National Association of naset Special Education Teachers

RTI Roundtable - Issue # 8

Problem Solving in Making Decisions

What is Problem Solving in RTI?

Problem solving is a data-based decision making process that is used to identify needed interventions for students in Tiers I, II and III. Decisions are made by teams that are composed of individuals who are qualified to make the important educational decisions to help students succeed in school. As a general rule, the composition of a decision making team changes by adding additional specialists' expertise as students move from tier to tier. When using problem solving or standard treatment protocol techniques, decision making teams should always include the student's general education teacher(s) and parents. If districts choose to use existing teams, they may need to modify procedures to align with the problem solving steps discussed below.

Who Is Involved in the Problem Solving Process?

Decision making team participants may include: the principal; academic specialists (Title I, ELL, and literacy consultants); special education teachers; school psychologists; speech and language pathologists and other educational staff associates; additional general education staff; and paraeducators, in addition to parents and the general education teacher(s) of the student.
In Making Decisions, What Type of Approach Should the Team Follow?
In making decisions, a team should use the following approach:

- **Define the problem** - When a concern is raised, the first step is to review the concern and attempt to identify the problem. The decision making team should first review existing student data to determine specific problems. For example, a student should not be identified as simply having an academic or a behavior problem. The team should try to narrow the problem (based upon available data) to identify the deficit skill area(s) (e.g., phonemic awareness, problem solving skills, math calculations, vocabulary, reading comprehension or peer interactions, etc.).
- **Analyze the cause** - Once the problem is defined, the decision making team needs to develop a hypothesis as to why the problem is occurring and continuing. This involves analyzing those variables that can be altered through instruction in order to find an instructional solution. This includes questions of fidelity, missing skills, motivational factors, or lack of exposure to the general curriculum. The team should focus on explanations of the problem that can be

addressed through instruction. In addition to the cause of the problem, the team needs to consider the student's rate of learning. In doing this, the team reviews the student's learning trend (e.g., progress) in the areas identified by the decision making team. The team should also compare the student's progress to peers over time.

- **Develop a plan** - Once the problem has been analyzed, the team identifies interventions that will meet the student's needs. The team does this by developing a plan that includes: an implementation timeframe (e.g., 4 weeks, 6 weeks, or 8 weeks); the frequency of the interventions (how often the intervention will be provided and for how many minutes per week); who will provide the intervention (e.g. classroom teacher, Title I teacher, etc); and a timeframe to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention. The student's plan should outline the goal for progress. The team plots an "aim-line" (graphic representation) depicting the desired rate of progress a student needs to reach the goal from the current baseline.
- **Implement the plan**- Interventions must be implemented with fidelity. To ensure fidelity, qualified staff must deliver the interventions according to the prescribed process and prescribed timeframe. Schools should document their delivery of the interventions using multiple sources (e.g. observation notes, lesson plans and grade books, student work reflecting instructional elements and graphs of student progress, etc.).
- **Evaluate the plan**- In order to determine if the intervention is working for a student, the team must collect data through progress monitoring. The frequency of progress monitoring depends on the tier, but in all cases the process is similar. A student's current performance and progress is compared to their projected "aim-line." If performance falls significantly below the aim-line over three or four consecutive monitoring periods, the decision making team should revisit the intervention plan to make appropriate modifications or revisions.

What About Using a Standard Treatment Protocol?

A standard treatment protocol is a viable alternative approach to problem solving and may be used along with, or in some cases in place of problem solving, to make decisions within a RTI system. Standard protocol is a process where student decisions are made using an established response to regular occurring circumstances.

Implementation usually involves a trial of fixed duration (e.g., 9-15 weeks) delivered in small groups or individually. A standard treatment protocol approach can be applied to make universal initial decisions for struggling students with similar problems. Recent research has shown that this approach can be successful when applying early interventions in reading. When students are successful in the treatment trial, they are returned to the core curriculum. When students are unresponsive to the treatment trial, they are provided individualized instruction supported through either strategic or intensive interventions.

Standard treatment protocol may be helpful for some types of decision making early on within a multi-tiered system. In general, problem solving and standard treatment protocol are not exclusive and many models use both approaches. The problem solving approach is often used more when making decisions about behavior. Standard treatment protocol often proves more successful early on in reading because it allows teams to make quick, evidenced-based decisions for a large number of students. RTI systems tend to make decisions in mathematics and writing using either approach or a combination of the standard treatment protocol and problem solving approach