

# Responding to Intervention

*Lisa Salazar* explains how to use Response to Intervention methods to close achievement gaps

**As defined by the Institute of Education Sciences**, RTI (or Response to Intervention) is a “comprehensive early detection and prevention strategy that identifies struggling students and assists them before they fall behind.” This strategy is not only used to identify and target special education students but is now being employed to bring struggling students up to par with their peers.

In the beginning, RTI was developed in response to other, error-prone methods of intervention. For example, in the infamous 1978 court case *Hoffman vs. Board of Education*, a student with a severe speech impediment was recommended for special education, despite test scores barely below average. After the student took eleven years of classes designed for the mentally retarded, professionals caught the mistake. He didn’t belong. Unfortunately, this wrongful placement deprived him of over a decade’s worth of valuable instruction during his most formative years.

Motivated, perhaps, by this and similar cases, researchers in the late 1970s began developing a method for intervention that would avoid such problems. They believed interventions needed to begin earlier and take

place in a regular classroom setting. These approaches gained some popularity in the 90s. But RTI really took off when, in 2004, lawmakers passed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which listed RTI as a viable way to identify students with learning disabilities.

Now, RTI is a hot topic. Administrators are finding that this style of intervention works well in integrating English learners (ELs) to an English-only classroom. And the extra help hasn’t come too soon. In New York alone, 30,000 ELs arrive each year; meanwhile EL graduation rates are dropping, with only 23 percent of New York City’s ELs graduating from high school within four years. The key is to start intervention early, so administrators around the country are working to incorporate intervention strategies into their schools.

## How It Works

RTI helps in a number of ways, but first and foremost, it is a preventive measure. Students do not have to wait to fail before they get help. Without early intervention, students may struggle for years before getting the kind of help they need, causing them to give up on the school system or, even worse, on them-

selves by the time an appropriate intervention begins.

Dr. Joseph Torgeson, director of the Florida Center for Reading Research at Florida State University, has seen RTI in action. “If the RTI model is applied successfully in kindergarten through second grade,” he says, “almost all students will arrive in third grade able to read third grade text accurately and fluently, with variable levels of understanding.”

RTI can be implemented in a variety of ways, and not every strategy will work in every school. When you have some rural school districts with a population of 200 and others topping out at 18,000, says Erin Lolich, director of an RTI initiative in Tigard-Tualitin, “I’d say the implementation varies.” She laughs. “Just slightly.”

And she ought to know. When the Oregon Department of Education started a partnership with Tigard-Tualitin School District in 2005, Lolich trained five other school districts on RTI methods. Now, thirty districts are involved. With such a diverse audience, each school must decide what strategies will best fit the students at that school. Whatever you decide, be sure to include these three components key to RTI:



### 1. High-quality, scientifically based classroom instruction

If your students aren't learning, something's got to change. But before you start looking in your students' direction, try taking a good, hard look at your own teaching strategies first.

RTI is about reforming our schools. RTI expert Dr. George Batsche explains that it "focuses on ensuring the effectiveness of core instruction and behavior programs prior to trying to 'fix' students who are having difficulty."

If half the class is struggling, you may need to reexamine your core curriculum. Dr. Batsche continues, "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 70 to 80 percent of students, and must be developed and implemented to achieve that goal."

So, now that we realize the disability may actually be with curriculum, take a moment to evaluate it. Get rid of programs that have proven less effective, and free up your funds to focus on students who are struggling for other reasons. Remember, curriculum must not be rigid, but should respond to students' needs.

### 2. Tiered instruction

Once you find an effective core curriculum, your students will still require different amounts of attention. Most RTI models rely on a three-tier system. The core curriculum makes up the first tier. With each subsequent tier, the instruction becomes progressively more individualized, leading to one-on-one time and increased frequency.

When students begin to show signs of being at risk through assessments and early screening, they move to Tier 2. If these signs continue, students move to more substantial interventions in Tier 3. Traditionally, remedial interventions were not integrated with core instruction, but in the RTI model, tiered instruction is closely tied to the core. Even students in Tier 3 should spend much of their day with their peers, participating in core curriculum. Tiers are only meant to supplement a good course of study.

The IES Practice Guide includes a checklist of assessing, adjusting, and monitoring tiered instruction, but every school's tier model is different. Drs. Sharon Vaughn and Jeane Wanzek, RTI experts, explain: "The Three Tier Model is not a program for implementation, but rather a framework for thinking about

RTI... [It] can be adjusted for any research-based program and any grouping practice. Students can be provided interventions in a range of group sizes, including whole class, small group, pairs, and one-on-one."

### 3. Ongoing student assessment

Not only are students assessed before entering Tier 2 or Tier 3, but they must continue to be assessed for progress. Dr. Torgeson observes that current interventions tend to stabilize the relative deficit in student skill rather than remediate it. With ongoing assess-

## Finding the Funds

**The new economic stimulus just** got passed, which means you can make a pass at some of the funds allocated to education. Because these are one-time monies, you may want to use your on software strategies that will be less expensive long term and will reach more students individually. But don't take too long to decide — the AB1802 funds expire on June 30!

ments, you can monitor the success of each intervention and make changes accordingly.

Keep in mind that the average student might remain in intervention programs for three years before gradually moving back to Tier 1 so be patient. At the same time don't wait too long to take extra action. Say Drs. Vaughn and Wanzek, "A critical feature of RTI is the early implementation of interventions designed to accelerate student learning using progress monitoring and possibly diagnostic assessments." The results of these assessments are used to establish the efficacy of current interventions and choose what step to take next.

### What You Can Do

RTI may seem overwhelming at first. Some wonder how they'll find the time to give so much individualized instruction, others are nervous about misinterpreting assessment results. You may think there's no time for progress monitoring, or your staff is too limited, but there are things you can do to make it work.

Ideally, every struggling student would be assigned a personal professional — a tutor or teacher who could focus all attention on one student. In schools with an ever-increasing population and an economy with ever-diminishing funds, however, idealism takes a backseat to reality, so consider other, more cost-effective programs. Perhaps your students' parents are very involved and could help out in tutoring programs before and after school. You could lead student-parent conferences and encourage parents to take a teaching role at home, or computer programs can be employed to increase efficiency.

## Inquiring Minds Want to Know

**When RTI's got you stumped, take advantage of a professional opinion.**

Once a month at [NCLDTalks.org](http://NCLDTalks.org), experts on RTI answer your questions in a live chat. Submit your questions beforehand, or do it live while you read the answers to dozens of questions from other inquiring minds.

### Software as an Intervention

Educational software is appealing in many ways. It provides one-on-one instruction while incorporating state-of-the-art technology. It can be so fun that students don't realize how much they're learning. It's versatile and can be used as a pull-out intervention during class, part of an after school program, or both. Of course the warmth and care of a human instructor can never be duplicated, but, when money is tight, some software can make up for this in other areas, incorporating engaging graphics, songs, and games into the curriculum.

Three years ago, Tennessee's Chester County School District began using educational software to help their English learners. Principal Randle Fenimore has used Imagine Learning English with his English learners for three years now, and he recently expanded the program to use as an RTI tool with all his students.

As he explains it, "The teachers who worked with it gave it a very high rating. They felt that it really did make a difference with their ESL students, so we decided to take a leap and go a step further." He's already making plans to expand the program to more students next year.

When asked what feature is most important to him in his educational software, he explained. "Just pulling out one thing is very difficult. They provide way above average support, and they have very good reports," Fenimore began. The program provides real-time individual and class summary reports that can be monitored at any time — perfect for ongoing assessments required for RTI.

Fenimore continued, "The program directly addresses the skills that each particular student needs. What could be more important than that?" In your search for software, look for programs with an adaptive curriculum — that automatically re-teaches when students don't do well in one area and that accelerates when students excel, so they don't get bored. Most importantly, use a kid-friendly program that your students will enjoy. "Children like working with the program," says Fenimore, "and if they like it, they're going to be more successful."

In 2007, only 26 percent of English learners (ELs) at Vista Valley Elementary School in California were proficient according to state

testing. After a year of concerted efforts, 41 percent of their ELs were proficient, but then the school district expected another 10 percent increase. It seemed a daunting task.

"We had done everything possible last year, so what do we do this year to increase

## Software Checklist

### ■ Efficient and effective placement:

You shouldn't have to place your students in the curriculum yourself — or sit by their side while they take a test. Good educational software will assess skills and place students automatically. Also beware of additional price tags. An assessment and placement program should be included as part of the package.

■ **Real instructional feedback:** Forget the dings and donges. When students answer incorrectly, these won't help them learn. They need feedback specific to that question in order to improve.

### ■ Strategic first-language support:

You only want your software to translate instructions as long as students need them. That way language won't be a barrier — or a crutch.

### ■ Supported content area reading:

When students read a new story, the words shouldn't be new too. Good EL software will build background knowledge and teach academic and story vocabulary in preparation.

### ■ User-friendly management system:

You have enough on your plate — tinkering with unwieldy management programs is the last thing you want to do. Find a program that will get going with just a few clicks each day.

### ■ Excellent customer support:

Recordings will get you nowhere fast, so look for a company that will answer your questions with a real person and give you straight answers and support.

### ■ Scientific, research-based curriculum:

Anyone can make a software program, but that doesn't mean it will work. Make sure your software was created using the teaching strategies proven to be effective.

# Checklist for Carrying out RTI Recommendations

## (from the IES Practice Guide)

**Recommendation 1:** Screen all students for potential reading problems at the beginning of the year and again in the middle of the year. Regularly monitor the progress of students who are at elevated risk for developing reading disabilities.

- Create a team at your school to facilitate the implementation of universal screening and progress monitoring.
- Select a set of efficient screening measures that identify children at risk for poor reading outcomes with reasonable degrees of accuracy.
- Use benchmarks or growth rates (or a combination of the two) to identify children at low, moderate, or high risk for developing reading difficulties.

**Recommendation 2:** Provide differentiated reading instruction for all students based on assessments of students' current reading levels (tier 1).

- Provide training for teachers on how to collect and interpret student data on reading efficiently and reliably.
- Develop data-driven guidelines for providing differentiated instruction to students at varied reading proficiency levels for part of the day.
- Differentiate instruction — including varying time, content, and degree of support and scaffolding — based on students' assessed skills.

**Recommendation 3:** Provide intensive, systematic instruction on up to three foundational reading skills in small groups to students who score below the benchmark score on universal screening. Typically, these groups meet between three and five times a week for 20 to 40 minutes (tier 2).

- Use a curriculum that addresses the components of reading instruction (comprehension, phonics, and vocabulary) and relates to students' needs and developmental levels.

■ Implement this program three to five times a week, for approximately 20 to 40 minutes each time.

■ Build skills gradually and provide a high level of teacher-student interaction with opportunities for practice and feedback.

**Recommendation 4:** Monitor the progress of tier 2 students at least once a month. Use these data to determine whether students still require intervention. For those students still making insufficient progress, school-wide teams should design a tier 3 intervention plan.

- Monitor progress of tier 2 students on a regular basis using grade appropriate measures. Progress monitoring should occur at least eight times during the school year.
- While providing tier 2 instruction, use progress monitoring data to identify students needing additional instruction.
- Consider using progress monitoring data to regroup tier 2 students approximately every six weeks.

**Recommendation 5:** Provide intensive instruction on a daily basis that promotes the development of the various components of reading proficiency to students who show minimal progress after reasonable time in tier 2 small group instruction (tier 3).

- Implement concentrated instruction that is focused on a small but targeted set of reading skills.
- Adjust the overall lesson pace.
- Schedule multiple and extended instructional sessions daily.
- Include opportunities for extensive practice and high-quality feedback with one-on-one instruction.
- Plan and individualize tier 3 instruction using input from a school-based RTI team.
- Ensure that tier 3 students master a reading skill or strategy before moving on.

by another 10 percent?" asks Principal Gloria McKearney. She cites the relatively small population of ELs at Vista Valley (26 percent of 510 students) as the major problem in targeting them. "When the whole class is EL, or even two-thirds, you can gear your lesson to the whole class. But when you only have a small number, it's really difficult to be direct and target those children's needs without leaving three-fourths of your class out."

It's a familiar story, but McKearney believes she's found the answer in RTI. "That's where Imagine Learning English [ILE] picks up," she

says of their newly implemented software. With the recent budget issues in California, "all my teachers have told me: whatever we cut, don't cut ILE." Because once you find an RTI system that works for you, you can't imagine your students' lives any other way.

Though California standards tests are still weeks away, McKearney is confident they will reach their goal of 51 percent proficiency among English learners at Vista Valley without neglecting her English speakers.

The average elementary school instructor teaches 20+ children, children who blossom

at different stages and learn at very different paces. Without an effective intervention program in place, it is impossible to track each student's individual progress, let alone plan student-specific remediation for those falling behind. Response to Intervention can address these issues as long as it is the right response. ■

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