Australian Education Research Organisation

Multi-tiered system of supports decision tree

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The Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) recommends the use of a multi tiered system of supports (MTSS) to better assist Years 7 to 9 students struggling with foundational literacy and numeracy skills. If you're unfamiliar with the MTSS framework, we recommended you start with AERO's Introduction to a Multi-Tiered System of Supports explainer.

This practice resource explains how to support students struggling with these skills using an MTSS approach. It's the second part of a series of guidance created in partnership with the Dyslexia-SPELD Foundation (DSF).

This MTSS decision tree is based on a simple framework of reading comprehension. It presents guidance on how to provide:

- universal screening of students to identify reading difficulties
- diagnostic assessment of identified students to better understand the nature of their reading difficulties
- intervention that targets their specific reading difficulties.

Tier 1 refers to evidence-based instructional practices and supports delivered to all students in general education classrooms that facilitate achievement of learning defined in the curriculum. High-quality evidence-based instructional practices and supports are outlined in AERO's Teaching for How Students Learn learning and teaching model.

Tier 2 interventions are generally provided to small groups in addition to the high-quality instruction received by all students at Tier 1. Tier 2 instruction comprises the same evidence-based, high-quality instructional practices previously described in this explainer and supplements Tier 1 – it does not replace it. Tier 2 instruction includes:

- additional support through evidence-based interventions, which may:
  - be aligned in content to the curriculum taught in Tier 1
  - address specific prerequisite knowledge and skills gaps, along the same progression of learning as Tier 1 content

- greater intensity through increased frequency (number of intervention sessions per week), length (how long each intervention session goes for) and duration (total time span of intervention), as well as smaller instructional group size
- closer monitoring of progress.

Tier 3 interventions are further intensified and targeted to meet specific individual learning needs. The evidence-based interventions at Tier 3 are informed by data such as results from universal screening assessments. Like Tier 2, Tier 3 occurs in addition to the high-quality instruction received by all students at Tier 1 and Tier 2.

The high-quality explicit instruction and evidence-based interventions at Tier 3 are further intensified over and above those provided at Tier 2. This is achieved by increasing the frequency and/or length of each session, duration of the intervention, and/or lowering group size (to either very small groups, or one-to-one). There is also greater frequency of progress monitoring.

Two examples of schools using an MTSS framework to support reading are Craigmore High School and Parafield Gardens High School.

The decision-making process (Figure 1) begins with a screening phase that sources as much information as possible about each student's reading ability. Information gathered can be considered in one of 2 possible categories.

Category A information includes universal screening assessments. Universal screening assessments provide objective data about the reading skills of an entire student population.

Category B is supporting information which may include previous NAPLAN results, recent school reports, writing samples, and any other available assessments or prior diagnoses. It's recommended that universal screening assessments are administered for all students, and Category B information supplement results from Category A.

If Category A and B information raise no concerns, a student will continue in Tier 1 instruction and their progress will be monitored within that context. No further action is required, other than teachers continuing to monitor progress in the Tier 1 classroom.
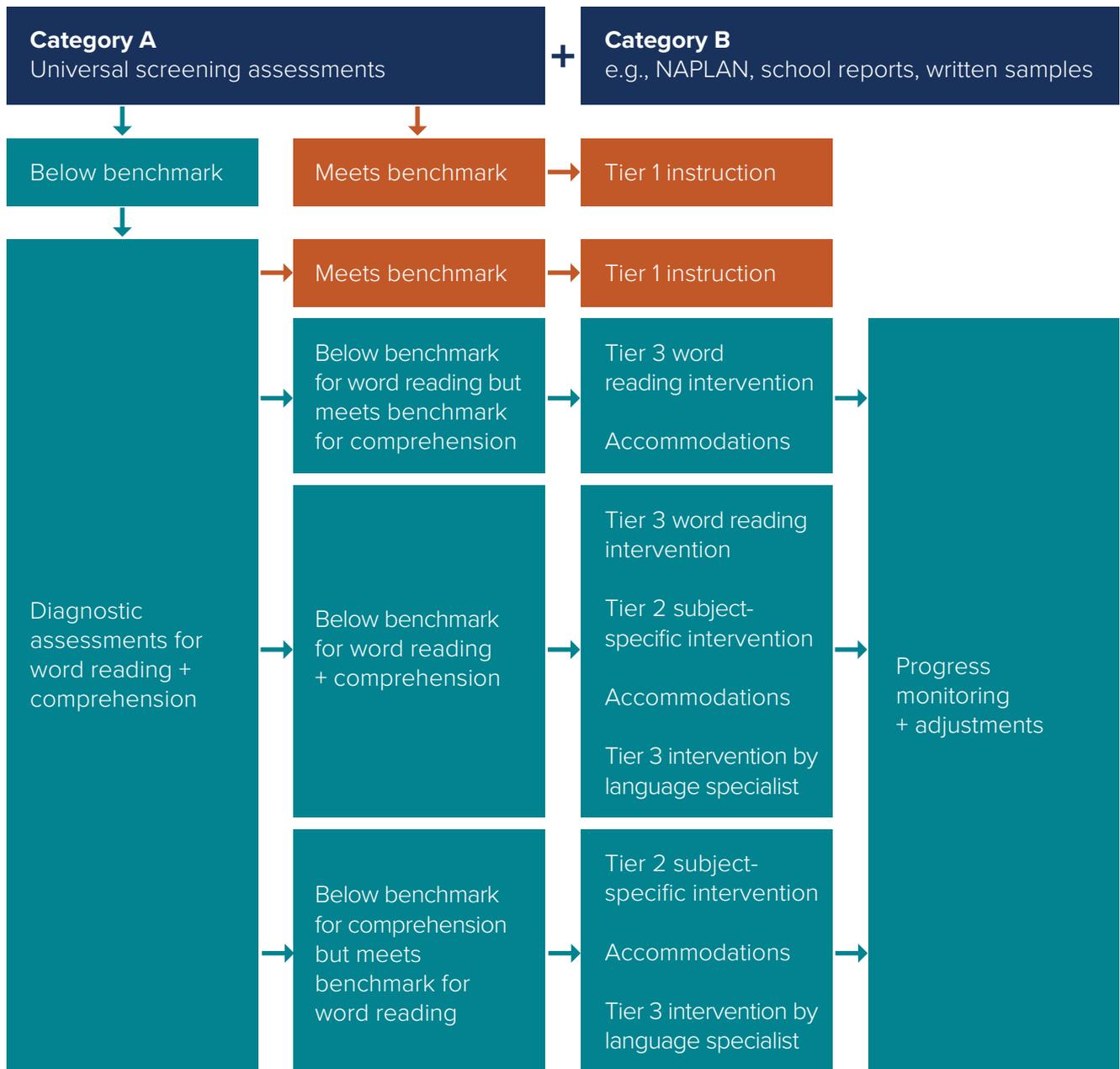
If a universal screening assessment (Category A) indicates that a student's reading falls below an established benchmark for their age or grade, then a diagnostic assessment is needed to determine where the difficulty lies. Category B information, such as NAPLAN results, student reports or a writing sample, can also be used to better understand the student's learning needs and potential next steps.

If a student falls below benchmark in their diagnostic assessment for word reading, they will benefit from Tier 3 word reading intervention with progress monitoring and modifications. Students in this group may also require accommodations for additional learning needs. (For more information, see Accommodations in our Choosing, Monitoring and Modifying Reading Interventions in MTSS practice guide.)

If a student falls below benchmark for comprehension, they will benefit from Tier 2 comprehension intervention with progress monitoring, modification, and accommodations to access the curriculum. Some students may also need to be referred to assessment for Tier 3 comprehension intervention with a specialist in speech and language.

If the diagnostic assessment reveals that a student falls below benchmark for both word reading and comprehension, then they will benefit from all the supports suggested above. Choosing, Monitoring and Modifying Reading Interventions in MTSS provides more information on recommended next steps.

Figure 1: An MTSS decision tree for reading in secondary school

Category A Universal screening assessments	+	Category B e.g., NAPLAN, school reports, written samples		
Below benchmark		Meets benchmark	Tier 1 instruction	
Diagnostic assessments for word reading + comprehension		Meets benchmark	Tier 1 instruction	
		Below benchmark for word reading but meets benchmark for comprehension	Tier 3 word reading intervention Accommodations	Progress monitoring + adjustments
		Below benchmark for word reading + comprehension	Tier 3 word reading intervention Tier 2 subject-specific intervention Accommodations Tier 3 intervention by language specialist	
		Below benchmark for comprehension but meets benchmark for word reading	Tier 2 subject-specific intervention Accommodations Tier 3 intervention by language specialist	

More information

AERO's MTSS resources provide further information about using MTSS to support students, including:

- how to assess students to identify reading skills in need of improvement
- examples of schools using screening and progress monitoring to support interventions
- how to choose interventions that target these gaps.

Five from Five's Reading Pledge also contains guidance on reading assessment and intervention for primary school students.

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