

Response to Intervention (RTI): A Primer for Parents



Ensuring a healthy start. Promoting a bright future.

By Mary Beth Klotz, PhD, NCSP, and Andrea Canter, PhD, NCSP
National Association of School Psychologists

A major concern for parents as well as teachers is how to help children who experience difficulty in school. All parents want to see their child excel, and it can be very frustrating when a child falls behind in either learning to read, achieving as expected in math and other subjects, or getting along socially with peers and teachers. Response to Intervention (RTI) is a multi-step approach to providing services and interventions to struggling learners at increasing levels of intensity. RTI allows for early intervention by providing academic and behavioral supports rather than waiting for a child to fail before offering help.

Some new federal laws have directed schools to focus more on helping all children learn by addressing problems earlier, before the child is so far behind that a referral to special education services is warranted. These laws include the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) of 2004. Both laws underscore the importance of providing high quality, scientifically-based instruction and interventions, and hold schools accountable for the progress of all students in terms of meeting state grade level standards. RTI is a process designed to help schools focus on these high quality interventions while carefully monitoring student progress. The information gained from an RTI process is used by school personnel and parents to adapt instruction and to determine the educational needs of the child.

What Are the Essential Components of RTI?

“Response to Intervention” refers to a process that emphasizes how well students respond to changes in instruction. The essential elements of an RTI approach 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 of student progress to shape instruction and make educational decisions. A number of leading national organizations and coalition groups, including the National Research Center on Learning Disabilities and the 14 organizations forming the 2004 Learning Disabilities (LD) Roundtable coalition, have outlined the core features of an RTI process as follows:

- 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 any special education evaluation timelines specified in 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?

Response to Intervention (RTI) is an array of procedures that can be used to determine if and how students respond to specific changes in instruction. RTI provides an improved process and structure for school teams in designing, implementing, and evaluating educational interventions.

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 or those who have behavioral or emotional problems that may interfere with their learning. Universal screening can be accomplished by reviewing recent results of state tests, or by administering an academic or behavioral screening test to all students in a given grade level. Those students whose test scores or screening results fall below a certain cut-off are identified as needing more specialized academic or behavioral 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 curricula 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. This increased flexibility has led to a growing interest in using RTI as part of an alternative method to traditional ability/achievement discrepancy comparisons. IDEA 2004 addresses RTI procedures within several contexts.

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. As before, 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 allows districts 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?

The hallmarks of effective home-school collaboration include open communication and involvement of parents in all stages of the learning process. Being informed about your school’s RTI process is the first step to becoming an active

partner. Both the National Center for Learning Disabilities and the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities advise parents to ask the following questions:

- Does our school use an RTI process? If not, are there plans to adopt one? 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?

What Are the Potential Benefits of RTI?

Perhaps the most commonly cited benefit of an RTI approach is that it eliminates a “wait to fail” situation because students get help promptly within the general education setting. Secondly, an RTI approach has the potential to reduce the number of students referred for special education services while increasing the number of students who are successful within regular education. Since an RTI approach 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 such as lack of prior instruction, referrals for special education evaluations are often reduced. RTI techniques have been favored for reducing the likelihood that students from diverse racial, cultural or linguistic backgrounds are incorrectly identified as having a disability. Finally, parents and school teams alike find that the student progress monitoring techniques utilized in an RTI approach provide more instructionally relevant information than traditional assessments.

What Are Next Steps in Implementing RTI Approaches?

There are many issues that must be addressed in order to effectively implement RTI approaches. Strong leadership and effective collaboration are essential ingredients in implementing RTI. 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. RTI is an educational approach that has the potential to help all students reach their full potential and to successfully meet the state grade level standards.

References and Web Resources

- Building the Legacy: IDEA 2004 website—<http://idea.ed.gov>
The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs website provides access to the IDEA 2004 statute, regulations, and helpful information.
- National Association of School Psychologists—
www.nasponline.org
NASP's has a variety of resource materials and helpful factsheets for parents. See collection of papers addressing the role of parents and school teams in RTI models: *New Roles in Response to Intervention: Creating Success for Schools and Children*
<http://www.nasponline.org/advocacy/rtifactsheets.aspx>.
- National Center for Learning Disabilities—www.ld.org
NCLD offers parents helpful information and resources on RTI and other school-related topics and advocacy information.
- National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD)—
www.ldonline.org/njclcd
The NJCLD is comprised of 13 organizations committed to the education and welfare of individuals with learning disabilities. See the paper: Responsiveness to Intervention and Learning Disabilities
http://www.ldonline.org/pdf/rti_final_august_2005.pdf
- National Research Center on Learning Disabilities—
www.nrclcd.org
The NRCLD engages in research, develops recommendations, and provides training. See the article: Understanding Responsiveness to Intervention in Learning Disabilities
<http://www.nrclcd.org/publications/papers/mellard.pdf>
- National Center on Student Progress Monitoring—
www.studentprogress.org
The National Center on Student Progress Monitoring provides information and technical assistance to implement progress monitoring techniques.

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The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) offers a wide variety of online resources to parents, teachers, and others working with children and youth that promote effective strategies, greater collaboration, and improved outcomes on a wide range of psychological, social/emotional, and academic issues. Visit the NASP website (www.nasponline.org) or use the direct links below to access information that can help you improve outcomes for the children and youth in your care.

About School Psychology—Downloadable brochures, FAQs, and facts about training, practice, and career choices for the profession.
www.nasponline.org/about_sp/spsych.aspx

NASP Resource Library—Online resources on a wide variety of topics.
www.nasponline.org/resources/index.aspx

Crisis Resources—Handouts, fact sheets, and links regarding crisis prevention/intervention, coping with trauma, suicide prevention, and school safety.
www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety

Culturally Competent Practice—Materials and resources promoting culturally competent school psychological services, recruitment of school psychologists from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and issues relating to English Language Learners and cultural diversity.
www.nasponline.org/resources/culturalcompetence

Mental Health—Articles, handouts, and links related to children's and adolescent's mental health and school-based mental health services.
www.nasponline.org/resources/mentalhealth

Advocacy—Information, resources, and advocacy tools for promoting school mental health services and learning opportunities for all children and youth. Important legislative, policy, and practice information and resources relating to key legislation including the Elementary and Secondary Education Act/No Child Left Behind (ESEA/NCLB) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA).
www.nasponline.org/advocacy

Response to Intervention—Information, resources, and tools related to Response to Intervention
www.nasponline.org/resources/rti

Links to State Associations—Easy access to state association websites.
www.nasponline.org/about_nasp/links_state_orgs.aspx

NASP Books & Products—Review tables of contents and chapters of NASP bestsellers and place orders.
www.nasponline.org/publications

Position Statements—Official NASP policy positions on key issues.
www.nasponline.org/about_nasp/position_paper.aspx