

## Tiered System of Supports – Referral Phase: Two Approaches to Identifying Students Who May Need Additional Support

### PURPOSE

The purpose of this story is to illustrate the difference in two approaches to referring a student through the Tiered System of Supports. One approach is a more traditional way of addressing student needs, and the other approach offers an example that is whole-child aligned.

### DIRECTIONS:

Read the sample story below. Consider what data you would collect, and how you might complete a referral form for Anisha.

The scenario below is a continuation of the story about Anisha and the two approaches a teacher might take to support her. Approach A is the traditional MTSS approach, one that applies “quick fixes” and looks primarily at the child as the problem that needs to be fixed. It limitedly considers contextual factors that are often at the source of a student’s struggle. Approach B is more aligned to a whole-child purpose, as it leverages a student’s context, is more reflective of teacher mindset and practice and acknowledges the significance of relationships.

In the Identification Phase, we analyzed how a teacher might respond to Anisha, who has some difficulty in school with regard to her attendance, emotional well-being and academic functioning. She is in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, is new to the school, and her mother is actively involved in her education. Anisha has some strengths in the area of art and in her ability to try to regulate her emotions. [Click here](#) to revisit the full story.

The last step in the Identification Phase is below and will help set the stage for reflection in the Referral Phase.

Traditional MTSS Approach A Recap	Whole-Child Aligned Approach B Recap
The teacher shares with Anisha’s mother that a referral will be made to the Tier 2 team to determine how best to support Anisha’s academics (distractibility and low grades). The teacher also explains that 1:1 coaching has been done with Anisha; however, it has been ineffective. The mother reluctantly accepts the teacher’s decision to refer Anisha for more support.	The teacher decides to keep the 1:1 meetings with Anisha, as it appears to be something that both the teacher and Anisha look forward to. The 1:1 meetings provide an opportunity for the teacher to learn more about Anisha, including why she used to draw on her desk. Anisha shares with the teacher that the drawings help her stay calm and make her feel happy. This is an additional piece of context that suggests Anisha might have some emotional needs that should be taken into consideration when addressing the academic concerns. The teacher decides to refer her for Tier 2 support and sends an email to Anisha’s mother to inform her of this next step.

Let’s now see what each approach looks like in the Referral Phase.

Decision to Refer for Tier 2 Supports	
Traditional MTSS Approach A	Whole-Child Aligned Approach B
<p>The teacher moves forward with the referral and finds an electronic copy of the referral form saved on the computer. The form is completed with the knowledge the teacher has so far. The teacher prints it out to take to the next grade-level Tier 2 team meeting. The teacher is hoping the team will schedule a meeting date soon, so that someone can provide Anisha with the support she needs. As a next step, the teacher begins thinking about what data to collect to support the referral for Anisha. The teacher decides to collect attendance data, assessment grades and contact with Anisha's mother and submits it as part of the referral.</p>	<p>The teacher sends an email to Anisha's mother to share that the process of referring Anisha to the grade-level Tier 2 meeting has begun. The teacher includes the purpose of the meeting along with details as to the kind of information that will be shared about Anisha to better support her. The teacher ends the email with a request to schedule a time to discuss more of Anisha's personal history, as it may assist with articulating appropriate goals and supports.</p>
<p>During the next 1:1 with Anisha, the teacher explains that the two will no longer be meeting because the teacher is considering other ways to get Anisha to improve her grades. Anisha is somewhat relieved to discontinue their 1:1 meetings.</p>	<p>During the next 1:1 meeting, the teacher explores more about Anisha in terms of her interests and areas of strength. The teacher verbalizes to Anisha that it appears she has some artistic strengths and has found some strategies she can use to support herself when she is experiencing negative feelings. Anisha confirms that she enjoys art and also takes a dance class once a week after school. Her mother picks her up from the library and takes Anisha to dance class. Due to her mother's work schedule, this is the only time Anisha is able to spend time with kids her age outside of school. Anisha also shares some of the music and TV shows she enjoys. Due to the brief nature of the check-ins, the teacher will follow up next time to dig a little deeper about Anisha's emotions and interests as the teacher continues to build a trusting relationship.</p>

**Questions for reflection:**

1. In Approach A, why might Anisha's mother be reluctant to agree with the referral?
2. Why do you think Anisha is relieved that she will no longer have 1:1 meetings with the teacher in the traditional MTSS Approach A?
3. How do you think Anisha's mother will respond to the teacher's email in Approach B?

While both approaches move in the direction of making a referral to seek support for Anisha through the school's Tiered System of Supports:

**In approach A** (traditional), the teacher decides to move forward despite the mother's reluctance. While the teacher is attempting to provide support to Anisha as quickly as possible, there has not been any insight provided to the mother about the purpose of the Tier 2 meeting. There may be some reluctance coming from Anisha's mother because she has not yet developed a relationship with Anisha's teacher and is concerned about what will happen during the Tier 2 meeting. The lack of knowledge might prompt Anisha's mother to think that they (Anisha and her mother) will be penalized, and as a result, she has not been very responsive to the teacher. In addition, the teacher has not made attempts thus far to learn more about Anisha and her family context. As reflected during the [Identification Phase](#) (see the "Leading Up to Decision to Refer for Tier 2 Supports" section of the story on pp. 4-5), the teacher's interaction with Anisha to date has been more punitive in nature and less about building a relationship.

**In Approach B** (whole-child aligned), the teacher is communicative with Anisha's mother. This interaction lends itself to a partnership between the caregiver and the teacher. Research shows that caregiver engagement in a child's education contributes to positive outcomes. Whole-child approaches consider all aspects of a child's development as important, so Anisha's teacher requests more information regarding her background. For example, there may be some cultural/religious considerations that have contributed to Anisha's attendance challenges in school in the past or her inability to complete work due to religious obligations. The sooner this type of information becomes available to the school, the less likely Anisha will need Tier 3 supports due to ineffective support around universal or Tier 2 practices. An added benefit is that the teacher can spend more time providing instruction and leveraging practices that can be applied universally.

The story continues...

Next Steps Leading Up to Tier 2 Grade-Level Team Meeting	
Traditional MTSS Approach A	Whole-Child Aligned Approach B
Before the grade-level meeting starts, the teacher gives the referral form and the data that was gathered to the instructional coach who leads the grade-level Tier 2 meetings.	Anisha's mother responds to the email and schedules an appointment with the teacher a few days later. During their meeting, her mother shares that she is fully in support of the referral and will provide information she feels comfortable sharing. The teacher reassures Anisha's mother that the information is confidential and explains who would have access to this potentially sensitive information. The teacher emphasizes that the information shared by her will be used to support Anisha and not used to cause harm or to embarrass her. After reassuring Anisha's mother, the interview is conducted. The interview questions include topics related to family composition, student interests, family stressors, academic history, and significant changes beyond the recent move. Anisha's mother is forthcoming but becomes somewhat guarded when discussing some of the family stressors. The teacher thanks Anisha's mother and shares that she will be informed of the meeting date and the outcome of the meeting.

After the teacher stops meeting with Anisha, the teacher notices that Anisha is becoming more disengaged in the classwork. The teacher decides to give Anisha a warning and tells her that the next step would be a call home to her mother. The teacher's response leaves Anisha feeling anxious about how her mother would respond to the call from the teacher. As a result, Anisha chooses to stay silent for the rest of the school day.	As the teacher begins to gather the data necessary to refer Anisha to the grade-level Tier 2 team and complete the referral form, the teacher continues to engage in a reflective process about how support for Anisha could be provided differently in the classroom and potential topics that might be of support during Anisha and the teacher's 1:1 meetings.
Within the next day or two, the teacher is informed that Anisha will be discussed at next week's grade-level Tier 2 meeting.	Given that Anisha's challenges are both social-emotional and academic, the teacher makes sure to document Anisha's strengths, attendance data, grades, contact with her mother, and response to the interventions attempted, and reflects on the severity of the concerns. Anisha's teacher also includes some relevant data from her interview with her mother. During the interview, her mother shared that Anisha's father recently passed away, that English is not the primary language spoken in the home, and that the family has moved frequently. The referral form is submitted to the instructional coach who leads the Tier 2 grade-level meetings. While gathering the data, the teacher begins to make some inferences about contextual factors that might be relevant or considered to better support the family.
	Within a day or two, the teacher is informed that Anisha will be discussed at next week's Tier 2 grade-level meeting. The teacher informs Anisha's mother via email and reminds her that questions are welcomed.

### Questions for Reflection

1. How comprehensive will the referral form data be in Approach A in comparison to Approach B?
2. Which approach in submitting the referral will allow for a timelier response to Anisha, and why?
3. What conclusions are you drawing about Anisha's background and how she is currently presenting in class?

**In Approach A** (traditional), the teacher is waiting for the meeting before adjusting the practices and approaches used with Anisha. This demonstrates the lack of reflection on the teacher's part to examine the classroom and instructional practices and any potential implicit bias that plays into the beliefs about and interactions with Anisha. There has not been any further contact noted with Anisha's mother, and Anisha is less engaged in the classroom. These details may lead the teacher to believe that the challenges will not improve. The belief that the burden rests on the student to make a change is also apparent in this approach, as is the belief that consequences are necessary and will result in changes in how the student presents in the classroom. Some strategies were attempted; however, they were ineffective, and as a result, this may have increased frustration for both the teacher and the student, creating an additional barrier to a successful outcome. Due to the limited interaction with Anisha's mother, the teacher in this approach has limited access to more detailed information about the context beyond the classroom that may be impacting Anisha. It creates a barrier for the teacher to reflect more thoroughly on how to best support Anisha. It can also leave room for assumptions, and the teacher may miss how unconscious/implicit bias might play a role in the responsiveness and implementation of supports.

**In Approach B** (whole-child aligned), the teacher has the opportunity to interact with Anisha's mother. This deepens the partnership between the parent and the teacher. The questions asked during the interview will allow the teacher to leverage the information provided in a way that will support reflection of teacher practice and mindset about Anisha. The responses also provide crucial insight into what might be going on beyond the classroom with Anisha that could be contributing to how she is showing up in class. For example, the teacher learns that English is not the primary language spoken in the home. This is most certainly an asset, as the family is bilingual, and is an important consideration when communicating with the family and supporting Anisha in school. There are some data points that clearly indicate that Anisha needs support beyond her academic struggles. The teacher will have the opportunity to meet with colleagues and discuss a plan suitable for Anisha and others in the classroom who may be exhibiting needs similar to Anisha. The more data the teacher has to support the student, the less likely assumptions, unconscious biases and reinforcement of inequitable practices will play into the developing a plan for Anisha.

At this time, please complete a [referral form](#) for Anisha based on Approach A and another one based on Approach B.

Let's take a look at the sample referral form.....

- TS Sample Student Referral Form Approach A
- TS Student Referral Form Approach B

How have these two approaches informed what you will do differently the next time you are making a Tier 2 referral?