

What is the Three-Tier Reading Model?

It is January of Miguel's kindergarten year. Although most of his classmates have learned all the letter names and most of the letter sounds, Miguel is having difficulty. He identifies a few letter names and letter sounds but is inconsistent from day to day.

It is April of second grade and Amy, who has struggled since first grade with most reading-related tasks, seems to be falling farther and farther behind. She has difficulty decoding new words. Winter benchmark assessments show she is reading about 35 words per minute, while her more fluent classmates are reading about 90 – 95 words per minute.

The Three-Tier Reading Model is designed to meet the instructional needs of all young readers, including those who are slow starters in kindergarten, such as Miguel, and those who continue to struggle in the early elementary grades, such as Amy. It is a prevention model that is aimed at catching students early — *before* they fall behind — and providing the supports they need throughout the first four years of schooling. The model may be conceptualized as a safety net for struggling readers and as an alternative to a “wait-til-they-fail” model.

The model consists of three tiers or levels of instruction: Tier I, Tier II, and Tier III. As used in this model, the term *interventionist* refers to the person providing the instruction, whether it is given in the general education classroom or in a small-group setting more akin to tutoring.

Tier I: Core Classroom Reading Instruction

Tier I is comprised of three elements: (a) a core reading program based on scientific reading research, (b) benchmark testing of students to determine instructional needs at least three times per year (fall, winter, and spring), and (c) ongoing professional development to provide teachers with the necessary tools to ensure every student receives quality reading instruction. Tier I reading instruction is designed to address the needs of the majority of a school's students. During core classroom reading instruction, students are at various levels of development in critical early reading skills. Some students are able to acquire the necessary skills with the standard instruction given by the teacher, while others require more intensive instruction in specific skill areas. Using flexible grouping and targeting specific skills, classroom teachers are often able to meet the needs of those students. Thus, in Tier I the classroom teacher is the interventionist.

The Three-Tier Model is designed to provide a safety net for struggling readers.

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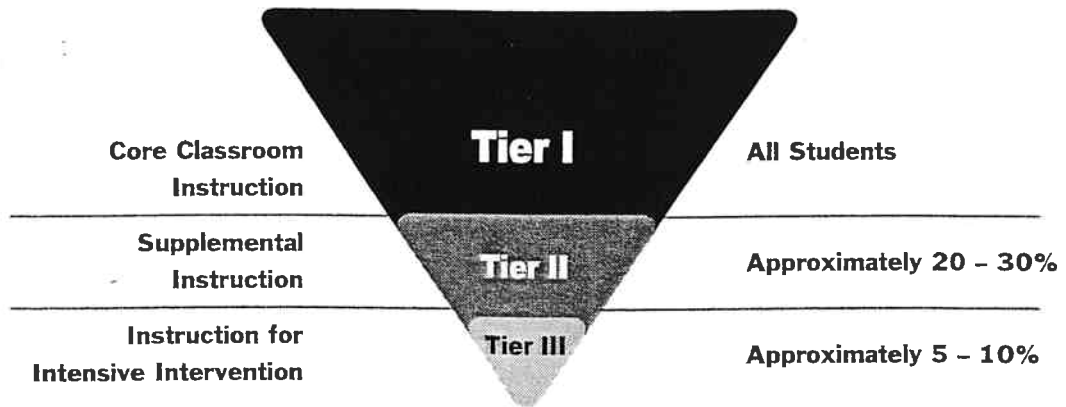
Table 1. The Three-Tier Reading Model: Tiers of Instruction

	Tier I	Tier II	Tier III
Definition	The “core” curricular and instructional reading programs and strategies in the general education setting, including ongoing professional development and assessment three times per year to determine if students are meeting benchmarks	Programs, strategies, and procedures designed and employed to <i>supplement, enhance, and support</i> Tier I which take place in groups of three to five	Specifically designed and customized reading instruction that is extended beyond the time allocated for Tier I and Tier II and which takes place in groups of three
Focus	For all students in K through 3	For students identified with marked reading difficulties, and who have not responded to Tier I efforts	For students with marked difficulties in reading or reading disabilities and who have not responded adequately to Tier I and Tier II efforts
Program	Scientific-based reading instruction and curriculum emphasizing the five critical elements of beginning reading	Specialized, scientifically based reading program(s) emphasizing the five critical elements of beginning reading	Sustained, intensive, scientifically based reading program(s) emphasizing the five critical elements of beginning reading
Instruction	Many opportunities to practice embedded throughout the school day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Additional attention, focus, and support Additional opportunities to practice embedded throughout the school day Pre-teach and review skills; frequent opportunities to practice skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Carefully designed and implemented, explicit, systematic instruction Fidelity of implementation carefully maintained
Interventionist	General education teacher	Supplemental instruction provided by personnel determined by the school	Additional intervention provided by personnel determined by the school
Setting	General education classroom	Appropriate setting designated by the school	Appropriate setting designated by the school
Grouping	Flexible grouping	Homogeneous small group instruction (1:3, 1:4, or 1:5)	Homogeneous small group instruction (1:3)
Time	90 minutes per day	Minimum of 30 minutes per day in small group	Minimum of two 30-minute sessions per day in small group
Assessment	Benchmark assessment at beginning, middle, and end of the academic year	Progress monitoring twice a month on target skill to ensure adequate progress and learning	Progress monitoring twice a month on target skill to ensure adequate progress and learning

Which students receive instruction in Tier II and Tier III?

Tier II and Tier III provide intensive, focused instruction for students identified by DIBELS™ or TPRI benchmark assessments as having low early literacy skills and being at-risk for reading difficulty. Generally, Tier I instruction (core classroom reading instruction) should meet the needs of seventy to eighty percent (or more) of learners. The lowest twenty to thirty percent may need additional support from Tier II supplemental instruction, and we anticipate that five to ten percent will require Tier III instruction for intensive intervention (see Figure 1). The aim of the Three-Tier Reading Model is to reduce the number of students with reading difficulties and put all students on track to becoming successful readers. Furthermore, the model holds promise as an integrated approach for all levels of instruction.

Figure 1. The Three-Tier Reading Model



How do students progress through the three tiers?

Movement through Tier I, Tier II, and Tier III is a dynamic process. Once a student's needs are met and he or she is able to achieve benchmarks on DIBELS™ or TPRI assessments, the supplemental instruction or intervention may no longer be required for that student. Benchmark testing of all kindergarten through third-grade students three times per year (fall, winter, spring) ensures that students who require additional help are (a) identified early, or (b) re-identified if they have previously received support and show that need again. In contrast to previous interventions for reading, the Three-Tier Reading Model provides a system that is responsive to students' changing needs.

they use progress monitoring to (a) track student learning, (b) plan instruction, and (c) provide feedback to students.

The use of these two types of progress monitoring, combined with timely intervention, should result in fewer students with reading difficulties and ultimately reduce the number of students referred for special education services.

How do we plan for assessment and progress monitoring?

Assessment plays a central role in the Three-Tier Reading Model, as it is used for two major purposes: benchmark assessment to determine the need for supplemental instruction, and progress-monitoring assessment, both to track student progress and inform instruction. The Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills™ (DIBELS™) are recommended for use in benchmark assessment and progress monitoring. The Texas Primary Reading Inventory (TPRI) is a suitable alternative to DIBELS™ for benchmark assessment. However, the TPRI is not designed to be used more than three or four times per year and should not be used for frequent progress monitoring to inform Tier II or Tier III instruction. The developers of the TPRI are currently designing multiple test forms that would make the TPRI an appropriate tool for frequent progress monitoring.

DIBELS™ or TPRI* benchmark assessments are given to all students three times per year (fall**, winter, and spring). Once benchmark assessments have been given, they are used as criteria to determine whether the student would benefit from the next tier of instruction.

Assessment is key to determining the need for supplemental instruction.

Table 2. Suggestions For Benchmark Testing Times

Assessment Period	Suggested Testing Time
Fall	About three weeks after school starts
Winter	One to two weeks after the holiday break (mid January)
Spring	No later than two weeks before the end of the school year

It is helpful to enter the benchmark data into a database so that reading performance can be analyzed at the individual, classroom, grade, and school levels. Reports can then be issued to teachers and administrators to (a) identify students who will benefit from supplemental reading instruction, (b) customize reading instruction based on students' needs, and (c) help school personnel determine the effectiveness of Tier I (the core reading program).

*Because this model calls for the administration of benchmark assessments three times per year, schools choosing to use the TPRI for benchmark assessments should require administration of the mid-year assessment period (which is usually optional) in addition to the usual beginning and end-of-the-year assessment periods for first, second, and third grade.

**The TPRI does not include a fall assessment period for kindergarten students.