MTSS Tier 1 Guide: Tier 1 is the Foundation

We define Tier 1 as the intentional high-fidelity implementation of effective academic, social-emotional, behavioral, and family-focused supports that every student receives daily and consistently to be well, belong, and engage fully in learning experiences that cultivate critical competencies that enable students to be life-ready. Tier 1 is the foundation of a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS), and ultimately, represents the core enriching experiences that every student should receive to promote success in school.

Purposes of Tier 1

Modern-day MTSS is over 60 years in the making. It was born out of the public health model, which proved effective at preventing and addressing a wide range of public health conditions and ailments. The public health model eventually made its way into education as the Iowa Heartland problem-solving model in the late 1970s and 80s and later served as the basis for Response to Intervention (RtI) and Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS). Terms such as universal prevention and primary prevention were used initially instead of Tier 1. The main emphasis was on preventing problems, diseases, or conditions from emerging in the first place. While Tier 1 is a critical investment in prevention, there is more to Tier 1 than prevention. The following are the 3 main purposes of Tier 1:

- **Prevention** - intentional implementation of prevention-focused supports that prevent academic, social-emotional, and behavior problems from developing in the first place.
- **Promotion -** increase access to experiences and supports that enrich, enhance or optimize success-enabling factors (e.g., accelerated academic learning, improved social & emotional competencies).
- **Facilitate Intervention** - Tier 1 provides the foundational supports necessary to enhance the effectiveness of Tier 2 and 3 interventions for students who have social, emotional and behavioral needs that warrant support in addition to Tier 1.

Tier 1 is Foundational

Like the foundation of a home, Tier 1 is the foundation of the student experience in school. When the foundation is strong and each student is able to access the enriched experiences they need, the probability of achieving beneficial outcomes for students goes up and the proportion of students with difficulties that warrant intervention goes down. On the flip side, if there are fractures in a home's foundation, there will be problems. The same is true in schools. Fractures in Tier 1 mean some students do not access the foundational experiences and

support they need for success in school. The fractures in the Tier 1 foundation result in more students who look like they need intervention, when in fact they need access to experiences and support every student should receive in school. A brief analogy illustrates this point. Imagine a child who is swimming in a dirty pond, but needs to get clean. In this case, the intervention is to spray the child off with clean water after they are taken out of the pond. The trouble is that the child eventually goes back in the dirty pond, only to get dirty again. To ensure that the child stays clean, we need a clean pond for the child to go back into. This is akin to ensuring that Tier 1 is robustly in place to enable interventions to work for those students who require additional support. We often expect too much out of our interventions when in fact Tier 1 must be in place.

Another tried-and-true analogy that reflects how Tier 1 is the foundation is one of ice cream and toppings. In this depiction, ice cream is the foundation of a delicious dessert. For many, the base ice cream is enough to meet one's needs for a delicious dessert. However, others may want toppings *in addition to* the base ice cream to achieve a delicious dessert that is individualized to their preferences (e.g., whipped cream, chocolate, carmel, nuts) and ultimately is worth the calories. In this case, the ice cream is necessary as it is the base upon which toppings are placed. You don't get rid of the base by

Layering of Support

More individualization as student needs increase/intensify

Tier 1   Tier 2   Tier 3

simply eating toppings. In fact, they wouldn't be called toppings any longer. Layering of toppings occurs in addition to the base and allows for more individualization. The toppings are often individualized based on preferences and needs. This ice cream analogy is consistent with Tier 1 as it is the base or foundation and Tier 2 and Tier 3 represent what is implemented in addition to the foundational supports--not in replacement of foundational supports.

Formula for Tier 1

At CharacterStrong, we outline 3 essential components to the Tier 1 formula. The first component of the formula is EVERY STUDENT, which means Tier 1 is designed for each student in school, not a selected group of students. When certain students are not accessing enriching foundational experiences and supports in school, we need to address that from the lens of Tier 1 foundation work vs the need for Tier 2 or Tier 3 supports.

Every Student +
Holistic Needs +
All Hands on Deck =
Tier 1

Academic   Social Emotional

Physical   Behavior
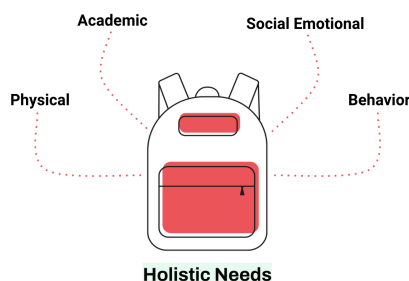
Holistic Needs

The second component is HOLISTIC NEEDS, which reflects the idea that students are human first and they bring academic, social-emotional, behavioral, and physical needs to the

educational table. When schools intentionally integrate effective supports that address students' holistic needs, they provide a robust and comprehensive Tier 1 level of support that increases the likelihood of positive outcomes for students.

The last component is ALL HANDS ON DECK, which is that all educators in a building who interface with students have a role and responsibility to implement Tier 1 practices to ensure students consistently access the experience and support they need.

Tier 1 Enriching Experiences
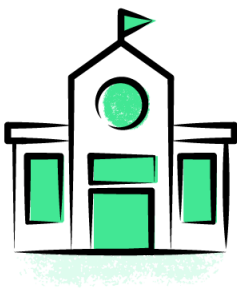
Once born, human beings develop and grow in response to experience. Human beings experience their environments through their senses (e.g., hear, see, touch, feel). When the environment provides access to *enriched experiences,* daily life functioning is optimized (e.g., emotionally regulated, positive social interactions, ability to maintain engagement) and development of knowledge and skills goes up. For example, early exposure to language, books, and time spent reading to young children are examples of enriched experiences that lead to early literacy skills that later develop into reading fluency and reading with comprehension. Some of the experiences in school are simply neutral--meaning that the experiences students take in lack the potency or effectiveness to optimize daily functioning and development. In some cases, the experiences in school can be harmful (e.g., bullying, non-engaging instruction, punitive discipline), which undermine student functioning and development. *Enriching experiences* reflect quality experiences that increase the likelihood of promoting positive functioning and development of students. Tier 1 provides an opportunity for educators to come together to discuss and identify the enriched experiences that they know deep down every student needs to access daily to function well in school. These experiences support the development and growth of knowledge and skills that lead to success in school and life.

From a continuous improvement standpoint, thinking about Tier 1 from the lens of enriched experiences allows educators to check their assumptions through reflective questions such as
- "Is my instruction creating access to enriched learning experiences?"
- "How can I improve my instruction to create more enriched learning experiences?"
- "What will I do when the environment I created does not allow students to access an enriched relational experience that promotes belonging and connection?"
- "Is our school environment a place where students are accessing enriched experiences that enable them to feel safe and be motivated to be a positive co-contributor to the school's culture and climate?"

- "When students have demonstrated they feel safe and developed a strong sense of belonging within the school environment what will I do next?"

Tier 1 Recipe for Success

The Tier 1 level of support can be conceptualized like a good baking recipe, which involves the combination of specific ingredients to create a desired food item, like a chocolate chip cookie. Too often schools adopt and deliver a single or limited set of ingredients yet expect to achieve certain student outcomes (i.e., akin to using only flour to bake a chocolate chip cookie). However, single ingredient approaches are insufficient to provide the full range of experiences and support students need to prevent problems from emerging, promote success enabling factors, and provide the foundation for more intensive intervention to work. Instead schools must focus on the recipe that combines important ingredients together to produce desired social-emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes. At CharacterStrong, we advocate for 5 ingredients of a Tier 1 recipe for success. The following are critical evidence-informed ingredients that combine to create a robust recipe for promoting student social-emotional, behavioral, and academic success as the foundation for school and life success.
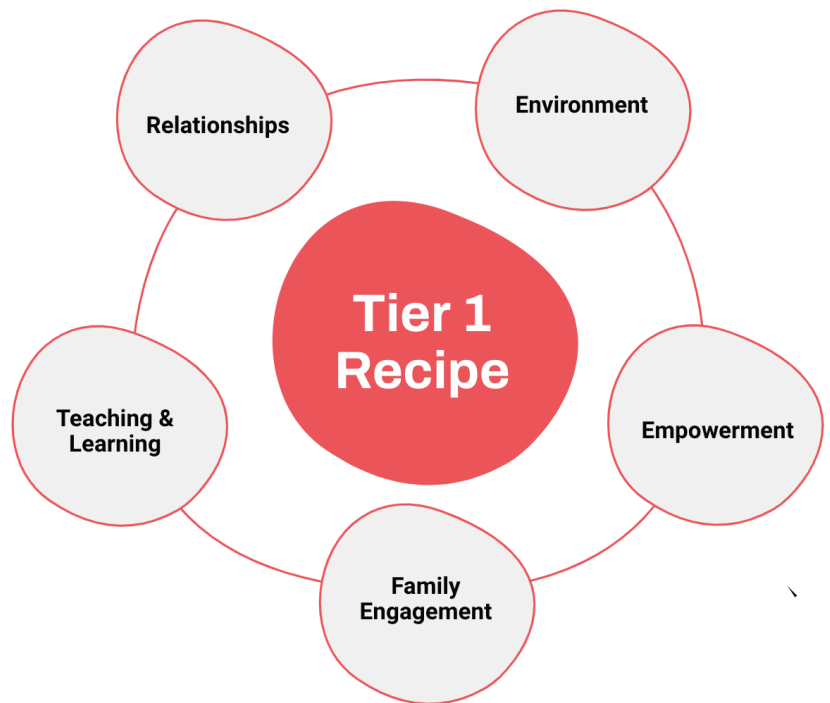
1. **Relationships** - Students thrive when they have consistent access to positive, supportive relationships with adults and peers in schools that cultivate a sense of belonging and connection.
2. **Environment** - Students thrive when they have consistent access to school and classroom environments that are safe, predictable, positive, proactive, and inclusive and the adults are on the same page with regard to expectations and how they respond to behavior consistently and with using a teaching approach.
3. **Teaching & Learning** - Students thrive when they have consistent access to learning experiences that promote active engagement and are relevant to their lives to cultivate critical knowledge and skills that ultimately prepare them for living a healthy, purposeful, and successful life as an adult.
4. **Empowerment -** Students thrive when they have consistent access to supports that empower them to have a voice, exercise their choice, and have ownership over their experiences in school.

5. **Family Engagement** - Students thrive when schools are culturally responsive by establishing two-way communication with families, allowing families to see that their cultural background is visible and embraced in the school, and empower families to have authentic input on their child's school experience.

Once key active ingredients of the Tier 1 recipe for success have been defined, they can be used to inform the selection of effective practices that educators are supported to implement with fidelity. High fidelity implementation of the effective practices brings to life each of the ingredients over time to increase students' access to enriched experiences that lead to desired outcomes of interest. Below is an example list of the 5 ingredients for Tier 1 success and how to bring that ingredient to life with effective practices.

Ingredients	Example Effective Practices
Relationships	● SERVE Model Adult Relationship Practices (Start Intentionally; Engage Relationally, Respond with Empathy, Values Practices Consistently, Exit Intentionally) ● Restorative Practices (proactive community building circles, restorative conferences, conflict de-escalation, affective language and formal conferencing) ● Establish-Maintain-Restore (Weekly Relationship Reflections, Establish Practices, Maintain Practices, and Restore Practices)
Environment	● Tier 1 Positive Behavior Intervention & Supports (teach, model, cue/prompt, recognize & acknowledge, & progressively respond with teaching) ● Proactive Classroom Management Strategies (pre-correction, neutralizing routines, visual schedules with first-then sequences, interspersing choice, classroom meetings, positive greetings at the door)
Teaching & Learning	● Evidence-based academic & social-emotional curriculum ● Instructional strategies that promote engagement & connection to lived experience
Empowerment	● Student voice practices ● Interpersing choice opportunities ● Goal setting (wish, outcome, obstacles, plan) ● Student leadership & self-governance
Family Engagement	● The two-way communication system between families & teachers ● Family voice and input opportunities (Town Hall meetings, surveys, focus groups) ● Family membership on the school Tier 1 implementation team ● All families able to see their cultural background visible and embraced in the school

Selecting Usable and Effective Tier 1 Practices

Schools that adopt Tier 1 programs or practices that are effective but ultimately not that usable or sustainable will be less likely to achieve meaningful changes in student outcomes. This is because students cannot benefit from effective Tier 1 programs or practices they do not receive with fidelity. Alternatively, schools that adopt and implement Tier 1 practices that are usable and sustainable but not effective are equally as unlikely to achieve meaningful changes in student outcomes. This is because ineffective practices will not produce benefit even if they are implemented with fidelity.

To identify potential effective and usable programs and practices that address the recognized problems/needs in the school system, it is important to outline criteria in order to make a proper selection decision. When reviewing programs and practices for adoption, you'll need to consider Effectiveness Criteria and Usability Criteria. For each program or practice you are considering, the scale below will aid in your selection of the most usable and effective supports for your systems needs. This helps answer questions like: "Is this program or practice even usable so we can implement it over time with fidelity and sustain it over time to continue to produce benefit for our students?" "Even if we implement this program or practice with fidelity, how do we know it will produce beneficial outcomes for students?"

Criteria	Rating Scale Meets - 2 Partially Meets - 1 Does Not Meet - 0	Notes about strengths and weaknesses
Effectiveness Criteria		
Evidence criterion - research-based evidence and/or practice-based evidence that provides defensible data that practices are likely to produce changes in student outcomes of interest		

Cultural and developmental appropriateness - how suitable are the practices to be adapted and delivered in a developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive way for students with different lived experiences and cultural identities		
Essential need - identified practices and interventions are in alignment with the root cause and are not misaligned with other initiatives, policies, and/or priorities		
Usability Criteria		
Implementation resources – does the practice have an established fidelity rubric and corresponding implementation supports (training, coaching, PLC process, practice profiles)		
Costs/Affordability - the financial resources needed to adopt and maintain the practices in the system over time		
Feasibility criterion - how doable and straightforward is it for staff to implement the practices with fidelity in light of other priorities vying for their time and energy		
Clarity and specificity criterion - whether the core components or steps of the practices are clearly defined and operationalized such that staff clearly understand what they are expected to do to deliver the practices with fidelity		