



RTI Roundtable - Issue # 9

RTI Models in Special Education

Why is Special Education an Integral Step in a Multitiered Model Such as RTI?

“Recent research has suggested the most productive model for improving outcomes for students with learning disabilities is one in which students’ instructional gaps are identified, progress relative to the gaps is monitored, and explicit and intensive instruction provided” (Vaughn & Linan-Thompson, 2003, p. 145). A model requiring this level of intensity and individualization is typically best provided in special education.

In many schools that are organized into multitiered service-delivery systems, the tertiary tier of service may be synonymous with special education. This tertiary level of support and intervention represents an integral step in a multitiered model such as RTI, rather than a last stop or destination for a student who is experiencing school or academic problems. Special education programming and placement become necessary for the student to benefit from his or her educational experiences. As such, special education as the tertiary tier of service is intended to deliver the most intensive, scientifically based instructional programs to address individual student needs. Ideally, this tier is structured to provide flexible service, systematically permitting a student to move in and out of tertiary support as his or her needs change relative to the demands of the general education curriculum (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006).

How Does Special Education Fit Within an RTI Model?

In some RTI models, special education services are provided to students with intensive needs who are not adequately responding to high-quality interventions in Tier 1 and Tier 2 and beyond. Decisions about students’ specific instructional needs are based in part on a student’s lack of responsiveness to effective instruction. Eligibility decisions also are informed by individualized, comprehensive evaluations to determine the specific nature and presence of a learning disability.

Special education is a data-based, individualized, iterative intervention. Special education can be defined generally as specially designed instruction to meet the unique needs of students with disabilities. To achieve academic success, students with SLD require intensive, iterative (recursive), explicit scientifically based instruction that is monitored on a continuing basis (Learning Disabilities Roundtable, 2002).

Students with SLD require a continuum of intervention options through general and special education across all grades and ages. The provision of these services can occur through accommodations, modifications, intense instruction, and remediation. Whereas accommodations and modifications are generally provided to help the student with SLD achieve expected outcomes in the general education setting, remediation and the development of compensatory strategies are the focus of special education interventions.

A key distinction between general and special education is that special education takes an individualized approach to instruction (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1995). Interventions in special education must be designed to meet the specific learning and behavioral needs of the student, implemented on a timely basis, provided by a highly qualified teacher or specialist, and monitored to determine progress and achievement of desired outcomes.

In summary, the following are critical features of special education as tertiary intervention in an RTI model:

Size of instructional group

Special education instruction is provided to individual students or small groups.

Mastery requirements of content

Special education programs, strategies, and procedures are designed and employed to supplement, enhance, and support Tier 1 and Tier 2 and beyond instruction by remediation of the relevant area and development of compensatory strategies. Mastery is relative to the student's functioning and determined by individualized education program (IEP) goal setting and through results of comprehensive evaluation.

Frequency of progress monitoring

Continuous progress monitoring informs the teaching process.

Duration of the intervention

Special education instruction likely will be considerably longer than the 10 to 12 weeks of supplemental instruction delivered in Tier 2 and beyond.

Frequency with which the intervention is delivered

The frequency of special education instruction depends upon student need.

Instructor qualifications

Special education teachers deliver the instruction.

Exit criteria

Exit criteria are specified and monitored so that placement is flexible.

Specific forms of special education instruction that have been found to be most effective in teaching students with learning disabilities combine direct instruction with strategy instruction (Swanson, 1999). Swanson (1999) identified the main features of this model:

1. Control of task difficulty
2. Small-group instruction
3. Directed questioning and response
4. Sequencing – breaking down the task
5. Drill-repetition-practice
6. Segmentation
7. Use of technology
8. Teacher-modeled problem solving
9. Strategy cues

The instruction and progress monitoring provided in Tier 1 and Tier 2 and beyond are an integral part of informing the intervention design and delivery within special education. The progress-monitoring results collected in Tier 1 and Tier 2 and beyond can help frame concerns about a student's progress. Special educators and related service providers will have thorough knowledge of the instruction and interventions implemented to date and can use that information to design interventions relevant to the student's learning needs. Additionally, general educators will be informed of the types of supports required in the general education classroom as students with SLD receive accommodations, modifications, and remediation specifically designed for their individual needs.

When Should a School District Initiate a Special Education Referral in a RTI System?

A school district should initiate a referral when it obtains information to cause it to suspect that a student has a disability or when a parent or any other person makes a referral requesting that a student be evaluated for special education services. A school district's child find responsibilities do not end when the district chooses to implement a RTI approach. Parents, teachers or any interested persons may also initiate a referral at any time if they believe a child requires special education services. Non-responsiveness at Tier III represents a baseline within a RTI system when a disability should be suspected absent other information and school districts may not require that a student demonstrate non-responsiveness at Tier III before initiating a referral.

If a Student is Determined Not Eligible for Special Education Services, How Long May That Student Continue to Receive the Intensive Interventions Provided at Tier III?

Students who enter Tier III should initially receive at least two full attempts of intensive interventions in order to determine if that student is non-responsive. Because RTI is a system of delivering the general education curriculum, each school district determines the level of resource commitment beyond the amount of time typically needed to determine if a disability is suspected. When students are determined ineligible for special education, school districts should also consider how other federal and state funding sources can supplement implementation of Tier III. Districts have to consider the needs of students who require accommodations under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act or other applicable laws. Students who have been determined ineligible for special education services but continue to insufficiently progress may be re-referred for special education.

How Might Specially Designed Instruction (SDI) Differ From the Tier III Interventions a Student May Have Been Receiving Prior to Qualifying for Special Education Services?

Interventions and services a student receives once determined eligible for special education services will vary with each individual student. If a student has been unsuccessful with two attempts of Tier III interventions, the student's SDI may look similar to those Tier III interventions except the instruction will be more intense, provided with an increased frequency and duration, and adapted to meet the student's unique needs.

Can a School District use RTI Data to Support the Decision That a Student Has a Disability in a Special Education Disability Category Other Than SLD?

Yes. RTI data may be included when considering criteria in other categories. However, the information included in the evaluation report must be comprehensively sufficient to address each area of suspected disability. Therefore, RTI data may not be the sole source of information but may supplement information provided for suspected disabilities in categories other than SLD.

How Will Use of the RTI Process Affect Special Education Referrals?

IDEA 2004 does not exclude or remove the use of a discrepancy model to identify students with specific learning disabilities and allows for the use of RTI data as part of the special education referral and evaluation process. Districts have the opportunity to use the rich assessment data collected by teachers from the RTI process to assist in making eligibility decisions. Final regulations to implement IDEA 2004 may clarify this process further.

Evaluation of the RTI will include information gained about student progress through the Three-Tier model as part of the eligibility determination for specific learning disabilities. It is expected that because students receive scientifically based instruction and focused intervention in the RTI model, the number of students inappropriately referred to special education (due to, for example, lack of high quality instruction in reading) will decline.

Ultimately, students should be more accurately diagnosed for specific learning disabilities and the needs of those without learning disabilities will continue to be met through the core instruction and subsequent intervention instruction in Tiers 1 and 2.

The RTI process does not preclude a parent's or teacher's right to request a multidisciplinary evaluation for the purpose of determining a student's eligibility for special education.

What Changes Are Needed in Special Education to Staff Roles, Responsibilities, and School Structures?

Changes are needed in special education. If special education is going to lead to beneficial outcomes for the students with greatest difficulties, then teachers will need to be prepared to provide the most intensive, powerful interventions. Teachers, both entry-level and experienced, will have to receive academic preparation in these methods, which will require that college and university educators are well-versed and able to disseminate information about appropriate instruction and curriculum. Special education will require significant changes to many staff roles and responsibilities and to school structures:

General and special education must be coordinated as part of a coherent system, which is held accountable for the educational outcomes of students with SLD.

- School staff (general education, special education, administration, and related service providers) work collaboratively in planning and delivering interventions.
- A seamless system occurs when there is alignment of principles, services, assessments, preservice training, and professional development. (Learning Disabilities Roundtable, 2002)

The roles and responsibilities of various staff members will depend on the methods adopted by a school or district and the available staff.

Even with general education and special education working together to ensure a seamless system of high-quality services, the ever-present question remains:

- What is in the best interests for the student whose response to Tier 1, Tier 2 and beyond, and special education instruction is very limited?
- Does that student with such a low response receive tertiary intervention/special education instruction indefinitely?
- Should that student be returned to the more inclusive general education classroom to receive Tier 1 instruction with some supplemental special education instruction?

We do not have an answer to this question. The literature (Bender, 2002; Tomlinson, 1999) suggests that by differentiating instruction, all students can benefit from instruction. IDEA 2004 specifies that schools must comply with providing a free appropriate public education (FAPE), wherein the school provides special education and related services at no cost to the child or her or his parents. We suggest that at a minimum, schools put in place procedures to document instruction and adequately monitor individual student progress in special education. For those students who are not as responsive as desired, one must carefully consider all of the options available, including changes in targeted outcomes and alternative placements that could provide more intense interventions.