



hotTOPIC 58

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RtI at the Secondary Level – Theory and Practice



By Julie DeVaud & Anne Roloff

Think about these startling statistics around secondary level literacy:

- ◆ Over half of adults scoring at the lowest literacy levels are drop-outs, and almost a quarter of these adults are high school graduates (NCES, 2005).
- ◆ Approximately two-thirds of eighth- and twelfth-grade students read at less than the “proficient” level as described by NAEP (National Institute for Literacy, 2006).
- ◆ A full 70% of the U.S. middle and high school students require differentiated instruction (Alliance for Excellent Education for the Carnegie Corporation of New York).

These are certainly disturbing statistics. What can educators do to reverse the trend? RtI may be an answer, by putting the RtI theories into practice.

On December 3, 2004, Congress reauthorized the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA). The language in IDEA and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) stresses the use of professionally sound interventions and instruction based on defensible research, as well as the delivery of effective academic and behavior programs to improve student performance. Congress believes that, as a result of this work, fewer students will require special education services. Provisions of IDEA allow school districts to use scientific, research-based interventions as an alternative method for identifying students with specific learning disabilities. This process is referred to as Response to Intervention (RtI).

RtI is a multi-tiered approach to help struggling learners. At each stage of intervention, the student’s progress is closely monitored to determine the need for further intensive instruction in general education or in special education. If a student needs a great deal of assistance, she or he may need extra help in both general and special education classrooms.

RtI holds the promise of ensuring that all students have access to high quality instruction. The worldview behind RtI reflects educators’ values and attitudes around the belief that all students can learn. This initiative ensures that struggling learners, including those with learning disabilities, can learn and should have appropriate learning opportunities tailored to meet their academic needs. In summary, RtI is an ALL-student initiative.

Just as RtI is an all-student initiative, its success requires all educators throughout the school to be responsible for each student. Though principals, administrators, counselors, and other staff do not experience the immediacy of learning in the classroom, their support is crucial. In order to reach this goal, collaboration among all these groups is essential for effective decision-making regarding student performance. Fostering a positive school climate supports the use of innovative practices.

RtI has seven core principles that represent recommended RtI practices (Mellard, 2003). Following these principles will help ensure that systems are in place to ensure the success of RtI and establish a framework to guide and define sound practice.

1. Use all available resources to teach all students.

Schools must provide resources in a manner directly proportional to students' needs. This will require schools and districts to reconsider current resource allocation systems so that financial and other support structures for RtI practices can be established and sustained.

2. Use scientific, research-based interventions/instruction. This means that the curriculum and instructional approaches must have a high probability of success for the majority of students. Since instructional practices vary in efficacy, ensuring that the practices and curriculum have demonstrated validity is an important consideration in the selection of interventions.

3. Monitor classroom performance. This principle emphasizes the importance of general education teachers in monitoring student progress rather than waiting to determine how students are learning in relation to their same-aged peers based on results of state-wide or district-wide assessments.

4. Conduct universal screening/benchmarking. Universal screening is the least intensive level of assessment completed within the RtI system and helps educators and parents identify students early who might be at risk. Since screening data may not be as reliable as other assessments, be sure to use multiple sources of evidence when determining whether or not a student is in need of intervention.

5. Use a multi-tier model of service delivery. Each tier represents an increasingly intense level of services associated with increasing levels of learner needs. In this system, all students receive instruction in the core curriculum supported by strategic and intensive interventions when needed. All students, including those with disabilities, are found in Tiers I, II, and III. Features such as universal screening, progress monitoring, fidelity of implementation and problem solving occur within each tier. This basic tiered model reflects what educators know about students in school: their instructional needs will vary. Because of this, the nature of the academic or behavioral intervention changes at each tier, becoming more rigorous as the student moves through the tiers.

6. Make data-based decisions. A team makes decisions using problem solving and/or standard treatment protocol techniques. The team's purpose is to find the best instructional approach for a student with an academic or behavioral problem.

7. Monitor progress frequently. To determine if the intervention is working, the decision making team must establish and implement progress monitoring. Use of assessments that can be collected frequently and are sensitive to small changes in student behavior.

A problem solving team at the building level monitors student movement through the tiers. This team 1) monitors the non-responders, 2) identifies and provides supplemental materials, 3) orchestrates Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports, and 4) problem-solves for individual students. As a general rule, the composition of this team changes by adding additional specialists' expertise as students move from tier to tier. The problem solving team should include the student's general education teachers and parents. Other team members may include: the principal, academic specialists in Title I, ELL, and literacy issues, special education teachers, school psychologists, and speech and language pathologists.

Steps for schools to take:

1. Correctly identify students who need intervention
2. Deliver intervention that effectively resolves the learning problem for the majority of students exposed to the intervention
3. Monitor the effects of the intervention and troubleshoot to ensure intervention integrity and positive effects on learning
4. Make decisions about the need for more intensive or less intensive intervention (e.g., progressing to higher tiers or lower tiers, discontinuing intervention)
5. Link resulting RtI data to referral and eligibility decisions in special education
6. Link resulting RtI data to system programming changes (e.g., resource allocation, professional development, program evaluation)

APPLICATIONS IN A SECONDARY SCHOOL SETTING

Implementing RtI at the secondary level presents a number of challenges. By the time a student reaches junior high and high school levels, learning disabilities have typically – although not always – been identified. However, other issues surface during the adolescent years, to include behavior, student motivation, attendance, social-emotional issues...the list goes on. We often find that students who are not succeeding fall into one or more of the abovementioned areas. Rather than a diagnosed disability, these students may exhibit behavioral issues, from apathy to acting out.

We often characterize these students as “falling through the cracks:” students who “get by” with Cs or Ds, or students who simply fail courses, sometimes more than once. These are the students we must target for interventions as soon as possible.

Niles Township High School District 219 has developed a successful and highly popular Level 1 intervention for students. At Niles North and Niles West High Schools, there is a Literacy Center where students may go for additional help throughout the school day, as well as before and after school. Over 13,000 visits to each Lit Center are reported annually.

The Lit Centers are designed as either a center with teachers and tutors, where students receive 1:1 assistance and tutoring in any aspect of their educational experience. They may drop in or make an appointment, and teachers may refer students to the Lit Centers if they feel a student needs assistance.

The Literacy Centers are unique in that they are staffed by teachers as well as student tutors. There are approximately 150 student tutors in each building. These students are nominated by their teachers the previous spring, or they may nominate themselves. They volunteer to tutor either 3 or 5 days per week, depending on their availability. They may tutor during their study hall, lunch, or before or after school. Student Tutors are required to attend a summer training day where they learn Socratic questioning and guiding techniques. Early in the school year, the tutors are trained again on how to guide students through the writing process, as well as problem

solving in math and science. In addition, training is built in for working with our large ELL population.

The Literacy Centers are staffed by classroom teachers throughout the day, as well as before and after school. Math and English teachers are staffed each period. Social Studies and Science teachers are staffed in the Lit Centers, but are not present every period each day.

The Literacy Centers at Niles North and Niles West High Schools have become enormously popular over the years as a Level 1 RtI intervention. The centers are collaborative learning environments where students are given the tools to think critically, problem solve, and perform at higher levels in their courses. Students come to rely on the Lit Center personnel available, and are encouraged by their peers and teachers to perform at higher levels and increase their grades. The student tutoring process has been the driving force behind the success of the Literacy Centers, and tutors and tutees alike love to participate in the program.

References

IDEA: Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (Public Law 108-446).

Mellard, D. (2003). Understanding Responsiveness to Intervention in Learning Disabilities Determination. Retrieval at <http://www.nrclid.org/publications/papers/mellard.shtml>.

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