

# CHAPTER 4

## CATCH ME WHEN (OR BEFORE) I FALL



The school team regularly tracks every student's behavioral, social-emotional and academic progress to ensure they don't fall behind.

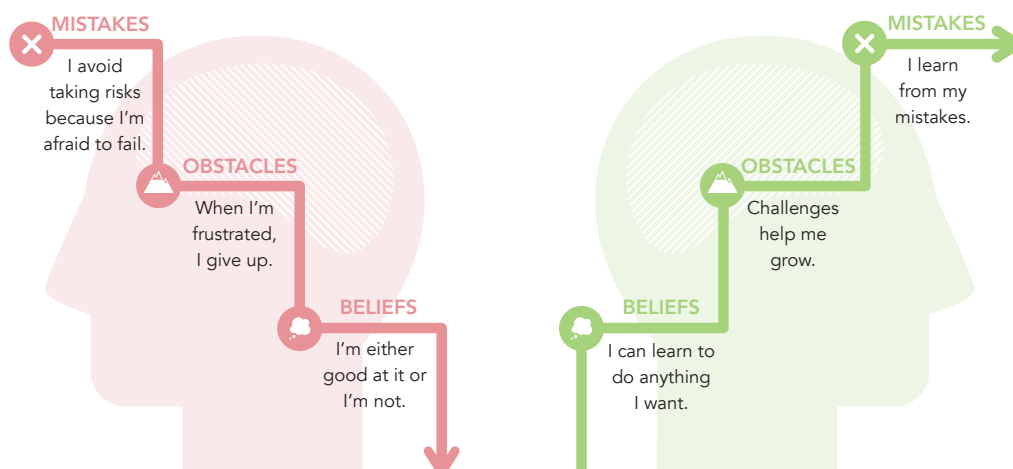
### THE PROBLEM: A DISABILITY DIAGNOSIS OFTEN BECOMES A STUDENT'S DESTINY

Once a student is identified as having a disability, educators often have a fixed perception about what that student needs. Some believe that a diagnosis of a disability inherently means the student will always struggle in the same way. These perceptions can end up trapping students in certain interventions or settings for far too long.

But like all students, students with disabilities grow and change over time. Their needs can shift. They can easily move from needing one kind of support to another type to needing nothing at all. It is important that teachers craft their instruction based on how these needs evolve. Just because a student needs a certain kind of support one semester doesn't mean they'll need that same support again later on. As Ryan Parry, who oversees special education for the Covina-Valley Unified School District, said, "Special ed is not a placement. It's a service."<sup>65</sup>

People with a **"fixed mindset"** believe that intelligence is something you're born with and doesn't change over time.

People with a **"growth mindset"** believe that intelligence can be developed with practice and hard work.



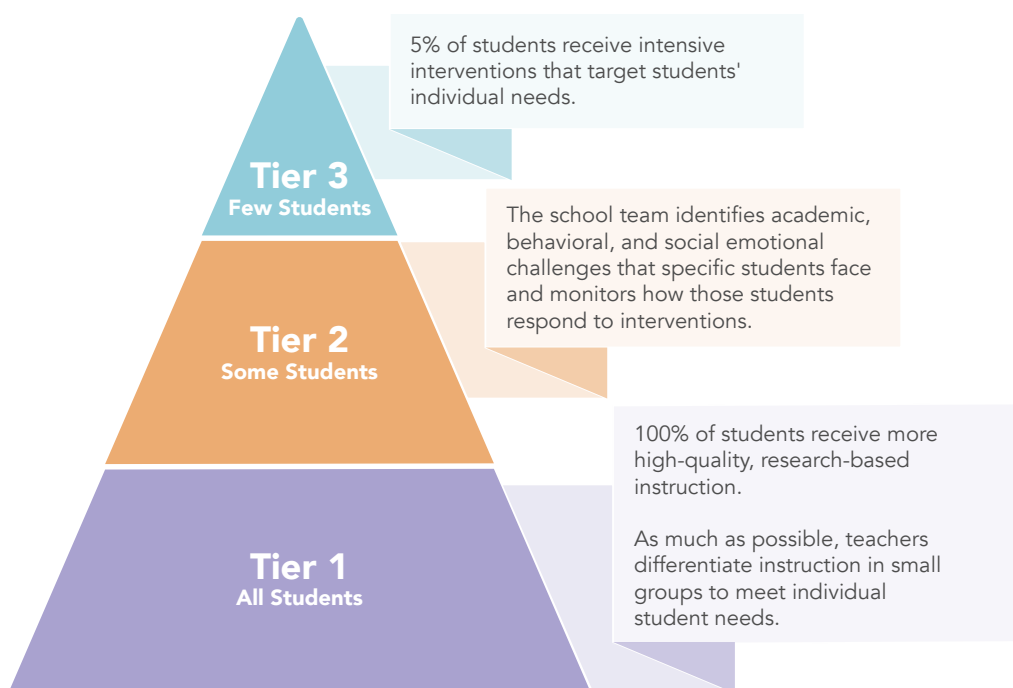
When school teams reject a **"fixed mindset"** and instead treat students with a **"growth mindset,"** they build a school culture where students feel comfortable to take risks, learn from failure, and can develop their intelligence over time through hard work.

Source: Content adapted from *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* by Carol Dweck

## ► THE SOLUTION: USE “TIERED INSTRUCTION” TO GET THE RIGHT SUPPORT TO THE RIGHT STUDENTS AT THE RIGHT TIME

To serve students with disabilities effectively, school teams must look at interventions with a growth mindset. They must believe that special education interventions can – and should – change depending on student needs. To do this, many schools and districts have adopted “tiered instruction.” In this approach, teachers provide three different levels – or “tiers” – of instructional strategies, depending on a student’s individual needs. Teachers closely track how students respond over time. Then they move students from one tier of interventions to another, depending on how fast they progress. If they continue to struggle, the teacher might increase the intensity of the support. If they respond well to the intervention and develop more confidence and independence, the teacher or school might decrease the support.

### **Tiered Instruction: More intensive support for students who need it most**



Source: content adapted from RTI Action Network. <http://www.rtinetwork.org/>

### **Tier 1 support - Core instruction for all students**

In the first level – or “Tier 1” – students receive general instruction in their general education classroom using the standard curriculum. Schools use broad instructional or behavioral strategies to support all students. Tier 1 interventions might include a teacher standing near a student when giving instructions, using visual cues, giving a student more structured note-taking templates or outlines, and/or assigning a student a seat near the teacher or a seat in an area with few distractions. Ideally, school teams would expect this level to meet the needs of about 80% of students.<sup>66</sup> At multiple points throughout the year, teachers evaluate how well students are responding to the general instructional approach. For example, a school might adopt a research-based reading curriculum and screen all students for reading problems three times per year to determine which students might need supports beyond the school-wide reading curriculum.

### **Tier 2 support - Group interventions**

However, around 15% of students may still be struggling with just traditional instruction. These students are then moved to “Tier 2.” At this level, students receive more intensive instruction in smaller group settings to help them access the general curriculum or additional support from their classroom teacher. This could include a behavior contract, a reward system, or modified assessments. It could also include repeated opportunities for practice.

For example, Tier 1 students could have guided reading three times a week, while Tier 2 students could have it five times a week. These interventions can be administered by an educator with special training, such as a reading specialist. But for smaller schools or those with fewer resources, general education teachers provide these interventions on their own. The interventions may take place over the course of several weeks, with the school team checking in over time to monitor progress.

### **Tier 3 support - Intensive interventions**

Even with Tier 2 support, approximately 5% of students may still not meet their learning or behavior goals. These students are moved to “Tier 3.” At this level, students often work one-on-one with a specialist for longer periods of time. In contrast, students in Tier 2 can usually manage larger groups for shorter amounts of time. Tier 3 students may need more individualized instruction. Sometimes they may need a custom-made curriculum that covers the foundational skills they may have missed. At this point, schools may also evaluate these students to determine what special education services they may need on an ongoing basis.

Research-based intervention processes have helped schools implement tiered instruction more effectively. One of the most common forms of tiered instruction is called Response to Intervention (RtI), which focuses on academic instruction and support. Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) focuses on behavioral support. More recently, districts and schools have begun shifting toward Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS). MTSS draws on both RtI and PBIS to address both academic and behavioral needs. Research has shown that these tiered systems can improve both academic performance and behavior. This is particularly true for low-income students and students of color.<sup>67</sup>

The key to all these approaches: they have highly trained and supported staff who know how to organize students into levels of escalating need and flexibly adapt to the changing needs of students over time. Students move between these tiers over the course of the year based on how they respond to various interventions and assessments. Depending on their progress, a student might move between Tiers 1 and 2 fluidly over the course of the year in one or more subjects. They also can move into Tier 2 and right back to Tier 1 after learning knowledge or skills they had missed in prior years.

Of course, legally under IDEA, parents have the right to ask schools to assess students for special education services immediately, instead of going through the tiered instruction process. In fact, in 2011, the U.S. Department of Education specifically stated that RtI could not be used to delay or deny special education identification. But when done well, the gradual progression of RtI can help ensure that teachers do not unnecessarily shuffle students with disabilities into the most intensive tier and separate them from the rest of the students. Instead, teachers move them into a more intensive tier only when data shows that they will truly benefit from that level of support.

### **Tiered instruction helps schools take a proactive – not reactive – approach to student support**

These approaches allow schools to meet student needs without placing them in unnecessarily restrictive settings. As Chapter 3 “Find Me” described, schools must work to ensure they quickly and accurately identify students for special education services. However, identification should not be a standalone process. It should be part of an overall intervention system that provides support to all students, measures if it’s working, and increases the supports when necessary.

Educators in Kansas have seen positive results since the Kansas State Department of Education adopted MTSS in 2007. “As we began to implement effective intervention at each tier, we began to see fewer children being referred to special education,” said Alexa Posny, then state director of special education in Kansas.<sup>68</sup> When fewer students are referred, students are less likely to be over-identified and those who truly do have special needs get more of the resources they need.

## Tiered instruction benefits all students

More recently, schools and districts have expanded their use of tiered instruction to cover all students. Federal law lets schools use up to 15% of their special education funds for students without disabilities who nonetheless need more support.<sup>69</sup> This makes it easier for schools to use tiered instruction with all students.

Since this model is more flexible, teachers can move students from one tier to the next based on the most current data. This allows them to offer more targeted support to struggling students – whether or not they have a disability. This means that tiered instruction can “blur” the lines between general and special education, often in positive ways. Researchers from the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) looked at two charter school networks (STRIVE Preparatory Schools in Denver and Uncommon Schools in New York City). They found they both successfully used tiered instruction to ensure that “students with special needs have similar education experiences and expectations to their general education peers.”<sup>70</sup> Students with disabilities did indeed receive more support from special educators. But researchers also observed that other struggling students were also included in this support, even though they didn’t have an IEP.

Another example of a school using tiered instruction is Lafayette Elementary in San Francisco. Principal Heath Caceres says that at Lafayette, it’s possible for a student with a disability to still be in Tier 1, while a student without a disability can be in Tier 3. This flexible model allows teachers to ensure that all students get what they need, when they need it.

## Tiered instruction helps students “exit out” from special education interventions if they no longer need them

By addressing needs as they emerge, school teams can actually decrease the number of students who require an IEP. While “exiting out” of special education should not be the goal for all students with disabilities, some students may develop independent skills and no longer need extra services. Research has found that when some schools train teachers in a tiered model of support, “special education leaders in these schools say that many students who may have acquired IEPs in other schools no longer require them.”<sup>71</sup> More than half of students who receive speech services ultimately after a while don’t need them anymore, leaving far fewer who need further evaluation for disabilities.<sup>72</sup> Under an effective system of tiered instruction and accurate identification, services go to students who need them the most when they need them -- rather than to students who may only need services for several years.

For example, the rural Sanger district in California’s Central Valley adopted RtI in 2005. When schools trained teachers in providing tiered support for students, they met the needs of many students without using special education services. After adopting RtI, the district’s rate of special education identification fell from 10% to 7%. Special Education Director Kimberly Salomonson believes this rate more accurately captures students’ likelihood to have a disability in her schools. When tiered instruction helps students reach grade-level success in the general education classroom, she believes “they are not special education and should not be labeled as such.”<sup>73</sup>

Similarly, at KIPP Raíces in Los Angeles, whenever possible, the school team makes an effort to exit students from special education services if it is clear that they no longer need them. “The goal is really to have kids become independent,” said Medalla Dimapindan, the school’s lead resource specialist.

Of course, some students with disabilities will require special education services throughout their entire school career. But for other students, a disability diagnosis does not necessarily mean they need the most intensive interventions. The most effective schools use the data from tiered instruction to determine what interventions work and which can change. They also use data to ensure that students who are no longer struggling can “exit out” when they no longer need extra support.

# WHAT ADVOCATES CAN DO TOGETHER

HOW TO ORGANIZE  
FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE



**CATCH ME WHEN  
(OR BEFORE) I FALL**

**The school team regularly tracks every student's behavioral, social-emotional and academic progress to ensure they don't fall behind.**

## WHAT TO ASK

- Do school staff consistently use a shared school-wide system to monitor and provide support to all students, both with and without disabilities?
- Are all students assessed for strengths and needs, and is student data driving decisions about instruction, behavior, interventions, and resource allocation?
- Do school team members consistently provide accommodations and modifications that enable students to access the curriculum?

## WHAT TO LOOK FOR

### DISTRICT / CHARTER SCHOOL NETWORK

- The district / charter school network holds each school accountable for monitoring data to detect trends in student performance at the individual, classroom, and school level and adjusts instruction accordingly. Principals are evaluated based on their ability to do this, and their managers intervene and support if they struggle.
- The district / charter school network ensures that all teachers are trained in the best ways to support students with disabilities by allocating funding for both general education and special education teachers to participate in professional development focused on supporting students with disabilities.
- The district / charter school network provides funding for teams of teachers from the same school (not just individual representative teachers) to attend professional development together and collaboratively adjust school-wide practices to better support students with disabilities.
- The district fully funds intervention programs so programs can succeed at the school level.

### SCHOOL / CLASSROOM

- Teachers consistently use a shared school-wide system to monitor student data and provide support to both students with and without disabilities. A multidisciplinary team of teachers and staff is responsible for looking at school-wide data and designing interventions to address academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs of all students.
- Teachers can explain and share documented evidence of the steps they have taken to support specific students, how the students responded, and then how they adjusted.
- The school's professional development calendar includes specific sessions on supporting students with disabilities or integrates special education topics into general training sessions.
- The school reserves time each week for collaboration between special education teachers and the general education teachers.
- All students receive some small-group or individualized instruction every day.



## WE KNOW WE'VE SUCCEEDED WHEN:

- The school team provides a wide range of increasingly intensive supports to meet the needs of all learners, including those who are struggling and those who are advanced, and proactively works to prevent academic and behavioral challenges. This includes universal screening, early intervention and frequent progress monitoring, all while supporting students to learn and grow independently.
- Comprehensive, research-based intervention processes – like multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) and Response to Intervention (RTI) – help schools identify students with disabilities earlier and more accurately.
- Both general and special education teachers at the school have strong training in special education interventions, particularly for the most common disabilities among their students.