



Response-to-Intervention—The Promise and the Peril

At first glance, response-to-intervention (RTI) is a method to identify learning disabilities. But, RTI could play a much larger role. It has the ability to transform how we educate students—all students. With RTI, students may get the support they need as soon as they show signs that they are having difficulty learning, regardless of whether or not they have a disability. At the same time, RTI could dramatically change—or even end—the field of learning disabilities (LD), according to Doug Fuchs, CEC’s 2004 Research Award recipient and professor at Vanderbilt University.

Despite the unknown ramifications, RTI is gaining acceptance in the special education community—evidenced by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) 2004 authorizing LD identification processes that consider a student’s response to evidence-based instruction and intervention. The promise of RTI—that students no longer have to “wait to fail” to receive help, it may prevent the over-identification of students for special education, and assessments that help educators plan instruction—get applause from special educators.

However, much about RTI is murky. RTI is still being researched and is in the early stages of development. As a result, widespread confusion exists as to what RTI is and whether schools are required to use it, says Fuchs. Questions range from basic ones such as how do we implement RTI to those addressing its far ranging implications. These include: can RTI be effectively implemented on a large scale and over the long term; is it feasible for older students and all subjects; and what are the implications for learning disabilities, special education, and general education.

Currently, a large handful of states use RTI to some degree. With the interest it has generated, it is likely that more schools and districts will consider using RTI or a similar process to identify students with LD. The shift requires significant rethinking of the way we work with students with disabilities and a melding of resources. Teachers who have used RTI say it is not a “one size fits all” process.

“One thing I’ve learned is that RTI won’t look the same in every building,” says Brandi Meade, general education teacher who has used RTI in the Coeur d’ Alene School District, Idaho. “Everyone has different resources, teacher strengths, the administration involved to different degrees. You have to figure out what works for you.”

CEC’s Representative Assembly undertook discussion of RTI in 2006, and a workgroup will develop guidance to CEC membership and the field on this issue, which will be available in 2007.

What Is RTI?

RTI is a multi-step approach to providing services to struggling students. Teachers provide instruction and interventions to them at increasing levels of intensity. They also monitor the progress students make at each intervention level and use the assessment results to decide whether the students need additional

instruction or intervention in general education or referral to special education.

RTI models have several components in common: RTI uses tiers of intervention for struggling students, relies on research based instruction and interventions, uses problem-solving to determine interventions for students, and monitors students regularly to determine if they are progressing as they should academically and/or behaviorally.

Many models are based on three or four tiers. Generally, in Tiers 1 and 2 general education teachers provide instruction and interventions. When students fail to respond to small group and intense individualized interventions, they are referred for special education. Special education teachers may help develop interventions and/or plan assessments for students receiving instruction and interventions in Tiers 1 and 2. They may not provide instruction to students until Tier 3 or 4, when the student could be referred and identified for special education. (For an example of an RTI model, see page 7.)

How Do You Decide to Move Students to a New Tier?

Deciding when students should move to a different tier is not an exact science, even though teachers use data to make their decisions. For example, students achieving in the lowest 10 or 20 percent of their grade level may be selected for intervention. After a period of time, perhaps three weeks, the students' progress is assessed. If a student's scores are below the trend line, falling, or flat, the team decides how to change the student's instruction. The team often will try various interventions at a level before recommending that the student be moved to the next tier.

One advantage to this process is that teachers can adjust students' goals quickly.

"We can be flexible and figure out what each kid needs," says Meade. "We can look at the progress monitoring, and it's clear if a student is not responding. Also, if we need to bump up a student's goal, we can do that and keep the student right on track"

Recommending a Student for Special Education

Students who do not respond to intervention are referred to special education. This step is taken after intensive intervention has not helped.

"When we have exhausted all our resources, we decide a student may be a candidate for special education," says Meade. "Here we have a tendency to hang on too long, to think 'We can fix this.' Not that special education is a bad thing. We just feel that we have failed if we can't remediate without special education."

Teachers may also use the Dual Discrepancy Model developed by Doug and Lynn Fuchs to determine whether a student should be referred to special education. In this model, teachers examine the students' learning rate and their level of performance. For a student to be deemed unresponsive, the student's performance on curriculum assessments must be below that of his or her classmates and the student's rate of learning lags behind his classmates.

"If the student's progress is low and slow, they may have a disability," says Carol Sadler, former school administrator and consultant on RTI from Oregon.

One dilemma that can occur with RTI is that students can fall into a never-never land of continuous

support. These students continue to progress when receiving interventions but can't succeed without them. While some say those students will be referred to special education, others say the students may simply continue to receive the extra help.

Finally, it is important to remember that students can be evaluated for special education at any time in the RTI process.

Identifying a Learning Disability under RTI

One of RTI's gray areas is evaluation for a learning disability. The IDEA regulations state that students who have received RTI and are referred for special education should be given a comprehensive evaluation. In reality, what constitutes a comprehensive evaluation is an open question.

Some maintain that while RTI can give us valuable information about a child's learning and progress, it cannot determine that a child has a disability.

"Unresponsiveness is insufficient to indicate a disability," says Daryl Mellard, co-principal investigator at the National Research Center on Learning Disabilities. He recommends that educators use RTI as a basis to discern why the student is not responding to interventions and develop hypotheses as to the nature of the problem. This could include a student's difficulty with information processing components, executive functioning, memory, or overall cognitive ability. Armed with such information, educators can then give a student a comprehensive evaluation that focuses on his or her specific learning needs and strengths.

Others say RTI provides a lot of the information needed to identify a learning disability, as well as more complete and valuable information (such as a student's learning style and educational history) than that provided in IQ-Achievement Discrepancy models.

To determine a learning disability, educators use the information gathered through RTI about the student's performance. They likely also conduct a file review, examining the student's attendance, attention control, and other factors; observe the child in class; and interview the parents. Finally, they may administer assessments that determine skill levels such as the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills and parts of the Wechsler Individual Achievement Test (especially reading). IQ tests such as the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children may be used only if there is suspicion of mental retardation or other disability.

While this process is comprehensive, it can leave the determination of a learning disability to one of default

"We rule out anything else that may make learning so challenging: attention issues, emotional issues....," says Carolyn Fisher, special education teacher from Metzger Elementary School in Tigard Tualatin, Oregon. "We weed out other possibilities, and a learning disability is present when no other factors take place."

In other instances, assessments to determine processing deficits are used only when a severe processing disorder may be present.

"We don't differentiate between the different types of learning disabilities," says Anna Bernard, special education teacher at Alberta Rider Elementary School in Oregon.

Implications for Special Education

Predictions about the long-term impact of RTI range from optimism to pessimism. On the positive side, RTI could strengthen special education. The thinking is that RTI would return special education to its historic role. Instead of the current model, where special educators work with a large number of students, these teachers would concentrate on students who are chronic nonresponders, says Fuchs.

“RTI provides an opportunity to re-establish ourselves as the expert instructors in the school, those who work with the most difficult to teach kids,” he says.

The alternative argument is that RTI could transform the field of learning disabilities. At stake is the definition of learning disability.

“If a low achievement definition (of learning disabilities) takes hold, the learning disability field will necessarily change in very significant ways. Learning disabilities as a field will disappear,” says Fuchs. “That may be a bit premature and melodramatic, but it may not be.”

Finally, though many special educators deplore the use of labels and willingly work with any student who is struggling, disability categories can provide critical information. By knowing a student’s specific learning disability, teachers can provide more effective instruction earlier. Also, if the field is eliminated, research on learning disabilities could also be eliminated. The result is diminishing information about the best way to educate these students.

The Special Education Teachers’ Role in RTI

There are no definitive rules for the special education teacher’s role in RTI. Some expect it to be expanded. Special educators will work with all struggling students, not just those with disabilities.

As mentioned above, others see the special education teacher’s role becoming one of specialization, teachers who work primarily with students who have the most difficulty learning and have a disability.

“Some interventions are so specialized that it will take a very highly qualified person to deliver it, and that will be the special education staff,” says Mellard. Fuchs postulates that special education could become the one place where “truly individualized, data-based instruction takes place.”

In practice, the special education teacher’s role may not be so cut and dry. While special educators may not provide instruction to students until they are referred to tier 3 or 4, that does not mean they have not been involved with the students. Often they are on grade level and/or problem-solving teams that review students’ progress and help develop interventions or assessments for them. Further, if the special educators are providing instruction on a skill a Tier 2 student needs, they often take the non-disabled student into that group.

How Does RTI Affect the Number of Students Eligible for Special Education?

Though it is too early to have definitive answers regarding how RTI will affect the number of students referred for special education, some schools that have used it show no change in the overall number of students receiving services. However, they have seen a large change in the grades in which students are found eligible. A substantial increase in the number of students referred for special education in the first and second grades has occurred, with a corresponding decrease in the number of students referred in the upper elementary grades.

What Is Needed to Make RTI Work?

Implementing RTI is a substantial undertaking. Staff may need professional development in the RTI process as well as in research-based instruction and progress monitoring. To assist teachers, some schools provide training and manuals on acceptable interventions. In addition, schools may bring in outside support, such as a university, to help teachers learn and teach curriculum.

“RTI requires a lot of resources to make sure interventions are in place,” says Sadler. “The responsibility shouldn’t be on the teachers to figure it all out. They need access to research-based interventions.”

Teaming is another integral part of RTI implementation. Teams, which have different configurations and schedules, assess how students are doing and devise interventions. Team members represent a range of expertise and may include the principal, counselor, special education teacher, general education grade level teacher(s), reading specialist, Title I specialist, psychologist, speech-language therapist, and others. The teams meet regularly, often at least monthly, to share their concerns about students and problem solve.

Fourth, RTI requires time. The meetings and collaboration necessitate common planning time. General education teachers are also stretched to find time to provide the interventions.

“There are lots of great programs,” says Meade. “What kids really need is more time with whatever concept they are working on. Finding time is the tricky part. You have to get very creative with scheduling.”

Implementing RTI requires one additional ingredient: school leadership. Strong collaborative leadership helps schools develop a strong core program. In addition, school leadership ensures teachers have the resources needed to implement RTI.

Disadvantages of RTI

Though RTI has significant potential advantages, it is far from foolproof—which is not surprising as RTI is in the early stages of development and implementation. Some issues were mentioned above: RTI’s possible impact on the field and uncertainties about the evaluation of students for LD. However, other equally significant concerns exist regarding RTI.

One of the biggest issues is who accepts responsibility for RTI. While RTI is a special education initiative, for it to work general education must take the lead in providing evidence-based instruction to all students as well as research-based interventions to struggling learners. Additionally, it is recommended that general education support staff, such as reading coaches or Title I personnel, provide interventions

and assessment for the lower tiers.

“RTI can be viewed as one of the great reform ideas in education,” says Mellard. “To move from an idea to great practice will take significant shifts in staff roles and responsibilities that has to first begin in general education.”

However, this division of responsibility could meet resistance. Some say special educators should provide the interventions and/or assessments in general education classes, while others maintain that special educators should not do so until the child is found eligible for special education.

Next, research on RTI is limited. Most of it has focused on students in the early elementary grades in reading, with some additional research on RTI and early math and behavior. However, little is known about the effectiveness of RTI for other subject areas or for students in the upper grades.

“We have a great deal to learn about implementation within contexts other than primary and elementary school,” says Mellard. “. . . . They need a great deal more information on specific interventions (in the upper grades).”

Also, there is fear that RTI may founder when it is implemented on a large scale. A cornerstone of RTI is research-based instructional strategies. Two difficulties arise. One is ensuring all teachers gain proficiency in using research-based teaching strategies. The second concerns fidelity. That is, will educators follow the protocol for these practices? Teachers using RTI already face this issue.

“RTI is good if the interventions are well implemented, using the right curriculum and instructing in the way we are trained and for a purposeful amount of time,” says Fisher. “If that’s not in place, there’s no way to track it. Fidelity can be a real problem. I’m always a little leery of it.”

Additionally, numerous unknowns about RTI implementation remain. One is the cut off score for not responding.

“We are still waiting for the definitive study on that,” says Mellard. “What will be the criteria, one standard deviation, three-four data points, six-eight points, 12 points?”

Mellard says this is just one concern. Other questions include how many interventions should be tried before a child is considered unresponsive, how long an intervention should be tried, how powerful the intervention is, and the size of the instruction group. Mellard also says how well trained the teacher is and the student’s reference group of peers are unresolved RTI issues.

Parents on RTI

In these early stages, teachers say parents give RTI high ratings. They are pleased the school is working so hard to help their child. A second advantage is that since parents have been part of the process, they have tracked their child’s lack of progress. They see that their child may need special education and are therefore more open to eligibility assessment.

What Do Teachers Think of RTI?

While it's not perfect, at this point teachers experienced with RTI also give it high marks. Overall, they see RTI doing what it is meant to do: it catches kids early and lets no one fall through the cracks.

“The beauty of the model is that the kids are all screened in the first weeks of school. Interventions happen from kindergarten on up, and no one is lost,” says Bernard.

A bonus is that RTI can engender collaboration between all school personnel.

The community approach also removes the stigma a student with a disability might feel. The students don't worry who sees them or why because all the teachers have embraced all the students, according to Meade.

The question of whether general education teachers will accept their role in RTI is meeting with success—at least in schools where teachers are supported. Even though these teachers may not greet RTI with open arms—they are frustrated that they have so many criteria they already have to meet and RTI places additional responsibilities on them—they have proven adept at implementing the interventions.

“Not every (general education) teacher wants to do every aspect of RTI,” says Bernard. “...but by and large, when asked to participate in these kinds of decisions for kids, they've been fantastic.”

In the end, both special and general education teachers who have worked with RTI in supportive environments give it a thumbs up.

“I could never go back to “wait to fail” again,” says Bernard.

“I've gone to many meetings where teachers say, ‘If I had to go back to the old model, I wouldn't. I would quit the job. It's (RTI's) what's best for the kids,’” adds Meade.

Sidebar

An RTI Model

The Tiers

Most RTI models use three or four tiers of intervention, and students receive increasingly intense instruction at each level. Though RTI is still evolving, here is one example of an RTI program.

- **Tier 1: Screening and Group Interventions**

Teachers identify students who may be at-risk for failure by assessing all students by using the results of state- or district-wide tests and/or weekly progress monitoring. This is done within the first month or, if necessary, the first grading period.

For those students who have been identified at-risk, teachers provide supplemental instruction or interventions in small groups, which occur in the general education class. The teachers regularly assess these students using a screening system such as curriculum-based measurement. The students who have made adequate progress return to the classroom; those who have not move to Tier 2.

- **Tier 2: Targeted Interventions**

Teachers give students in Tier 2 more intensive services and interventions. These services are provided in small group settings, and they are in addition to general curriculum instruction. Fuchs and Fuchs recommend in *TEACHING Exceptional Children* that the group is taught at least three times a week, 30 minutes per session. Tier 2 should not exceed a grading period. Students who show too little progress at Tier 2 are considered for more intensive interventions in Tier 3.

- **Tier 3: Intensive Interventions and Comprehensive Evaluation**

Teachers give students in Tier 3 individualized, intensive interventions that target their skill deficits. Students who do not respond to the targeted interventions are considered for eligibility for special education.

Student assessment in the RTI model employs some form of progress monitoring, such as curriculum-based measurement. These assessments, which are short, easily administered, and given regularly, perform a dual role. They tell teachers whether students have mastered content and inform instruction.

Who Provides RTI Services?

RTI requires extensive collaboration between general and special education teachers. While the roles are not set in stone, there are some recommendations.

General education teachers are responsible for Tier 1 of the RTI model, and it is incumbent on them to provide research-based, effective instruction to all students.

Special education teachers and other specialized personnel may become part of the RTI model at Tier 2. Together, they design interventions for the Tier 2 students. The interventions may be implemented by the classroom or special education teacher. The special educator's role becomes more significant for students who receive Tier 3 interventions. At Tier 3 or 4, depending on the model used, special education teachers play an integral role in evaluating and providing appropriate educational services for students who have a disability.

When Are Parents Notified?

Parents should be notified of their child's participation in the RTI process at least by Tier 2. Schools should explain the RTI process (preferably in a face-to-face meeting), give parents written intervention plans, and obtain their consent.

According to the National Center for Learning Disabilities, the written intervention plans should contain:

- A description of the specific intervention.
- The length of time that will be allowed for the intervention to have a positive effect.
- The number of minutes per day the intervention will be implemented.
- Who will provide the intervention.
- Where the intervention will be provided.
- The factors for judging whether the student is succeeding.
- The progress monitoring strategy that will be used.
- A progress monitoring schedule.

- How frequently parents will receive reports about their child's response to the intervention.

Additionally, parents should receive feedback on their child's progress at each tier via a written report, phone call, or meeting. Parents can request a formal evaluation for a disability at any time in the RTI process.

Resources

[CEC: Changing the Way We Identify Learning Disabilities](#)

[CEC: CEC's Representative Assembly Tackles Policy and Practice Issues at Convention](#)

[CEC: Identifying Learning Disabilities](#)

[CEC: Representative Assembly Minutes](#)

[National Center on Learning Disabilities](#)

[National Research Center on Learning Disabilities](#)

[CEC's Division on Learning Disabilities](#)