

From Your School Psychologist

Understanding Response to Intervention

Helping a child who is having difficulty in school is a concern of parents and teachers alike. Everyone wants to see their child excel, and it can be very frustrating when a child falls behind in class. Traditionally, children having the most difficulty have been referred for an evaluation to determine if they need and qualify for special education services as a result of a learning disability. However, there is a growing effort in education to provide more targeted help, or interventions, to struggling learners before they either fall too far behind or require special education services. This process is called “Response to Intervention” (RTI) and its goal is to ensure that whenever possible children succeed in their general education classrooms.

What Are the Essential Components of RTI?

Response to Intervention emphasizes how well students respond to changes in instruction. The essential elements of RTI are: providing scientific, research-based instruction and interventions in general education; monitoring and measuring student progress in response to the instruction and interventions; and using these measures to shape instruction and make educational decisions. In general, the core features of an RTI process include:

- High quality, research-based instruction and behavioral support in general education.
- Universal (school-wide or district-wide) screening of academics and behavior in order to determine which students need closer monitoring or additional interventions.
- Multiple tiers of increasingly intense scientific, research-based interventions that are matched to student need.
- Use of a collaborative approach by school staff for development, implementation, and monitoring of the intervention process.
- Continuous monitoring of student progress during the interventions, using objective information to determine if students are meeting goals.
- Follow-up measures providing information that the intervention was implemented as intended and with appropriate consistency.
- Documentation of parent involvement throughout the process.
- Documentation that the special education evaluation timelines specified in the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) 2004 and in the state regulations are followed unless both the parents and the school team agree to an extension.

What Are the Key Terms?

Universal Screening is a step taken by school personnel early in the school year to determine which students are “at risk” for not meeting grade level standards. Universal screening can be accomplished by reviewing recent results of state tests, or by administering an academic screening test to all children in a given grade level. Those students whose test scores fall below a certain cut-off are identified as needing more specialized academic interventions.

Student Progress Monitoring is a scientifically based practice that is used to frequently assess

students' academic performance and evaluate the effectiveness of instruction. Progress monitoring procedures can be used with individual students or an entire class.

Scientific, Research-Based Instruction refers to specific curriculum and educational interventions that have been proven to be effective; that is, the research has been reported in scientific, peer-reviewed journals.

What Role Does RTI Play in Special Education Eligibility?

IDEA 2004 offers greater flexibility to school teams by eliminating the requirement that students must exhibit a severe discrepancy between intellectual ability and achievement in order to be found eligible for special education and related services as a student with a learning disability. RTI is one alternative method to traditional ability/achievement discrepancy comparisons. IDEA 2004 addresses RTI through:

Effective instruction and progress monitoring. For students to be considered for special education services based on a learning disability they first must have been provided with effective instruction and their progress measured through “data-based documentation of repeated assessments of achievement.” Furthermore, results of the student progress monitoring must be provided to the child’s parents.

Evaluation procedures. The law gives districts the option of using RTI procedures as *part* of the evaluation procedures for special education eligibility. Comprehensive assessment is still required under the reauthorized law, however. That means that schools still need to carefully examine all relevant aspects of a student’s performance and history before concluding that a disability does or does not exist. Schools must rule out learning problems that are primarily the result of factors such as poor vision, hearing, mental retardation, emotional disturbance, lack of appropriate instruction, or limited English proficiency.

Early Intervening Services. IDEA 2004 creates the option of using up to 15% of federal special education funds for “early intervening services” for students who have not been identified as needing special education, but who need additional academic and behavioral support to succeed in the general education setting. The types of services that can be included are central to the RTI process, and include professional development for teachers and school staff to enable them to deliver scientifically based academic and behavioral interventions, as well as educational evaluations, services, supports, and scientifically based literacy instruction.

How Can Parents Be Involved in the RTI Process?

Parents play a vital role in their child’s school success. Being informed about your school’s RTI process is the first step to becoming an active partner. Questions to ask include:

- Does our school use an RTI process? (Be aware that your child’s school may call their procedures a “problem solving process,” or may have a unique title for their procedures—e.g., Instructional Support Team—and not use the specific RTI terminology.)

- Are there written materials for parents explaining the RTI process? How can parents be involved in the various phases of the RTI process?
- What interventions are being used, and are these scientifically based as supported by research?
- What length of time is recommended for an intervention before determining if the student is making adequate progress?
- How do school personnel check to be sure that the interventions were carried out as planned?
- What techniques are being used to monitor student progress and the effectiveness of the interventions? Does the school provide parents with regular progress monitoring reports?
- At what point in the RTI process are parents informed of their due process rights under IDEA 2004, including the right to request an evaluation for special education eligibility?
- When is informed parental consent obtained and when do the special education evaluation timelines officially commence under the district's RTI plan?

What Are the Potential Benefits of RTI?

An RTI approach eliminates a “wait to fail” situation because students get help promptly within the general education setting before falling too far behind. RTI also has the potential to reduce the number of students unnecessarily referred for special education services because it helps distinguish between those students whose achievement problems are due to a learning disability and those students whose achievement problems are due to other issues that can be addressed in general education. Finally, parents and school teams alike find that the RTI student progress monitoring techniques provide more instructionally relevant information than traditional assessments.

What Steps Are Required to Implement RTI?

While federal regulations offer guidance, each school district needs to develop its own procedures based on their state regulations, resources, and the needs of its student population. However:

- All schools must be prepared to offer a variety of proven instructional strategies.
- Staff must be trained to measure student performance using methods that are sensitive to small increments of growth.
- Parents must be kept informed of these new procedures and made partners in the process.
- Teams must determine how they will define an “adequate” response to an intervention—how much progress over what period of time will be the benchmark to determine if an intervention is successful?

Adapted from: “Response to Intervention: A Primer for Parents,” by Mary Beth Klotz and Andrea Canter, www.nasponline.org, 2006. The full handout is available online at www.nasponline.org/families.

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