

Tier 1: 10 Signs I Wish I'd Caught Sooner

The quiet signals that a student — or a system — is drifting out of Tier 1, long before the data catches up.

CASELOAD

The students in front of you

- 1. A quiet kid's grades slipped half a letter — and no one mentioned it.**
B to B-minus doesn't trigger anything. It should. The students who fall hardest in Tier 2 are almost always the ones who dropped quietly in Tier 1 first.
- 2. The same three students keep getting sent to the counselor "just to check in."**
Informal referrals are data. If three teachers independently reach out about the same kid in a month, that's a Tier 2 signal dressed up as a hallway conversation.
- 3. A student stopped raising their hand.**
Participation change is one of the earliest warning signals in any classroom — and the one most likely to be written off as "just a phase."
- 4. Attendance slipped from 96% to 91% — and nobody flagged it.**
A five-point drop over a semester looks fine in any single week. It isn't. Chronic absenteeism starts at 90%, and most kids don't arrive there suddenly — they drift. Watch the trend, not the snapshot.

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The systems around them

- 5. Teachers are differentiating, but no one's written down what they changed.**
Good Tier 1 instruction is happening. The documentation of it isn't. When a parent or a specialist asks what's been tried, nobody can answer in under 10 minutes.
- 6. Universal screener results live in someone's inbox.**
If the fall screener data isn't in front of grade-level teams by week 4, it isn't Tier 1 — it's a compliance exercise.
- 7. Schoolwide behavior expectations got taught in September — and never again.**
Hallway, cafeteria, and classroom expectations aren't a back-to-school activity. They're a Tier 1 system. By February, the students who most needed those routines reinforced are exactly the ones who've quietly stopped following them.

DATA

The paper trail

- 8. The intervention list has more students on it this quarter than last.**
Tier 2 growing faster than enrollment is the clearest sign Tier 1 isn't holding. Most buildings notice this a full year late.
- 9. You can't say, in one sentence, what your Tier 1 reading block actually looks like.**
If a building's core instruction can't be described briefly and consistently by three different staff members, there isn't a Tier 1 — there are Tier 1s, plural.
- 10. Every Tier 2 referral starts with, "We've tried everything."**
"Everything" is the word we use when we didn't write any of it down. Tier 1 documentation isn't bureaucracy — it's the only thing that protects a teacher's judgment when someone asks what happened before the referral.

If three or more of these feel familiar, the problem probably isn't Tier 2 — it's a Tier 1 leak upstream. The good news: every one of these is fixable, and none require new software to start.

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