TURNAROUND FOR CHILDREN

Tiered System of Supports – Identification 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 supporting a student in need through a Tiered System of Supports. One approach is a more traditional way of addressing student needs, and the other approach offers an example more in alignment to a whole-child vision.

DIRECTIONS:

Read the sample story below. Consider how you might approach this student. Then, reflect on which approach is more aligned to your thinking and way of responding to students, and what you might do differently in alignment with applying a whole-child lens.

Red Oak Middle School has been in session for two months. Anisha is a 12-year-old girl in 7th grade and is new to the school. There are 22 students in her class.

Anisha currently lives with her mother and younger brother. Her mother works full-time to support her and her 6-year-old sibling. Anisha picks up her brother from his elementary school, three blocks away, before the end of his dismissal time. Luckily, his school dismisses students a few minutes later than Anisha's school. She is then responsible for walking with her brother to the library, a few buildings down from his school, to wait for their mother to pick them up. Anisha and her brother spend time with their grandmother on the weekends, often because of their mother's work schedule.

This is Anisha's third week at school, and the teacher notices that Anisha is easily distracted and can be chatty with one of the students near her seat. Anisha's inability to focus is most challenging during independent work. Anisha only participates in class verbally when called upon. She can also be seen drawing small pictures on her desk or with her head down.

Anisha is having a particularly difficult time with reading comprehension. She is less distracted in math; however, she rarely turns in homework assignments for most subjects and is starting to receive low grades in both math and language arts. Anisha comes to school every day but is often late and appears tired.

The teacher in this scenario has begun to consider how to respond to Anisha. There are a few approaches the teacher could take based on their awareness of some early indicators. Below are two examples of how the teacher might think about how Anisha is presenting in class. In the table below, take note of what the indicators of concern are, and how those concerns are described.

Early Indicators of Need	
Approach A	**Approach B**
Demonstrates off-task behavior	Appears to be distracted
Incomplete homework and class assignments	Limited homework and classwork completion
Refusal to participate in class	Low or limited engagement in the class
Arrives to school late	Difficulty attending school on time
	Caregivers: mother and grandmother *(at this point, there is no mention of father figure)*
	Has one friend

Questions for reflection:

1. What assumptions might the teacher be making about Anisha based on the indicators noted in Approach A? Approach B?
2. How is the teacher likely to respond based on their assumption in Approach A versus Approach B?

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In both approaches above, the teacher expresses concern about similar indicators of need. However, **Approach A** focuses primarily on how Anisha is functioning in the class. **Approach B** begins to consider both in-school and out-of-school contexts. For example, in **Approach A,** there is no mention of the student's home environment or relationships with peers. This is important because the context of a student beyond academics and their experiences in school can provide insight into the best ways to support the student, as aligned with and reflective of a holistic approach. We also drew your attention to how the indicators were described. Language is often a reflection of a person's beliefs or mindset. The tone and word choice can reflect and reinforce positive or negative responses to students. **Approach A** leads with a deficit-based mindset, and **Approach B** leads with an asset-based mindset.

Now, let's look at the next steps for each approach ...

Next Steps	
Traditional MTSS Approach A	**Whole-Child Aligned Approach B**
The teacher schedules a 1:1 meeting with Anisha to discuss grades and participation in class.	The teacher schedules a few 1:1 meetings with Anisha to build a deeper rapport because she is a new student. The goal is to first talk to Anisha to learn more about her and the reason behind her drawings on the desk.
The teacher talks with Anisha about her lateness and warns that her mother will be called to inform her that this is unacceptable.	The teacher sends home a note to schedule a phone conversation with Anisha's mother in an attempt to build a rapport. The teacher plans to talk about Anisha's strengths and to discuss at least one of the concerns. During the phone call, the teacher welcomes the family to the school, discusses some important information about school and shares plans to get to know Anisha. The teacher then broaches the subject of Anisha's late arrival to school. Anisha's mother acknowledges the tardiness and commits to working on improving it. Mother comments that she appreciates the call and support for Anisha, as she is new to the school.
The teacher decides to use incentives to reduce Anisha's chatty behavior and warns her about the consequences of drawing on the desk.	To support Anisha with her academics and her distractibility, the teacher decides to offer some 1:1 coaching. The teacher also decides to use nonverbal cues to capture Anisha's attention when she becomes distracted.
The teacher considers giving Anisha a week to improve, and if she does not, the teacher will look into referring her for Tier 2 support due to her low grades.	The teacher shares with Anisha her goals, and that her progress will be monitored for a week to see if some improvements are made in Anisha's class performance and behavior. At that point, the teacher will determine what the best next steps are.

Questions for reflection:

1. What differences in the approaches are you noticing between Approach A and Approach B above?
2. Looking at the different approaches, are there aspects that resonate with you? Why? Are there aspects that do not resonate? Why?
3. What might Anisha be thinking and feeling about herself and the teacher based on the teacher's response in Approach A versus Approach B?

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In Approach A, the teacher naturally begins to respond to the student based on the guidance provided by their school. It is common practice for school policies and procedures to influence how educators unintentionally respond to students, in ways that are not in alignment with a whole-child approach. In a traditional approach to supporting students, we often look for "quick fixes" and overidentification of needs, rather than developing a holistic understanding of students. The approach is also a reflection of some assumptions the educator has about the cause of Anisha's behavior. This approach is more aligned to blaming the student, and as a result, it is more punitive. This perspective asks, *What is wrong with this student?* **Approach A** does not consider context and primarily leverages the caregiver for punitive reasons. There has been no indication that the teacher in **Approach A** is engaging in any reflection about pedagogy or strategies used.

Approach B considers the contextual factors that may be contributing to the behavior the teacher is noticing. The approach asks the question, *How can I support this student?* The teacher is concerned about the student's functioning in the class and at home. The teacher seeks to understand Anisha holistically. This perspective reflects one aspect of a whole-child approach. The whole-child approach recognizes the importance of context, building relationships, and creating a supportive environment, and it moves away from making assumptions.

The next section begins to look at the impact of the strategies above …

Impact of Strategies	
Traditional MTSS Approach A	**Whole-Child Aligned Approach B**
Anisha has stopped drawing on the desk; however, she continues to get distracted and continues her chatty behavior. The lateness also continues to be a challenge.	The teacher plans for the follow-up 1:1 meeting with Anisha. The teacher talks with her about the progress she has made with regard to her behavior. The teacher shares that she will continue to coach her. The teacher asks Anisha about what she believes she struggles with and/or needs more of from the teacher. Anisha has the opportunity to share the drawings that she made since their last meeting. To support and reinforce Anisha's talent and the talent of other students, the teacher decides to set aside time every day after lunch for students to share something about themselves, if they choose. This will allow Anisha an ongoing opportunity to discuss her artwork and other interests.
The teacher has been unable to connect with Anisha's mother and decides to send a letter indicating the concerns.	The following week, the teacher has some trouble following up with Anisha's mother and decides to send a letter home sharing Anisha's progress and next steps to support Anisha. The teacher explains that the progress includes less chatty behavior and discontinued drawings on the desk. In an effort to maintain ongoing communication, the teacher inquires about the best way and time to communicate with Anisha's mother.
During the 1:1 meeting, the teacher acknowledges that there has been some improvement in Anisha's behavior with regard to drawing on the desk. However, the chatty behavior continues, and the teacher decides to move Anisha's seat. The incentive points only last for a day or two because Anisha is not motivated by the reward she would earn through the points. The teacher informs Anisha that she needs to improve her focus and get motivated to do her work and bring her grades up. The teacher also informs Anisha that they will continue to meet regularly.	

Questions for reflection:

1. What impact does each approach have on Anisha's engagement in the classroom and her relationship with the teacher?
2. What do you notice about the level of engagement with Anisha's mother in each approach?

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In both approaches, the teacher felt it was best to have 1:1 meetings with both Anisha and her mom. Based on the results of **Approach A** (traditional MTSS), the teacher continues to move forward with a more punitive way of responding to Anisha, and frustration is growing due to the limited contact with Anisha's mother. While the teacher is meeting with Anisha, the 1:1 meetings are causing a more adverse interaction with Anisha and do not create an environment for Anisha to develop a relationship with the teacher.

Approach B (whole-child aligned) encourages opportunities to develop a relationship with Anisha and her family. This approach allows for flexibility and considers the need to provide alternate ways of integrating the voice of the caregiver. For example, rather than assuming that the mother does not care and has refused to continue working with the teacher, the caregiver's context with regard to her work schedule is taken into consideration. In alignment with taking an asset-based approach, the letter being sent to the caregiver acknowledges the progress the student has made instead of only focusing on her challenges. Anisha is also being given the opportunity to share some personal drawings and discuss what has been difficult for her. This allows the relationship to deepen, incorporating student voice, an example of applying an inclusive response that is more likely to lead to a positive equitable outcome for Anisha. The teacher is leveraging the letter to build a relationship and not to punish to the student.

The story continues below …

Decision to Refer	
Traditional MTSS Approach A	**Whole-Child Aligned Approach B**
For the next 2 days, the teacher notices a slight improvement in Anisha's participation in class; however, there is not much improvement in her homework completion or lateness.	A few days later, Anisha's mother responds to the letter via email. The letter from the teacher inquired about the best times and modalities for reaching out to her. The mother explains about her long work hours and shares that email would be best, and text messages can be used in case of an emergency. The teacher shares that Anisha's timeliness has improved, along with her chattiness and her drawing on the desk. The teacher also shares that coaching is happening with Anisha to support her academic work, and that Anisha might need more support. The mother explains that Anisha had challenges in her last school and agrees that more support is necessary.
After some time, Anisha's mother reaches out to the teacher via email after receipt of the letter. They schedule a phone conference. During the scheduled call, the teacher lists the concerns she has about Anisha. The teacher inquires about the student's lateness. The mother explains that she works long hours, has some difficulty waking up on time and states that she will work on improving Anisha's attendance and behavior.	Given the limited progress in Anisha's academics, her academic history as reported by her mother and her continued distractibility (although she is less chatty), the teacher recognizes that the student may need more academic support.
The teacher shares with Anisha's mother that a referral will be made to their 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 the student look forward to. The 1:1 meetings provide an opportunity for the teacher to learn more about Anisha and why she used to draw on her desk. Anisha shared 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 Anisha for Tier 2 support and sends an email to Anisha's mom to inform her of this next step.

Questions for reflection:

1. What do you think is contributing to Anisha's limited progress in the Traditional MTSS Approach A?
2. In each approach, how does Anisha's mother respond to the teacher's consideration of accessing more support?
3. Based on the different approaches, which approach resonates with you? What, if anything, would you have done differently?

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The **Traditional Approach (A)** continues to support Anisha through punitive measures. The teacher meets with Anisha's mother with the expectation that the mother would help fix the challenges presented in the classroom. The burden is on the student and the mother to address the issues. When this approach seems ineffective, the teacher decides that a Tier 2 referral should be made. The teacher makes some classroom changes but does not reflect on their practice or approach in responding to or supporting Anisha.

The **Whole-Child Approach (B)** leverages context, is more reflective of teacher practice and acknowledges the significance of relationships. The teacher decides to formally make a Tier 2 referral and has learned about some emotional needs Anisha is experiencing as well. The teacher suspects this might have some impact but is still building a relationship with Anisha and does not want to jump to conclusions.

Throughout this tool, we have shared some reflection questions to support thinking deeper about two possible approaches to responding to a student. **Click here** for additional reflection questions to examine the teacher's response.

What is one step you will take when thinking about students who need additional support that will move you closer to being whole-child aligned?

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