The School Administrator

Feature
Response to Intervention: What & Why?

Neither a fad nor a program, but rather the practice of using data to match instruction and intervention to changing student need

by Judy Elliott

Everyone is talking about response to intervention. But what is RTI, really, and why should we care? After all isn't this just another new education reform that sounds like a good idea but will soon fade from the scene?

Response to intervention is the practice of providing high-quality instruction and intervention matched to student need, monitoring progress frequently to make decisions about changes in instruction or goals and applying student response data to important education decisions.   This approach is not about placing the problems within the student, but rather examining the student's response to instruction and/or intervention. In essence, RTI expands the practice of looking at students' risk of learning and behavioral failure beyond the student and takes into consideration a host of factors. Effective implementation of RTI requires leadership, collaborative planning and implementation by professionals across the education system.   RTI as a framework or model should be applied to decisions for general, remedial and special education, creating a well-integrated system of instruction and intervention guided by student performance data that is close to the classroom.   Today in public education, we are faced with more diversity and challenges than ever before. Too often, fields within education work in isolation — from our English language learners and gifted students to our special education students. We hear about "special ed" and we hear about "general ed," but it is really about "every ed." With scarce resources available, both fiscal and human capital, we need to align our education system to meet the learning needs of everyone in the education system.   The No Child Left Behind Act has brought the issues of student learning and accountability for that learning front and center. Education systems must necessarily account for the learning of "every ed." However, national and local data continue to show achievement gaps for students of color and those with disabilities. We know more about what works in instruction than ever before; yet we still have gaps in student learning and achievement.   Those continuing gaps beg these questions: Is robust, effective instruction taking place in our classrooms? Are we differentiating instruction based on students' talents and needs? Are we working from the model of one size fits all? Are we providing tiered or increasingly intense interventions for students who, based on data, show they need more strategic and intensive academic and behavioral instruction?

In the school systems where I've worked — Long Beach, Calif., Unified School District, the Portland, Ore., Public Schools and most recently Los Angeles Unified School District — we began our journey by looking at data, examining core instruction and identifying interventions, both systemically and at the school site. We moved toward building a system of instruction that provided more time and increasingly intense interventions for students who were struggling. RTI provides the vehicle to examine an entire system of student learning at the district, classroom and individual student performance levels.

Access Issues One major challenge in improving the outcomes of our students involves providing access to what services and support they need to succeed. That is, moving away from a one-size-fits-all approach and moving toward differentiation based on talent and need. However, the historical silo structures of our schools have gotten in the way of systemically making this happen for all students.   In most school districts, resources are organized by categorical programs or funding stream — Title I, English language learners, talented and gifted, special education, etc. Unfortunately, knowing that a student qualifies for Title I tells us nothing about that student's specific learning needs. In most cases, when a student does not progress at the expected rate, she or he is placed under the microscope. In other words, the psychopathology is within the student, and often the student is referred for special education testing.   Seldom does an evaluation of the student's classroom learning environment take place to examine what factors may be related to the reported lack of progress. Without a comprehensive evaluation of students within the context of the instructional environment, it is often difficult to reliably and validly indicate the true cause of poor student progress. It is imperative we include an analysis of variables directly related to academic success such as academic engaged time, opportunities to respond, teacher presentation style, teacher-student monitoring procedures, academic learning time and teacher expectations, to name just a few. Effective instruction is at the heart of RTI.   The systemic work of leadership involved in implementing RTI cannot be underestimated. First and foremost, it requires creating a culture and deep belief that all students can learn irrespective of disability, race, primary language and/or socioeconomic status.   Second, it requires the vision and intentional message that instructional reform efforts and resources must be aligned to ensure growth in student achievement and that the delivery of quality professional development, for both teachers and administrators, is systemic. RTI does not require more resources per se, but rather a reallocation and examination of current practices that are working and discontinuing those that are not.   Third, it requires the knowledge, appreciation and continual use of data in making instructional and programmatic changes that are second nature to all consumers in the system — administrators, teachers, parents and the community.

Core Principles The core principles on which RTI is based are supported both by research and common sense. Research provides the evidence demonstrating the general effectiveness of RTI practices. Common sense keeps our attention focused on what is most important: student learning.

> • **Believe that we can effectively teach all children.** All RTI practices are

founded on the assumption and belief that all children can learn. The corollary is that it is our responsibility to identify the curricular, instructional and environmental conditions that enable learning. We then must determine the means and systems to provide those resources.

• **Intervene early.** It is best to intervene early with learning and behavior, when problems and concerns are relatively small. Early intervention does not mean K-5, but rather preK-12. Early intervention programs are established at elementary and secondary levels for students who are not being successful, either academically or behaviorally.

• **Use a multitiered model of service delivery.** To achieve high rates of student success for all students, instruction in the schools must be differentiated in both nature and intensity. To efficiently differentiate instruction for all students, tiered models of intervention are used in RTI systems.

• **Use a problem-solving method to make -decisions within a multitiered model.** At its core, this method requires answering four interrelated questions: (1) Is there a problem and what is it? (2) Why is it happening? (3) What are we going to do about it? and (4) Did our intervention work? The problem-solving method can be applied to all students in a preK-12 system, including small groups and individual students.   In Long Beach schools, the problem-solving model is the first step used at the student-success-team or building-team level. From here, interventions, either behavioral, or instructional, are prioritized and put in place in the classroom. Ongoing progress monitoring is done to ensure interventions are robustly implemented.   At the district level, the problem-solving method enables central-office personnel to look at data and ascertain whether in fact a school district program, instructional methodology, intervention and/or professional development is working for the students it is intended to help. Use of data is key.

Three Components   Implementation of RTI requires three essential components: (1) multiple tiers of intervention, (2) a problem-solving method and (3) an integrated data collection/assessment system to inform decisions at each tier of service delivery.   RTI uses a three-tiered model to allocate resources where they are most effective. For the sake of illustration, RTI can be thought of as a pyramid with three levels of interventions. Embedded in each tier is a set of unique support structures and instruction that help teachers implement evidence-based curricula and instructional practices at levels of fidelity designed to improve a student's achievement. Ongoing assessment within each tier is essential to determine a student's proficiency on critical academic and/or behavioral skills. This assessment or progress monitoring is used to inform instruction at each tier and to identify in a timely fashion the increasingly intense level of instruction a student needs.   The base of the pyramid, or Tier 1, represents core instruction all students should have equitable access to. Typically, we want 75-85 percent of students successfully learning the core curriculum.   Tier 2 of the pyramid, also known as strategic interventions, is for about 10-15 percent of students who need targeted

instruction, or what I call "an extra scoop" of instruction, to learn successfully. Strategic instruction is provided to students who display poor response to group instructional procedures used in Tier 1. Tier 2 instruction is in addition to the Tier 1 core instruction.   Tier 3 of the pyramid, also known as intensive instruction, is for an estimated 5-10 percent of students who need intensive, individual and/or small-group instruction that is highly targeted. Tier 3 typically includes use of a different program or instruction from Tier 1 or 2 because those data show students are not making progress given previously tried interventions.

A note of caution: Tier 3 is not simply special education. Rather, it is where interventions are tailored to likely include long-term intensive instruction that may or may not include special education services. For example, a student whose diminished performance is the result of lack of instruction may need to be provided ongoing, intensive instruction delivered in more substantial blocks of time to help him or her catch up to peers. Another example might include a student whose performance problems are directly related to limited English proficiency. Again, the student may need a longer-term set of interventions that do not include special education.

In both Long Beach and the Portland Public Schools, we started by examining the success of students in core instruction. If you find when looking at your data that 50 percent of students are not at proficiency in Tier 1, or core instruction, you do not simply put these students in Tier 2 interventions. You must go back and examine the instruction in your core. If you have high rates of students referred for special education or in special education, you must look at core instruction and ask: Is it the instruction or is it the student?

Problem Solving   A second essential component of RTI is the use of the problem-solving method.The problem-solving model provides educators a consistent step-by-step process to identify problems, develop interventions and evaluate the effectiveness of those interventions. Clearly, a consistent method to solve problems must be available to teachers and other staff to understand why some students are not responding to the academic and/or behavior instruction.   It is important to ensure all factors (curriculum, effective instruction, school and classroom environment) have been examined prior to assuming that student factors or disability are responsible for student performance. The problem-solving process occurs within each tier of the pyramid.   The third essential component of RTI is the use of an integrated data-collection/assessment system to inform decisions at each tier of the pyramid. This component helps determine a student's response to instruction and intervention. The overarching format for these assessments is curriculum-based assessment. These procedures have a 30-year history and have been used across curriculum areas and grade levels.   These assessments share several characteristics. They:

> • directly assess the specific skills embodied in state and local academic standards;   are sensitive to small increments of growth over time;

> • can be administered efficiently over short periods;

- may be repeatedly administered using multiple forms;

- are readily summarized in teacher-friendly ways;

- can be used to make comparisons across students;

- can be used to monitor an individual student's progress over time; and

- have direct relevance to the development of instructional strategies that address the student's area of need.

Curriculum-based measurements or formative assessments are administered frequently and are more closely aligned to day-to-day instruction. They help teachers answer two key questions: What to teach and how to teach. State assessments that students take regularly are not sensitive to daily instruction and serve an entirely different purpose. That is, they set out to determine, for example, how all 4th graders or 10th graders are performing on a large scale across a state.

Secondary Levels   Some think that because there is little research at the middle or high school levels that RTI is not valid in the secondary level. This is not so. The principles and components of RTI are the same at all grade levels.   The challenge in secondary schools involves identifying the multiple measures or universal screens you will use to decide which students need more intensive instruction or intervention.   Typically, students at the secondary level are deficient in basic skills that get in the way of learning higher-level skills. In Long Beach, multiple measures include scores on state assessments, grades (although subjective), literacy screens and pre-assessments in core curriculum materials being used in English language arts, district-developed quarterly and end-of-course exams in algebra, grade 8 math or English language development. The use of multiple measures depend on what your target is (e.g., literacy, mathematics, English learners).   At the secondary level, the creation of the master schedule is key.The challenge is creating the schedule to provide Tier 2 and 3 interventions for students while still allowing students to earn credit toward graduation. It is doable when the priority is set on providing tiered intervention classes for students who, according to multiple measures, show the need for additional targeted instruction. You cannot do more or catch up students using the same time structures.   Typically, middle and high school master schedules include double blocks of time to provide additional Tier 2 and 3 interventions for students. So, for instance, students may be enrolled in Algebra I and have a second dose or block of perhaps a developmental math program. Likewise, students will be enrolled in English language arts with a second block of a reading intervention, thus increasing the time and intensity of instruction.

Starting Point   Generally, schools do not have the resources to provide supplemental and intensive instruction to more than 20 percent of students. Therefore, core instruction must be effective for 75-85 percent of students and must be developed and implemented to achieve that goal. Core instruction must be responsive to the needs of all students.   So the first step in the implementation of RTI is to evaluate the

effectiveness of core instruction and to problem solve how to improve it if it is less than effective. Districts and schools should evaluate existing practices and resources to determine the approach that will best help establish needed core, strategic and intensive interventions.   A key indicator of a school and a district implementing RTI is that they have an instruction/intervention resource map identifying all of the academic and behavior instruction/interventions available to students at the core, supplemental and intensive levels.   One key component of this resource map is the degree to which the interventions in Tiers 2 and 3 are integrated with core instruction in Tier 1. Receiving instruction in Tier 2 or Tier 3 is not a life sentence. Students must be able to fluidly move between tiers as the data show they are ready.   In a traditional system, remedial and special education services are less integrated with core instruction than in an RTI model. There is a qualitative difference between establishing interventions and ensuring that the interventions are linked and integrated with core instruction.   A note of caution: Do not bite off more than you can chew. Implementing with integrity is most important. There is no "RTI in a Box." Districts and schools must move through three phases — development of a consensus of need, establishment of the infrastructure and implementation of practice.   Take the time to develop consensus of RTI as the framework and foundation that will enable the district and school to systematically meet the needs of all students. Giving staff the tools (professional development, intervention support and documentation, data, technology to display and interpret the data) to successfully implement RTI is necessary before you attempt to implement RTI systemically.

Field Lessons   As school district leaders, we must identify, consolidate, supplement and integrate resources from diverse funding sources to produce the infrastructure necessary to support the implementation of RTI. This includes ongoing and sustained capacity building, both skill and knowledge, from the board room to the classroom. This is not about adding another initiative. It is about keeping what works and replacing what doesn't with effective data-based instructional practices.

We must work to develop a single integrated system to connect general, remedial and special education that results in a seamless system of instruction, intervention and data-based student outcomes.   This approach has allowed the Long Beach Unified School District to erase the achievement gap, while providing special education services to only about 7.5 percent of its students.   Additionally, as district leaders we must establish timelines and defined responsibilities at the district and school site levels, to ensure the successful implementation of RTI across the preK-12 system. This includes providing intentional time to collaborate. And, as with the implementation of any reform, we must build in regular fidelity checks for all components of the system, both at the district and school-site levels.

Professional development must be integrated across English language learners and compensatory, gifted, general and special education. As Portland Public Schools continues its journey on establishing RTI systemically, it has moved from separate professional development by categorical program to a totally integrated system of training.

Teachers from all programs learn about instruction together, providing the opportunity to create a common understanding and common language on which instructional reform can take place.   Finally, as a part of any change process, expect and pro-actively manage resistance. Resistance to change suggests a loss of some sort. Our work in building consensus for RTI needs to identify what that sense of loss is. Personnel have much at stake. The shift to a culture of ongoing use of data at the classroom and building levels, on top of state assessments, can be intimidating to faculty and principals. The use of data is not meant to be punitive but rather to allow for a laser-like focus on the use of personnel, existing resources and delivery of professional development.   In all my years in education one thing I've learned is for certain: Administrators, teachers and parents share a common yearning — to help students who are struggling. Once people see that data are a tool to provide tailored interventions for students and support for classroom instruction, trust is built, collegial relationships are forged and the realization emerges that we are in this for the betterment of all students.

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