Tennessee TSC
Tiered Supports Center

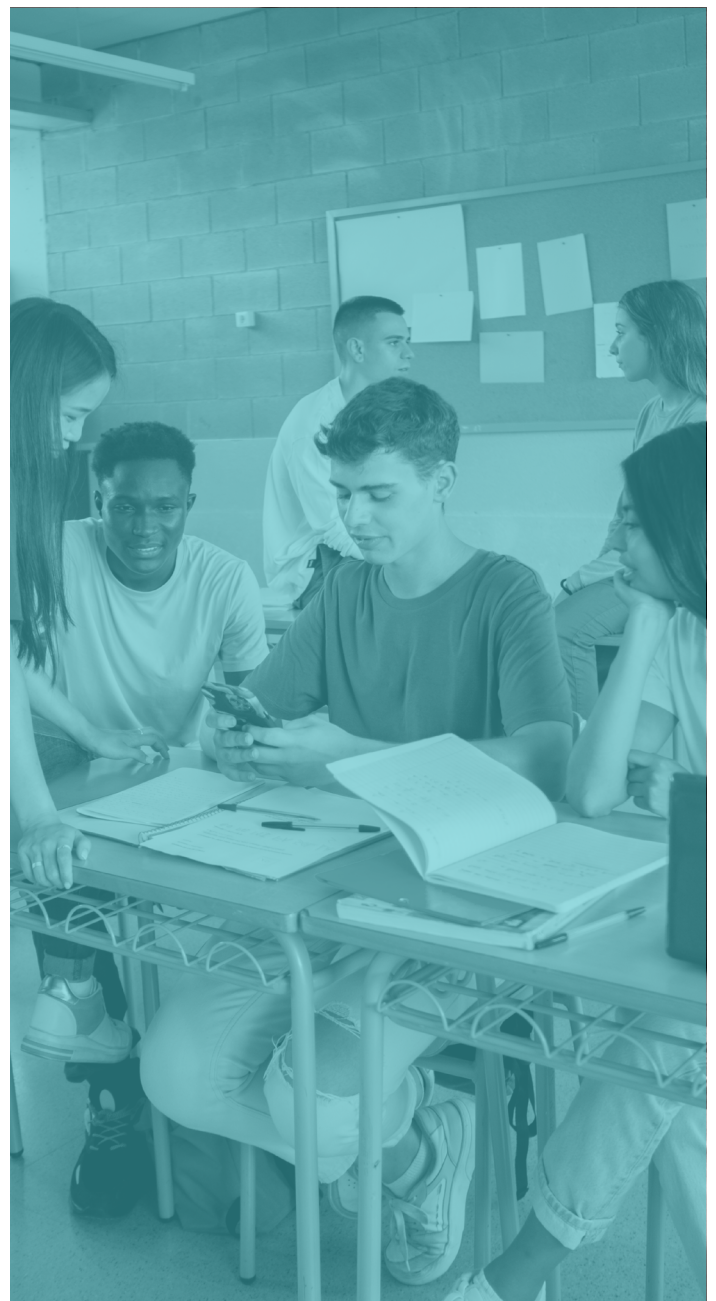# Student Involvement Series: What is Student Involvement?

Defining Student Involvement in RTI²-B

Response to Instruction and Intervention for Behavior (RTI²-B) is Tennessee's multi-tiered system of behavior support. In these systems, and particularly for Tier I supports, it is important to prioritize student involvement. When students feel they have a voice in school-wide initiatives such as RTI²-B, they will be more motivated to engage in the multiple facets of the system. For example, if students help develop the school-wide acknowledgment system, they might be more motivated to earn their selected privileges and incentives (e.g., raffles for prom tickets; preferred seating at assemblies).

RTI²-B is a school-wide framework, so input is needed from all members of the school community, including staff, families, and students. Studies have shown that students seldom have a role in school decision-making processes and usually have even fewer opportunities to participate in school improvement efforts.[1] Schools with high levels of meaningful student involvement tend to have six key characteristics that relate to their school culture.

Six Key Characteristics

1. School-wide approaches
2. High levels of student authority
3. Interrelated strategies
4. Sustainable structures of support
5. Personal commitment
6. Strong learning connections

Six Key Characteristics

The following elements are consistently identified in schools where students and adults commonly agree that there are high levels of meaningful student involvement.		
Characteristic	**Description**	**Example**
1. School-wide approaches	All students in all grades are involved in decision making and advocacy initiatives regarding the RTI^2-B framework.	Students are shown school-wide data during their advisory or homeroom period and discuss ideas for how to make improvements together as a class.
2. High levels of student authority	School faculty validate students' ideas, knowledge, opinions, and experiences to improve the school.	Schools use the ideas generated by students during advisory. They communicate to students that all ideas were reviewed, identify which ones will be incorporated, and continue to ask for feedback.
3. Interrelated strategies	Students are given learning, teaching, and leadership opportunities in the school to make sustainable school improvements.	Student leadership teams learn about RTI^2-B and work with the RTI^2-B team to update the Tier I Implementation Manual and teach their peers components of the plan in multiple ways.
4. Sustainable structures of support	To promote meaningful student involvement, the school creates and amends policies and procedures.	Schools provide a variety of ways for students to offer input and become involved with the Tier I plan. These opportunities are regularly scheduled and communicated.
5. Personal commitment	Students and adults acknowledge that to improve their RTI^2-B framework, they need to have a mutual investment.	Students can have meaningful, structured, and frequent collaboration with adults where their ideas become part of the Tier I plan.
6. Strong learning connections	Student involvement is connected to classroom learning and is relevant for both teachers and students.	Elective courses are offered for credit to facilitate collaboration with adults. Examples include Leadership for interested students or Freshman Academy for all Freshman.

Benefits of Student Involvement

Including students in the RTI[2]-B process will create a lasting and positive impact on the Tier I plan. One benefit to involving students is improved student buy-in. Students have unique knowledge and perspective about their school that adults cannot fully replicate.[1]

By gathering input from and involving students in the Tier I plan, school staff move away from "doing things to students" to "working with students."[3] Giving students a voice in school priorities and initiatives is an effective way to improve student outcomes and allows for messages to be shared in student friendly language.[3,4] In addition, finding creative ways to seek student input and involve students in the process provides opportunities for student leadership.[3]

Summary

Throughout planning and implementation, schools need to make sure that they are involving students in Tier I of RTI[2]-B. Ensuring students are involved improves student buy-in, establishes that adults are "working with students" instead of "doing things to students," shares messages in student friendly language, and provides opportunities for student leadership.

For Further Reading

Feuerborn, L., Wallace, C., & Tyre, A. (2016). A qualitative analysis of middle and high school teacher perceptions of school wide positive behavior supports. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions, 18*(4), 219-229.

Mitra, D. (2006). Increasing student voice. *The Prevention Researcher, 13*(1), 7-10.

Smyth, J. (2006). When students have power. I*nternational Journal of Leadership in Education, 9*(4), 285- 298.

Endnotes

[1]Mitra, D. L. (2009). Strengthening student voice initiatives in high school: An examination of the supports needed for school-based youth-adult partnerships. *Youth & Society, 40*(3), 311-335.

[2]Fletcher, A. (2005). *Meaningful student involvement: Guide to students as partners in school change.* SoundOut.

[3]Good, C., & Lindsay, P. (n.d.). *Student voice: Strategies to involve students in PBIS* [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved from http://www.pbis.org.

[4]Scales, P. C., Van Boekel, M., Pekel, K., Syvertsen, A. K., & Roehlkepartain, E. C. (2020). Effects of developmental relationships with teachers on middle school students' motivation and performance. *Psychology in the Schools, 57*, 646- 677.
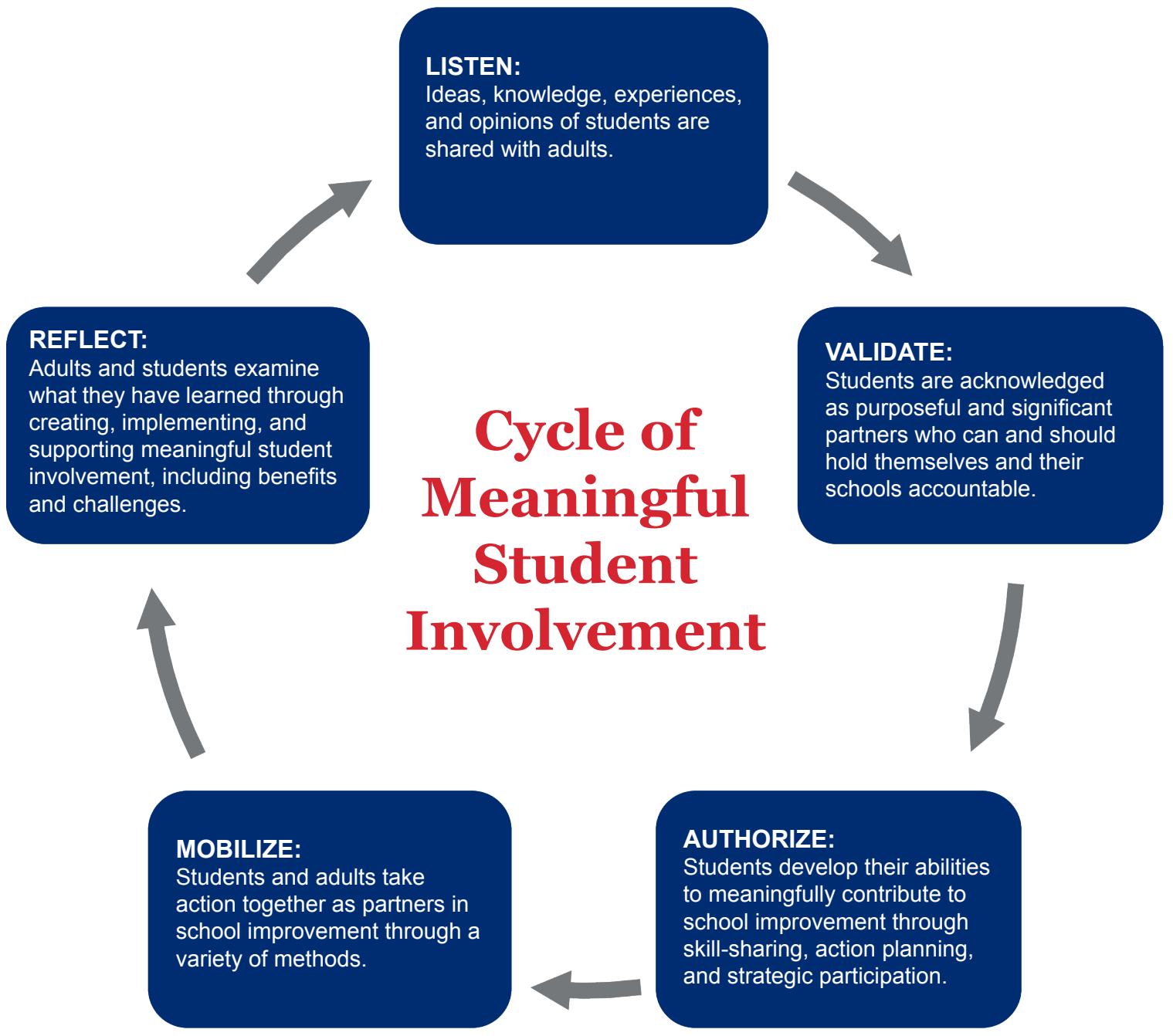
Tennessee TSC
Tiered Supports Center

Student Involvement Series: Meaningful Involvement

Schools of all levels can reference the **Cycle of Meaningful Student Involvement** to promote meaningful student involvement in RTI^2-B planning.[1]

This cycle shows five steps to actively engage students in school improvement decisions. As opportunities for student involvement in RTI^2-B are considered, schools can use Fletcher and Hart's **Ladder of Student Involvement** to examine the extent to which an opportunity is meaningful.[1]

This ladder illustrates eight levels of student involvement. The lower rungs of the ladder represent non-participation, while the higher rungs represent high-quality, meaningful involvement. When using this tool, consider how your school could climb the ladder when involving students in decisions regarding the RTI^2-B framework.

LISTEN:
Ideas, knowledge, experiences, and opinions of students are shared with adults.

REFLECT:
Adults and students examine what they have learned through creating, implementing, and supporting meaningful student involvement, including benefits and challenges.

Cycle of Meaningful Student Involvement

VALIDATE:
Students are acknowledged as purposeful and significant partners who can and should hold themselves and their schools accountable.

MOBILIZE:
Students and adults take action together as partners in school improvement through a variety of methods.

AUTHORIZE:
Students develop their abilities to meaningfully contribute to school improvement through skill-sharing, action planning, and strategic participation.

Ladder of Student Involvement

Characteristic		Example
	8. Student-initiated, shared decisions with adults	Students initiate action and share decision-making with adults.
Degrees of Participation	7. Student-initiated, student-led decisions	Meaningful student involvement is propelled by students and creates opportunities for students to initiate and direct projects, classes, or activities. Adults are involved only in supportive roles.
	6. Adult-initiated, shared decisions with students	Students are involved in designing projects, classes, or activities that are initiated by adults. Many activities, including decision-making, teaching, and evaluation, are shared with students.
	5. Students informed and consulted	Students give advice on projects, classes, or activities designed and run by adults. The students are informed about how their input will be used and the outcomes of the decisions made by adults.
	4. Students informed and assigned	Student involvement is assigned by teachers who assign specific roles and teach students why they are being involved.
Degrees of Non-Participation	3. Students tokenized	Students appear to be given a voice, but in fact have little or no choice about what they do or how they participate.
	2. Students are decoration	Students are used to help or bolster a cause in a relatively indirect way; adults do not pretend that the cause is inspired by students. Causes are determined by adults, and adults make all decisions.
	1. Students manipulated	Adults use students to support causes by pretending that those causes are inspired by students.

Summary

Involving students in the planning process of the RTI^2-B framework is important, but schools need to make sure students have a meaningful level of involvement. Students should feel their ideas are valued when asked for input, and adults should be ready to fully collaborate with students and share in the decision-making process.

For Further Reading

Feuerborn, L., Wallace, C., & Tyre, A. (2016). A qualitative analysis of middle and high school teacher perceptions of school wide positive behavior supports. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions, 18*(4), 219-229.

Mitra, D. (2006). Increasing student voice. *The Prevention Researcher, 13*(1), 7-10.

Smyth, J. (2006). When students have power. *International Journal of Leadership in Education, 9*(4), 285-298.

Endnotes

[1]Mitra, D. L. (2009). Strengthening student voice initiatives in high school: An examination of the supports needed for school-based youth-adult partnerships. *Youth & Society, 40*(3), 311-335.

Tennessee TSC
Tiered Supports Center

Student Involvement Series: Student Leadership Teams

Student Leadership Teams

An efficient way to involve students from all grade levels in RTI[2]-B is to develop student leadership teams or work with existing student leadership teams. Students can be chosen for these teams through nominations or applications. The team should be made up of students who represent diverse perspectives and interests (e.g., academic performance, social groups, clubs, extracurricular activities), as well as students who work well with others, are willing to be involved, are creative, and have leadership potential.[1]

These teams can check in with the RTI[2]-B team regularly to provide input on components of the Tier I plan and school-wide activities. Creating student leadership teams prepares students for future responsibilities, facilitates structured collaboration with adults, and gives students valuable leadership experience.

Peer leadership. The student leadership team can support RTI[2]-B planning and implementation through work with other students in the building. They can do this by gathering input, teaching the behavioral expectations to other students, mentoring younger students, explaining the Tier I plan to new students, advertising special events, and acknowledging students and staff.[1] When behavioral expectations are taught and reviewed with all students in the building, the student leadership team can participate in teaching the expectations across school settings. They can do this by helping the RTI[2]-B team create lesson plans, performing skits, creating videos, or teaching younger students. Members of the student leadership team can also serve as mentors by helping new students understand the school-wide behavioral expectations, the acknowledgment system, and all aspects of the Tier I plan.

Similarly, older students can mentor younger students on the school's Tier I plan, especially in areas where younger students may be struggling. For example, if younger students are having difficulty meeting behavioral expectations on the playground, older students can re-teach those expectations, model appropriate behavior, and help the younger students practice engaging in that expected behavior during recess. At the high school level, a mentorship program supported by the student leadership team can be used to help students who are at-risk get back on track.

Event leadership. In addition to working directly with their peers, the student leadership team can also oversee planning and advertising school-wide events. Examples of these events include carnivals, pep rallies, field days, movie nights, and dance parties. Members of the school leadership team can be responsible for spreading awareness to all key collaborators, including students, families, community members, and local businesses. Students can advertise events by making posters, wearing special shirts, speaking during school announcements, or posting on social media. Additionally, the leadership team can work with local businesses to enhance community partnerships, spread awareness of the Tier I plan, and advertise events so that more students and families can learn about the Tier I plan.

Acknowledgment system leadership. Finally, the student leadership team can collaborate with RTI[2]-B leaders to make sure staff and students are acknowledged when they engage in the school's behavioral expectations. If students are rewarded by earning tickets or points, the student leadership team can help run the school store or organize a celebration during which students can use their tickets or points to buy items or experiences.

To acknowledge staff, the student leadership team can create thank you cards, select a teacher of the month, pass out special treats, or host a raffle for teachers who support RTI[2]-B.

Working with Student Leadership Teams

Members of the RTI^2-B team are responsible for supporting student leadership teams and promoting meaningful participation. There are three key ways to do this.

1. RTI^2-B teams should gather student input and use it to make decisions. Students should be told how their input will be used so they feel their voice has value. When gathering input from students, RTI^2-B teams must remember to evaluate both what is and what is not effective regarding the RTI^2-B Tier I plan. Students will buy into the plan more if they feel that they are a part of the plan.

2. RTI^2-B teams should provide the student leadership team with meaningful opportunities to collaborate. For example, the student leadership team can collaborate with the RTI^2-B team on the development of the Tier I Implementation Manual. They can also be involved in decision-making related to the implementation of the RTI^2-B plan.

3. RTI^2-B teams should give the student leadership team opportunities to lead RTI^2-B initiatives. This will allow their peers to view them as leaders and understand that students had a role in developing the Tier I plan. Example leadership opportunities include helping students set up a mentorship program to help others learn about the RTI^2-B plan and helping them develop ways to advertise for future events related to the plan. Working with the student leadership team shows that everyone is striving toward a positive school climate and culture.

Summary

The RTI^2-B team should actively involve students as part of the Tier I plan. An efficient way to involve students in all grade levels is to develop student leadership teams or work with existing student leadership teams.

For Further Reading

Feuerborn, L., Wallace, C., & Tyre, A. (2016). A qualitative analysis of middle and high school teacher perceptions of school wide positive behavior supports. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions, 18*(4), 219-229.

Mitra, D. (2006). Increasing student voice. *The Prevention Researcher, 13*(1), 7-10.

Smyth, J. (2006). When students have power. International Journal of *Leadership in Education, 9*(4), 285-298.

Endnotes

[1]Hine, M., & Caceres, E. (n.d.). *Student involvement: How to include student in the RTI^2-B framework* [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved from www.tennesseebsp.org.

Tennessee TSC
Tiered Supports Center

Student Involvement Series:
Working with Elementary, Middle, and High School Students

Three Ways to Engage Elementary School Students

1. **Develop subcommittees.** Involve elementary students in the school's RTI^2-B plan by developing RTI^2-B student subcommittees. Subcommittees can be formed so students can reflect and share ideas on topics like: (a) teaching behavioral expectations, (b) acknowledging student behavior, (c) improving the school's RTI^2-B plan, and (d) planning upcoming school-wide events or celebrations.

2. **Build relationships.** Engage students in the RTI^2-B plan by building relationships with them. Strong student-staff relationships can help students feel like significant and accountable partners in the plan. Collaborating with students on subcommittees is just one way to build relationships. Relationships can also be built by allowing students to submit their input and ideas on school initiatives.

3. **Gather student input.** Involve students in the RTI^2-B plan by providing multiple ways for students' knowledge, opinions, and ideas to be validated. Meetings with students from different grade levels, student subcommittee meetings, and morning meetings, for example, can be used to gather student input and improve the school's RTI^2-B plan.

Three Ways to Engage Middle School Students

1. **Build Relationships.** The transition to middle school typically coincides with rapid changes in physical, emotional, and interpersonal development.[1] This transition may lead to declines in academic performance, self-image, perceived social support, and social relationships. A strategy to help students in middle school feel heard and supported is to intentionally build relationships with students. By doing this, their motivation to participate in class and engage in positive behavior will improve. Just think, would you do well in a class where you felt the teacher didn't support you?

2. **Survey students.** Another way to engage middle school students is to gather their input through student surveys. Questionnaires can be used to ask students about all aspects of the Tier I plan, including the acknowledgment system, types of rewards, the behavioral expectations matrix, teaching expectations, and the discipline process. Using the survey results to make changes to the Tier I plan and then telling students how their ideas were used will help students feel like they have a say in what happens at their school.

3. **Create Subcommittees.** Like student surveys, student subcommittees can also be used to meaningfully engage middle school students. Similar to elementary school subcommittees, developing these subcommittees allows students to share ideas, provide feedback on the Tier I plan, and discuss what could be changed to make it more successful. Students on these committees should have regular contact with faculty, which will build positive relationships as students and staff work together towards a common goal.

Three Ways to Engage High School Students

1. **Form youth-adult partnerships.** High school students are keenly aware of the problems that face their communities and their schools. When involving high school students in RTI[2]-B, it is important to create youth-adult partnerships.[2] These youth-adult partnerships exist in government agencies, foundations, community-based organizations, and businesses; however, they are less common in schools.

   In meaningful school-based partnerships, students and adults collaborate by making decisions, developing projects, and implementing change efforts. Successful partnerships are established through authenticity, meaningful roles, and trust and safety.[2]

   The following bullet points describe how these elements are present in meaningful RTI[2]-B partnerships between students and adults.

   - **Authenticity** – Students are involved in the planning and implementation of RTI[2]-B because the initiative directly impacts them.

   - **Meaningful roles** – Students are given roles on RTI[2]-B teams or subcommittees that utilize their strengths and skill sets.

   - **Trust and safety** – Adults and students have

   discussions about the students' role on the team with dedicated time for reflection. Strong relationships are built by allowing students to fully become part of the RTI[2]-B team. This means students meet regularly with the adults on the RTI[2]-B team, review school-wide data, and action plan as a member of the team.

2. **Create "student-voice" initiatives.** Another strategy to engage high school students is to have "student-voice" initiatives which intentionally allow for students to be part of the planning process. These initiatives give students an opportunity to participate in school decisions that will shape their lives and the lives of their peers. Allowing students to share their voice increases their sense of belonging, agency, and competence.[2] Prioritizing student voice also benefits the school by improving teaching, curriculum, and student-teacher relationships.[2]

3. **Include students as part of both planning and implementation.** When schools are rolling out new initiatives, students should be part of the planning process. This decision improves student buy-in and increases the likelihood that it will be well received by students. As teams implement, it is important to regularly check back with students for their input and discuss any potential changes to the plan.

Summary

Effective Tier I plans and RTI²-B frameworks involve students in decision-making. Students can be involved in a variety of ways that are based on the needs of their school. RTI²-B teams should collaborate with students throughout the year to ensure that student voices are heard and their ideas are validated and mobilized.

For Further Reading

Feuerborn, L., Wallace, C., & Tyre, A. (2016). A qualitative analysis of middle and high school teacher perceptions of school wide positive behavior supports. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions, 18(*4), 219-229.

Mitra, D. (2006). Increasing student voice. *The Prevention Researcher, 13*(1), 7-10.

Smyth, J. (2006). When students have power. *International Journal of Leadership in Education, 9*(4), 285-298.

Endnotes

[1] Scales, P. C., Van Boekel, M., Pekel, K., Syvertsen, A. K., & Roehlkepartain, E. C. (2020). Effects of developmental relationships with teachers on middle school students' motivation and performance. *Psychology in the Schools, 57*, 646-677.

[2] Mitra, D. L. (2009). Strengthening student voice initiatives in high school: An examination of the supports needed for school-based youth-adult partnerships. *Youth & Society, 40*(3), 311-335.
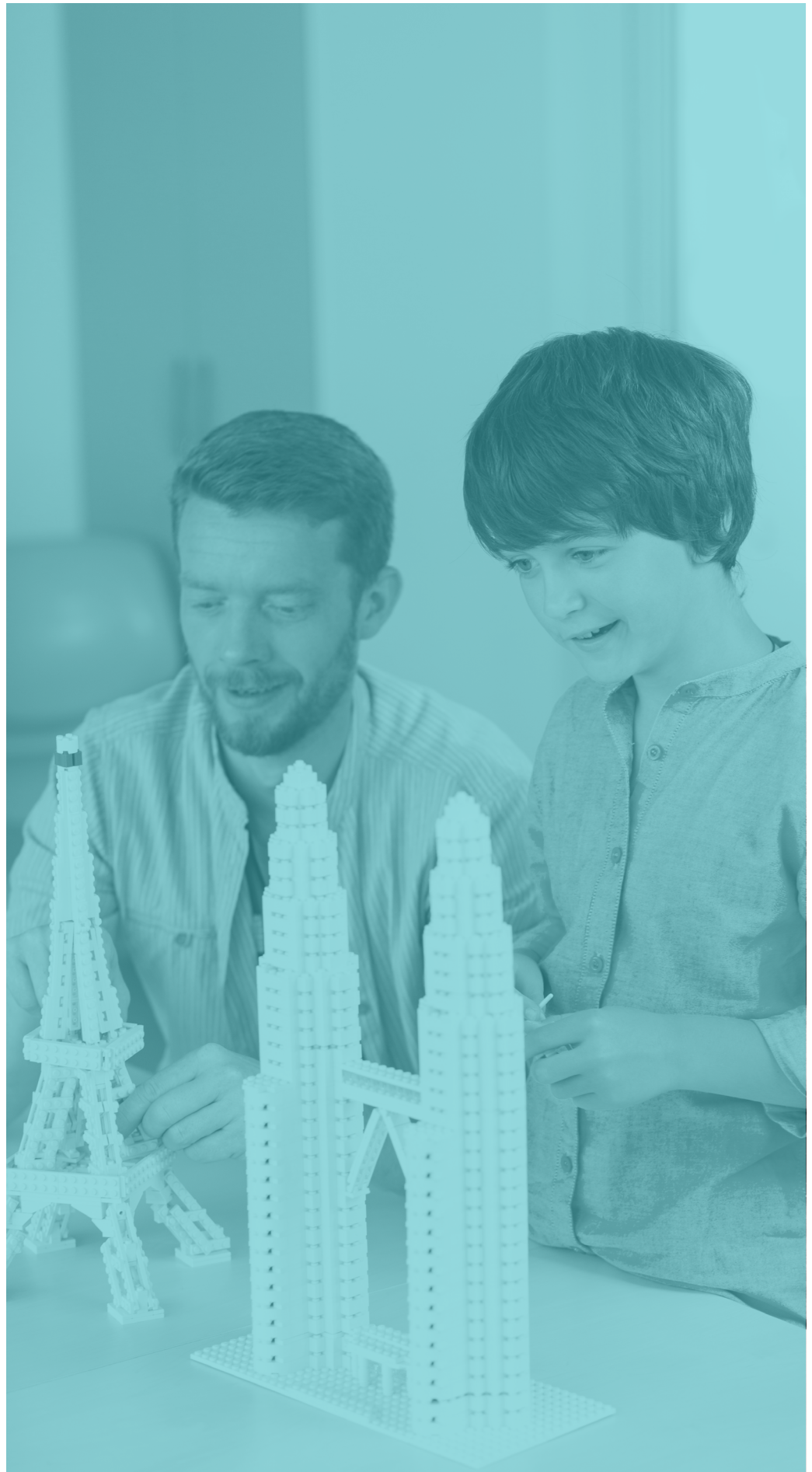
Student Involvement Series: Focus Groups

What is a Focus Group?

A focus group is a planned discussion to gain perspectives from a group on a defined topic within a supportive atmosphere.[1] Focus groups can be used in schools to explore students' perspectives on school-wide systems or initiatives. Relative to one-on-one interviews, small group discussions provide students opportunities to exchange ideas, elaborate on other students' responses, and identify areas of agreement and disagreement among group members.

Using focus group data is one way to incorporate student insights into the school-wide RTI[2]-B framework. Providing input empowers students and helps teams determine how to best support them. Engaging students early in the development of an RTI[2]-B framework will minimize the need for modifications later on. This is because student needs will already be reflected in the plan.[2] Conducting student focus groups is an inexpensive, flexible, data rich, and efficient means of collecting data for decision-making.[1]

Focus Group Participants and Roles

Student focus groups typically include six to ten students with one to two adults as facilitators. The facilitator's role is to ask questions, make sure students stay on topic, and manage time (e.g., ensure adequate time is devoted to each question; wrap up the discussion by the end of the scheduled meeting).

A second adult may also be present to take notes or assist with audio recording the discussion. With permission from participating students, school leadership teams may decide to audio record focus groups for later reflection and discussion.

Focus Group Roles	
Student	• Answers prepared questions • Shares opinions and reactions
Facilitator	• Asks prepared questions • Keeps students on topic • Conducts focus group in a timely manner
Additional Adult	• Takes notes • Audio records focus group

Recruiting Student Participants

When recruiting students to participate in a focus group, RTI[2]-B teams should consider students who are involved in different aspects of school life.

For example, a school may choose students in different grades who represent diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, participate in a variety of different clubs or sports, and range in academic performance. The primary goal of an RTI[2]-B student focus group is to solicit as many reactions to and opinions of the RTI[2]-B framework as possible.

Thus, it can be beneficial to recruit students who are and are not responding well to the school-wide system. Recruiting around 8 participants per focus group is optimal to get a wide range of views but also hear from each group member.[1]

Once prospective students are identified, a school's RTI[2]-B team can invite them to participate in an organized focus group meeting. Forced student participation is not ideal because this may lead to information that is not useful. Invited students should feel free to accept or decline the invitation at any time.

Additionally, they should be asked to sign a letter of understanding that outlines participation guidelines. The letter should confirm that students understand:

- their ideas are of value and will be considered in the design or adaptation of the school-wide program,

- not to share any parts of the focus group discussion outside the group,

- whether the conversation will be audio recorded,

- they have the option to opt out at any time, and

- their confidentiality will be protected.

Example Student Letter of Understanding

We invited you to participate in a school focus group. The goal of this focus group is to understand what the RTI[2]-B team is doing well in your school and gather suggestions to improve the school-wide behavior plan.

During the focus group, you will be asked questions about the school-wide plan. There are no right or wrong answers. The RTI[2]-B team is simply looking for ideas to make the plan more motivating for students. If you choose to participate, we will expect you to be honest with your answers, even if you don't agree with other people in the group. Only one person will be allowed to speak at a time. This will allow us to hear all ideas. We want to create a safe environment for open discussion so that each student feels comfortable sharing their opinions. To that end, we will expect that what is said in the group is not repeated outside of the group.

You can choose whether or not to participate in this focus group. If you choose to participate, the responses you share will be recorded, but your name will not be included in the meeting notes and it will be removed from audio recordings.

I understand the information above, and I agree to participate in this focus group and follow these guidelines.

Signature: _____ Date:_____

Designing Questions

To make the most of an RTI²-B focus group, questions should be prepared in advance. When preparing questions, school-wide data should be examined to identify challenges that might be better understood with student input. The questions need to be written in developmentally appropriate language so students can understand them and offer meaningful feedback.

Ideally, questions should be open-ended, and they should relate to the school's RTI²-B framework and how it can better meet student needs. Once questions are developed, the facilitator should review the questions before presenting them to the focus group. This will help the facilitator navigate discussions smoothly and effectively. It is not necessary, however, for students to receive the questions beforehand.

The following tables provide examples of student-friendly questions designed to examine students' perspectives on school-wide data findings and RTI²-B implementation.
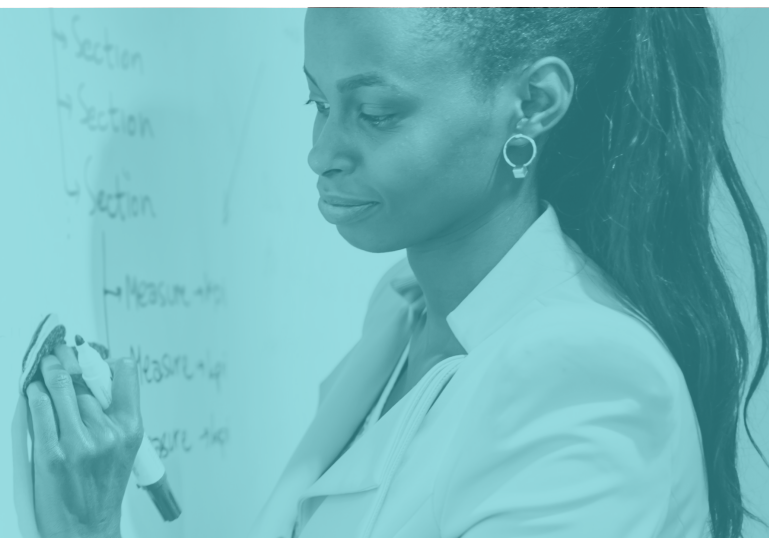
Questions Designed to Examine Student Perspectives on School-wide Data Findings	
School-wide Data Findings:	**Example Questions for Students:**
Since September, hallway office discipline referrals have increased by 20%.	More students have been getting in trouble in the hallways lately. Why do you think that is?
Only 1/3 of the school attended the most recent school-wide event.	Not a lot of people came to our last school celebration. Why do you think they didn't attend the celebration?
Sales from the school-wide store have decreased by 50%.	Students aren't buying a lot from the school store. What reward items should we add to the store? What would students like to buy?
Tardies have increased by 15% in the past month.	More students are showing up late for class/school. Why do you think that might be? What can we do to help students arrive on time?

Questions Designed to Examine Student Perspectives on RTI²-B Implementation
Why did our school adopt the RTI²-B framework?
What do you like most about our school? Least?
What types of rewards do you feel are needed at our school?
How can we better involve students in the school-wide system?
Do you feel safe at our school, and what contributes to that feeling?

Conducting a Focus Group

The facilitator should begin a focus group meeting by welcoming the participants and communicating the purpose of the meeting. From the start, students should feel their voices are important and that the RTI²-B team is seeking information to improve the school-wide plan. After opening the meeting, the facilitator should proceed by asking participating students to respond to the RTI²-B team's prepared questions.

As students respond, the facilitator should ask students to elaborate on ideas and keep the conversation flowing. After student responses are gathered for each question, the facilitator should end the meeting by thanking students for their participation, writing them a pass to go back to class, and dismissing them from the room. The duration of the focus group should match the developmental level of the students, with focus groups at the high school level lasting no more than 60-90 minutes to avoid potential fatigue and disinterest.[3]

The list below provides example prompts to extend student responses and focus group discussion.

Follow-Up Prompt Ideas

- How did that make your feel?
- Can you tell me more about that please?
- How do you think this can be improved?
- Why do you think that is?

Analyzing the Data

After a focus group, the facilitator should work with the RTI²-B team to identify themes in students' responses to the focus group questions. Themes are reoccurring ideas that multiple students in the focus group shared or agreed with. To identify themes, the team will need to examine notes taken during the focus group and recordings of the meeting, if available.

Identifying response themes can help team members determine a starting point for making changes to the RTI²-B framework. As changes are made, the RTI²-B team should communicate the changes to all students and highlight the value of student input in identifying the needed changes.

Summary

Focus groups are planned discussions that can be used to involve students in the development of an RTI^2-B plan. Information gathered during a focus group can be used by leadership teams to adjust the Tier I plan to better meet student needs. Focus group materials and formats should be tailored to accommodate the age of the student population.

For Further Reading

Tynan, A. C., & Drayton, J. L. (2007). Conducting focus groups: A guide for first-time users.

Endnotes

[1] Horowitz, J. A., Vessey, J. A., Carlson, K. L., Bradley, J. F., Montoya, C., & McCullough, B. (2003). Conducting school-based focus groups: Lessons learned from the CATS project. *Journal of Pediatric Nursing*, *5*(18), 321-331.

[2] Wyatt, T. H., Krauskopf, P.B., & Davidson, R. (2008). Using focus groups for program planning and evaluation. *The Journal of School Nursing*, *24*(2), 71-77.

[3] Packer-Muti. B. (2010). Conducting a focus group. The Qualitative Report, *15*(4), 1023-1026.