

SPOTLIGHT

On Response to Intervention

Editor's Note: A 2010 survey of administrators found that a majority of school districts now use response to intervention frameworks. RTI can be applied at almost any grade level and is expanding beyond its uses in early-childhood literacy and special education to reach all students. This Spotlight examines the role RTI plays in boosting student achievement, guiding implementation of the common-core standards, and the related challenges of allocating funding to support district-wide implementation.

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RTI: An Approach on the March

Response to intervention started out as a way to identify and teach struggling readers and special education students, but it's fast becoming a way to change schooling for all

By Christina A. Samuels

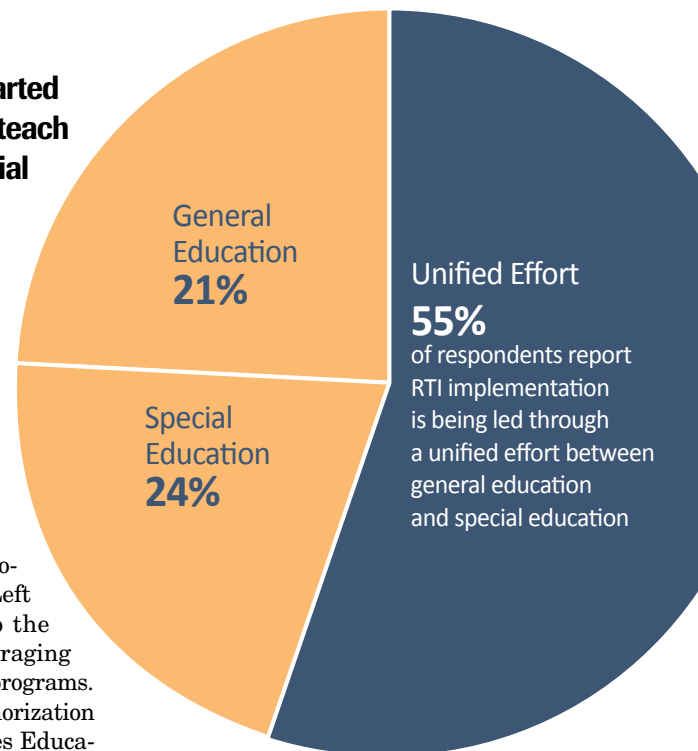
Response to intervention burst onto the national scene thanks to two major efforts by the federal government.

The \$1 billion Reading First program ushered in with No Child Left Behind in 2002 gave a boost to the educational framework by encouraging schools to use it for their literacy programs.

Two years later, the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act said that states must permit districts to use RTI as one tool for determining if a child has a specific learning disability.

The process has been growing exponentially ever since, morphing along the way into new forms and educational uses.

In 2010, a survey of district administrators found that 61 percent had implemented an RTI educational framework or were in the process of spreading RTI throughout their districts. In 2007, that proportion was only about a quarter.



RTI ADOPTION Proponents of response to intervention have stressed that RTI goes beyond special education, and a survey conducted last year suggests that message is being received. More than half of school administrators said their districts are implementing RTI as a joint effort between general education and special education.

SOURCES: Spectrum K-12 Solutions; American Association of School Administrators

Response to intervention involves early identification of students' learning problems and the use of focused lessons, or interventions, to address those problems before they became entrenched. Though primarily linked with special education and early reading, the method is now used at all levels of schooling and in a variety of subject areas. Educators use "tiered-intervention" models—of which RTI is one type—to improve school discipline. Response-to-intervention models have also been used to improve instruction for English-language learners, with preschoolers, and as a lever for districtwide reform.

The process has been credited as a factor in reducing the overall rate of students diagnosed with specific learning disabilities, which has been on a steady decline since 2005. And in a time of constrained resources, response-to-intervention materials are one of the few areas where school districts are increasing spending.

RTI "hasn't changed special education," Alexa E. Posny, the assistant secretary overseeing the U.S. Department of Education's office of special education and rehabilitative services, told a group of researchers gathered in Washington for an RTI research summit last December. "It has changed education, and will continue to do so."

The basic framework of a response-to-intervention process has coalesced around a few necessary parts. The approach typically begins with a program of "universal screening" that picks out students who may be struggling academically, usually with early reading skills.

When the student's problem area has been identified, teachers use high-quality, research-based interventions with the student, while closely monitoring his or her response to those lessons. If the student's skills pick up, he or she leaves the process. If there are still problems, the interventions intensify in frequency or length.

If a student still doesn't respond to the most intensive instruction, he or she might then be referred for a comprehensive special education evaluation. In that way, using RTI as part of a disability-intervention process is different from the previous method that involved giving a student an IQ test, and then seeing if those results showed a discrepancy between the student's intelligence and academic achievements. The "IQ discrepancy" model meant that students had to essentially fail in school for a long period before being deemed eligible for special education services.

Proponents of RTI say the process has changed education because of its focus on

catching problems early, and on improving education for all students.

"RTI, writ large, is really about general education reform," said Robert H. Pasternack, a former assistant secretary for special education and rehabilitative services, and now an official with Dallas-based Cambium Learning Group, which creates instructional materials. Mr. Pasternack was in office when President George W. Bush created the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education, which in 2001 pushed both for the use of RTI and for allowing states to use federal special education dollars for intervening early with students who were not yet identified as having a disability. Both recommendations ended up in the IDEA.

"We had a moral imperative to do things differently, and a fiscal imperative to do things differently," Mr. Pasternack said, because too often, students were being told they had a disability when they were really victims of poor instruction.

Even with the intense and expanding interest and the investment of new money and other resources, the RTI process evokes questions.

The migration of RTI into new subjects, grade levels, and uses has come with little hard research to guide the way. At the same time, education schools are trying to figure out how—or whether—to introduce the concept to teachers-in-training.

Researchers are pondering whether RTI is being used carefully enough to yield valid results when it comes to identifying learning disabilities.

By the same token, some parents have complained that the process takes too long, and is not always implemented well enough to help their academically challenged children.

As the debate continues, RTI practitioners are forging ahead.

Donald Deshler, a professor of special education at the University of Kansas, in Lawrence, and a longtime researcher of student literacy, said the next step in RTI is for researchers to shift away from studying the nuts and bolts of how to implement the framework, and instead figure out just what elements make the process thrive in some schools and districts.

"There are some things that are embedded in RTI that make me hopeful," Mr. Deshler added. For one, he said, "it begins and ends with instruction. RTI looks directly at student achievement in the most fundamental way."

Q:

Many people talk about response to intervention as being a general education initiative, which leaves some wondering how special educators with their specialized training fit in. What is your day like now with students at your elementary school?

ELIZABETH DOBRINEN

Special Education Teacher, Madison Elementary School, Sanger, Calif.:

A: "If RTI is done with fidelity, the strengths of both the general education and special education teachers stand out. Special education teachers have been trained to individualize to the need of students and find appropriate strategies that meet their needs. The lower tiers of the RTI model are where general teachers' strengths are highlighted. They are trained to teach the grade level standards and to dig deeper into those standards effectively.

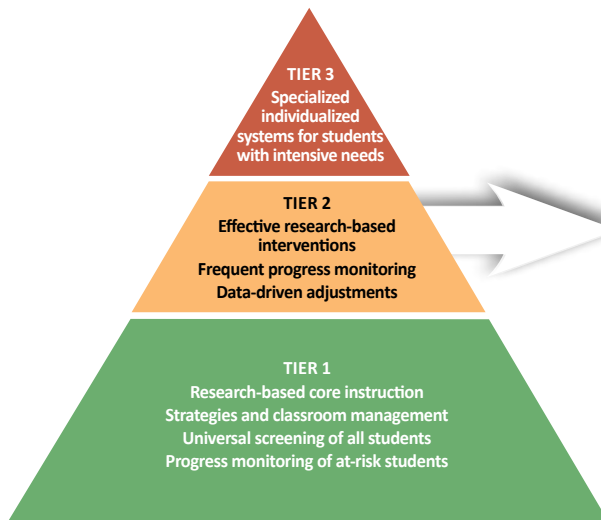
"It takes a lot of communication, collaboration and trust among my colleagues to pull off a schedule where the needs of the [special education] students are being met and the needs of the students that I may be serving in the intensive groups can be met as well. The goal of the schedule is to effectively meet the needs of all students.

"A great example of that this year is my one reading group that has 2nd- and 3rd-graders. The five students are grouped together based on all five having the same need. Two of the students are on an [individualized education program.] Two of the students are in the problem solving stage—the RTI team is asking, 'Why are these two students not progressing as effectively as they should?' So those two are receiving services from the intervention teacher and myself.

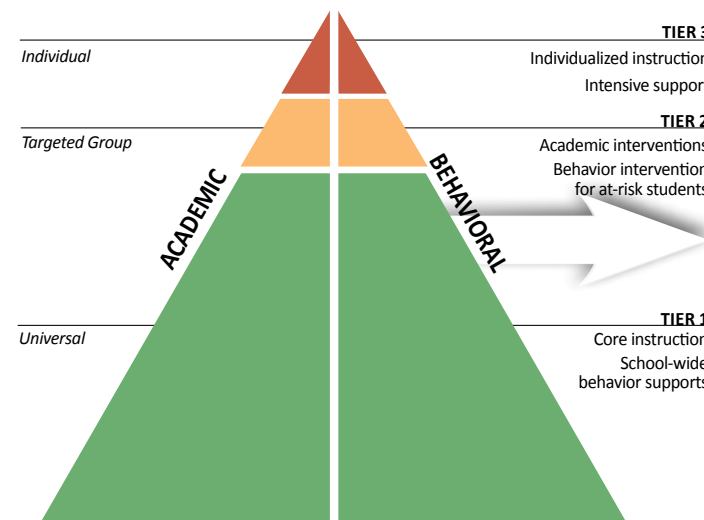
"The fifth student is in the bottom 5 percent of his grade level for reading. He needs strategic intervention to help him grow. Working together with the RTI team and grade-level teachers, all five students are receiving what they need to be successful."

THE EVOLUTION OF RTI

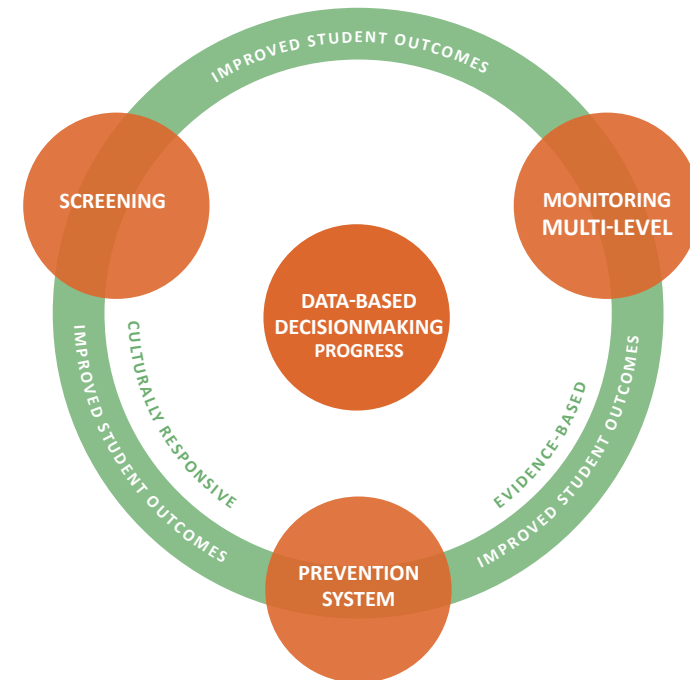
The basic “pyramid of interventions,” at left, became a well-known symbol of response to intervention because it gives a quick visual representation of how an RTI program can function in schools. Some depictions evolved to show how RTI fits in a model of academic as well as behavioral supports for students. Below, the National Center on Response to Intervention now promotes an even more complex visual model of RTI.



SOURCE: “Foundations and Research on Identifying Model Responsiveness-to-Intervention Sites,” *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 2004

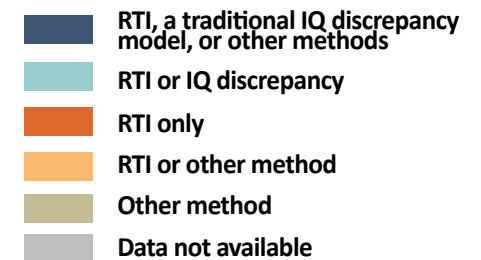
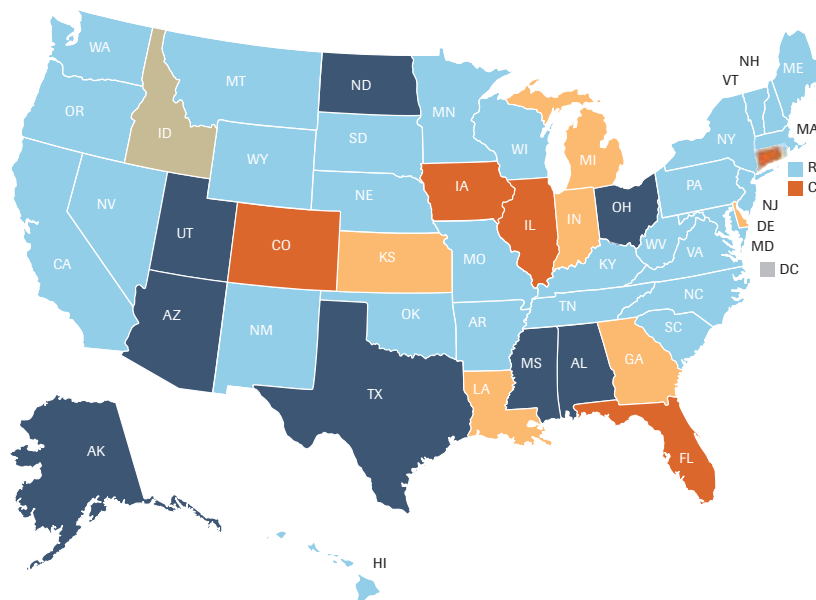


SOURCE: “Response to Intervention: Policy Considerations and Implementation,” National Association of State Directors of Special Education, 2005



NATIONWIDE LOOK: Identifying Students With Learning Disabilities

Seven years after response to intervention was incorporated into federal special education law, most states now allow RTI or IQ discrepancy to be used to identify students with learning disabilities.



Source: National Center on Response to Intervention



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Review of IDEA Shows More Use of Response to Intervention

By Nirvi Shah

Seven years after the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act was renewed with a provision allowing response to intervention to be used when deciding if a child has a specific learning disability, a new study shows 71 percent of school districts use the strategy in at least one school.

IDEA requires the U.S. Department of Education to have the Institute of Education Sciences review how states and districts put the law into place, separate of annual reports submitted by the department to Congress on the implementation of the law. The latest national assessment, released in late July, found that response to intervention is used in 61 percent of all elementary schools, 45 percent of middle schools, and 29 percent of high schools.

RTI involves identifying students' learning problems quickly and using a series of focused lessons, or interventions, to address those problems before they become entrenched. The intensity of those interventions increases if the student doesn't respond.

It's not entirely surprising that RTI is growing in popularity, and it is probably in wider use than reflected in this study, which looked at RTI use in the 2008-09 school year. Earlier this year, one of my colleagues wrote about this trend, (*See Education Week, March 2, 2011*) nudged along by the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA, which said states must allow districts to use RTI as a tool for determining if a child has a specific learning disability. And a recent report from the National Center on Learning Disabilities attributes the use of RTI as part of the reason behind the decline in the number of students found to have a learning disability over the last 10 years.

Building on this report, the Institute for Educational Sciences is

working on a more in-depth evaluation of RTI that will describe how its practice for early grade reading varies across schools and how academic outcomes, including reading achievement and special education identification, vary with elementary schools' adoption of these practices.

Other findings about IDEA in the report:

- Almost 90 percent of special education teachers for preschool-age children with disabilities and school-age children and youth with disabilities are considered "highly qualified," but the definition of highly qualified varies sharply from state to state.
- About 5 percent of preschool-age and school-age special education teacher full-time positions were vacant during the 2008-09 school year. Among the districts that said qualified applicants were hard to find, more than half had difficulty finding qualified special education teachers who serve children in high school. In addition, it was particularly hard to find teachers to work with students with autism and emotional disturbances.
- For both young children and school-age children, the number of requests for due process hearings was far more than the number of due process hearings that actually took place. When parents have a complaint about the services their child receives, they can request one of these hearings to try to resolve their concerns. While the number of requests for these hearings stayed about the same from 2003 to 2008—about 22 requests for every 10,000 students with disabilities—the number that actually took place dropped by more than half, from 3.36 for every 10,000 students in 2003-04 to 1.61 in 2007-08.

Published August 19, 2011, in *Education Week's On Special Education Blog*

Survey of School, District Workers Shows Wider Use of RTI

By Nirvi Shah

Yet another study shows the growing popularity of response to intervention.

Response to intervention, or RTI, is a strategy that involves identifying students' learning problems quickly and using a series of focused lessons, or interventions, to address those problems before they become entrenched. The intensity of the interventions increase if a student doesn't respond. In this survey, full implementation of RTI involved universal screening of students at least three times a year, the use of clear decision rules to move students between tiers of instruction, and regular monitoring of students' progress based on their learning needs.

In a survey of nearly 1,400 school- and district-level workers, 68 percent said they are either in full implementation or in the process of districtwide implementation. The survey showed that districts with 10,000 or more students were significantly more likely to be in full implementation than smaller districts.

GlobalScholar conducted the survey. The company describes itself as being comprised of the education solution offerings of Scantlon, GlobalScholar and Spectrum K12. The survey was also sponsored by the American Association of School Administrators and the National Association of State Directors of Special Education, among others.

The survey also reaffirmed what other studies have found: of schools planning or implementing RTI, most are elementary schools. Among survey respondents who said they are using or considering RTI, 98 percent said they already use or are planning to implement it in the elementary grades.

Also, the survey found, a majority of districts report that putting RTI into place is a unified effort between special education and general education. In districts where the effort is coming from a single area, gen-

eral education is a little more likely to be leading.

RTI has been credited with a decline in the number of students identified as having learning disabilities in recent years. This survey found that in 35 percent of districts, using RTI cut referrals to special education by at least 10 percent, and in some districts it was as much as 50 percent.

Fourteen percent of those surveyed said that RTI has been the focus of legal proceedings, such as due process hearings or official complaints.

Also interesting: 11 percent said using RTI has led to an increase in the number of schools in the district making adequate yearly progress under the No Child Left Behind law. That's up from 5 percent last year.

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States Adapting Best Practices From Special Ed. for Standards

By Nirvi Shah

Some instructional approaches associated closely with special education are gaining traction more quickly than ever as more states and districts look to them as the ideal tools to implement the Common Core State Standards.

In particular, two strategies—universal design for learning and response to intervention—are being cited by states in requests for waivers from the No Child Left Behind Act in the section about how they will implement the standards. Those familiar with the techniques say the pairings are logical, and the timing is right.

“To us, it makes perfect sense. With UDL, you really do start with addressing goals that are applicable for all learners,” said Patti Ralabate, the director of implementation for the Center for Applied Special Technology in Wakefield, Mass., which helped develop UDL.

Broadly, universal design for learning is an instructional method that involves creating lessons and classroom materials flexible enough to accommodate different learning styles. And response to intervention is an approach intended to provide early identification of students’ learning problems paired with the use of focused lessons—interventions—to address those problems before it’s too late.

“Without a system to be responsive to student need, we’re kind of back where we started with standards: aiming at the middle. There was going to be nothing intrinsically new unless we seized upon an opportunity to make this about every kid,” said Emilie Amundson, the assistant director of content and learning for the Wisconsin education department. “We have an opportunity to sell RTI as a process that helps implement the common core as opposed to this thing you do for special ed. identification or special education.”

And because the common-core standards are new, the timing is perfect for states to shift to using UDL and RTI, said Ricki Sabia, the chairwoman of the National UDL Task Force in Washington and the associate director of the National Down Syndrome Society, based in New York City.

States are “redoing their curriculum anyway. We never expected people to just throw out everything and start all over,” Ms. Sabia said. “Now, all of a sudden, they are changing everything.”

Marrying Strategy, Content

Districts already using either or both approaches say there is no question about their benefits for implementing the common-core standards.

When the Bartholomew Consolidated school district in Columbus, Ind., began reworking its approach to instruction to incorporate the principles of universal design for learning a few years ago, it was presented from the start as something to be used with all students, regardless of whether they had a disability.

That approach will stick as the district begins teaching the common-core standards, said George Van Horn, the special education director for the 12,000-student district.

“We don’t believe there’s something for one segment of students that’s not for the benefit of other students,” he said. He illustrates this for some teachers by noting the utility of closed captioning in a crowded bar or noisy gym. “It was created for people with hearing difficulties, yet look at the benefit,” he said.

When a science teacher incorporated common-core vocabulary into her lessons, she didn’t order students to memorize a list and take a test—a task some students wouldn’t be able to manage. Instead, students were able to show they’ve learned the words using journals, doing some kind

of project, or carrying out a computer activity. The latter approach reflects the work the district is working on with Ms. Ralabate's center to improve literacy instruction across subjects, a demand of the common-core standards.

In the Chelmsford, Mass., school system, universal design for learning has been applied in pockets across the 5,000-student district for several years, said Kristan Rodriguez, the assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction.

Now, the district is working with the Center for Applied Special Technology on marrying UDL with teaching the common-core standards that require students to show their prowess in persuasive and informative writing.

But teachers already familiar with UDL who are teaching the standards—Massachusetts students will be tested on the English/language arts common-core standards next year—are using it with other standards already, Ms. Rodriguez said.

A recent example: A middle school English teacher said some of her students who had taken a midterm didn't show mastery of certain skills on the exam. She split them into groups, matching those who missed similar questions, and asked them to demonstrate their knowledge of those skills in another way, by teaching it to the rest of the class.

Providing students with choice, a different way of expressing themselves, is one of the core tenets of UDL.

"Kids that initially had trouble with understanding those skills created an activity that demonstrated their mastery," she said.

Doubling Up

The shift in the use of UDL is also significant for students because of the very aim of the new standards, Ms. Sabia said, which is to produce a generation better prepared for life after high school.

"Being college- and career-ready is not just about mastering content. It's about knowing how to approach things," she said. When students know the most effective ways to learn and express themselves, those are strategies they can use the rest of their lives. But if they know something, and their teachers can't tell, "you're wasting time reteaching. And the kids are getting frustrated," she said.

An ideal situation for implementing the common-core standards would be one in which UDL and RTI are employed together—which is the approach in Chelmsford and other Massachusetts districts, Ms. Sabia said.

"UDL is key for RTI. If you're not letting [students] show what they know," Ms. Sabia said, "you're not going to know whether the intervention is working."

The Center for Applied Special Technology

is working with several districts specifically on connecting the common-core standards with UDL, Ms. Ralabate said. It recently received an \$800,000 grant from the Seattle-based Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to work with four districts for a year on implementing UDL in sync with the standards, including Chelmsford, Bartholomew, and in Maryland, the systems in Baltimore and Cecil counties. (The Gates Foundation also provides support for coverage of K-12 business and innovation in *Education Week*.)

In the past, much of the center's work has been about just informing people what universal design for learning is, Ms. Ralabate said.

"This gives us the opportunity to do more than just awareness-building. It gives us the opportunity to do a lot of matching and coordinating between other initiatives and UDL," she said.

Other states and districts are working through these coordination efforts on their own.

In the Kent Independent School District in the Grand Rapids, Mich. area, special education director Laurie VanderPloeg said pieces of UDL had been in place long before the common-core standards. The strategy was targeted at only a fraction of Kent County's 109,000 students. Now, UDL has been embedded in the curriculum districtwide.

"Before, it was students with disabilities who had it as accommodations," she said. Now, all students benefit, and there is less attention on whether an individual student has a disability.

In North Carolina, universal design for learning has been used for a while, said Claire Greer, the state education department's consultant for autism, severe, and multiple disabilities and the coordinator of its deaf-blind project. But because of the common-core standards, the attitude about its use and potential has changed dramatically, she said.

"For the first time, it's a part of instruction. That is the shift that's being made. The UDL information is no longer just housed in special ed.," Ms. Greer said. "UDL is ... not about special ed.; it's about all learners."

Challenges Remain

New approaches to instruction won't erase the challenges of implementing standards that are more demanding of students and teachers than most states' existing standards. In the 2,800-student Mason County, Ky., district, students with disabilities' education plans are now being written based on the standards, said Greta Stanfield, its special education director.

Some teachers "get these big deer-in-the-headlights looks. 'We can't teach all those standards in one year,'" teachers say. Instead,

“ UDL is key for RTI. If you're not letting [students] show what they know, you're not going to know whether the intervention is working.”

RICKI SABIA

Chairwoman, National UDL Task Force

they determine which standards are truly essential, she said.

"Can they achieve the same [amount of standards] in a single year? No," Ms. Stanfield said. "Even our gifted students are struggling."

To help students who show they are falling behind, the district has increased the amount of time they spend on math from 55 minutes a day to 90. Most of those students have disabilities, she said. Next school year, some will have 60 minutes more on top of that, at the expense of classes she said she knows are engaging, such as art.

For students with disabilities, the standards, accepted by all but four states, could eliminate some of the time students with disabilities lose moving between schools and states, said Lindsay Jones, the senior director of policy and advocacy services for the Council for Exceptional Children in Arlington, Va.

"You should be able to do that and not worry—especially for kids with disabilities where transition is a huge issue," she said.

But one overarching fear remains, despite the changes to instruction the standards may bring, improvements to education plans, and the smoothing of transitions.

"What we saw in the beginning of No Child Left Behind was, blame the kids with disabilities—they're so far behind," Ms. Jones said. Indeed, many schools failed to make the law's hallmark adequate yearly progress benchmark solely because of students with disabilities.

As the stakes for schools have risen, with demands increasing for all students, "it was all of a sudden, 'Wait a minute. Everybody's behind,'" Ms. Jones said.

The rigorous new standards may once again turn students with disabilities into scapegoats for poor school performance, she said.

"I think you're going to see the same thing," Ms. Jones said. "I'm concerned that will repeat itself."

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A Calif. District Employs RTI to Boost Achievement for All

Educators in Sanger, Calif., schools credit response to intervention for helping to increase student test scores

By Christina A. Samuels

The 2004-05 school year didn't start off well for the Sanger Unified School District.

The 10,500-student district, located about a dozen miles east of Fresno, had entered its first year of "program improvement"—a gentler way of saying that Sanger was among the 98 lowest-performing districts in the state based on the success criteria spelled out in the federal No Child Left Behind law.

The district fell short because it had failed to make adequate yearly progress. Hardly any group of students was doing as well as they could be, administrators said.

"We recognized we had some weak areas. We didn't recognize how profound they were, and that was a shock for us," said Marcus Johnson, who has been superintendent of Sanger Unified since 2003.

The district, set among the vineyards and citrus groves of California's Central Valley, has some children with high needs: Seventy-six percent are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch and 24 percent are English-language learners. But in 2004, the system hadn't aligned its curriculum to state standards, had a fractured system of professional development, and had no real way to expand or sustain the random bursts of improvement that would appear in an individual school or classroom, according to local educators.

It's a sad story that Sanger administrators don't mind telling six years later, because the district's turnaround since then has been so dramatic. In two years, it exited program improvement and racked up honors at its schools for academic achievement.

California measures its schools on an "academic performance index," an annual measure of test-score performance that starts at

200 and tops out at 1,000. The target is 800 points or more. In 2004, Sanger's API was 599 points. In 2010, it was 805. And Mr. Johnson was named the 2011 Superintendent of the Year by the American Association of School Superintendents.

One key piece of the district's success, administrators here say, was committing to response to intervention. RTI is an instructional practice that involves identifying students with specific learning or behavioral weaknesses and then providing progressively intensive interventions to help them improve. Here in Sanger, response to intervention was not put in place solely to address lagging special education achievement; instead, the process was seen as a way of improving education for the entire district, including students with disabilities.

Sanger's experience is one practical example that can help answer some questions that have swirled around RTI ever since its inclusion in the 2004 Individuals With Disabilities Education Act. The increasingly popular educational framework is described by its supporters as a "general education initiative," but what does that look like in operation?

To answer that question, it's necessary to look at where the district was, and where it is heading.

Diving In

The response-to-intervention framework can be implemented different ways, but there are some common elements. It requires that all students be evaluated and that those with identified academic weaknesses be given specific lessons or interventions that address those weaknesses. Students are monitored closely for their response to the interventions, and if they improve, the extra interventions are scaled back. The process is often repre-

Q:

How has your job as a school psychologist changed to adapt to response to intervention and other reforms going on in your district?

MITCHEL CASADOS

**school psychologist,
Washington Academic Middle
School, Sanger, Calif.:**

A: "Before we began the process of implementing systems-level interventions, I would have needed to have bought a Dalmatian, painted my car red, and added a siren because, honestly, I operated more like a firefighter, only being able to address the most pressing behavioral and academic issues in crisis mode. After some initial analysis, we quickly realized that many of our support and administrative staff were facing the same issue. With a middle school population of 1,700, reacting to discipline issues was far more of a priority than preventing them.

"After systematically creating a multi-tiered intervention system founded on the idea that prevention is a more fruitful investment than reaction and that the school environment can be programmed to systematically respond to student and staff needs, our site made significant progress (i.e., we cut our discipline rate by 50 percent in two months!) ...

"I view the principal role of the school psychologist as an engineer of prevention and intervention, with the direct delivery of services provided for the most needy of students. If constructed properly, the school environment itself, in which people are one element, should be the primary service provider."

Q:

Why did you join the RTI committee in your school district?

TARA PHIEFFER

mother of four and member of the RTI committee for the 2,600-student Seaford Union Free School District, Long Island, N.Y.:

A: “I have a child who is in general education and has an [individualized education program] for speech and reading. He’s struggling with one of the pieces of the core curriculum. I had to bring it to the attention of the teacher [in October]. In February they started his intervention. [The delay produces] a snowball effect. One concept builds on another. He didn’t master a concept he needed to get to the next one. It’s very frustrating and overwhelming for him.

“It’s a frustration not just for parents and children, but also for the teacher[s] ... they are so pressed for time.

“That’s why when an RTI plan is put in place [teachers will] know. If we see [a child] not mastering the concept in this span, then [we decide] what we need to do to intervene.

“We’ve talked about time scales and measurements for each intervention. Progress monitoring could be two weeks or four weeks—smaller increments to see growth, so it isn’t a snowball effect. We can see growth and give kids positive reinforcement quickly, or if they haven’t grown and they need to go on to the next intervention. That’s where I think a lot of the problem lies from our own experience here.

“We haven’t seen other people’s RTI plans to see what time scale they have for each intervention. It would be interesting to see how that works. I think that time frame has to be of the essence. It’s a lot of work I’m sure, but I think it would help the kids.

“I feel bad for these teachers. They keep saying, ‘When are we going to find the time for this?’ But it’s going to be mandated. The pressure’s on.”

sented as a pyramid, where all students are in the bottom tier, getting strong instruction, while the smaller groups of students who need extra help are represented in higher tiers.

Sanger considers RTI one leg of a tripod of interventions that it put into place after getting the bad news from the state about its poor academic ranking. The other two changes were the implementation of Explicit Direct Instruction and the creation of professional learning communities, a collaboration framework designed to make student instruction a collaborative effort among school staff. The benefit of Explicit Direct Instruction’s systematic approach, Sanger’s educational leaders say, is that all students in a particular grade end up being taught the same information, aligned closely to state standards. Bringing Explicit Direct Instruction to the district was a way of bolstering instruction in RTI’s “Tier 1,” the instruction that all students receive, said Mr. Johnson, the superintendent.

Creating professional learning communities allowed teachers, administrators, and support staff members to interact in a way they never had before, Mr. Johnson said. Teachers and school psychologists could get together, for instance, to share information about students who may need extra support.

The RTI process, along with other reform efforts, were rolled out in what district administrators call a “loose-tight” model of leadership: All of the district’s 13 schools were expected to adopt the changes, but the specifics were left up to each school.

Kimberly Salomonson, a program specialist who provides support services to several schools in the district, remembers being worried at first that each school wouldn’t be given a specific series of steps to follow.

“What we realized was that it just wasn’t going to be necessary,” she said. The fact that schools were trying some different elements allowed the district to experiment with a broad set of resources, she said. Principals and teachers were able to learn from their counterparts at other schools.

“If you own [the process], and it’s not successful, you really have an incentive to fix it,” Ms. Salomonson said.

How RTI looks

To those who argue that RTI sounds just like good teaching, Ketti Davis and the staff at Sanger’s Lone Star Elementary describe how a struggling student might have been helped before the district reform initiatives. With 560 students, the school is about 40 percent Hispanic and 40 percent Asian, with the remainder white, African-American and Filipino. Three-quarters of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches, and around 40 percent are English-language learners, the

principal said.

Ms. Davis and her colleagues said the school has good teachers, who would recognize if a student was struggling and would try different activities to nudge the child into better achievement—but there was little coordination of that work. The result was that everyone at the school would be working hard, but not seeing the kinds of improvements that could boost the school’s performance overall.

“There was no real coordinated information. Behavioral issues would be mixed in with the academic,” Ms. Davis said. Some teachers referred many students for special education evaluations; others referred relatively few. And if a student was found ineligible for special education, there was no set plan for what to do next.

Under Lone Star’s restructured process, students who need extra help may now work with the same teacher who provides special education services without having to be identified as a special education student. Frequently regrouping students helps keep all of them from feeling embarrassed by labels, said Leslie Hoffman, the school’s resource, or special education teacher.

“It’s like a revolving door in my classroom. There’s no stigma attached to that,” she said.

Parents are notified when their children move into “Tier 2” or “Tier 3” interventions, so they can know they are receiving extra help.

But the process can be a juggling act between giving students extra interventions and making sure they’re not missing other instruction that can leave them behind. The third tier of instruction can be individual instruction on a daily basis, but teachers try to make sure students aren’t missing so much regular class time that they fall behind in other subjects.

“Do we want to move students out of standard instruction to give them remediation? That’s not always the best program,” said Anna Quintanilla, the school psychologist at Lone Star. Explaining those needs to parents is an ongoing process, she said.

The role of school psychologists is one element that changed at all Sanger schools when response to intervention was introduced districtwide.

School psychologists often spend a lot of time evaluating students for special education. In Sanger, the school psychologists see their work as much more expansive. They’re the ones who have the professional training to evaluate the mountains of data that an RTI process yields on each student, they say.

Mitchel Casados, the school psychologist at the 1,700-student Washington Academic Middle School, the district’s sole middle school, says he sees school psychology shifting in the direction of “more systems-level consulting and less individual service delivery” as a result of the district’s move to RTI. Washington

Academic has been honored this year as a “school to watch” by a national alliance that promotes middle-grades reform.

Before the reform process, “my role was a firefighter,” Mr. Casados said, noting that he and other administrators processed discipline referrals all day long.

“Teachers didn’t get the sense that discipline was something they could address themselves,” he said. The middle school put in place a behavior-focused, tiered-intervention system, which cut down on students’ acting out in classrooms. Students still get sent to the office for misbehaving, but the reduction in referrals gives administrators time to leave the office and visit classrooms, too, Mr. Casados said.

The district credits RTI and other initiatives with its improved performance on state tests. In 2004-05, 35 percent of all students were proficient or above in English/language arts, and 44 percent were proficient or above in math. Last school year, the proficiency rates were 58 percent in English/language arts, and 67 percent in math.

In special education, where RTI is often focused, Sanger also has seen improvement. In 2004-05, the proficiency rate for that student group was 18.6 percent in English/language arts, and 23 percent in math. Last school year, those rates had risen to 36.5 percent proficiency in English/language arts, and 48 percent proficiency in math.

The California Comprehensive Center at WestEd, part of a federal network that provides assistance to the California education department to implement the NCLB law and improve student achievement, has profiled Sanger and three other California districts for having better-than-expected performance among special education students, considering the district’s demographics.

Positive Results

Even with the improvement in special education test scores, Sanger officials struggle with closing the achievement gap completely.

“If you exit students out of special education who can learn in a regular setting, we’re left with the kids who have really intensive needs,” said Matthew Navo, the director of pupil services for the district.” But keeping students in special education is expensive and doesn’t serve those children well, he said.

The district credits the reform effort for reducing “encroachment,” a term for when the district has to draw from general funds to pay for special programs. W. Richard Smith, Sanger’s deputy superintendent, says that encroachment was reduced by \$640,000 in the first three years of the initiative.

Sanger still is working on how to incorporate RTI into a process for identifying students who possibly have learning disabilities. The

idea, which introduced response to intervention to federal education law, says that states can allow districts to use RTI as part of a special education evaluation. The federal Education Department since has issued guidance clarifying that RTI cannot be the only method that a school uses to make such a determination, but it can be part of a comprehensive evaluation.

This year, Sanger is piloting at two elementary schools an identification process that includes RTI. District administrators said they want to avoid a situation where a student might be considered learning disabled in one school, but not another, because of differing RTI practices. Eventually, some interventions, and the length of time that students spend in them, will look similar districtwide, say central office staff.

District officials do say that RTI has cut down on special education referrals. “We’re constantly problem-solving,” said Elizabeth Dobrinen, an intervention teacher at Madison Elementary School in the district. “If this program doesn’t work, it doesn’t mean we’re on the way to special education. It might mean we haven’t gotten quite the right thing for every kid.”

Time will tell what happens to those students as they move through middle school and high school. Sanger staff members say that the process will continue to adapt to the changing needs of its students.

“I’m sorry, but business as usual is not doing the job for our kids,” Superintendent Johnson said. “We’ve created a support structure where it’s harder for a child to fail than it is for them to succeed in our system.”

Special coverage of district and high school reform and its impact on student opportunities for success is supported in part by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

How Research-Based Reading Intervention Can Help Districts Meet Common Core Standards



The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) aim to revolutionize the way that American children are taught to read and engage with texts. Particularly in the area of English Language Arts, the Common Core requires a paradigm shift, with a focus on the development of critical thinking skills, as well as reading comprehension, to ensure that students have the breadth of literacy skills needed to foster success in college and future careers.

Achieving such ambitious goals will be neither easy nor inexpensive, particularly for districts that may be performing well below the new standards. But districts can make the transition easier by integrating research-based reading intervention programs into their current curriculums, using targeted instruction for struggling students and regular assessments to ensure that student outcomes will meet the requirements of the CCSS. By augmenting their established curriculums with carefully designed and thoroughly vetted reading intervention programs, school districts can meet the Common Core's ambitious goals.

Common Core State Standards for Reading

To date, 45 U.S. states, as well as the District of Columbia, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands and the U.S. Virgin Islands (as of August 9, 2012), have adopted the Common Core State Standards, which provide teachers, administrators, parents, and students with uniform standards for measuring student achievement. The Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy (CCSS-ELA) include specific objectives concerning students' reading abilities that go behind simple comprehension to deeper critical thinking skills. The CCSS mandate requires that students' reading abilities develop in alignment with set goals as they progress from one grade to the next, with the expectation that they will be prepared for college and the workforce by the end of high school. The Common Core also requires students be exposed to a spectrum of literature, including classical and contemporary works, as well as challenging informational texts. While the standards compel teachers to provide instruction on certain essential content – including classic myths and stories from around the world, foundational U.S. documents, seminal works of American literature, and the writings of Shakespeare – they also give school districts and teachers latitude in designing or choosing curricula they think are most suitable for their students.

In this regard, the CCSS are focused on the ends rather than the means. According to the CCSS website (www.corestandards.org), "By emphasizing required achievements, the Standards leave room for teachers, curriculum developers, and states to determine how those goals should be reached and what additional topics should be addressed."

By focusing less on the content of each individual district's curriculum and more on outlining desirable outcomes, the Common Core gives teachers and districts freedom to select research-based reading intervention programs best suited to their needs.

Implementing the Common Core

A number of proactive school districts are already working to bring their curricula into line with the Common Core, by either leveraging existing reading intervention programs or piloting new Response to Intervention (RTI) programs to ensure that students are meeting grade-level standards.

"Our district had started Common Core awareness the year before I came [in 2011], and we spent a lot of effort on professional development last year, primarily in the elementary levels," says Gary McGuire, curriculum director of the Temple City Unified School District (TCUSD) in Temple City, California.

Although adjusting to the Common Core has not been easy, he adds, "We're further ahead, I think, than other districts in bringing that awareness together and getting the Common Core standards into the teachers' hands." He credits the district's adoption of the *Voyager Passport*® and *Passport Reading Journeys*® reading intervention programs from Voyager Learning and the accompanying implementation support for giving the district a head start.

Prior to McGuire's arrival, school and district administrators recognized that referrals to special education were too high, particularly for minority students. They began exploring RTI as a vehicle for meeting intermediate intervention needs, including reading intervention for Title I students, and contracted with Voyager to provide the assessment and reading intervention tools for all grade levels. Although district schools completed implementation training in 2010-2011, the programs were not put into practice in the classroom until 2011-2012. Both *Voyager Passport* and *Passport Reading Journeys* provide the type of rich content and instruction in critical thinking that align well with the Common Core, McGuire notes.

"[The] content isn't going to vary that much in the Common Core, it's the way we approach the content, the depth of knowledge. That's going to impact what we do in interventions for the kids, as well," says McGuire. "Voyager has that depth of knowledge built into it. We just need to consciously link those together as we're rolling out the rest of our Common Core professional development and get into implementation."

Researched-Based Instruction

The standards-based movement that has driven adoption of the CCSS places heavy emphasis on the use of research-based curriculum and frequent student

assessment to monitor student progress toward grade-level expectations. Districts using reading intervention programs that are built on a strong research foundation, and also include integrated tools for increased practice and testing to track student progress, are finding the transition to the Common Core less onerous.

"We really appreciate having the research that is already done that shows us what does work, so we're not starting from scratch," says Geri Coats, a reading teacher at Righetti High School in Santa Maria, California, of Voyager's *LANGUAGE!*® reading intervention program. "We're able to implement strategies and assessments that are already proven to be successful with students, and we are seeing that success with our students," she adds.

Righetti serves more than 2000 students annually, including a large population of lower-income Title I children. The school adopted *LANGUAGE!* ten years ago and is currently using it as the reading intervention for regular

"We're able to implement strategies and assessments that are already proven to be successful with students, and we are seeing that success with our students."

Geri Coats, Reading Teacher,
Righetti High School, Santa Maria, California,
Voyager's *LANGUAGE!*® reading intervention program

education, special education, as well as the English Language Learner (ELL) intervention curriculum. Using one program for reading intervention lets students transition more easily between levels and eventually move out of *LANGUAGE!* into Reading Improvement or English Skills classes as an intermediary step before college prep English.

"[*LANGUAGE!*] provides students with the requisite skills that they will need to be successful and be able to comprehend the literature and write at the level that the Common Core demands, and do the analysis that is required in the Common Core, rather than just responding to literature and writing stories," says Coats. "Once they can develop that foundation in their *LANGUAGE!* class, they're much better off to go be successful and prove that they've learned it in both their college prep classes and in their assessments for the state."

Coats' results with *LANGUAGE!* and evangelism of the curriculum to her peers led the Santa Maria Joint Union High School District to pilot the program in the district's two other schools, along with another program. The idea was for all schools to provide the same instruction, particularly for ELL students, so that student data could

be compared more easily across grades and sites—an objective that has become even more relevant with California’s adoption of the Common Core.

“We said we wanted to stick with *LANGUAGE!* because we know it works—we’ve seen results with our students, and we didn’t want to change at all,” says Coats. A colleague at Santa Maria High School who used *LANGUAGE!* in her classroom for the pilot quickly became a strong proponent of the research-based curriculum and championed it to the district administration. The program was adopted district-wide two years ago.

The Role of Assessments

Because the assessments for the Common Core State Standards are not yet in place, Santa Maria Joint Union High School District uses student scores on the California High School Exit Exam (CHSEE) to track whether students likely will meet the CCSS grade-level requirements. Students generally take *LANGUAGE!* in the ninth grade, and the CHSEE is administered in the spring semester of the tenth grade.

“When we look at the percentages of passing, the students who come out of *LANGUAGE!* do at least as well as the population of students who started in college prep,” says Coats.

Judy Zimny, Ed.D., vice president of Voyager Education Services, notes that with the adoption of the Common Core State Standards, teachers need a shared understanding of what success looks like, and appropriate support to ensure they are teaching to the requisite level of mastery.

“It really boils down to making sure that your curriculum and your instruction and assessment are well aligned, that you have strong, specific, useful, formative assessments that happen regularly every two to three weeks across grade levels, and vertically within your grade levels,” Zimny says.

Teachers in Santa Maria using the *LANGUAGE!* reading intervention program also use VPORT®, Cambium Learning’s online assessment system and student management portal, to track student progress and determine whether differentiated instruction is needed for students.

Says Coats, “I find it very useful to help assess where my students are at, what I need to go back and reteach, and how I can do specialized groupings for reteaching if I only have a couple of students who need one thing.”

Best Practices for Teachers

Differentiating instruction based on how students are performing against grade-level expectations is critical to the success of any reading intervention program, notes Fred Ditmars, vice president of support services for Voyager Learning. He states, “You can’t teach without inspecting how it’s actually working with the students. The use of assessments has been so fundamental to what education is moving to.”

Equally important, says Ditmars, is the quality of instruction, and ensuring that teachers have adequate training and support to deliver the curriculum with fidelity. The key to a successful implementation of a new curriculum—something that will be a reality for many schools and districts to meet the requirements of the Common Core State Standards—is to change the behaviors in the school and the classroom. Research indicates that those behaviors don’t change without coaching.

“Our implementation team takes the best practices for effective teaching and helps to ensure those are understood and realized in the classroom through ongoing coaching with the teachers and ongoing professional development with the leaders, reinforcing those best practices through the school year,” Ditmars explains. In an independent analysis of implementation results for Voyager programs, districts that ensured 100 percent of teachers were trained in the curriculum had 32 percent better results than those districts that did not, he notes.

Conclusion

The Common Core State Standards are going to dramatically alter the landscape of American education. Although the CCSS mandates will undoubtedly benefit America’s education system and its children, they likely will be a challenge to implement, especially with students who struggle learning to read. Research-based programs with built-in assessment tools, like those provided by Voyager Learning, can make it easier for school districts and teachers to implement the Common Core successfully.

“I have the whole year [of data], and as you track the kids, individuals and groups, by grade level and site, you can see the impact [the program] has had on student growth,” says Gary McGuire. “In conversations with teachers, they’re saying they’re seeing the same things in the classroom with the kids who have been through it.”

At the same time, educating teachers about the standards for success and the best practices for meeting those standards is critical to bolstering student outcomes.

“In the end, it’s all about professional development,” says Judy Zimny. Regardless of which program is used—and regardless of whether they are teaching to state standards or the Common Core—educators need to have shared expectations and a common vision of what success looks like, and they need the kind of coaching that can help them meet their goals.

Says Zimny, “Our job is to make that school and the leadership and those teachers successful. It’s not about us being successful—it’s about us helping them be successful.”

When teachers and administrators have the right instructional tools, combined with continuous guidance and support, they are well-equipped to meet the requirements of the Common Core and help students reach new levels of achievement.

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Parents Skeptical of RTI's Benefits

Some say the approach delays help to students

By Christina A. Samuels

Eleven years ago, John Tomanelli and his wife, Doreen Johnson, settled in Marlborough, Conn., “specifically for the education,” as Mr. Tomanelli said.

But, for their youngest son, Ian, Marlborough Elementary School didn't turn out to be all they had hoped for. Diagnosed with speech and language delays in preschool, Ian had made sufficient progress by the middle of 3rd grade for the district and his parents to agree to end special education services for him. But Ian, now a 4th grader, continued to struggle in reading and writing, and in September, Marlborough educators decided he was a candidate for the district's Scientific Research-Based Interventions program, Connecticut's version of the “response to intervention” educational framework. His intervention was daily small-group reading instruction with his teacher.

That wasn't enough to meet Ian's needs, according to Ian's parents, who say the boy continued to struggle. They didn't know when the school would take its next step to help their son and, without the due process provisions available to them in special education, they weren't sure what their next steps should be, either.

“Where does this leave us—besides getting a tutor and accepting our son is a C student?” Ms. Johnson asks. “Do we need to look for an attorney?”

Ian's family's experience with response to intervention mirrors the concerns of many families across the country. As much as educational proponents and policymakers extol the benefits of RTI, it can be a hard sell to parents. Some say schools that use the educational framework for identifying and serving students with learning deficits don't always do a good job of providing interventions that work or of explaining what happens if an intervention doesn't work. Others argue that the approach is implemented inconsistently from district to district.

Marlborough Elementary Principal Scott Nierendorf declined to comment on the particulars of Ian's case, but said he and his staff are working to improve communication with parents about SRBI, an initiative the state rolled out in 2008. “If parents have questions, I want them to come in. If we can't explain it well, we may need to try a different approach. They may not always agree with us, but I

hope they'll have a better idea of why we're doing what we're doing.”

Parents' Concerns

Nationally, parents and their advocates say inconsistent implementation is the number-one problem with RTI. “I've never seen a process with so much potential and an implementation process that was so inconsistent,” said Mark Halpert, a father of children with special needs and a co-president of the Learning Disabilities Association of Florida.

Another concern among parents is that they feel RTI may slow or stop the process of identifying their children for special education services. José and Maria Patillo of Evanston, Ill., a diverse suburb north of Chicago, offer one example. When Abel, their second-youngest son, entered Evanston District 65's Head Start program in September, his difficulties were apparent.

Unlike the couple's other children, Abel “can't concentrate well in school,” according to Ms. Patillo. “He throws temper tantrums, doesn't sit still, and interrupts all the time.”

The Patillos had already noticed Abel needed special help and taken steps to meet his needs. They participated in a home-visiting program run by Family Focus, a local nonprofit group, and Abel had received speech therapy.

“When Abel started school, I talked to a teacher about my concerns,” Ms. Patillo said. For months, the help Abel received through RTI meant the classroom aide sat near him during group times to model appropriate behavior and redirect him as necessary. To his parents, that wasn't enough.

In November, Ms. Patillo wrote a letter to the program asking that Abel be evaluated for special education services.

In early January, the Patillos contacted local special education advocate Cari Levin. With her help, they persuaded the district to move forward with an evaluation. “I had to push pretty hard,” Ms. Levin said. “Abel has lost half a school year of intervention. It's important not to lose time right now.”

District officials said in an interview that they wanted to give RTI a chance and keep Abel in regular education as much as possible, without delaying needed services. “The purpose is not to delay services, the purpose is to give support to the teacher,” said Ellen Fogel-

“A parent always has the right to request an evaluation at any time.”

ALEXA POSNY

Assistant Secretary For Special Education and Rehabilitative Services,
U.S. Department of Education

berg, the director of early-childhood services. “We're new to this, and it's relatively new in early childhood.”

Ms. Fogelberg acknowledged the district has room to improve in communicating with parents about RTI. “I think we have the same intentions,” he said. “That might not always be clear to them.”

Elsewhere, advocates for parents say they see children remaining in RTI for multiple years without showing progress. “The majority of my caseload are high-functioning kids with autism who are being held in this holding pattern of RTI without their education needs being identified or addressed,” said Mara LaViola, an advocate who works with families of special-needs children in Dallas. “When they're in RTI, the schools really don't do anything. There's no data collection, no research-based intervention.”

Of eight sets of parents interviewed by *Education Week*, three parents—from Illinois, Massachusetts, and Texas—said their children have been in RTI for two to four years without showing progress. None would speak on the record for fear of schools retaliating against their children.

Department Weighs In

Federal officials are hearing stories like these and responding. “RTI was never intended to delay or deny a child with a disability,” said Alexa Posny, the assistant secretary for special education and rehabilitative services for the U.S. Department of Education. “A parent always has the right to request an evaluation at any time.”

On Jan. 21, the Education Department sent a memo to state school officers reminding

them that RTI cannot be used to delay or deny evaluation and that established due process provisions must continue to be followed.

However, it has declined to set time limits on how long states and districts can use RTI with students. “We can’t say there’s a fixed period of time, but when there’s evidence interventions aren’t working, that’s it. It was never intended to go on forever,” Ms. Posny said. She acknowledged the department has heard of cases where children remained in RTI for multiple years. “There is no reason to have to provide something for three or four years. That is unconscionable.”

Meanwhile, some parents in schools where RTI’s potential has been realized raved about what it has done for their children. Mendy Gomez of Tucson, Ariz., credits the educational framework as implemented in the local Vail school district with helping her son Adam, a 5th grader, reach grade level in reading. She said his success owes equally to RTI, the efforts she and her son have made, and Vail’s district leadership.

“I’ve had the luxury of seeing two different districts,” she said. “The difference in this district is management. The constant underlying theme is: Is this kid able to get to grade level? How can we work with him or her to get to grade level?”

At age 6, Adam was diagnosed with dyslexia and attention deficit hyperactivity syndrome, given an individualized education program and placed in special education. When Adam moved from the Phoenix district to Ocotillo Ridge Elementary in the Vail district, educators followed his earlier IEP and pulled him out of his regular classroom to provide support in reading and writing. But at the same time, he became part of the schoolwide RTI process.

Ms. Gomez said she appreciates Ocotillo Ridge’s benchmark assessments and built-in time for teachers to reteach students who haven’t mastered a standard. “A lot of parents are frustrated with [benchmark assessments], but I see the benefits of it. It catches them early enough. ... You can see and track where your kid’s strengths and weaknesses are,” said Ms. Gomez.

During 4th grade, Adam made big strides—reaching grade level in reading and coming close in writing. This fall, Adam’s IEP team determined he was ready to be in the regular classroom full time.

Adam’s story is not unusual among transfers to Vail, said Assistant Superintendent John Carruth. “When we put them in our system for a while, we see them close down that gap” between their ability and their achievement, he noted. “When you see that kind of kid make that kind of rapid gain, I believe the kid didn’t have a true disability in the first place.”

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Districts Must Walk Fine Line in Funding RTI Programs

By Sarah D. Sparks

As response to intervention becomes more popular, education leaders find the framework’s fluidity and broad application at times can be an awkward fit for some of the federal programs often used to pay for it.

The U.S. Department of Education has tried to encourage districts to pool federal formula grants for students in poverty, those in special education, English-language learners, and others with state and local money to support schoolwide RTI systems, but Melissa Junge, a lawyer with the Washington-based law firm Federal Education Group, said few districts manage to consolidate federal and local money fully. RTI’s individual student-focused philosophy often clashes with the rigid, decades-old school infrastructure of services provided based on students’ grant eligibility.

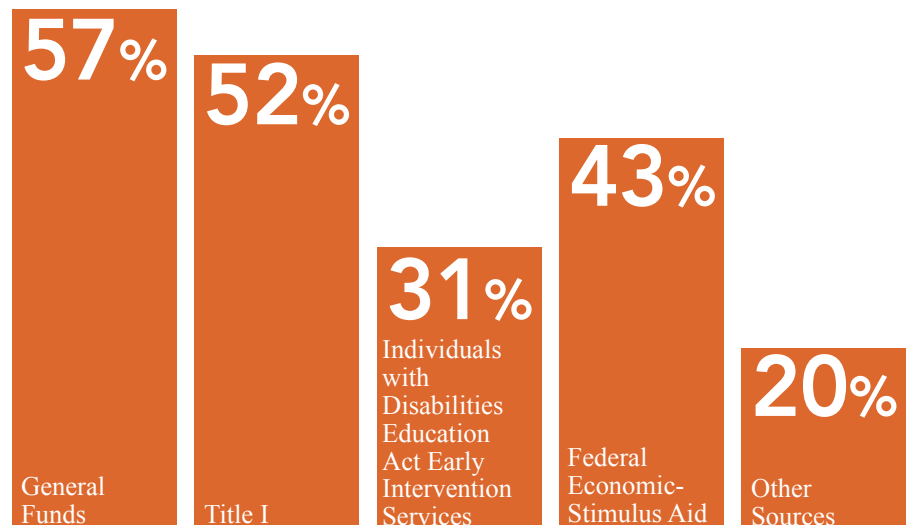
“While not impossible, using federal grant funds to support a comprehensive approach such as RTI can be very challenging,” Ms. Junge said.

That’s a problem because, while schools get considerable spending flexibility if they can completely consolidate all federal, state, and local money in a “schoolwide” program, the fiscal requirements of each grant can cause problems if schools do not unify programs and funding properly.

Such restrictions are “a huge barrier” to implementing RTI, according to Tessie Rose Bailey, a research analyst for the National Center on Response to Intervention at the Washington-based American Institutes for Research, “and most administrators just don’t have the knowledge or training to use their funds appropri-

FUNDING RTI A majority of districts surveyed last year relied on local funds and federal Title I programs to support RTI.

SOURCES: K-12 Solutions; American Association of School Administrators



ately, and so they just don't do anything with federal funds."

Under most circumstances, a district cannot use federal money to pay for something already mandated by state or local law; such use of federal grants runs counter to the requirement that aid such as Title I for disadvantaged students supplement, rather than supplant, local support for education.

Money under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act can be used to support any services based on a child's individualized education program. But only the 15 percent available for early-intervention services for students at academic risk can be used for students who have not been diagnosed with a disability, and according to federal rules, that money must be tracked even in a schoolwide Title I school—a school that has been given permission to pool federal funds to serve all children because of a high concentration of poor students.

Individual grants, such as Title III for English-language learners, also have restrictions on how they can be spent in connection with other grants.

"There is a disconnect between the objectives of RTI and the legal requirements that apply to federal grants," Ms. Junge said. "The focus of a good RTI program is to provide a successful intervention, but not necessarily a label, to get a student on track," while federal grants aim to serve specific groups of students.

So far, the most recent federal financial guidance on RTI is a 2008 annotated presentation. According to the slides, a school that does not fully implement a schoolwide Title I program can still use federal money to implement RTI, but only in specific interventions and tiers.

Erin Gross, an RTI coordinator for the Iberville Parish public schools in Louisiana, said all of her district's 10 schools have consolidated schoolwide programs, but administrators still struggle to meet the requirements of individual grants properly.

A few years ago, it was easy to incorporate reading assessments and interventions into the district's RTI framework to meet the goals of the federal Reading First program or the idea's early-intervention-services grants Ms. Gross said, but as the economy has languished, the district has had to be ever more cautious.

"We're reorganizing a lot of the money now," Ms. Gross said. With Reading First and other grants ended, she said, the district is tweaking the RTI program so that it meets the requirements of its new Teacher Incentive Fund grant—a pot of money generally used for teacher merit-pay projects.

"A lot of [the funding streams are] chang-

ing," Ms. Gross said, "If it ever all dries up, I don't know what we'd do, because we don't have the money to pay both teachers and interventionists."

Good Intentions

Good state or local intentions compound federal compliance problems. For example, about a dozen states require schools to use an RTI process to help determine a student's eligibility for special education services, and Mississippi mandated it as an instructional model for all students.

No one is "really comfortable" with this topic, Ms. Bailey said. "You might think you're on the right track, and then it turns around and bites you."

Louisiana is one state trying not to get bitten. State educators developed draft guidance in 2009 on how districts should implement RTI, but they have not yet made it final. That step might be construed as a mandate that could violate supplanting restrictions. Instead, schools use the "draft" guidance to frame their thinking about RTI implementation, according to state RTI coordinator Diana Jones. "It's not mandated at the state [level] yet, but it's our expectation that everyone will universally screen, identify who is at grade level and below grade level, and develop ways to help them."

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How Should Students With Learning Disabilities Be Identified?

By Nirvi Shah

Who are students with learning disabilities? It depends on what state or school district you live in.

The combination of a surge in the use of response to intervention and a lack of consensus about how much of a role cognitive assessment should play in an evaluation prompted the National Center for Learning Disabilities this month to issue a new set of guidelines on its view of how students with specific learning disabilities should be identified.

As the use of RTI has grown, there have also been concerns that it has been used inappropriately, delaying or preventing the identification of some students as having learning disabilities, or other disabilities.

NCLD said comprehensive evaluations of students should include multiple prongs, which it cites as coming straight from the 2004 version of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. These include a variety of assessment tools and strategies to gather functional, developmental, and academic information about a child; an observation of the student in the learning environment; the determination that a student's learning struggles are not primarily the result of a visual, hearing, or physical disability, an intellectual disability, an emotional disturbance, cultural factors, environmental or economic disadvantage, or because they are learning English; and the determination that a student's

struggles aren't primarily the result of a lack of instruction.

In addition, parents and a team of school staff must work together to determine if a child has a learning disability, NCLD said. Parents have to be provided with the results of repeated assessments of achievement.

For students participating in an RTI program, parents must be notified about their state's policies on the collection of student performance data, strategies for increasing the child's rate of learning, and their right to request an evaluation for special education services.

The RTI process can't be used to deny or delay these evaluations.

The new position from NCLD focuses heavily on RTI, noting that "when implemented with fidelity, RTI will expedite the [learning disability] evaluation process, as data on the child's response to instruction and intervention will have taken place prior to the onset of the 60-day timeline (or shorter if required by state policy) for an initial evaluation."

But it again emphasizes not substituting RTI for that evaluation.

"It is essential that schools proceed in a timely fashion," the position statement said, "With increasingly intensive interventions to ensure that the child is not languishing in an ineffective instructional program or intervention."

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In RTI Era, is Federal Special Education Law Out of Date?

By Nirvi Shah

When districts first started adopting response to intervention, the approach quickly became the target of criticism from parents who believed school districts were trying to put off more costly special education services.

RTI, an approach that involves using an escalating set of techniques to address skills a student is struggling with, got a boost in 2004, when the federal law changed to require states to let districts use it if they chose.

The hope was that its use would help distinguish between children who truly have specific learning disabilities and students whose learning difficulties could be resolved with general education interventions. Sure enough, in the last few years, the number of students identified as having learning disabilities has dropped.

But there are still lots of questions about how RTI is used, and whether it's being used correctly, considering the federal rules about identifying students with disabilities haven't changed. The RTI Action Network recently posted a piece about whether those rules and RTI jive. It comes almost a year after the federal Department of Education warned states about not using RTI to delay or deny evaluations for special education services.

"Ultimately, the key question is how schools can both make effective use of available high-quality research-based interventions, while at the same time avoiding potentially complicated child-find legal claims," writes Texas attorney Jose L. Martin, whose practice works exclusively on disabilities issues and litigation affecting public schools.

He said schools would be wise to avoid one-sided decisions on regular education interventions, including decisions on timelines for interventions and schedules for progress monitoring, and the point at which to initiate an evaluation for special education.

"Schools appear to stand in the best position to defend their actions if they are undertaken in collaboration with parents who are informed they are free to request an IDEA evaluation at any time," Mr. Martin writes.

He notes that in some court cases, districts

have successfully defended their use of RTI. But in others, he writes, they lose when they use RTI—in response to parental demands for a special ed evaluation—but then don't actually provide that evaluation. Even if districts document the steps they take to intervene with struggling students and communicate their plans to parents while remaining clear about their option to request a special education referral, Mr. Martin wonders whether it's time for federal law to evolve with the perspective of years of RTI and other interventions at work within schools.

"As a broader range of struggling students' needs can be met outside of the special education system, IDEA might evolve to reflect this reality by updating its definition of special education services," he said. "Perhaps this debate will also lead to reform in child-find and referral rules, in recognition of schools' local intellectual and resources investments in high-quality intervention programs."

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INTERVIEW

Responding to RTI

Early-reading expert Richard Allington believes response to intervention is possibly "our last, best hope" for achieving full literacy in the United States. So why does he sound so unhopeful?

Interview by Anthony Rebora

RICHARD ALLINGTON, a professor of education at the University of Tennessee and the author of a number of prominent books on reading policy and instruction, is one of the country's most recognized experts on early literacy. A former president of the International Reading Association and the National Reading Council and co-editor of *No Quick Fix: Rethinking Literacy Programs in America's Elementary Schools* (Teachers College Press, 1995), Allington has long advocated for intensifying instructional support for struggling readers, and he is often credited with helping lay the groundwork for the response to intervention concept. But while he believes RTI is "our last, best hope" for achieving full literacy in the United States, he is critical of the way it has been conceptualized and implemented in many schools. Allington's most recent book, tellingly, is titled *What Really Matters in Response to Intervention* (Allyn & Bacon, 2008).

Q In *No Quick Fix: The RTI Edition*, you describe response to intervention as an "old wine with a new label." What do you mean by that?

Well, I'm 62. And literally, since I entered the education field at 21 and became a reading specialist the following year, the promise has been held that we're going to teach all kids to read. The good news is that, in the past five or 10 years, we've had large-scale demonstrations that show that in fact we could do that if we wanted to. We have studies involving multiple school districts and hundreds or thousands of kids demonstrating that, with quality instruction and intervention, 98 percent of all kids can be reading at grade level by the end of 1st or 2nd grade. So it's not a question that we don't know what to do. It's a question of having the will to develop full literacy in this country, and to organize schools and allocate money in ways that would allow us to do that. Instead, we've tended to come up with flim-flam excuses for why it's not possible.

Q So you see RTI as a way of building on the research that's been done on successful literacy instruction?

I'd like to think it could be. I've called it perhaps our "last, best hope."

Q Why do you think it holds promise?

If for no other reason that, for the first time in many years, the federal government wrote a law that is not very prescriptive. It simply says: Take up to 15 percent of your current special education allocation and use that money instead to prevent the development of learning disabilities or reading disabilities. And do it in a way that, while there's no mention of specific intervention tiers, incorporates increasingly expert and increasingly intensive instruction. It's just telling schools to stop using money in ways that haven't worked over the past half-century and start investing at least some of that money

in interventions that are designed to actually solve kids' reading problems.

Q So it's not so much the specific framework of RTI that you see as promising as the emphasis it puts on intensive reading instruction?

Yes. For me the most important part of the proverbial three tiers is the first one: regular classroom instruction. In my view, RTI works best if it's started in kindergarten and 1st grade—we know how to solve those problems. Unfortunately, we have good evidence that a lot of kindergarten and 1st grade teachers in this country are just not very skilled in teaching reading. They may offer solid social and emotional support, but when it comes to delivering high-quality academic instruction, they just don't do it. And a lot of them also assume that if a kid is struggling and is way behind in reading, he must have some neurological problem, and therefore it's not their job to teach him.

So you can do a lot by strengthening instruction. The evidence is there in the research literature. We can reduce the number of kids who have trouble in the 1st grade by half just by improving the quality of kindergarten. And by 2nd grade, we can reduce the number of kids who are behind by another half just by improving the quality of 1st grade instruction.

Q How do you do that? I mean, if you were an administrator who was implementing RTI, what would you do in terms of professional development? How do you help teachers so they can deliver that high level of instruction?

I think it takes someone who knows what they're doing to start with, and virtually every school system already has those people on their staff. Again, we know from the research literature that, while a lot of kindergarten and 1st grade teachers might not be that strong in academic instruction, at least 25 percent of kindergarten and 1st grade teachers are in fact very skilled. So that 25 percent is out there whose expertise can be built on. The problem is they're just typically ignored.

But, yes, the most successful training models are those that involve teachers who are actually working with each other, where the teachers who don't know what to do in delivering reading instruction are given a few days each to observe a teacher who does know what to do. The skilled teacher, that is, becomes a mentor teacher who helps others acquire those types of skills.

And the effects of a little high-quality training can be significant. One of the studies on reading professional development that the [U.S. Department of Education's] What Works

Clearinghouse has rated as having strong evidence—actually I think it's the only one—was done by my wife [University of Tennessee Professor Anne McGill-Franzen] in Philadelphia with kindergarten teachers. This program primarily involved using mentor teachers and some staff from an organization called the Children's Literacy Initiative. And it really only required about three days of work before the school year started and about three hours a month of professional development and, for some teachers, a little in-class support. But the difference in performance was dramatic: Students in the classes of the teachers who got the training ended the year in about the 45th percentile in reading, while those with teachers who didn't get the training ended the year at the 13th percentile.

And I'll tell you, I actually went down to help my wife with some of the debriefing interviews at the end of the year. We had veteran teachers—people my age—breaking down in the interview and starting to cry, saying, "Why didn't anyone ever teach us this before? Why have I been teaching for 30 years and never knew how to teach kids to read?"

Q What mistakes do schools commonly make in implementing RTI?

Letting the interventions be done by paraprofessionals or parent volunteers or special education teachers who have limited reading-instruction expertise. If you want a kid to remain illiterate and ultimately end up in special ed., send him out to work with someone who lacks expertise in teaching reading. If you want him to develop literacy, put him with someone with expertise in teaching kids at that age to read.

The idea behind RTI was for a district to actually take some of its special education budget to fund reading specialists, but in most cases, they haven't done that. In too many cases, they simply have paraprofessionals work with those kids. So the amount of expert reading instruction the kids are getting under RTI is typically very slight.

My question to superintendents is always, "Would you let me randomly select one of your paraprofessionals to be your assistant superintendent for finance, or to be the head football coach, or teach AP chemistry?" No, of course not, because those jobs require that you know something. But when you take people who are not reading experts and put them with hardest kids to teach, and then blame the kids when they don't make progress, you penalize the children for the rest of their lives because of your decision.

Q You've been critical of the use of so-called packaged reading programs in schools. Why?

Well, the problem is that the concept of a packaged reading program doesn't have any scientific validity to start with, because we know that if you take 100 kids or even 10 kids, there are no prescribed programs that will work with all of them. What kids need are teachers who know how to teach and have multiple ways of addressing their individual needs. And the evidence that there's a packaged program that will make a teacher more expert is slim to none.

Q So the alternative would be to focus on building on teachers' expertise and knowledge?

Right. And one good example of how to do that is the much-criticized Reading Recovery program, which isn't a scripted program in the sense that most commercial programs are. Instead, it's a year long—or even life long—professional development plan. Of the 150 reading-intervention programs that the What Works Clearinghouse looked at, it was the only one determined to have strong evidence that it worked. And I've been telling principals for 20 years that the good thing about a program like Reading Recovery is that, if your district ever decides not to continue funding it, your teachers still have that expertise, and you can't take that away from them. You can take away the one-to-one tutoring that's part of the program, but even more important than that is the expertise of the teachers. Another example of a large-scale program that schools ought to be looking at is the Interactive Strategies Approach, developed by researchers F.R. Vellutino and Donna Scanlon. That is also a kind of extended PD plan.

Q When schools implement RTI, they often use digital screening and monitoring tools for assessment ...

It's idiotic.

Q Those tools aren't effective?

No. We don't have any evidence that any computerized screening and monitoring tools are related to reading growth. It just doesn't exist. In fact, I think we have enough evidence in the opposite direction with the problems of Reading First.

Q So what do you advise schools to use to determine where a student is in his reading ability?

Well, I tell them, if the student is in kindergarten or 1st grade, to listen to the child read. And you have to have some sense of the difficulty level of the books, and you need to be expert enough to know what strategies students at different stages should be demonstrating in their reading.

Q OK, say I'm a principal, and I say to you, "Listen, I'm not sure my teachers have the expertise at this point to make those kinds of judgments without the help of available tools."

I'd say you're a principal who doesn't have a clue, and you probably need to go off and develop some expertise yourself. Or maybe find another job.

Look, the problem isn't that teachers don't know which students are in trouble and need help. I mean, you could try an experiment: Call 100 1st grade teachers around the country and ask them, "Do you have any kids who are in trouble in learning to read?" They're not going to say, "Gosh, I don't know. I haven't DIBELd them yet." Teachers know who needs help. If they don't know, they shouldn't be teaching.

Q But you just said that many teachers aren't skilled in teaching reading?

But that doesn't mean they don't know who's in trouble. They just don't know what to do with a kid who's in trouble. The point is we need to free teachers up from spending their time using an assessment program on kids every few weeks, or having a reading or LD specialists going around doing it. Educators need to be working with kids and teaching them rather than continuing to document that they can't do something.

Q Do you have any guidelines for the amount of intervention time that should be provided for a struggling reader?

Well, let's talk about kindergarten and 1st grade. In kindergarten, amazingly, it takes as little as 15 to 20 minutes a day, working in a one-on-one or very small group setting with a child. That's it. In 1st grade, most of the studies have recommended either a half-hour or 45 minutes a day, five days a week, usually for a period of roughly 20 weeks, as an initial shot at it. At that point, some kids still may not be up to grade level. But if you give them another 20 weeks, you can be down to 2 percent of kids who aren't reading at grade level. And that 2 percent, according to the large-scale studies, are typically those students who are highly mobile and come in and out of the program, or are part of that very small portion of the school population who have very severe or profound cognitive disabilities. But you have to look around and ask, how many schools do we currently have that have any kind of intensive expert intervention in place in kindergarten, much less 30 or 45 minutes a day of one-to-one or one-to-

three expert intervention for up to a year in the 1st grade? The answer is, there are virtually no schools like that in this country.

Q None?

None. And they'll say they don't have enough money to provide that kind of intervention. And I'm saying, wait a second, we're spending between \$5,000 and \$10,000 a year on every child who's identified as having a learning disability, and you don't have enough money to try to prevent that?

Q Can RTI work with older students or adolescents?

Well, we don't have a lot of research on how well it works with older children, but I certainly think it can. The problem is that you really have to ramp up instruction because, as they get older, the kids get further and further behind in the current setting. Let me give you an example: Let's say you have a 4th grader who's reading at the 2nd grade level. So you've got evidence that whatever you've been doing up to this point has produced about a half grade's growth per year. So even if you can provide something that will double his rate of growth, up to a year's growth per year, by the time he gets to 9th grade, he'll only be reading at a 7th grade level. Now, if we can triple his rate of growth—to a year and a half grade level per year—he'd be caught up by 9th grade. If we could quadruple it, he'd be caught up by 6th grade and in even better shape.

Q How do you do that?

I think you could do that, with a substantial amount of high-quality instruction—and that means, in effect, that his reading instruction has to take place all day long. In other words, if he's reading at a 2nd grade level in 4th grade, this child would need texts in social studies, science, and math that are written at the 2nd grade level but cover the 4th grade curriculum, so he has a book in his hands all day long that he can actually read. If we did that in addition to high-quality classroom reading instruction and then provided 45 minutes every day after school of one-on-one expert instruction, and maybe did something in the summer that wasn't as useless as what we usually see going on in summer school, we might be able to catch him up.

Q How realistic is that scenario?

I think it's pretty realistic, and it's not very expensive compared to what we're doing now to keep the child essentially illiterate. If you look at the research on the quality and

quantity of reading instruction given to students in special education or Title I classes (some of which both my wife and I conducted), I mean, it's not a rosy scenario. Too often, no one gets worse or less instruction in reading than the kids who need it most. Did you know there are only 19 states that require special education teachers to take even one course in teaching reading? In other words, special education teachers often know less about teaching reading than the regular classroom teachers who turn to them for help.

Q When do you think a determination for special education should be made under an RTI framework?

I think if you've spent most of kindergarten and 1st grade giving a child expert, intensive instruction and he or she is still lagging way behind, it might be time. But I'd be awfully hesitant to classify any child given the lack of expectations for academic growth in special education. If we had evidence that special education programs were actually declassifying a third of their kids each year—in other words that two or three years of treatment in special education could get them caught up—I'd be more optimistic.

Q So, in most cases, you'd just continue the interventions and expert reading instruction?

Yes.

Q Even if a student failed to make it to grade level for several years running?

Yep. Now, you could define special education such that the whole point was that kids who go into it were getting more and better instruction every day, such that special education was likely to catch them up and perhaps lead to declassification. But I don't see any will in schools to do that. And I worry about RTI, in some states and schools, being run by special ed. personnel. Again, though it was created in a special education law and has potential bearing on how special education determinations are made, it's not intrinsically a spec. ed. program. It's about strengthening regular classroom instruction and general education interventions for students so they can stay out of special ed. But I'm afraid some schools just see it as a way to find more LD kids faster.

Q What advice would you have for a teacher who is in a school that is implementing RTI and wants to make it work?

Well, the best advice is to make sure you

know what you're doing with struggling readers in your classroom, all day long. And then work to ensure that, when a student leaves your classroom for intervention, he or she is going out to work with someone who knows as much or even more than you do about what to do with that child.

Q Any particular resource or book you would recommend to start with?

I think one of the most powerful resources is a skinny little book called *Choice Words* by Peter Johnston. I think it's all of 68 pages long, and the subtitle is *How Our Language Affects Children's Learning*. It's simply a careful and close look at how effective teachers talk to their children and how less effective teachers talk to their children. How do you foster a child's sense of agency and identity? Think about it: By the end of 1st grade, most struggling readers already know they're terrible at reading and they think they're the problem. And at that point they start working very hard on any number of schemes to try to hide the fact that they can't read or aren't very good at it. And not surprisingly, they don't do much reading independently. This is a cycle that teachers need to and can break.

In the end it's us, educators, who really matter in the case of struggling readers. We have to understand that and ask the questions about what we are doing or not doing, rather than asking what is wrong with the child.

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Jose L. Martín

National Center for Learning Disabilities

Lessons from California Districts Showing Unusually Strong Academic Performance for Students in Special Education

<http://www.schoolsmovingup.net/cs/smu/view/rs/25889>

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<http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20114026/>

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Candace Cortiella

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