2009). Either the curriculum and instruction or the physical environment is changed to place students in situations where correct responding is more likely. In academics, students may be instructed in smaller groups, using a carefully sequenced curriculum with instruction in conspicuous strategies (Coyne, Kame’enui, & Carnine, 2007). In behavior, Tier 2 interventions add additional structure to the school day or challenging routines, often through increased adult or peer role model contact and/or set routines, such as a check-in/check-out feedback and mentoring intervention (Crone, Hawken, & Horner, 2010).

INTEGRATING TIER 2 ACADEMIC AND BEHAVIOR SUPPORT

Though Tier 2 interventions are usually considered stand-alone programs, a true system for Tier 2 support includes systems to coordinate recurring tasks regarding who receives support, what type of support is provided, and how progress is monitored.

KENT MCINTOSH, PhD, NCSP, is an assistant professor of school psychology at The University of British Columbia in Vancouver. HANK BOHANON, PhD, is an associate professor of special education at Loyola University of Chicago. STEVE GOODMAN, PhD, is codirector of Michigan’s Integrated Behavior and Learning Support Initiative (MiBLSI), a project funded by Michigan Department of Education. This article is adapted from material originally published by the RTI Action Network (<http://www.rtinetwork.org/learn/behavior>), copyright 2009 by National Center for Learning Disabilities, Inc. Used with permission.

At this level, the actual interventions may be separate, but outcomes are likely to be enhanced by integrating teams. It is useful to consider four common team activities when integrating systems: *screening, assessment, intervention, and progress monitoring.*

Screening. A critical task for teams is to examine school-wide data to identify which students require more than Tier 1 support to be successful. In academics, screening often involves curriculum-based measurement (CBM), a collection of measures across academic domains that have adequate to strong psychometric properties (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2010). For behavior, common measures include office discipline referrals (ODRs; McIntosh, Frank, & Spaulding, in press) and multiple-gate screening systems (Severson, Walker, Hope-Doolittle, Kratochwill, & Gresham, 2007).

There are considerable benefits to combining the groups charged with screening for academic and behavior challenges into one team. First, the processes of screening for both are remarkably similar. Though data sources are different, the decision-making steps are exactly the same. Second, considering both sets of data at the same table provides advantages beyond examining them separately. For example, when a student is flagged in both areas at the same time, it may indicate a more significant (perhaps Tier 3) need that may have otherwise been missed (Reinke, Herman, Petros, & Ialongo, 2008). In addition, problems in one area may serve as an effective screener for problems in another. Given the low rates of ODRs in kindergarten and prediction of behavior problems from kindergarten reading deficits (McIntosh, Horner, Chard, Boland, & Good, 2006), intensive reading needs can be used as a screener for behavior, picking up behavior needs more quickly. Conversely, when students receive frequent ODRs or suspensions, their classroom instruction is interrupted, signaling the need to monitor academic skills more closely. Finally, using both data sets can help predict problems that are not solely academic or behavioral in nature, such as dropout. Effective dropout screening involves assessing both data sources simultaneously (e.g., ODRs, GPA, and credits toward graduation). Hence, an integrated screening team can identify students more accurately with less time spent.

Assessment. Screening identifies which students need Tier 2 support, but additional information is often required to select the appropriate intervention. In some cases, reanalysis of screening data may provide much of this information. For example, reading benchmark data may indicate whether intervention should focus primarily on skill acquisition (data indicating low accuracy) or fluency (data indicating accurate but slow reading rates; Daly, Chafouleas, & Skinner, 2005). Use of ODR data may indicate whether the student has difficulty interacting with peers or teachers and which school settings should be targeted for additional support (Newton, Horner, Algozzine, Todd, & Algozzine, 2009). In many cases, however, additional information will improve intervention selection.

One approach that provides a link between academic and behavior support is functional behavior assessment (FBA). The FBA is a process conducted to understand problem behavior within an environmental context, particularly the events that evoke and maintain problem behavior (O’Neill et al., 1997). The final steps of an FBA are to select intervention strategies that will prevent problem behavior, teach adaptive skills that serve the same function as problem behavior, and monitor plan implementation and effectiveness. This process is an evidence-based practice for individuals with significant disabilities (Carr et al., 1999), and a growing body of research shows the effectiveness of FBA with general education populations (McIntosh, Brown, & Borgmeier, 2008). Moreover, FBA has been used to distinguish between students who are likely or not likely to respond to particular Tier 2 interventions (Carter & Horner, 2009; March & Horner, 2002; McIntosh, Campbell, Carter, & Dickey, 2009).

The FBA process plays a pivotal role in helping teams understand whether integrated academic and behavior support is needed, or if one or the other will suffice. If the function of problem behavior is to obtain or escape social interactions (e.g., teacher attention), there may be no academic component needed for an effective intervention (McIntosh, Horner, Chard, Dickey, & Braun, 2008). However, if the function of the problem behavior is to escape academic tasks, an academic intervention is often necessary to improve behavior. In these cases, an academic-only intervention may be more effective than a behavior-only intervention (Filter & Horner, 2009; Preciado, Horner, & Baker, 2009). As such, identifying the likely function of problem behavior is necessary for selecting appropriate Tier 2 interventions.

When integrated teams examine academic and behavior data together, they may have enough information to complete an efficient brief FBA (Crone & Horner, 2003). For example, students receiving ODRs outside of the classroom with a recorded motivation of obtaining peer attention but without academic challenges (e.g., CBM data below benchmarks or failing grades) could be perfect candidates for Tier 2 behavior interventions. Students receiving ODRs in the classroom with a motivation of escape from academic tasks may need additional academic support. Request for assistance forms that include fields to provide information about events that predict and maintain problem behavior can be particularly helpful in intervention selection.

Intervention. Because a fully implemented RTI system includes a range of interventions for Tier 2 support, some additional level of assessment may be necessary to select the most appropriate intervention. As described above, there are predictable challenges that students may face (e.g., academic skill acquisition, fluency, or generalization; low levels of positive interactions), and as a result, schools should have more than one Tier 2 intervention available (McIntosh, Campbell, et al., 2009). Teams can audit their Tier

2 systems by identifying what interventions are already in place and what student needs each intervention addresses. Then teams can add interventions to fill gaps or eliminate interventions based on redundancy or weak effects (Hawken et al., 2009).

Though it makes sense to integrate Tier 2 teams and data, at this level of efficient intervention, it probably makes sense to continue with separate interventions and only fully integrate when providing an intensive, individualized intervention when response to Tier 2 support is inadequate. Given the wealth of Tier 2 academic and behavior interventions available (Fuchs, 2009; Hawken et al., 2009), students can be provided with separate interventions in each area with relative ease.

However, some Tier 2 interventions inherently provide moderate levels of academic and behavior support simultaneously, a benefit for students who need support primarily in one area but could use some assistance in the other. Small group academic interventions provide an excellent opportunity to teach and reinforce prosocial classroom behaviors in a more controlled setting. In addition, students can be reinforced socially for their academic efforts, highlighting an avenue for accessing adult attention in the general education classroom. Likewise, some Tier 2 behavior interventions also provide a modest degree of academic support. Check-in/check-out interventions primarily target classroom behavior, resulting in decreased problem behavior but also increased academic engagement (Hawken & Horner, 2003). Self-monitoring systems, in which students assess their own classroom behavior, often target engagement and direction following, resulting in increased academic engagement and work completion (Todd, Horner, & Sugai, 1999).

An important but often overlooked aspect of intervention that must be given attention is fidelity of implementation. Without considering fidelity of implementation, it is unknown whether students fail to respond to Tier 2 support or if the student has not received the intended support. School teams can take steps to measure and improve fidelity, including the use of direct consultation, intervention scripts, and ongoing observation and performance feedback (Roach & Elliot, 2008). Meeting time devoted to monitoring and improving fidelity of implementation may seem less important than time spent discussing student progress, but it is a valuable and critical investment of resources for all students.

Progress Monitoring. In keeping with the principle of efficiency, most Tier 2 interventions have built-in progress monitoring systems. For example, repeated fluency timings can easily be graphed to show student progress. In the same way, the daily point cards used in check-in/check-out and self-monitoring systems can be graphed to monitor progress. These data can also be shared with students to provide them feedback and enhance their skills in self-monitoring their progress. If systematic data are not produced as part of the intervention process, some system will need to be added to determine response to intervention. Often, data used in screening can be used for monitoring progress (e.g., CBM data). In behavior, direct observation is rarely feasible at Tier 2, and ODRs are not sensitive to daily improvement in performance (McIntosh et al., in press). Recently, direct behavior rating systems and brief behavior rating scales have been proposed as efficient and reliable methods for monitoring student behavior (Chafouleas, Volpe, Gresham, & Cook, in press). Regardless of the measures used, it is critical that school teams measure the effectiveness of interventions, even evidence-based interventions, for every student (Kratochwill & Shernoff, 2004).

Measuring response to intervention is generally much easier in academics than behavior. In academics, students have more stable trajectories of growth for decision making. Student progress can be compared to the growth rates for other students receiving the same level of intervention (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2008). These trajectories can be analyzed to identify whether students are progressing toward important long-term academic outcomes (Kaminski, Cummings, Powell-Smith, & Good, 2008). In behavior, there are few stable trajectories that can be tapped for short-term growth goals. Students should experience some success nearly immediately upon implementation of an effective behavior intervention, but improvement to typical behavior functioning may take time, as new skills must be learned and used regularly to become part of a student's repertoire. Recently, there has been research in quantifying behavior response to intervention. One metric with particular promise is the percent of days meeting a predetermined goal (a percent of possible points earned on a daily point card). Cheney, Flower, and Templeton (2008) examined this metric for analyzing check-in/check-out data and found it an effective and logical measure of response to Tier 2 behavior intervention. Because some students may be successful with Tier 2 support in either academics or behavior but not in the other, measuring progress in both areas is warranted.

CONCLUSION

As noted earlier in this article, support at Tier 2 requires more than simply providing intervention for students. Effective Tier 2 support includes teaming systems to manage the tasks needed to identify students, select interventions, implement with fidelity, and determine success with the level of support provided. Most schools have teams to coordinate additional academic and behavior support, though they are often separate and focus mainly on special education eligibility. As a result, they do not have the time to complete these ongoing tasks. Providing high quality Tier 2 support can decrease the eligibility decision-making workload (Goodman, McGlinchey, & Schallmo, 2010), and integrating these teams provides an opportunity to manage these shared tasks more efficiently. ■

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