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# PROBLEM-SOLVING TEAMS: INFORMATION FOR PARENTS AND EDUCATORS

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The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the current reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandate that educators focus on supporting the academic progress of all students through research-based instructional strategies. Further, recent calls to reform special education have emphasized the importance of using problem-solving approaches to support at-risk students within general education.

Unlike traditional models of refer and place, problem-solving models seek to resolve student difficulties within general education through the application of evidence-based interventions and systematic monitoring of student progress. The student's response to regular education interventions then becomes the primary determinant of need for special education referral, evaluation, and service.

While there have been many models of problem solving at building, district, and state levels, all share several key common features: (a) screening and assessment that emphasize skills rather than classification, and measuring response to instruction rather than norm-referenced comparisons, (b) evidence-based interventions within general education, and (c) collaborative consultation and/or team efforts among general and special educators.

This handout describes the functioning and implementation of this collaborative team in the context of a problem-solving model.

## Definitions and Terms

A Problem-Solving Team is a school-based group composed of various school personnel, such as teachers, guidance counselors, school psychologists, and administrators, who meet to provide assistance to children who are having academic or behavioral difficulties in school. The team is responsible for implementing a problem-solving approach to identify and intervene in response to students' needs within the arena of general education.

Many terms have been used to refer to this Problem-Solving Team including Instructional Support Teams, Intervention Assistance Teams, Building Level Teams, Mainstream Assistance Teams, and Student Support Teams. Here, *Problem-Solving Team* will be used to encompass all such teams that have the purpose and employ the methods described in this handout.

**Problem solving versus pre-referral.** It is important to distinguish Problem-Solving Teams from what are frequently termed *Pre-Referral Teams*. The two differ primarily in purpose and intent. A Problem-Solving Team develops valid interventions designed to resolve a student's academic or behavioral difficulty in a general education setting if possible. The emphasis in problem solving is to meet the student's *needs* first and produce positive learning outcomes.

Conversely, the mind-set of Pre-Referral Teams typically is to move a child through one or more interventions as a prelude to a traditional psycho-educational assessment for consideration of special education placement. A Pre-Referral Team is often used as a mechanism to collect all the necessary referral information in order to get a student evaluated. Historically, Pre-Referral Teams have been perceived as procedural hurdles en-route to special education services rather than as vehicles for implementing evidence-based interventions to solve student problems.

## Common Components and Strategies

There are numerous variations of problem-solving models in schools. Generally all have three basic components: (a) describing and analyzing a student concern, (b) identifying potential strategies to address the concern, and (c) testing the selected alternative strategies by implementing them and evaluating their effectiveness.

The distinguishing features of Problem-Solving Teams include the following:

- Use of a systematic, problem-solving process.
- Focus on modifying the environment to assist students.
- Focus on assessment of what the student knows and can do, and not on weaknesses.
- Use of functional assessments that can be performed by teachers.
- Interventions that have been shown by research to have a high probability of success.
- Use of strategies to ensure that the interventions are implemented consistently and accurately.
- Use of systematic data collection and progress monitoring to determine the student's response to the intervention.

## Problem-Solving Steps

The nature of problem solving involves a sequence of steps starting with a definition of the problem and proceeding to the testing of a hypothesis and evaluating the outcome of any intervention. Depending on the model used, problem solving is typically broken down into as few as four or as many as eight steps. Regardless of the number of steps, the general problem solving sequence is as follows:

**Step 1: Define the problem.** Team members discuss the referral information and define the concern in observable and measurable terms. The emphasis at this step is to break down a broad general concern such as *reading difficulty* into the specific skills related to the concern, such as problems with phonemic awareness, accuracy, and fluency, or poor comprehension, thus providing a more specific and behavioral definition of the problem. Questions that need to be answered through assessment are also generated at this step. For example, a question to ask regarding a first grader might be, "What teaching strategy will help Derrick learn the vowel sounds?"

**Step 2: Develop an assessment plan.** The Problem-Solving Team identifies methods for measuring the specific behavior or skill identified in the first step. This measurement, called a *baseline*, identifies the pre-intervention level of performance.

For example, if the identified problem was reading fluency, the team may decide to obtain a measure of words read correctly at a certain grade level in 1 minute. The reading probe (simple test from the student's curriculum) is administered on three separate occasions, and the median number of words per minute is the student's baseline.

If the identified concern was behavioral, the team may use direct classroom observations or teacher

frequency counts (e.g., number of times student leaves seat during instruction) as the method for obtaining baseline data.

**Step 3: Analysis of the assessment results and goal setting.** The Problem-Solving Team compares the target student's baseline performance to an acceptable level of student performance. This acceptable level of performance or standard for comparison is often based on a classroom or local norm that has been developed using measures such as Curriculum-Based Measurement (CBM) or observations of the peer group. Based on the discrepancy between the target student's baseline performance and the expected or desired performance, goals can be set for the next phase.

**Step 4: Develop and implement the intervention plan.** The Problem-Solving Team identifies interventions that can be implemented with the student and relevant personnel who are responsible for carrying out the interventions and monitoring the student's progress. It is recommended that teams implement an intervention for at least a 3-week period.

Interventions have two components: (a) a modification of instruction or behavioral contingencies for the student targeted in the identified area of concern and (b) a progress-monitoring component to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention.

*Modifications* in instruction or behavioral contingencies—the intervention plan itself—are selected based on identified student needs and empirically based strategies. For academic concerns, the *progress monitoring* might involve weekly administration of the same CBM probes that were used to obtain the target student's baseline, or daily records of task completion. Using measurable goals and objectives allows for graphing of the student's performance, providing a visual depiction of the student's progress toward the goal established during step three.

In addition to specific measurement of student performance, the intervention plan should address *treatment fidelity*; that is, the degree to which the intervention is implemented as planned. This is critical when it comes time to evaluate the plan's effectiveness: If the intervention appears to be ineffective, it is critical to determine if the intervention really failed or failed to be implemented.

Teams that consider necessary supports to enable an intervention to be faithfully implemented will have few problems with treatment fidelity. For example, if a peer tutoring intervention is recommended, the team should consider what supports will be needed by the peer tutors, such as scheduled time, training as tutors, parent permission, and space to work.

**Step 5: Analysis of the intervention plan.** The Problem-Solving Team analyzes the target student's rate of progress and the student's performance relative to the goal that was set in step 3. Several different outcomes can occur when analyzing the data obtained during the intervention phase:

If the team determines that the student is making sufficient progress toward the goal or has achieved the goal as a result of the intervention plan, then they may decide to *continue* the intervention plan with periodic progress monitoring without making any changes to the plan. The continuation of progress monitoring, however, is important in order to identify any future difficulties the student may encounter.

If the team decides that the student did not make adequate progress toward the goal with the intervention plan, then they may decide to *develop a different plan or modify* and add on to the one already in place.

If the team determines that the student's needs are more than can be met in a regular education setting (after intensive intervention in the regular education setting and data documenting lack of growth toward the goal despite the interventions) , then the team may decide to *refer the child to the special education team* for consideration of an evaluation of eligibility in accordance with state and district procedures. Regardless of the procedures and criteria used for special education evaluations, the data gathered by the Problem-Solving Team will provide invaluable information to the special education team regarding the student's needs and response to intervention.

## Frequently Asked Questions About Problem-Solving Teams

**What is an intervention?** An intervention is a new strategy or modification of instruction or behavior management designed to help a student (or group of students) improve performance relative to a specific goal. In the context of problem-solving models, interventions are evidence-based strategies; that is, they have been proven effective in similar situations through well-designed research. Simply making a change is not really an intervention. For example, shortening assignments or moving the student's desk are not really interventions, although a well-designed intervention might include such changes. An effective intervention is based on valid information about current performance and desired performance, is realistic for implementation in the current setting, is directed toward important and realistic goals, and defines success in measurable terms.

**How is the effectiveness of an intervention measured?** Through a problem-solving process,

information (data) is gathered throughout the implementation of the intervention in order to see if it is working for the child. Teams will often use CBM to measure a student's academic performance and chart his or her progress in response to interventions. With older students, progress toward goals might involve test scores, grades, tallies of completed assignments, etc. Other measurement techniques are used to measure progress toward behavioral goals, such as direct classroom observations or frequency counts (tallies of occurrences of behaviors such as fights or office referrals). Effectiveness is judged by comparing the results of these measures with the student's baseline and with the goal of the intervention.

### **Are students later referred to special education?**

Evaluation for special education eligibility is only one possible outcome of the problem-solving process. The goal of Problem-Solving Teams is to help children in the general education setting—and often they succeed. Research indicates that implementation of Problem-Solving Teams can significantly reduce referral to special education while improving student achievement and behavior.

### **Are parents involved in problem-solving teams?**

Parent input is critical to student success in school. Many Problem-Solving Team models include parents as members of the team. Parent input should always be sought because parents know their children best and often have unique information and ideas to share. They often can provide needed background information about a student's health and development as well as input about how the child acts in a variety of settings. Depending on the nature of the intervention, parent involvement may be crucial to its success.

**What skills and training are needed to implement problem-solving teams?** Educators and parents are not necessarily comfortable and skillful as team members without training and practice. Teaming requires good listening and collaboration skills, as well as a good foundation in the design of academic and behavioral interventions and in the measurement of student skills and progress. Schools seeking to implement a Problem-Solving Team process are urged to start slowly, and to start with training in team processes and intervention strategies. Although the team itself will mostly likely be a core group of regular and special educators, all school personnel will need to be familiar with the process to be used by their team, including how to make a referral, how to collect baseline data, and how to help collect information to evaluate intervention outcomes.

## Resources

- Inverson, A. M. (2002) Best practices in problem-solving team structure and process. In A. Thomas & J. Grimes (Eds.), *Best practices in school psychology IV* (pp. 657–669). Bethesda, MD: The National Association of School Psychologists. ISBN: 0-932955-85-1.
- Tilly III, W.D. (2002). Best practices in school psychology as a problem solving enterprise. In A. Thomas & J. Grimes (Eds.), *Best practices in school psychology IV* (pp. 21–36). Bethesda, MD: The National Association of School Psychologists. ISBN: 0-932955-85-1.
- Reschly, D. J., Tilly III, W.D., & Grimes, J. P. (1999). *Special education in transition: Functional assessment and noncategorical programming*. Longmont, CO: Sopris West. ISBN: 1570352275.
- Ysseldyke, J., & Marston, D. (1999). Origins of categorical special education services in schools and a rationale for changing them. In D. J. Reschly, W. D. Tilly III, & J. P. Grimes (Eds.), *Special education in transition: Functional assessment and noncategorical programming* (pp. 1–18). Longmont, CO: Sopris West. ISBN: 1570352275.

## Websites

- Heartland (IA) Area Education Agency 11, special education research site—  
[www.aea11.k12.ia.us/spedresearch](http://www.aea11.k12.ia.us/spedresearch) (See *Diverse Learners*)
- National Association of School Psychologists—  
[www.nasponline.org](http://www.nasponline.org) (Search *Problem-Solving Model*)

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The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) offers a wide variety of free or low cost online resources to parents, teachers, and others working with children and youth through the NASP website [www.nasponline.org](http://www.nasponline.org)

and the NASP Center for Children & Families website [www.naspcenter.org](http://www.naspcenter.org). Or use the direct links below to access information that can help you improve outcomes for the children and youth in your care.

**About School Psychology**—Downloadable brochures, FAQs, and facts about training, practice, and career choices for the profession.  
[www.nasponline.org/about\\_nasp/spsych.html](http://www.nasponline.org/about_nasp/spsych.html)

**Crisis Resources**—Handouts, fact sheets, and links regarding crisis prevention/intervention, coping with trauma, suicide prevention, and school safety.  
[www.nasponline.org/crisisresources](http://www.nasponline.org/crisisresources)

**Culturally Competent Practice**—Materials and resources promoting culturally competent assessment and intervention, minority recruitment, and issues related to cultural diversity and tolerance.  
[www.nasponline.org/culturalcompetence](http://www.nasponline.org/culturalcompetence)

**En Español**—Parent handouts and materials translated into Spanish. [www.naspcenter.org/espanol/](http://www.naspcenter.org/espanol/)

**IDEA Information**—Information, resources, and advocacy tools regarding IDEA policy and practical implementation.  
[www.nasponline.org/advocacy/IDEAinformation.html](http://www.nasponline.org/advocacy/IDEAinformation.html)

**Information for Educators**—Handouts, articles, and other resources on a variety of topics.  
[www.naspcenter.org/teachers/teachers.html](http://www.naspcenter.org/teachers/teachers.html)

**Information for Parents**—Handouts and other resources a variety of topics.  
[www.naspcenter.org/parents/parents.html](http://www.naspcenter.org/parents/parents.html)

**Links to State Associations**—Easy access to state association websites.  
[www.nasponline.org/information/links\\_state\\_orgs.html](http://www.nasponline.org/information/links_state_orgs.html)

**NASP Books & Publications Store**—Review tables of contents and chapters of NASP bestsellers.  
[www.nasponline.org/bestsellers](http://www.nasponline.org/bestsellers)  
Order online. [www.nasponline.org/store](http://www.nasponline.org/store)

**Position Papers**—Official NASP policy positions on key issues.  
[www.nasponline.org/information/position\\_paper.html](http://www.nasponline.org/information/position_paper.html)

**Success in School/Skills for Life**—Parent handouts that can be posted on your school's website.  
[www.naspcenter.org/resourcekit](http://www.naspcenter.org/resourcekit)