



# PYRAMID OF SUPPORT

There is something for everyone in this model for a school-based support system.

If you are a school site administrator, mark all of the activities that apply to the work you did last week:

- Facilitated a curriculum planning session with a group of teachers.
- Conducted several teacher evaluation observations and post-observation conferences.
- Reviewed your site budget to determine how additional cuts will affect the school program.
- Met with your area's board member regarding current district issues.
- Held a problem-solving session with an angry parent.
- Planned and held a meaningful professional development staff meeting.
- Attended a student's Individual Education Plan meeting.
- Met with the district facilities coordinator to discuss an ongoing maintenance project.

It is no secret that the role of a principal involves a daunting number of diverse responsibilities and activities. On any given day, it may actually be hard to determine what a principal's "real" job title should be.

One of the most difficult aspects of creating a successful school is determining how the school practices and systems can support the needs of struggling students. Consider the bottom line. How do we ensure that all students have access to the supports necessary to enable them to be successful? How do we ensure that students with the greatest needs do not receive all of the school's resources at the expense of others?

This article is about creating a coordinated, school-based student support system that ensures the success of all students, especially those who are sometimes left behind.

From the perspective of a school administrator, you may be asking, "What is my role in coordinating the systems at my school to support all children?" Much like a helicopter pilot, school principals are expected to be able to "hover" over the latest educational research, the newest legislation and the current events within the school site.

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*By Jill Baker and Tiffany Brown*

Administrators are expected to “drop down” to create understanding for others, “fly back up” to let teachers do their work, and “drop down” again to offer assistance and support. In the midst of this fearless flying, the vision of improving the education for all students must be the only destination.

### **A pyramid of support for students**

The “Pyramid of Support” is a model that promotes the idea of “something for everyone” (NASDSE, 2005). In the pyramid model, all students fall somewhere within the spectrum of supports that exist at a given school site. The majority (around 80 percent) of the school population falls within the foundational level of the pyramid (tier one), while approximately 5 percent of students can typically be identified as those with the most intense individual needs (tier three).

As the needs of the students become more intense, the range of interventions that are provided for them also become more intensive and individualized. The pyramid model also reflects a method of organizing support into a “menu of options” that a school team can refer to when identifying appropriate interventions for students. Ultimately, a school site’s menu of options will include all of the available academic and behavioral interventions for students.

### **Tier one: School wide (80 percent)**

Tier one is the most accessible level of support for students. Interventions that are available at this level include all of the functions of the general curriculum with minor changes in the specificity of use that is offered to students who are beginning to struggle.

For example, English Language Development is a standard component of the curriculum for students who are working to acquire English as a second language. However, the delivery of ELD may be differentiated based on the needs and level of academic success of a student. A student who may have already been re-designated, but whose academic performance is not yet proficient, may benefit from continued ELD as an intervention.

### **Tier two: Targeted (15 percent)**

At the Targeted Level of Support (tier two), the intensity of interventions increases. Students who require supports within this tier are those who have begun to “flash upon our radar screens” with more frequency. This group reflects approximately 15 percent of students who have either academic or behavioral struggles.

Ironically, while this is the group who may be the most responsive to intervention, this is typically the group that receives the least amount of attention (Adelman & Taylor, 2005). As a rule, schools



tend to operate from the paradigm of “what we do for all” and “what we do for the most struggling few.” However, the group that requires a targeted level of intervention is truly the group that can benefit most quickly and efficiently from receiving additional supports.

Take, for example, a student who is reading slightly below grade level. Given the opportunity for specific reading instruction accompanied by daily reading practice with an adult, the student will most likely make notable gains within a short time frame. Supports such as after-school tutoring or the opportunity to read with a parent volunteer will be beneficial to these students because their academic needs are not that far from their instructional grade level.

Different than a student who has multiple instructional gaps, a student in this circumstance will be supported through minor intervention with consistent opportunities for academic practice. The trick in this case is determining the need, selecting the appropriate intervention and monitoring the student’s response.

### **Tier three: Intensive (5 percent)**

Finally, the students with the most intensive needs are addressed in tier three. As described, it is this group that requires the village. It is this group that needs the most innovative and specific interventions. Furthermore, it is this group that needs the closest level of monitoring, the most accommodation, and a true understanding about what an individual student’s needs are.

The administrative role in serving this “5 percent” of all students becomes one of an operations manager who frequently asks, “How are we going to use what we have to care for these students?” Progress for this group takes clear, consistent focus and monitoring. Delineating the needs of students in tier three is half of the struggle toward efficiently balancing the dispersion of resources at a school site.

### **Connecting the components: The principal’s role**

The principal’s role in connecting each of the components of an effective school-based student support system is paramount to the system’s development, success and continuous improvement. As mentioned, the role of the principal can be likened to that of a helicopter pilot. In this model, the helicopter pilot has the dual role of hovering over the school in an oversight capacity, while at other times “dropping down” to assume a hands-on role with the interventions that are taking place for students within the school.

While hovering above the school in the helicopter, the principal is able to assist staff in the connectivity of all of the important pieces of the school’s intervention work. With intentionality, the principal can work to align the available resources to the students’ needs that exist while “keeping an eye” on everything from a 15,000-foot perspective.

While piloting the helicopter, the principal may participate in direct service to students, facilitate specific conversations about students or the overall intervention work, or pose questions that may assist a school team in moving its intervention plan forward. This dropping down allows a principal the opportunity

to collect formal and informal data for use in planning professional development, for the evaluation of interventions and for an ongoing, first-hand experience with the issues facing both staff and students.

### **School-based support systems**

The principal's role in connecting all components of a school-based student support system together involves the oversight of six key components. We have found that attention to these components ensures that a comprehensive school-based system is both cultivated and monitored.

The six key components are as follows: teacher collaboration, student support team, database tracking method, support staff collaboration, professional development and evaluation of interventions.

**1. Teacher collaboration** is a critical component to the success of a school-based support system that is anchored in a standards-based system. Collaboration that allows teachers to create a common ground for discussing students' needs becomes part of a school culture that supports an effective intervention system.

Teacher collaboration may take the form of structured grade-level meetings, structured department meetings, release-time professional development sessions that incorporate the study of student intervention, or staff meeting sessions that allow for small-group strategic discussion.

The key to teacher collaboration is not just that student intervention is discussed, it is how the information about intervention is recorded, monitored and made a part of the school-based support system.

**2. A Student Support Team** that meets regularly and is action-focused plays a critical role in matching students with the appropriate interventions. The goals of an effective SST include collaborating with teachers, school specialists, students' families and other support providers to design an intervention plan.

The plan should include a case manager who communicates with the classroom teacher, specific interventions, a plan for monitoring the student's re-

sponse to the interventions, a timeline for revisiting the student's progress and a plan for communicating with all stakeholders.

**3. A simple database tracking method** that holds all students' names and the type of support being provided can have a dramatic effect on the ability of the principal to monitor the interventions that are taking place at a school site.

The database may easily serve two purposes. The first purpose is to track what every individual student is being provided, which helps determine the efficacy of the intervention. A master copy of the database is typically held in one confidential, accessible location where support providers may access, input and study the intervention information when working to support a student.

The second function of the database is the opportunity to determine where gaps exist in the overall school-based support system. By having all of the intervention data in a consistent format and in one location, this analysis may occur.

**4. Support staff collaboration** takes on many different forms in 2006. Support staffs are typically small groups that may include: administrative staff, a school psychologist, school counselor, nurse, resource teacher, community worker and/or any other staff member who provides oversight or direct service to students (i.e. Student Mentor Program Coordinator).

The principal's role related to support staff collaboration is one of facilitation and connectivity. We have found several mechanisms that enhance collaboration practices. When small groups meet to discuss student progress, referrals, outside support providers or other support issues, minutes are taken in a standard form that can be quickly copied at the conclusion of the meeting. This ensures continual access to important monitoring information and the opportunity for oversight.

We have recently introduced the idea of a "virtual meeting" to schools where itinerant staff comprise almost the totality of the support to students beyond the classroom teacher. A virtual meeting calls upon a set of people to write a brief update on a standard form that is passed

among itinerant staff members during the week. Once all participants have entered their weekly (or bi-weekly) information, the virtual meeting notes are copied and shared among pertinent staff.

**5. The professional development of staff** is both a distinct component of an effective school-based support system and one that must be completely ingrained. Professional development must leverage all other aspects of a school's work, including interventions. The role of the principal in professional development must be to ensure alignment of the messages that the school is sending to staff.

For example, if teachers are being asked to differentiate during their reading block or as they question students in relation to their study of algebraic functions, we must offer the opportunity for staff to learn current methods of differentiation.

The principal must work to allocate time to the capacity-building of all staff who work directly with students, who program students into specific courses, who provide in-class or out-of-class interventions and who make decisions about the interventions that are provided throughout the entire school.

This capacity-building may include teaching by a school psychologist, a department head, a teacher whose training has assisted him in gathering a specific set of skills or a school counselor who sees students from a different perspective.

**6. The evaluation of interventions** is the responsibility of the principal and/or an oversight team. As the staff member who can most quickly drop down to view any one component of the school, the principal must lead the effort to determine the efficacy of interventions.

The principal may assist staff in looking at data to determine whether or not a specific intervention is making a difference for students. Rather than rely upon standardized test data, the data that we refer to is classroom-based data that either a teacher selects or the SST selects as part of the student's monitoring plan.

In its finest form, our evaluation becomes a part of the school culture and

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weaves its way into conversations across a school campus. It becomes commonplace to hear, “Does the data suggest that we keep doing this?” or “How has this helped student learning?” This continuous improvement culture, which may best develop out of the need to evaluate interventions, will truly benefit all aspects of the school.

## Creating what you want with what you have

Coordinating the supports that exist for students at your school site requires an assessment of what is already in place. Ponder the following questions: How do groups collaborate about students’ progress? Do you have a Student Study Team that meets consistently and follows up on student needs? How do teachers use data to inform instruction and the need for student intervention? What type of professional development is in place for teachers to build their skills regarding interventions and monitoring? As

the site administrator, you either hold the answers to these questions or the vision that is needed to seek the answers. There is no special program, article, list or hand-out that can give a school exactly what is needed. The development of what is needed (and hence the answers to the questions) is created from within the walls of the school.

As a site administrator, you are the one who must “hover above” and be ready to “drop down” in a moment’s notice. The creation of the systems that support student learning is one of many tasks that are expected of administrators on any given day. However, of all of the tasks that may be faced within a day, the opportunity to offer “something for everyone” is the approach that will have the greatest impact upon the village.

## And how are the children?

In closing, we reflect upon a story recently shared with us. It is customary for members of the Masai Tribe in Africa to greet each other by asking, “And how are the children?” The question reflects

the value that tribe members place on the well-being of their children. As site administrators, when asked, “And how are the children?” we want to be able to respond by saying that there is “something for everyone” and that all of the children are accounted for and well. ■

## References

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National Association of State Directors of Special Education. (2005). *Response to Intervention: Policy Considerations and Implementation*. Alexandria, VA: NASDSE.

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