



RTI Roundtable - Issue # 12

Review System Requirements for Response to Intervention

Response to intervention assessment requires changes in the ways resources are used and a very close relationship between general and special education.

General educators need to understand the approach and why all of their students need to be closely monitored—especially in the development of early academic skills. Special educators must understand the limitations of traditional assessment systems and adopt highly prescribed and systematic interventions.

Most importantly, general and special educators need to work together to implement and maintain the system. This section details the following system requirements for RTI:

- 1. Leadership**
- 2. Teaming**
- 3. Use of a research based core reading curriculum**
- 4. Valid screening or identification procedures and decision rules**
- 5. Adopted intervention protocols and progress monitoring**
- 6. Policy and procedure development including special education procedures**
- 7. Capacity building**

Moving from a discrepancy approach to RTI requires on-going support to teams and to individuals. A leadership team at the district level will help schools move forward and sustain new practices. This team needs to know:

1. What is a Leadership Team?

- Provide expertise when problems are encountered or practices are questioned.

- Provide training related to LD identification including traditional practices and the rationale for RTI.
- Identify the need for and provide support to teams with respect to research based interventions and progress monitoring methods.
- Help obtain and commit resources for screening, assessment and interventions.
- Interpret new information in the field regarding LD.
- Judge the fidelity of implementation of components of RTI and trouble shoot.
- Plan to sustain the system.

Horner and Sugai (2000) have worked extensively with school wide systems that address behavior supports through team processes, and they emphasize the importance of the school principal having a primary role on any such team. The philosophical and instructional leadership provided by the principal is essential to a team's ability to establish its mission, overcome difficulties and sustain its work over time.

2. What is Teaming?

Teaming is an essential component of an RTI system. RTI requires cooperation among special education, general education, and compensatory programs such as Title I or Title III (English language learners/ELL). Considerations to take into account include team membership, team structures, and teamwork.

Team Membership

Experience in implementing effective behavior and instructional supports dictates that decisions about team membership be considered carefully. Generally, the team must have one or more members who:

- Have the authority to allocate school resources and assign work (administrative support)
- Can provide leadership for the team, organize and implement agendas, monitor role clarity and fidelity
- Are able to effect changes in the general education instructional program for groups of students (such as skill grouping)
- Can organize and present screening data
- Are able to plan for and provide research based individualized interventions (such as a small group working on decoding multi-syllabic words)
- Can set goals for students, plan for progress monitoring, plot data, and interpret data to determine the effectiveness of interventions
- Are able to train classroom teachers and paraprofessionals to progress monitor and provide interventions
- Represent the involvement of special education, ELL, Title, and other support programs

Team Structures

Schools may find that more than one team best serves their needs. For example, initial data analysis and planning may be accomplished through a grade level team. At that level, a group of teachers might find that fewer than 80% of their students are meeting expectations and decide to investigate ways to strengthen their instructional program. If the core program is meeting the needs of at least 80% of the students, the teachers may decide to strengthen instruction for students who are marginally below expectations through skill grouping and differentiating

instruction across classes. This level of team must have measurement, progress monitoring, and administrative resources available.

Another level of the team might meet to plan interventions for students who are not making expected progress in the programs designed by the grade level teams. This team must maintain strong ties to the general education classroom and all of the capacities listed above.

Some schools use one central team to perform all functions of data analysis and intervention planning, at the classroom, small group, and individual level. Using a single level team requires a substantial commitment of time and resources to both conducting the work of the team and maintaining the “health” of team functioning.

Teamwork

Teaming in order to analyze student progress using standardized data and decision making means that on occasion individuals will need to engage in curriculum, or special education decisions. Successful teams establish working agreements about conducting meetings, decision making, interactions, and roles.

Examples of such agreements are:

- Team members will encourage each other to express their opinions.
- Decision rules will be used to guide the team’s work.
- Once a decision is made, team members will support that decision.
- Meetings will start and end on time.
- Team members will bring necessary information to the meetings.
- The agenda will be followed.
- Decisions will be made through a consensus process.
- The principal makes final decisions about allocation of resources.

Teams should revisit their working agreements periodically to ensure they continue to be relevant and are being implemented.

Planning is Essential

As the team is formed, a yearlong plan of work should be established. There will be a cycle of reviewing school wide data, group intervention data, and individual intervention data that requires projecting agendas for meetings and planning to organize information to be considered.

IDEA 2004 requires teams to determine students not eligible for special education if their difficulties are attributed to lack of instruction in the essential components of reading instruction as identified in No Child Left Behind (phonemic awareness, alphabetic principle, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension). Also, when implementing RTI teams must have confidence that the general core curriculum provides students with an appropriate opportunity to learn. Effective core curricula are expected to provide sufficient instruction so that at least 80% of students meet expectations without additional support.

Reading is set apart as especially important because the majority of students with learning disabilities are identified with problems learning to read. Other academic areas are substantiated with less research, but curricula and instruction may be validated by meeting these guidelines:

1. The curriculum that is being used has been analyzed and is aligned with benchmarks.
2. Instruction is intense, regular, and differentiated to meet the skill needs of individual students.
3. At least 80% of students are meeting expectations such as benchmarks.

It is particularly important to examine the “80%” criterion. This expectation is a general guideline, and teams should adjust that expectation to a higher level if the general achievement in the school is typically higher than 80%. In some schools, the expectation is more appropriately 85% or even 90%. Performance in each classroom is expected to be close to the school average.

While the criteria may be adjusted upward, it should not be adjusted downward.

It should be assumed that, if 80% of students in a district, school, or classroom are not meeting benchmarks, the problem is with either the content of the core curriculum, or intensity and frequency of instruction.

3. How Do You Use a Research-Based Core Curriculum?

IDEA 2004 requires teams to determine students not eligible for special education if their difficulties are attributed to lack of instruction in the essential components of reading instruction as identified in No Child Left Behind (phonemic awareness, alphabetic principle, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension). Also, when implementing RTI teams must have confidence that the general core curriculum provides students with an appropriate opportunity to learn. Effective core curricula are expected to provide sufficient instruction so that at least 80% of students meet expectations without additional support.

Reading is set apart as especially important because the majority of students with learning disabilities are identified with problems learning to read. Other academic areas are substantiated with less research, but curricula and instruction may be validated by meeting these guidelines:

1. The curriculum that is being used has been analyzed and is aligned with benchmarks.
2. Instruction is intense, regular, and differentiated to meet the skill needs of individual students.
3. At least 80% of students are meeting expectations such as benchmarks.

It is particularly important to examine the “80%” criterion. This expectation is a general guideline, and teams should adjust that expectation to a higher level if the general achievement in the school is typically higher than 80%. In some schools, the expectation is more appropriately 85% or even 90%. Performance in each classroom is expected to be close to the school average.

While the criteria may be adjusted upward, it should not be adjusted downward. It should be assumed that, if 80% of students in a district, school, or classroom are not meeting benchmarks, the problem is with either the content of the core curriculum, or intensity and frequency of instruction.

4. What are Valid Screening or Identification Procedures and Decision Rules?

School personnel need to know when a student is at risk of failure in a core academic subject. Whether a district adopts a problem solving, pre referral, or tiered model of RTI, teachers or teams need to know when to select a student for intervention. This requires that valid data are

examined on a regular schedule and that students are selected for intervention on this basis. Data that may inform these decisions include:

1. Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills
2. Curriculum Based Measures
3. Fluency measures with norms that are local or based on national studies
4. Statewide assessments
5. Locally developed measures that can be interpreted on consistent, objective criteria
6. Behavior and attendance data that can be interpreted on consistent, objective criteria
7. Teacher concern

Using clearly defined criteria and decision rules—for example, “Students who are in the lowest 10% of the class will be selected for interventions”—helps to teachers’ level of tolerance with respect to students who are struggling. These decision rules are those that are used to select students for intervention.

Decision rules are also necessary to ensure that students who are not responding adequately move to more intensive or appropriate interventions, and that a decision is made to complete the special education referral process when needed. An example of this kind of decision rule is “Change the intervention when the student does not meet the aim line for three consecutive data points.” These types of rules are those that govern the intervention process.

5. What are Adopted Intervention Protocols and Progress Monitoring Intervention Protocols?

There is some concern that RTI based decisions will lack uniformity. This concern is based at least partially on the difficulty in documenting what interventions have been provided and their levels of intensity and duration.

Those concerns may be addressed by carefully standardizing interventions.

Gresham (2002) reviewed research in reading interventions and determined that a combination of Direct Instruction and Strategy Instruction produces the greatest effects for struggling students. Other authorities (National Reading Panel, 2000; Shaywitz, 2004) add Fluency Instruction as an important component of interventions for many students.

Interventions become increasingly intense as students do not respond adequately. Intensity is achieved by changing group size, expertise of the teacher, duration or frequency of lessons, or motivation.

As interventions become more intense, it is difficult to provide both general education curriculum and interventions to a student. It is recommended that when there simply isn’t enough time in the school day to provide an intensive intervention, programming like extended school day be considered. Another approach is to provide the systematic basic skills instruction and practice in the intervention setting and include students in language and comprehension instruction in the general education classroom. For example, in math the student would be included in the general education classroom for conceptual, vocabulary, and math reasoning instruction. A menu of interventions should be developed that match area of deficit, curricula, and intensity to specific student profiles.

The following steps may be used in designing an intervention:

1. Identify students with similar skill deficits (e.g., math fact fluency).
2. Specify each child's deficit level (e.g., writes 10 correct facts per minute).
3. Identify a curriculum that is specific to the skill deficit(s).
4. Identify an instructor who has been trained to use the curriculum.
5. Decide how long the intervention will progress before review.
6. Develop a progress monitoring chart for each student that includes a clearly marked benchmark and aim line.

Progress Monitoring

Progress monitoring is assessment of students' academic performance on a regular basis in order to determine whether children are benefiting from instruction and to build more effective programs for those who are not. Standard methods of progress monitoring prevent inconsistency in decision making and eligibility decisions. Progress monitoring for these purposes must include clear benchmarks for performance and reliable, easy to administer measures such as curriculum based measures (CBMs).

Progress monitoring involves the following steps:

1. Establish a benchmark for performance and plot it on a chart (e.g., "read orally at grade level, 40 words per minute by June"). It must be plotted at the projected end of the instructional period, such as the end of the school year.
2. Establish the student's current level of performance (e.g., "20 words per minute").
3. Draw an aim line from the student's current level to the performance benchmark. This is a picture of the slope of progress required to meet the benchmark.
4. Monitor the student's progress at equal intervals (e.g., every third instructional day). Plot the data.
5. Analyze the data on a regular basis, applying decision rules (e.g., "the intervention will be changed after 3 data points that are below the aim line").
6. Draw a trend line to validate that the student's progress is adequate to meet the goal over time.

6. What are Policy and Procedure Development including Special Education Procedures?

Adopting RTI

RTI is a system that affects both general and special education. Districts that have successfully implemented these approaches experience substantial system-wide benefits for all children. However, obtaining "buy-in" and cooperation for use of resources is essential. Administrative support from the top down and teacher support from the bottom up are vital to success and sustainability.

Initially, RTI will require extra resources for training and time for teams to work together. Support services such as ELL and Title I may need to be reorganized. Funds may need to be set aside to provide interventions. Commitment and planning need to be in place before RTI is implemented. IDEA 2004 offers districts the opportunity to support the RTI

process by using IDEA funds for “early intervening services.” These are coordinated services that are preventative in nature and function within the general education context.

Defining and Adopting Procedures

When moving to an RTI approach, a set of fluid activities (data review, intervention implementation, and analysis) are used much like we have used traditional testing instruments. These activities may be difficult for some teams to track. Individuals must conduct those activities in standardized ways, documenting their work, and using standardized decision making guidelines. This prevents arbitrary decision making, and ensures students move through the system and are considered for evaluation and eligibility in a timely manner.

Decision Rules

This essential procedural component has been referenced several times. An example of decision rules used by the Effective Behavior and Instructional Support (EBIS) (Sadler, 2002) are:

1. Organize the lowest 20% of students in the group (class, grade level, or school) to receive interventions.
2. Students in group interventions are monitored weekly.
3. Students in individual interventions are monitored at least 1 time weekly.
4. Change interventions when 3 consecutive data points do not meet the student’s goal line.
5. Move students to an individual intervention after two unsuccessful group interventions.
6. Refer a student for special education after one unsuccessful individual intervention.

Parental Notice and Consent

Procedures must establish clearly when and how parents are involved in the RTI process. Questions to answer ahead of time include: “When are parents invited to team meetings?” “When are parents provided with procedural safeguards?”

“When is parental consent required?” In the EBIS system, parents are notified of any individual intervention. Since it has been found that a second individual intervention typically is provided to students who are or will be referred for special education, it is at this point a special education referral is made and consent for evaluation is obtained.

Special Education Procedures

As described in the general section on RTI, all of the evaluation requirements for special education remain in effect when implementing this approach. This means that teams need to be very clear about an evaluation planning process that regards the use of response to intervention as one component of a full and individual evaluation. Districts need to develop well defined procedures and ensure teams are trained before implementing RTI.

Evaluation Planning and Eligibility Determination

Using a response to intervention model (RTI) to decide a student has LD involves systematic application of professional judgment. Through the review of data obtained from multiple sources, consideration of those data within specific contexts, and thoughtful discourse, a team is prepared to make an eligibility decision. More complex than relying on a simple numerical

formula, this process produces decisions that reflect the benefit of collective knowledge, expertise, and insight of the team.

7. What is Capacity Building?

It is imperative that a core group of district staff deeply understands current research on the identification of learning disabilities. The leadership team referred to earlier might serve to teach broader groups of teachers, specialists, and administrators. This team will need time to study and master issues around LD identification, reading instruction, and progress monitoring.

Special educators must grasp the foundational underpinnings of RTI and the research from which they developed. Additionally, this group of staff will need training specifically targeting the transition from a discrepancy model to RTI – why is practice changing? This group’s level of understanding must be sufficient to support implementation of the RTI approach as well as explaining the approach to colleagues and parents. Many practitioners will need to review and discuss this information several times before they are comfortable with the core concepts.

General educators require training on the same topics, though understanding need not be as comprehensive. The focus of training for this group is on the importance of early skill development and monitoring of that development, the redefined view of general education as providing first level interventions, and the need for collaboration.

For some team members, this will require a fundamental change in the way part of their job is accomplished. For example, when IQ testing is not a routine part of each LD evaluation, school psychologists will play a very different role on a team. Their time may be used to conduct more targeted evaluations of attention or behavioral characteristics, consultation, or to assist with additional progress monitoring.

Where teaming is not a norm, deliberate planning for team formation and functioning is required. When a group is adopting both new practices and new ways of doing work, individuals may experience significant stress. A professional facilitator can help a team define its mission, establish norms, and improve skills like conflict management and negotiation.