

# Tiered System of Supports: Identification Phase



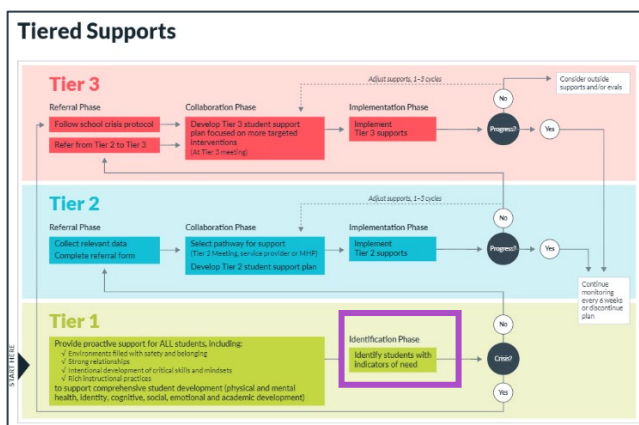
## What Is It and Why Is It Important?

Based on the [science of learning and development](#), schools should create a collaborative Tiered System of Supports to meet student needs and address learning barriers, both in and out of the classroom, in an integrated way. The first phase of a Tiered System of Supports is the Identification Phase.

The goals of the Identification Phase are as follows:

- To challenge potential inequitable beliefs and practices held by educators and schools
- To develop a deeper understanding of the student
- To refine teacher mindset and practice
- To be responsive to students in a timely and equitable manner

The universal (supports all students receive – otherwise known as Tier 1), proactive, equitable, integrated, culturally relevant, [holistic practices](#) and protocols (inclusive of supportive environments, relationships, rich instructional experiences, and skills and mindsets) will support the needs of most students. However, there will be times when these practices are not sufficient to support some students. We, as educators, must possess the skills necessary to recognize when a student's needs are not being met with universal practices. It can be easy to place blame on students for failing to meet our expectations. For example, educators may inadvertently apply punitive measures first, based on how students are presenting in the classroom. However, the science of learning and development tells us that there are reasons behind the academic, social, emotional and motivational challenges students present.



As reflected in the visual, the Identification Phase is the initial step in the process of engaging in activities that encourage educators to reflect on and recognize student assets while determining which students would benefit from additional support. This phase serves as an opportunity to explore the context surrounding a student, whether it be their home environment, community, school or classroom.

There are a few methods by which an educator becomes aware that a student may need additional support. The most common method is for an educator to recognize, through observation, that a student is having some challenges academically or socioemotionally. This phase requires educators to reflect on what might be contributing to their concerns about a student and then begin to collect relevant information about their context. Aligned to whole-child development, this reflection will also include interrogation of unconscious, implicit biases and mindsets held about how children learn and develop, and the experiences educators and schools provide to students each day.

Another way that an educator becomes aware of a student needing additional support is for caregivers to express a concern or make a request for additional support for their student. In most cases, caregivers are the most familiar with the student's individual strengths and assets, developmental milestones, and the context of the home environment and school, all of which contribute to the overall functioning of the student. Therefore, it is imperative that the educator welcome and encourage the input of caregivers, as their insight can provide the necessary data to support students in a way that is timely and effective, and that should be leveraged to challenge potential inequitable practices and approaches that do not support the student. Caregiver engagement in a proactive manner is inclusive and contributes to creating an equitable experience and outcome for both students and their families. Collaboration with caregivers is an ongoing process.

Lastly, students are often the first person aware that they are experiencing difficulty prior to the recognition of either a caregiver or educator. For example, students (particularly in high school and middle school) possess the ability to be self-aware and recognize that they are having some challenges academically or having a difficult experience at home that may result in their experiencing negative feelings. This recognition may prompt them to seek some additional support. With that said, students are not usually considered to be "experts" in their capacity; their ability to understand their own needs may be underestimated, and therefore, adults interact with them in a way that dismisses their valuable perspective. Inclusivity of student voice should be seen as a necessary step in promoting equity and students' ability to grow and develop in a way that highlights their strengths and meets their developmental needs.

## What Should I Be Looking For?

As noted above, there are a number of indicators that may prompt you identify which students have needs that are not being met with universal practices. These indicators are organized into four categories:

- School functioning (attendance or lowered academic performance)
- Externalizing behaviors (significant change in mood or behavior, or poor social relationships)
- Internalizing behaviors (anxiety or low self-esteem)
- Family concerns and systems involvement (foster care or domestic violence)

## What Tools Can Support This Process?

Turnaround for Children offers two tools below to support the reflective process of identifying students, exploring educator mindsets, and examining systems and practices that often contribute to inequitable responses to and outcomes for students.

- *Indicators of Need*
- *Guiding Questions for Identification*

## What Else Do I Need to Know?

A holistic approach places emphasis on being proactive, so early acknowledgment of student needs is critical to student success. Unmet needs can have long-term effects on student outcomes.

As you gain clarity around what is contributing to your concerns about how the student is presenting in the classroom, it will be important to take these reflections and consider whether there are some refinements or shifts that need to be made in your mindset, your classroom environment (practices, procedures) and/or schoolwide universal Tier 1 practices. It is important for educators to implement as many universal and proactive strategies as possible before referring a child for Tier 2 or Tier 3 supports UNLESS the student demonstrates a need for a more immediate response that requires support beyond the scope of universal classroom practices. One common option is to have an informal conversation with a grade-level teammate or someone on your school's wellness or mental health team to see if they have any suggestions for strategies to try in support of your student.

In most cases, students should first receive Tier 2 supports. This can be done through a Tier 2 grade-level meeting or by discussing the student with another service provider or student support staff member. However, some indicators may warrant a direct Tier 3 (crisis) referral, in which case educators should follow the school crisis protocol and refer the student directly for Tier 3 support (see our section on [Responding to Student's Urgent Needs](#) for more information). There are a few cases where a student may not perfectly meet the guidelines for a crisis; however, their needs are significant enough to require a more tailored approach. Consultation with the Tier 3 lead can provide some additional support in determining what is most appropriate for the student.