

Response to Intervention in Reading

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What is Response to Intervention?

Response to Intervention, or RTI, is one of the most promising reform movements in education today. Focused on improving the quality of teaching and learning in the general education classroom, RTI serves a dual purpose: (1) to develop more valid ways of identifying students with reading and learning disabilities, and (2) to provide early intervention for students at risk of reading failure. RTI allows teachers to determine which students need special education services based on the ongoing assessment of student performance, rather than the results of one or two days of testing by a school psychologist. Special education placement is recommended only when a student fails to respond well to reading instruction and to subsequent focused tutoring in the general education classroom.

Teachers use RTI to determine if instructional support and intervention delivered in the general education classroom — such as small-group instruction or pre-teaching of relevant foundational skills — improve a student's learning rate prior to referring the student for special education. For example, if a student struggles to acquire reading skills during appropriate core reading instruction, the classroom teacher and/or reading interventionist may provide intensive small-group instruction on key skills such as decoding and word-reading fluency.

RTI also provides a decision-making framework that uses assessment to drive instruction. An important premise of RTI is that reading instruction in the general education classroom, as well as subsequent instructional supports, is based on validated and research-proven approaches. Educators identify students with reading disabilities only when the students' responses to a research-based intervention are dramatically different from those of their peers.

Once educators have determined that the student needs additional support and have placed the student into an intervention group, ongoing assessment assists teachers in determining how well the student is responding to instruction. Teachers use assessment data to flexibly group students based on their individual needs and to determine whether to continue with current strategies or to provide additional levels of instructional scaffolding.

How is RTI Implemented in Schools?

There are two models for implementing RTI in schools. The first model is based on a problemsolving framework with a team of RTI professionals, often consisting of a student's classroom teacher, school psychologist, and reading specialist. The team keeps track of student data, records the specific reading interventions the classroom teacher uses, and notes how the student responds to particular interventions. Specifically, the team compares student performance to established criteria that identify students who are progressing at expected reading rates.

The second and more commonly used RTI model is the standardized protocol model. This model features standardized procedures and specific guidelines for assessment and instruction. For example, educators would implement consistent instructional methods for predetermined lengths of time. Rather than using individual reading plans for students who do not respond well to reading interventions, the standardized protocol model provides the same supplemental instruction (e.g., intensive practice in phonemic segmentation and letter-sound recognition) for all students who have not been making progress at expected levels. In other words, small-group instruction would be the same for all of the struggling readers in a given classroom.

One strength of the standardized protocol model is that there are clear procedures for RTI that everyone in the school can follow. Some have noted that this model is better suited for academic difficulties such as reading simply because it does not require arbitrary problem solving and reliance on untrained professionals. Overall, the consistent, predetermined RTI guidelines and procedures eliminate any ambiguity in the instructional decision-making process.

What is a Tiered Approach?

For RTI to be effective, it must incorporate a multi-tier prevention model. Tier 1 is comprised of core instruction that uses the best available evidence on how to teach reading. It is critical that a strong, sustained professional development process be in place to ensure that teachers are implementing the core reading program with fidelity.

The purpose of Tier 2 is to provide scaffolded support for students who are not responding well to the evidence-based instruction delivered through the core reading program in the general education classroom. In Tier 2, students receive intensive, small-group instruction using a curriculum that can be aligned to the scope and sequence of the core reading program.

Intervention materials should continue to incorporate the systematic, explicit features of an effective, research-validated reading program. Ideally, students receive intervention instruction at least four times per week for a minimum of 20 minutes each time. This is in addition to their Tier 1 core reading instruction.

Tier 3 of the Response to Intervention model involves longer-term, more intensive reading interventions than are provided in Tier 2. Tier 3 interventions may or may not involve special education. Educators may deliver instruction through Title I or other district-provided remediation programs. For example, if a student's reading difficulties result from a lack of adequate or sufficient reading instruction, Tier 3 intervention may be provided by programs other than special education. Conversely, if teachers determine that a student has received appropriate instruction, a multi-disciplinary team operating under IDEA regulations may determine if special education services are necessary.

What is the Role of Progress Monitoring in RTI?

Progress monitoring is an integral part of the Response to Intervention model. The purpose of progress monitoring is to determine whether or not students are responding successfully to reading instruction and/or intervention. A scientifically research-based practice, progress monitoring utilizes frequently administered assessments that reflect slight changes in a student's performance in reading. They are most often brief assessments that test phonemic awareness, as well as fluency in identifying letter sounds, nonsense words, high-frequency words, and connected text.

In Tier 1, all students take progress monitoring assessments. The purpose of this universal screening is to identify students who may be at risk for reading failure. After these students are identified, educators continue to monitor their progress periodically for six to eight weeks. Students whose performance continues to indicate that they are not progressing at the expected rate may be placed in the more intensive interventions offered in Tier 2.

After students are placed in Tier 2, teachers monitor their progress weekly to determine if they are responding to the evidence-based intervention program. Students whose reading skills reach a predetermined level of accuracy, or benchmark, will be dismissed from Tier 2 instruction and return to Tier 1. Once dismissed, their progress is monitored two to four times per month to ensure that they continue to respond to the reading instruction provided in core instruction. Students who continue to experience difficulty may receive another round of Tier 2 intervention or be moved to Tier 3, where they receive additional time and depth of instruction.

Educators monitor the progress of students in Tier 3 on a weekly basis. If a student continues to experience difficulty in reading, and if teachers have determined that the student needs a multidisciplinary evaluation for special education, data from Tier 1 and Tier 2 progress monitoring assessments provide evidence that educators have explored all general education resources and avenues.

The research on RTI is enlightening, and the results are compelling. And while the RTI framework requires additional training and improved technological systems to monitor and report data, the depth of information that is available to administrators, teachers, and parents — and more importantly the improved outcomes for students — will be well worth the collective effort.

