

Tiered Support Teams at Lionsgate

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Introduction

Collaboration is one of four *High Leverage Practices* (CEC, 2017) identified for improving student outcomes in special education. Lionsgate Academy employs numerous professionals from various disciplines. The education and training of these professionals lends quality programming for all students. Given the training and education of each professional, the approach to intervention is naturally seen through the lens of that particular field of practice.

Lionsgate Academy intentionally brings together these various practitioners on a tiered support team (TST) in response to particular student needs. The Lionsgate Tiered Support Team (TST) is a group of seasoned staff who are responsible for modifying an individual student's educational supports when they are experiencing a difficult period in the school year; this may impact their academic, behavioral, or mental health goals. The purpose of the TST is to examine the necessity for an individualized, tiered level of support for that student. The TST does this between Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings and is designed to quickly address challenges that may not have been addressed earlier. The TST is meant to intervene early enough to prevent a change to a more restrictive environment for the student.

Each program (Shoreview, Minnetonka, AIM, and LYNX) has its own TST. Members usually include an administrator (principal/program lead or supervisor), a behavior specialist (Dean of Students, Special Education Intervention Coordinator, BCBA, etc.), a clinical practitioner (social worker, mental health worker) and other professionals as deemed helpful by the leader of the TST. A TST meets regularly (usually once a week) and reviews proposals concerning individual students that were submitted by a licensed staff member who knows the student well.

A TST guides the referring staff member to evaluate the concern, take data, consider interventions, implement and monitor a plan, while keeping the student in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). LRE is a legal term that holds that individual students should spend time with other students, in general education classrooms, as much a part of the day as possible.

Consideration for these interventions is made based on the current Individualized Education Program (IEP) along with TST recommendations that bridge supports until the next IEP meeting is scheduled. The concept of tiered supports comes from the research-based *Multi-Tiered Systems of Support* used in many school districts. This brief will include some of that research-base and then describe in greater detail how Lionsgate uses TST.

Federal Law and the Evolution of Tiered Supports

Since the 1970s when special education laws were first enacted at the Federal level, Congress has intended to specifically address common needs across all states and all educational entities. According to Saleh (2021), the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was passed to provide students who had disabilities, “equality of [educational] opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency.” He goes on to say that IDEA “aims to curb educational problems associated with low expectations and insufficient focus on alternative research, teaching methods, and tools.”

For decades now, there have been six guiding principles of IDEA, focusing on students’ rights and schools’ responsibilities (ASK Resource Center, 2018).

- Free Appropriate Public Education
- Appropriate Evaluation
- Individualized Education Program (IEP)
- Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)
- Parent and Student Participation in Decision Making
- Procedural Safeguards

Since Lionsgate was established to serve students with disabilities, the research-based integration of general education and special education has been the defining “blueprint” since it opened. As time goes on, we continue to develop policies and practices to support the blueprint. These take place using strategies that give clarity and language to our work. One perspective includes the use of a *Multi-tiered System of Support* (MTSS).

According to the California Department of Education (CDE), MTSS (2020) can be defined as an integrated, comprehensive framework that focuses on

- Core instruction,
- Differentiated learning,
- Student-centered learning,
- Individualized student needs, and
- The alignment of systems as necessary for all students’ academic, behavioral, and social success.

This framework is incorporated into the school day and the school year. It takes into account how general and special education staff relate through curriculum and planning activities. It also takes into account more than just disability issues; many students who need MTSS come from families with limited economic resources, speak English as a second language, are behind peers in academic growth, or have other barriers to success in school.

The “tiers” of MTSS provide three kinds of support.

Tier 1 represents things that *all* students receive whether or not they have disabilities or other learning needs. These might include social emotional learning, school climate activities, mental health screening, wellness/prevention promotion, and acknowledgement of positive behaviors.

Tier 2 includes activities that are designed to target students who may need additional supports from time to time. These might include small group services, social skills instruction, progress monitoring, and problem solving circles.

Tier 3 includes extensive interventions for students with the most significant behavioral or academic challenges.

Framework of Tiered Supports		
Tier 1	Tier 2	Tier 3
Universal Interventions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All settings/all students • Proactive, preventative • Data-based decision making • Safe and welcoming culture 	Targeted Group Interventions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some students (at risk) • High efficiently • Rapid response • Skill development • Intentional student and staff interactions • Monitoring/feedback 	Intensive, Individual Interventions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assessment based • Intense, durable procedures • Wrap around services • Interagency collaboration • Behavior goals

(Hoover-Schrum Memorial School District, n.d.)

At Lionsgate, more students may receive Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports than in other schools because of the complex ways a disability may affect a student and/or because of other barriers as mentioned above.

When a student enrolls in Lionsgate, we work with the home district to determine the types of support a student needs as they transfer and then provide programming that reflects those needs. At any time during their attendance, it is then that a licensed staff who believes that more support may be needed, refers the student to the TST. The idea is to get to work on making adaptations as quickly and efficiently as possible. When a student is considered for a more restrictive environment, new collaborators may become involved and initiatives put in place:

Typical Activities and Interventions for Tiers 1 - 3				
	Social Emotional Learning (SEL)	Mental Health Supports	Positive Behavioral Interventions	Restorative Justice
Tier 1	School climate, SEL curriculum	Screening, prevention, wellness	School-wide behavior	Problem solving circles

			expectations	
Tier 2	Targeted social skills instruction	Group counseling, progress monitoring	Social and academic instructional groups	Peer jury, conferencing
Tier 3	Individual social skills instruction	Crisis counseling, support teams, outside referrals	Wrap around services, intensive behavioral planning	Family or community based conferencing

(Midwest PBIS Network, 2021)

It is important to note that Tier 3 is not synonymous with special education. In fact, students with disabilities may not need Tier 3 support while students not identified as having a disability may require those supports. It is also important to note that MTSS does not function as a step ladder. A student may need intensive Tier 3 support without first accessing Tier 2 supports. For example, if a student suffers a traumatic event, individual counseling daily may be needed. We do not tell them to try attending weekly group sessions to see if those work first. If the child is in crisis, we must provide them with the level of support required regardless of a defined disability or a predetermined sequence of scaled supports.

The Tiered Support Team Process at Lionsgate

Prior to making a referral to the TST, steps are taken to communicate concerns with team members especially the case manager. Some interventions may have been attempted and found ineffective. The case manager also spends time in the classroom and determines if accommodations and modifications are being delivered in accordance with the IEP. Contact is also made at this time with parents and, if appropriate, with outside providers. (At this point, the referring staff in conjunction with the case manager should gather data based on the concerns.)

Students most commonly are referred to TST for:

- Additional staffing (student specific educational assistant support)
- Adding mental health services
- Changing classroom settings
- Adjusted special ed transportation

Using input from others, a referral may be made and a TST lead will connect with the referral source and invite them into an upcoming TST meeting. At the meeting, data will be shared and past interventions described. The building principal and special education coordinator rule out any instruction or academic environmental factors.

From there, the TST reviews the current IEP, data from staff, and input from other staff who may have insights. Classroom behavior, changes in health (mental or physical), and changes in out-of-school situations are also reviewed. If indicated, the team may also seek input from outside providers (like a therapist or a counselor) or seek a Functional Behavior Analysis (FBA) which is “a systematic set of strategies that is used to determine the underlying function or

purpose of a behavior, so that an effective intervention plan can be developed” (Collet-Klingenberg, 2008). An FBA is a more formal and in-depth method of collecting data and may only be needed for more complex behaviors.

After TST review and discussion with parents or caregivers, interventions can be put in place and may include movement to Tier 2 and/or Tier 3 activities. Again, concerns about the Least Restrictive Environment come into play and taking a student out of general education classrooms must only be done with careful consideration. For some, an early IEP meeting may be in order and regular review of a student’s progress to new or adjusted goals must be maintained.

Conclusion

Students can face new challenges during a school year and may need “new” supports that are not on their current IEP. In order to respond to these challenges, Lionsgate has tiered support teams that can adjust services in the short term and make sure they continue long term, if needed. The team is made up of experienced staff who have a good understanding of how individual services and supports can be incorporated into a student’s day.

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