Cover page

Title: Special Education: A systematic approach to efficiency and effectiveness

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The purpose of this study was to investigate the effectiveness and the efficacy of regional special education programs. Focus groups were conducted in an independent school district and two special education cooperatives. Focus groups were conducted with general education teachers, special education teachers, principals, paraprofessionals, superintendents and related services professionals. Fifteen focus groups were conducted. The questions asked were (a) what should be maintained in the delivery of special education and yet streamlined, (b) what roles should general education assume in an RTI model, (c) how can regular and special education be more collaborative in an RTI model, (d) what are some of the managerial components that need to be maintained or changed, (e) what role should special education and support staff take with a RTI model, and (f) what are some of the other issues regarding delivery of special education. Results from the study indicate that RTI has the potential to address delivery of special education services in a more effective and efficient manner. Concerns expressed include (a) the need for staff development and training on interventions, the difficulty of implementation at the secondary level, and the difficulty of implementation in rural schools. In general, RTI is viewed as an opportunity for school systems to move from a dual system (general education and special education) into a unified system that can more effectively meet the needs of all students. Recommendations for school districts include (a) involving general education teachers in data collection; (b) using special education teachers as consultants and resource people; (c) allocating resources to fully implement suggested interventions; and (d) implementing a staff development program for regular and special education teachers. Recommendations for higher education programs include providing students with (a) teaching and intervention strategies, (b) collaboration skills, (c) data collection

skills, (d) special education processes, and (e) assessment skills. In addition, preparation programs need to establish partnerships with PK-12 schools to not only observe and stay attuned to the application of RTI but to also provide support and professional development to assure the full implementation of RTI strategies.

Educators continue to be concerned about how to deliver special education services in a more efficient and effective manner. This is a concern considering the number of school age children receiving special education services. According to *Education Week, Quality Counts 2004* an estimated 6 million of the nation's school age children between the ages of 6-21 receive special services. Sixty-seven percent of the children are identified as having specific learning disparities or speech and language impairments.

A 2005 survey conducted by the National Directors of Special Education and The Access Center found the most commonly reported issues regarding instruction of students with special needs are (a) general education teachers lack of knowledge about appropriate accommodations and modifications for students with disabilities, (b) special education teachers lack of knowledge about general education curriculum, (c) low expectations for students with disabilities, (d) a need for professional development for general education and special education teachers to learn strategies for meeting the needs of all students including students with disabilities, and (e) time for co-planning and meaningful collaboration between general and special education personnel across all grade levels. Specifically, school administrators and teachers need a streamlined decision-making process that can address issues of efficiency and effectiveness in a broad yet detailed scope.

One such systematic process, Response to Intervention (RTI), can be used by schools to establish a more effective and efficient way to delivery special education. RTI has been the focus of an attempt to provide more accountability for general education to

serve all students. The focus is on teaching and learning. The general intent of RTI is to examine ways to use remedial interventions to assist in the identification of students needing special education services. In a report prepared by the National Joint Committee on Leaning Disabilities (NJCLD), June 2005, it was suggested that RTI can provide (a) data for more effective and earlier identification of students with learning disabilities and (b) a systematic way to ensure that students experiencing educational difficulties receive more timely and effective support (p 1). RTI is intended to address early interventions for students who are experiencing significantly low achievement. One basic assumption behind RTI is that when teachers provide quality instruction and remedial services to students without disabilities they will make significant educational progress. Fuchs and Fuchs (2006) analyzed the "what" and "why" of RTI as well as the validity of RTI. They noted many challenges is using a RTI model but concluded that as a "framework (it) has many strong possibilities. Right now we see its promise in regards to how its multilayered structure can be implemented in the early grades to strengthen the intensity and effectiveness of reading instruction for at-risk students, preventing chronic school failure that corrodes children's' spirits and diminishes all of us who work on behalf of public schools" (p.98).

NJCLD identified the following about RTI: (a) high quality, research-based instruction and behavioral support in general education; (b) scientific, research-based interventions focused specifically on individual student difficulties and delivered with appropriate intensity; (c) the use of a collaborative approach by school staff for development, implementation and monitoring of intervention process; (d) collaborative approach by school staff for development, implementation and monitoring of intervention

process; (e) documentation of partner involvement during the process; (f) documentation that the timelines adhere to described federal regulations; and (g) systemic assessment and documentation that the interventions used were implemented with fidelity. (p 2)

RTI has been presented as a way to reduce referrals to special education. Moreover, it is viewed as a way to reduce the cost of special education services. This is accomplished by referring only those students who do not respond to the interventions recommended during the RTI process. However, when considering the costs effectiveness of an RTI model, Barnett, Daly, Jones and Lentz Jr. (2004) report that the cost to implement an RTI model will vary related to the team fluency in problem solving.

As suggested, RTI is a collaborative problem solving process. The collaboration occurs between general education and special education and focuses on quality teaching and learning. Data collected from collaborative problem solving can be used as part of the evaluation for special education identification. This saves time and costs and also assists in making appropriate referrals for special education services. The collaborative process can assist with appropriately separating the students with disabilities from those who perform poorly because of inadequate prior instruction. Thus it also can lead to a reduction in referrals to special education by identifying students who truly are in need of special education services and those who are not (Fuchs, Mock, Morgan & Young, 2003). The collaborative process allows teams of general education teachers and special education teachers to offer support for each other when addressing the academic needs of students. Consequently, a process such as RTI supports a collaborative, unified system rather than creating a divided, dual system.

It is not the intent of this paper to present a detailed description of the RTI process, instead it is to suggest that appropriate implementation of RTI can result in a more effective and efficient delivery of services to students with disabilities. Suffice it to say, that RTI is a multi-tiered model and framework that delineates a continuum of programs and services for students with academic difficulties (NJCLD, 2005). RTI can result in more effective and efficient deliver through (a) early identification, (b) reduced referrals to special education (c) reduced referrals of misidentified minorities to special education and (d) assured relevant data with student referrals.

VanDerHeyer, Witt and Gilbertson (2006) studied the effects of the decision making used in an RTI model to determine the evaluation and qualification of students referred for special education. They determined through cost analysis that resources devoted to traditional assessments were reduced and replaced by direct assessment and interventions and through consultation services in classroom. The process was "truly a referral system" (p. 251).

VanDerHeyer, Witt and Barnett (2005) suggest that the benefits of implementing an RTI model would result in school-wide achievement because academically struggling students will be identified and immediate intervention will be available. They further conclude that it places collaborative decision-making in an instructional framework, which is a more appropriate place for determining a student's academic program and environment. They also acknowledge the potential of reduced referrals to special education.

Mellard, Byrd, Johnson, Tollefson, and Boesche (2004) found in their analysis of research regarding the use of RTI that one of the must significant contributions of RTI is

that the procedures lend themselves to a better understanding and quality of instruction and informed decision making. The procedures can also yield information that more accurately ranks students within their peer group and more accurately ranks their performance with the curriculum. Consequently, students at risk for learning disabilities can be identified and receive interventions early. Mellard, et al. (2004) conclude that through the implementation of RTI, students who received intensive, high quality instruction in small groups made significant progress in a short amount of time and continued to perform well once the interventions stopped (p. 247).

Mastropieri and Scruggs (2005) address the changing roles of teachers and diagnosticians with RTI. The major responsibility for implementation in tiers 1 and 2 of a RTI model rests in the general education classroom. It is general education teachers who are responsible for delivering the needed interventions. The success of implementation, according to Mastropier and Scruggs, has yet to be determined and clearly articulated. They contend there are several questions that need to be addressed including how to institutionalize a RTI model.

Additional discussions in the literature also address the influential role of general education administrators regarding the implementation of RTI. (Lasky & Karge, 2006; Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2006). Lose (2008) suggests that with the implementation of RTI the principal can take measures to allow for struggling learners to reach their full potential and continue to learn in the regular classroom. The principal can also allocate resources to implement the interventions needed for remedial academic problems experienced by students.

Purpose and methodology

The RTI literature provides support for the idea that RTI can be a proactive process for developing an effective and efficient delivery of special education. Based on findings from the literature, we designed a study to investigate: (a) what ways are there to provide more efficient and effective delivery of special education services, (b) what are the funding issues that interfere with the delivery of service; (c) what are the administrative issues facing special education; (d) how can a more inclusive environment be established; and (e) how can general education administrators become more engaged and empowered in special education decision-making processes? Using the questions as the framework, focus groups were initiated in three administrative units: an independent school district and two special education cooperatives. A special education cooperative is a group of independent school districts collaborating to provide special education services. The enrollments of the districts ranged from a single district of approximately 7000 students to districts with an enrollment of 300 students.

Focus groups were conducted with general education teachers, special education teachers, principals, paraprofessionals, superintendents and related services professional. Focus groups ranged in size from five to twelve individuals. A total of 15 focus groups were conducted with a total of 100 individuals participating. Questions used for the focus groups were developed with the intent of soliciting responses from stakeholders about how to more effectively and efficiently deliver special education services. The questions included (a) what should be maintained in the delivery of special education and yet streamlined, (b) what roles should general education assume in an RTI model, (c) how can regular and special education be more collaborative in an RTI model, (d) what are some of the managerial components that need to be maintained or changed, (e) what role

should special education and support staff take with a RTI model, and (f) what are some of the other issues regarding delivery of special education.

Findings and discussion

The findings reported in this paper are preliminary. The study involves the collection and analysis of additional data. The preliminary findings are shared through themes or issues as they relate to the delivery of special education.

First it is important to note that in order for RTI to be effective it must be institutionalized and understood by all stakeholders. The stakeholders interviewed indicated that RTI can be a process for providing an effective and more efficient deliver of special education. One superintendent stated, "Superintendents need to set the tone and it should result in less referral to special education." Another indicated there is the need for staff development. Yet another stated, "I am not sure how much involvement special education should have in the initial tiers of RTI; that way they can focus on the more intense interventions." Superintendents emphasized tight budgets and emphasized the importance of not spending money "unnecessarily" but rather "more effectively."

Special education directors indicted that RTI should give teachers more tools and assist them in working through interventions. One director noted, "RTI interventions cannot be an add-on to general education." The special education directors emphasized the need for staff development in order for RTI to be implemented effectively. One director stated, "There are concerns about the limited training of regular education teachers." Another stated a need for "team training." The special education directors also viewed RTI as an opportunity for improving instruction in a manner that would increase effective teaching and they viewed RTI as an opportunity to create a systematic process

for data collection. From the perspective of the special education directors interviewed, RTI can be used to maximize interventions for all students.

Special educational teachers were less willing to see RTI as the solution to issues in special education. They expressed concerns about collaboration. They articulated "the need for time to meet to work on interventions" and "the need for administrative support superintendent and principals need buy-in." There were a number of issues regarding the implementation of an RTI model in a rural setting: "One special education teacher in a K-12 setting can't find the time to add interventions." "There is only one teacher and no time to network." "I can't deal with all the special education issues let alone regular classroom issues." Further, they see a very different acceptance of RTI at the high school than in the elementary: "In the high school you can't cover all the classes and know all the subjects." "You can't work on skills like the elementary." However, they did see RTI as an effort to keep students in the regular classroom. "RTI will assure a restructure of delivery and not an addition of new staff." In line with the superintendents and directors of special education, special education teachers saw the need for staff development in order to fully implement any RTI model. They also saw the need for special education teachers to take on a non teaching role and become the "intervention specialist."

The principals also saw the need for staff development. They stated, "We need to get teachers to workshops," and "We need staff development to do this." They saw RTI as a general education responsibility. One principal stated, "General education needs to be responsible." They understood the value of "earlier identification of students with needs." However, principals noted, "we need the time to do this."

Regular classroom teachers saw the positives of RTI. They saw it as a general education role and that it might be more efficient. "If a student is referred in 1st grade and not accepted and then referred in 2nd grade, the delay is too long and you start all over again." The key to the regular classroom teachers is the time to work collaboratively. "The time to sit down and problem solve." They also commented that implementation in rural settings would be difficult.

The preliminary findings of this study indicate that RTI, if implemented appropriately, has the potential to address delivery of special education services in a more effective and efficient manner. It is important to note, however, that the findings surface concerns. The concerns need to be addressed in order to fully realize the potential of an RTI model. First, all stakeholders referenced the need for staff development and training on interventions. Second, there is a concern that it may be more difficult to implement RTI at the secondary level. Delivery of special education at the secondary level remains a "tutoring model rather than an intervention remediation model." Third, implementing a RTI model in rural schools would be difficult. One special education teacher working a K-12 system would not be able address all the needs and interventions.

Conclusions and recommendations

The literature outlines that an RTI intervention model, if implemented correctly, will have an impact on the delivery of special education. It will also have an impact on how general education is accountable for the services of at risk students. This is especially true due to early identification and remediation. A systematic process of intervention will result in reduced referrals to special education (VanDerHeyer, Witt &

Barnett, 2005). The RTI model can also result in a more cost effective service delivery (Barnett, Daly, Jones, & Lentz, Jr., 2004).

Ardoin, Witt, Connell, and Koenig concluded that "professional time can take advantage of the decision making tools within an RTI model with the goal of more accurate decision making regarding decisions about special education." (p. 379).

The conclusions and basic foundation of the success of an RTI model and, consequently, a more effective and efficient delivery of special education services is grounded in the following recommendations: (a) general education teachers need to become more involved in data collection. This will require new skills taught during teacher preparation programs; (b) special education teachers will become consultants and resource people. This, too, will require embedding new skills in special education teacher preparation programs; (c) elimination of dual systems (general education and special education) in schools. This needs to be replaced with a unified, collaborative system; (d) school administrators intent on student learn and the allocation of resources to fully implement suggested interventions; (e) a comprehensive RTI staff development program for regular and special education teachers; (f) a restructure of how special education is delivered the secondary level, shifting from academic tutor to remediation; (g) a comprehensive review of costs; (h) structured, collaborative planning time for general and special education teachers; (i) there continues to be the need to reduce the amount of paper work; (j) RTI, or any intervention strategy, needs to be "owned" by regular education; and (k) school leaders need to set the tone for institutionalizing RTI.

Teacher and school administration preparation programs can prepare pre-service teachers and aspiring administrators by being attentive to the development of appropriate

knowledge, skills and dispositions. Preparation programs for general education should include (a) strategies to address instructional interventions for at-risk students, (b) skills in working collaboratively with special education teachers, (c) strategies for providing effective instructional delivery for all students, (d) data collecting skills, (e) assessment of instructional strategies for all learners, and problem solving/decision making skills. Special education preparation programs should include (a) collaborative skills for working in partnership with general education teachers, (b) understanding of interventions strategies, (c) knowledge of PK-12 curriculum, (d) team building skills, (e) assessment of instructional strategies, (f) data collection, and (g) problem solving/decision making skills. Administration preparation programs should provide aspiring school leaders with knowledge, skill and dispositions that include (a) accepting ownership for all students, (b) assistance in identification of instructional interventions, (c) knowledge of special education processes, (d) understanding of how to allocate resources to assure suggested interventions can and will be implemented as recommended, and (e) data-driven decision making skills. In addition, teacher preparation programs and administration preparation programs need to establish partnerships with PK-12 schools to not only observe and stay attuned to the application of RTI but to also provide support and professional development to assure the full implementation of RTI strategies.

RTI is an intervention model that is receiving national attention. Many educators have high hopes that it will serve to help school systems develop a more effect and efficient process for special education; of even greater value may be the opportunity RTI provides for school systems to replace what has become a dual system (general education

and special education) into a unified system that can more effectively meet the needs of all students. Higher education's involvement in this initiative is crucial.   Teacher preparation programs as well as administration preparation programs need to prepare aspiring teachers and administrators with the knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary to support RTI and to serve the needs of all students.

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