

## A Parent's Guide to Response to Intervention (RTI)



**M**illions of school-age children experience difficulties with learning. Their struggles in school may be due to factors such as cultural or language differences, poor attendance or a lack of appropriate instruction. In some cases, a disability such as a learning disability can make learning difficult for a child.

For years schools have attempted to provide help to these students using a variety of approaches—including programs such as special education and Title I. In recent years, Congress has added new provisions to our nation's federal education laws—the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 2004)—that are designed to encourage school districts to provide additional support for struggling students within general education. This support should be provided as early as possible—when students show the earliest signs of difficulty.

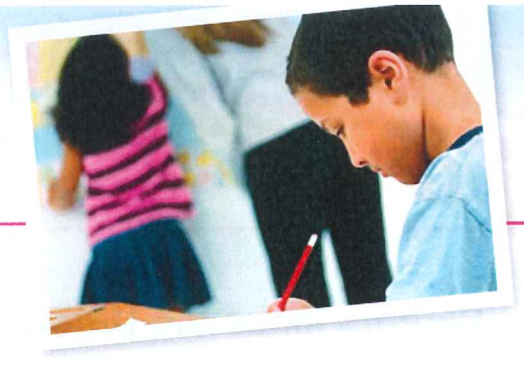
When students are allowed to fail, they often get further and further behind, making it more and more difficult to get them back on grade level. By helping students early, schools can keep every student on grade level and on track to graduate. While schools have attempted many ways to help struggling students, including those with disabilities, the current focus is on an improved, research-based process known as **Response to Intervention (RTI)**. RTI is not a special kind of program or book. It is a way to help all students succeed, including struggling learners. Ultimately, the goal of RTI is to prevent failure and make all students successful learners.

The RTI process might also be called Responsiveness to Intervention or Multi-Tier System of Support (MTSS) depending on the state or school district. Whatever the name, parents play a critical role in RTI, just like any other successful school initiative.

The National Center for Learning Disabilities' RTI Action Network has developed this guide for parents and schools involved in implementing RTI in the elementary grades. As schools work to implement this new approach, some confusion may arise, so parents should feel free to ask questions and raise concerns along the way. Possible questions to ask appear on page 18.

**IMPORTANT!** The manner in which states and school districts might implement RTI varies greatly, so be sure to check with your state or local school district for additional information about RTI in your child's school.





## What Is Response to Intervention (RTI)?

RTI is a multistep process that schools use to:

- Provide services and interventions to help all students, including students who struggle with learning
- Improve the early identification and support of students with learning and behavior needs, including the need for special education

**Provide services and interventions to help all students, including students who struggle with learning.**

An RTI process provides extra help at increasing levels of intensity depending on how much progress students are making. RTI can be used at any grade level (preschool, elementary, middle or high school) and for any content area (reading, math, science, social studies). It is most often used in reading or math. It can also be used to improve student behavior.

In an RTI process, the progress students make at each stage of intervention is closely monitored. Results of this monitoring are used to make decisions about the need for further research-based instruction and/or intervention in general education.

RTI provides a more objective way to look at student performance. Using data, like progress monitoring reports, helps teachers and parents understand how the student is doing compared to grade-level expectations. Providing early help through an RTI process can limit the amount of academic failure that any student experiences. Keeping students at or near grade level, even in the early grades, is essential to a student's self-esteem and long-term success in school.

**Improve the early identification and support of students with learning and behavior needs, including the need for special education.**

RTI can also increase the accuracy of identification for special education. Its use could also reduce the number of children who are mistakenly identified as having learning disabilities when their learning problems are actually due to cultural differences or lack of appropriate instruction. Information and data gathered by an RTI process can lead to earlier identification of students who have true disabilities and are in need of special education services. It can also help schools and parents decide if a student needs special education in order to succeed in school. For students receiving special education, RTI can help determine if a student is benefitting from special services.

**IMPORTANT!** Some states require an RTI process as part of the identification of students suspected of having learning disabilities (LD). Be sure to find out about your state's policies and procedures regarding RTI for LD identification by checking with your state's department of education.





## Parents Make the Difference

Parents want the best for their children, including a successful and positive school experience. When a child is struggling in school there is no time to waste. Working together, parents and teachers can keep students on the road to school success and graduation.

If your child is struggling in school (see box), it is important that you:

- Communicate with your child's teacher(s)
- Ensure that your child attends school regularly
- Encourage your child to do well in school
- Understand the assessments (tests) your child takes
- Ask how you can help your child at home
- Understand and exercise your rights as a parent
- Collaborate with your child's school

**IMPORTANT!** Visit [www.LD.org](http://www.LD.org) to learn more about your rights.

Your child may be having difficulties in school if he or she exhibits any of the following:

**Lack of Motivation, Interest or Attention.** Your child is resistant or unwilling to participate in school activities and assignments or is inattentive in class.

**Homework Frustrations.** Your child argues about doing homework, cries or has tantrums, or requires your assistance to complete homework assignments.

**Behavior Problems.** Your child is acting up in class, seeking help or attention from other students.

**Slipping Grades.** Your child's grades are steadily declining, indicating the schoolwork is either too difficult or your child lacks the skills needed to complete the tasks.

**Low Self-Esteem.** Your child avoids talking about school with you, becomes withdrawn or makes negative comments about his or her abilities.

## Getting to Graduation

In the United States today, nearly one-third of all high school students leave school before graduating.\* Struggling in school and failing classes are among the main reasons teens drop out of school, and this pattern often shows up early. For example, students who fail eighth grade English or math are 75 percent more likely to drop out of high school. Students who are held back due to academic failure and who are older than the students in their grade also tend to drop out. Seventy percent of inmates in prison did not graduate from high school.

Parents who are involved in their children's education—even in the early grades—often make the difference between academic success and failure. Students do better when their parents care: when parents make sure their children get to school and are progressing well and when parents communicate their expectations for success. If problems arise, involved parents have laid a solid foundation for dealing with them.

*\*Source: Alliance for Excellent Education*



## PARENT PERSPECTIVE: **Mendy Gomez, Tucson, Arizona**

Few argue the need for more parent involvement in our schools. I've always made involvement in my children's education a top priority. After all, raising my children is my number one job.

While a little involvement is fairly easy, things can get complicated when your child is struggling in school. As I've worked to address the learning issues my son has experienced since beginning formal schooling, I've needed to ask questions all along the way. I've learned that I'm really the best expert on my child and I have a lot to contribute to his success in school.

Schools can help parents of struggling learners by focusing on collaboration—a partnership with one common goal: the educational success of their child. But what determines success? How can schools and parents work together toward that success?

Here are some things that parents can do to create an effective collaboration:

- **Get help early.** Schools have lots of children to teach. But every student gets just one chance at learning. Parents of struggling learners must take an urgent approach to getting help in addressing their child's needs.
- **Seek partnership.** While schools might be full of experts trained in teaching and other areas like school psychology, social work and counseling, parents are experts on their children. Developing a partnership with school personnel will maximize everyone's expertise.
- **Find middle ground.** To get the most accomplished, schools and parents must meet half-way—whether finding convenient times to meet or providing information to help parents understand what's happening with their child.

As our family goes through our journey with our son, we have learned to never stop asking questions, to focus on what our child can do—not what he can't do, and to build on his strengths.

*Mendy Gomez is the mother of two children in the Vail School District in Arizona. Her son has dyslexia and AD/HD and has made outstanding progress in the programs offered through the Vail School District. She works closely with her district and other educational advocacy groups to ensure every child is afforded a quality education.*



## Response to Intervention Example: A Three-Tier Model

There is no single, widely practiced “model” of RTI. It can look different in every school. It is generally defined as a three-tier (or three-step) model of school supports that uses research-based academic and/or behavior interventions.

At all stages of the process, RTI should focus on discovering how to make the student more successful rather than focusing on the student's lack of success.

### A three-tier RTI model includes the following:

#### Tier 1: Screening and Group Interventions



The goal of RTI is to prevent failure and make all students successful learners. In Tier 1 all students receive high-quality, scientifically based instruction. Students who are “at-risk” are identified using universal screenings and, in some cases, results on state or district-wide tests. Tier 1 can include frequent progress monitoring of all students for a brief period.

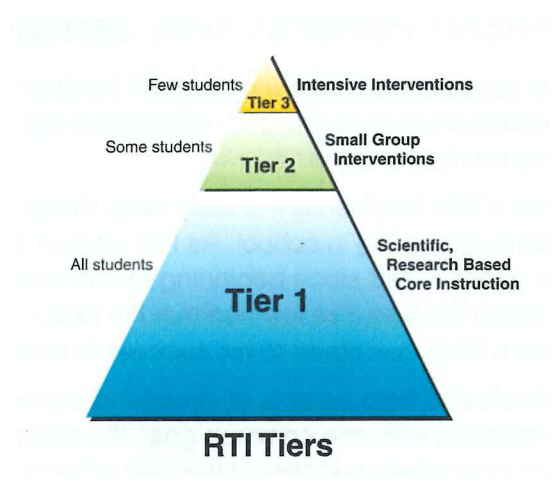
For example, in kindergarten and first grade, the teacher may test the students’ knowledge of letters and sounds. Through universal screenings, teachers can get a good idea of which students are having difficulties. Screenings can also identify students who may benefit from enrichment or accelerated learning.

Identified students receive supplemental instruction, or interventions, generally delivered in small groups during the students’ regular school day in the regular classroom. Student progress is closely monitored using a validated screening system such as curriculum-based measurement.

The length of time for Tier 1 can vary. At the end of this period, students not showing adequate progress are moved to Tier 2. (Note: This step may be broken into two separate tiers in a four-tier model.)

Parents should be informed when a school begins an RTI process. Basic information should be provided and specifics about the grade levels and content areas using RTI (such as reading) should be shared. The parents of students involved in the RTI process should receive regular updates on their students’ progress.

**IMPORTANT!** The careful analysis of performance data for all students is critical to a successful RTI process. It provides evidence that the school’s curriculum and instructional process are providing acceptable progress for most students. For example, if the majority of students are succeeding, the general education program can be considered to be sufficiently effective, and more intensive interventions are required for those students not meeting expectations. However, if significant numbers of students in the general education program are not making acceptable progress based on desired benchmarks, the school must work to improve the overall curriculum and/or instructional program.





## Tier 2: Targeted Interventions



Students not making adequate progress in Tier 1 are provided with more intensive services and specialized interventions to remediate deficits. These services are provided in addition to instruction in the general curriculum.

Interventions are provided in small groups in an appropriate setting—either within or outside of the general classroom—by the classroom teacher or specialist, such as a reading specialist. Progress on the targeted skill is monitored frequently (for example, once a week or once every two weeks) to ensure adequate progress and learning. In the early grades (kindergarten–grade 3) interventions are usually in the areas of reading and math.

For example, a student having difficulty in reading may be provided additional instruction in a small group of three to five students for 30 minutes each day with a reading teacher. The student's progress is measured often to see if the additional, more intensive instruction is helping to close the learning gap.

Students who continue to show too little progress at this level of intervention are then considered for more intensive interventions as part of Tier 3.

Parents of students involved in Tier 2 interventions should be provided regular updates on their students' progress and information on how they can assist their child at home to support the school's efforts. Involvement in intervention change decisions and the development of a written intervention plan help parents understand the progress needed to close the learning gap.

**IMPORTANT!** While the length of time for Tier 2 can vary, the focus throughout this tier should be on the amount of progress being made by the student. Progress is measured by use of progress monitoring data.

## Tier 3: Intensive Interventions and Comprehensive Evaluation



Students receive individualized, intensive interventions that target the student's skill deficits for the remediation of existing problems and the prevention of more severe problems.

For example, the teacher or specialist may work with the student one-on-one so that instruction can be tailored specifically to the needs of that one student. Progress is monitored closely to make sure the student is doing well and to help the teacher decide whether a change in instruction is needed. Charting the student's progress helps the teacher decide if the student needs more instruction time, a different method or different materials.

Students who do not respond to these targeted interventions are then considered for special education following the requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The data collected during Tiers 1, 2 and 3 are included and used to make the decision about a student's need for special education.

In some cases, special education is considered Tier 3 of an RTI process. Information provided by schools should clearly indicate how special education fits into the RTI process being used.



Parents of students involved in Tier 3 interventions should be provided with frequent updates on their student's progress and involved in decisions about intervention changes. A written intervention plan helps parents understand the progress needed to close the learning gap. Parents should also continue to receive information on how they can assist their child at home.

**IMPORTANT!** At any point in an RTI process, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) allows parents to request a formal evaluation to determine eligibility for special education. A school's RTI process cannot be used to deny or delay a formal evaluation for special education. Read more about this on page 13.

## Essential Components of RTI

Regardless of the specific RTI process being used by a school, it should include these essential components:

- ✓ Monitoring a student's progress in the general curriculum using appropriate screenings or tests (assessments)
- ✓ Choosing and implementing scientifically proven interventions to address a student's learning problems
- ✓ Following formal guidelines to decide which students are not making sufficient progress or responding to the intervention (called decision rules)
- ✓ Monitoring how the student responds to the intervention by using assessments at least once a week or once every two weeks
- ✓ Making sure the interventions are provided accurately and consistently (fidelity)
- ✓ Determining the level of support that a student needs in order to be successful
- ✓ Giving parents notice of a referral and a request to conduct a formal evaluation if a disability is suspected as required by IDEA



## What RTI Is Not

The following practices are not appropriate instructional interventions and should not be part of an RTI plan:

- Special or reassigned seating in the classroom
- Shortened assignments
- Communications with the parent about the child at regular parent-teacher conferences or other informal communications
- Classroom observations
- Suspension
- Retention
- More of the same/ general classroom instruction and/or assignments