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NEWSLETTER

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RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION

Possibilities for Service Delivery at the Secondary School Level

Response to Intervention (RtI) came into the national forefront in the late 1990s as an alternate approach for identifying students with specific learning disabilities. Briefly, RtI assumes that a broad system of early intervention and support is in place, one possible component of which is evaluating a student for suspected learning disabilities. All students are provided with evidence-based instruction and progress monitoring in general education classrooms.

As schools have begun to implement RtI models, the approach has grown beyond just a special education identification approach. It has become a comprehensive, data-based prevention model for helping struggling students achieve. At the elementary school level, where RtI models primarily have been implemented, we are beginning to see their potential for influencing the nature of early intervention and instruction. And, as secondary educators embrace the approach, we also are finding some promising results. This newsletter takes a look at the challenges and possibilities of implementing an RtI model at the secondary level.

RtI—The Basics

In 2004, the amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) included a new provision that allowed local education agencies to use RtI as part of their learning disabilities evaluation procedures. However, federal law did not prescribe how to implement this new federal provision, and to date there has been no endorsement of a particular RtI model.

Although there are various RtI models, most share several common features (see the text box, Common Features of an RtI Model). At the first indication of nonresponse to classroom instruction, appropriate scientifically based interventions—typically organized into at least three tiers that represent varying degrees of intensity—are provided. Student progress is monitored to determine what is working or not working and what adjustments need to be made. Students identified as being at risk after not responding to primary interventions participate in either targeted, group-based supplementary instruction (secondary interventions), or if needed, more intensive, typically individualized, tertiary interventions.

General educators collaborate with support staff—including special educators, related service personnel, teachers of English language learners, Title I staff, and administrators—and sometimes parents in problem solving for a student or group of students. Typically, a formal process is followed in which team members identify and analyze the problem, select the intervention, implement the intervention, monitor the response, and use monitoring data to determine next steps.

Most RtI models are based on the premise that students should not have to wait and fail in order to receive needed services and supports. To this end, RtI provides a mechanism for supporting struggling students in general education. In fact, a decrease in inappropriate special education referrals is often an outcome of a comprehensive RtI model, as are reduced rates of student disengagement and increased numbers of students achieving grade level standards (Burns, 2008). Research has shown the efficacy of elementary school RtI models in improving basic reading instruction and providing positive behavioral supports (Glover & DiPerna, 2007).

Common Features of an RtI Model

School staff members:

- Provide all students with scientifically-based instruction in general education settings.
- Screen students in academics and behavior to identify at-risk students.
- Implement scientifically-based interventions—typically organized by increasing levels of intensity in at least three tiers—to address identified student difficulties.
- Conduct continuous monitoring of at-risk student performance for primary interventions, and more frequent monitoring (e.g., bi-weekly) for secondary and tertiary interventions.
- Use progress monitoring data as part of a formal problem-solving process to determine the effectiveness of interventions and to make any adjustments.
- Assess the fidelity with which instruction and interventions are implemented.
- Ensure that the RtI model includes provisions for referral for comprehensive evaluation, as appropriate.

Source: Bradley, R., Danielson, L., & Doolittle, J. (2007). Responsiveness to intervention: 1997 to 2007. *Teaching Exceptional Children, 39*(5), 8–12.

RtI at the High School Level—Challenges and Possibilities

Students enter high school with a variety of needs that can be served by an RtI model. In some cases, academic and/or behavioral challenges may not have been identified, or they may not have surfaced until high school. New students or those returning to the school district may not be prepared adequately for the district curriculum. By high school, it is estimated that between 40 and 60 percent of students chronically disengage from school, not counting those who have dropped out (Klem & Cannell, 2004).

The challenge at the secondary school level in implementing an RtI model involves addressing very real logistic challenges. Consider these basic differences:

- At the **elementary level**, the focus is on learning basic skills, which lends itself well to ongoing progress monitoring. Elementary students generally attend one class with one teacher for most of the day, which allows for flexibility in planning and implementing interventions. Schoolwide problem-solving teams, which are becoming increasingly commonplace in many elementary schools, provide a foundation on which to anchor an RtI model.
- At the **secondary level**, the focus is on learning content and using higher-level thinking skills within subject areas—a focus that does not readily lend itself to the use of universal screening tools, ongoing progress monitoring, and interventions that work across subject areas. Secondary students attend multiple classes—some less than an hour in duration—taught by different teachers who may interact with each other rarely. This can hinder the identification and implementation of interventions across subjects. Teaming across subject areas requires additional time and scheduling flexibility.

Given these significant differences, is RtI possible in secondary schools? According to secondary educators who are implementing RtI models, the answer is "Yes."

Successful implementation will most likely require high schools to adopt—if they have not already done

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SECONDARY LEVEL RtI IMPLEMENTATION TIP

Use Data To Identify Students At Risk for Dropping Out for RtI Intervention

Many potential dropouts can be identified in the first year of high school and provided with interventions that may help them stay in school. RtI teams may find the following types of data useful in identifying at-risk students.

- Track student attendance, grades, promotion status, and engagement indicators and determine criteria for who is considered off track for graduation.
- Track ninth grade students who miss 10 days or more of school in the first 30 days.
- Monitor first-quarter freshman grades and identify students who are failing core academic subjects.
- Monitor end-of-year grades.
- Track students who will not be promoted to tenth grade as a result of failing too many core subjects.

Source: Kennelly, L., & Monrad, M. (2007). Approaches to drop out prevention: Heeding early warning signs with appropriate interventions. Washington, DC: National High School Center. Retrieved March 25, 2008, from http://www.betterhighschools.org/docs/NHSC_ApproachestoDropoutPrevention.pdf

so—practices and procedures for ongoing capacity-building and collaboration (Arnberger & Shoop, 2008; Canter, 2004; Canter, Klotz, & Cowen, 2008; Duffy, 2007). Examples of practices and procedures include:

- Identifying relevant screening and progress monitoring tools across subject areas, tying student progress monitoring measures to local curricular and state content standards, and making sure measures are sensitive enough to discern benchmarks.
- Identifying appropriate intervention models that work across subject areas and ensuring that they are implemented appropriately.
- Establishing teams—including a cross disciplinary group of subject area teachers, specialists, and administrators—that can make collaborative decisions.
- Developing a viable process that clearly articulates how the model will work—including student scheduling, RtI team meeting time, data retrieval, etc.
- Identifying effective instructional techniques across content areas that support student engagement in the curriculum and ensuring that teachers have sufficient professional development.
- Identifying and utilizing a culturally salient vehicle for instructional delivery to minimize or eliminate cultural discontinuity as a reason for low student performance.

RtI—At the Center of School Improvement at Thomas B. Doherty High School

In 1999, when **Dr. Jill Martin** became principal of Thomas B. Doherty High School in Colorado Springs, CO, she was faced with some significant challenges. The freshman failure rate was 40 percent, the graduation rate was 76 percent, the dropout rate was significant, and the school ranked "average" on the Colorado School Accountability Report. In just seven years, Dr. Martin and her staff made significant changes that led to improvements in academic progress for their 2,000 students. Measures of progress include:

- An increased graduation rate to 84.1 percent.
- A decreased dropout rate to 0.88 percent.
- A freshman failure rate that was reduced by 57 percent, with 91 percent of ninth graders reporting a smooth adjustment to high school.
- A 62 percent growth in enrollment in AP classes and a 25 percent growth in enrollment in honors classes.
- Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in 2004, 2006, and 2007 (31 of 33 AYP indicators/subgroup targets achieved in 2005).
- A ranking of "high" on the Colorado School Accountability Report for 2004 through 2007.

To put these gains in context, they came during a period of growth and demographic change in which the study body increased by 130 students, minority enrollment increased from 18 percent to 22 percent, and the percentage of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch rose from 6.5 percent to 20 percent.

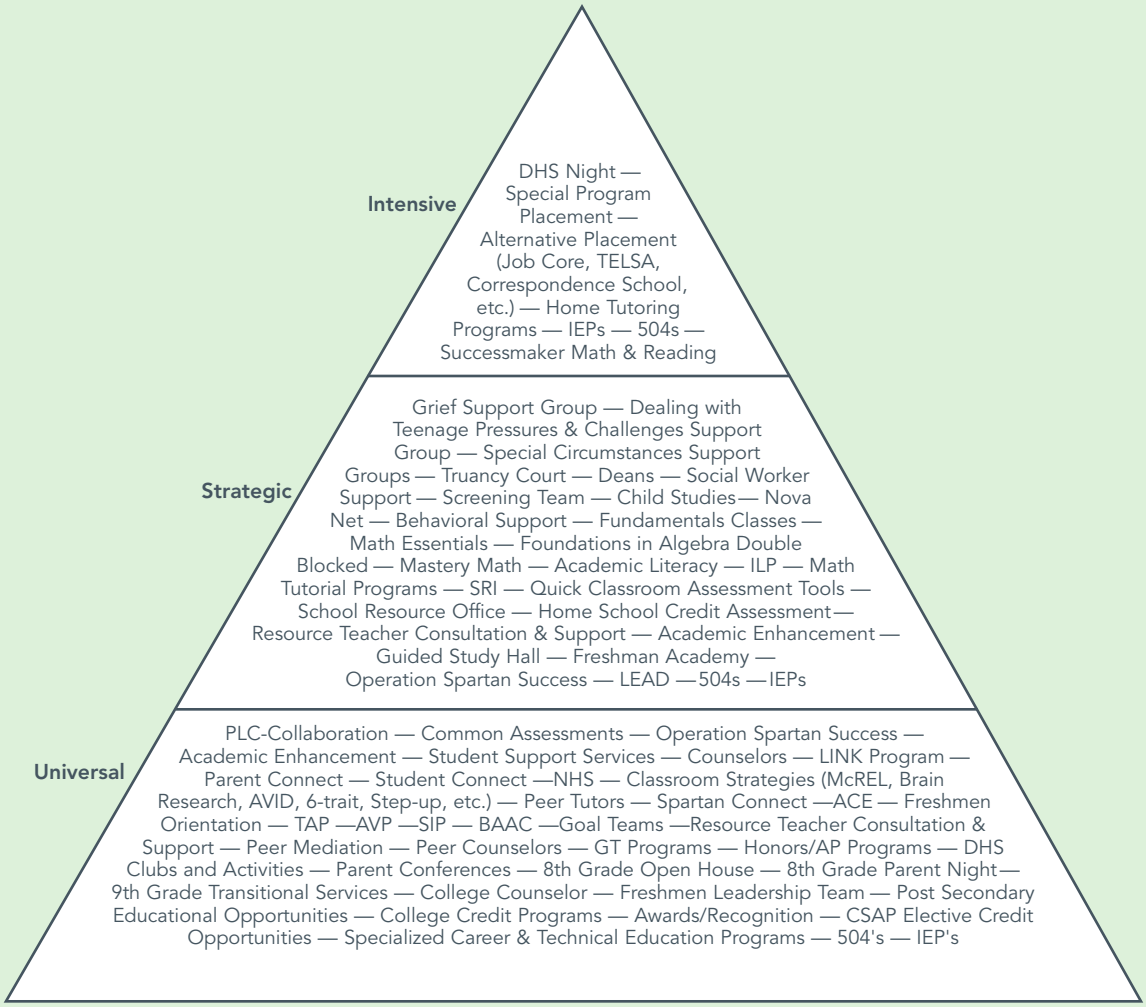
Dr. Martin attributes much of the success to the implementation of an RtI multi-tiered model that has led to greater personalization of the learning

environment and allowed educators to focus on helping students who are having difficulty meeting learning and behavioral standards. "The challenge we face with No Child Left Behind (NCLB) accountability issues is how to meet the needs of all students," she explains. "We had been implementing professional learning communities (PLC) and data-driven decision making as part of our school improvement efforts. When the state mandated RtI, it provided us with a mechanism to expand our PLC work and answer the questions, 'What do you do when students don't learn what you want them to know?' and 'What do you do if students already know what you want them to know?' *Whatever it takes* became our focus."

Dr. Martin and her staff began by adopting a three-tiered model of support and organizing their resources into the different levels (see the text box, Doherty High School RtI Pyramid of Interventions). "Seeing what resources you already have [on paper] helps dispel the notion that RtI is just a fad," she asserts. "And it helps us see what we are already doing to help students who are not learning."

Dr. Martin and her staff then began reviewing student data to see if there were interventions available to address all of the needs—and where there were none, they began developing them. "We found that a large number of incoming freshmen were at risk, so we developed the Freshman Academy—a special course that helps prepare students for the rigors of high school," she tells us. "We also targeted a subgroup of struggling juniors and seniors who were not making it during the day program and developed night school classes for them."

As part of the RtI initiative, Dr. Martin and her staff initiated some new teams. The overall RtI team looks at student data that are aligned with curriculum standards—such as common assessments, district



Doherty High School — Response to Intervention (RtI)
Pyramid of Interventions

Source: Martin, J. (2007). *Implementing Response to Intervention at the high school level: Every student, every day!* Colorado Springs, CO: Thomas B. Doherty High School. Retrieved March 25, 2008, from http://www.nwrel.org/nwrcc/rti-webinar/materials/rti-dhs.pdf

At Risk Reports, and the computerized Measures of Academic Progress assessment that screens math, reading, and language usage—and decides which students need more individual attention. The RtI screening team monitors students who are receiving specific interventions and studies cases where interventions are not working. The professional development team is involved in suggesting staff development for teachers in classroom interventions that support all students.

According to Dr. Martin, the time teachers spend on teams is essential to the success of RtI. School starts late for students one day each week, which allows teachers to collaborate in grade level, subject area, or schoolwide teams, including RtI teams.

SECONDARY LEVEL RtI IMPLEMENTATION TIP

Screen Incoming Ninth Graders and Provide Support Before They Fail

In the Chisago Lakes School District, located in rural Minnesota, high school educators became concerned that a large number of students would not be able to pass the new statewide math test in eleventh grade, on which a passing grade was required for graduation. Rather than wait to see which students would be successful in ninth and tenth grade math classes, educators used an RtI model to identify students with math difficulties before they entered ninth grade and developed a second-tier intervention to support them.

All eighth grade students were screened, and those who were at risk for math difficulties were identified. Teachers implemented a math resource room in which students received evidence-based instructional support and progress monitoring. Students were scheduled for the math resource room during a period in which they would normally have an elective course. The intervention was continued at the high school level in ninth and tenth grades, where it was substituted for study hall and/or an elective. Results showed that the intervention was successful in increasing students' math skills as measured by average growth on the Measures of Academic Progress assessment.

Source: Windram, H., Scierka, B., & Silberglitt, B. (2007). Response to intervention at the secondary level: Two districts' models of implementation. *NASP Communiqué, 34*(5), 1–7. Retrieved March 25, 2008, from http://www.nasponline.org/publications/cq/mocq355rtisecondary.aspx

SECONDARY LEVEL RtI IMPLEMENTATION TIP

Improve Buy-in by Using RtI to Solve Priority Issues

In the Washington DC public schools, an RtI model is implemented through districtwide student support teams (SSTs) to address the needs of struggling students. Team members use a decision-making process in which they analyze data for individuals or groups of students, identify a problem and intervention, monitor the implementation of the intervention, review data collected on the intervention, and make further recommendations. Interventions are organized in a three-tiered model.

One strategy—focusing on a school improvement priority issue that affects numerous students—led to enhanced buy-in at the secondary level. In these cases, school staff considered schoolwide interventions to address the needs of a group of students. Consider these examples:

- Improving the low attendance rate in one high school was a districtwide focus. Teams began studying data for approximately 150 students who were chronic nonattenders in first period classes. They surveyed the students and discovered a variety of reasons for nonattendance—safety concerns related to getting to school (e.g., passing through gang territory), home responsibilities (e.g., looking after younger siblings, taking care of older relatives, etc.), poor transportation, etc. Once students missed classes, they fell behind and lost the incentive to attend. Teams designed intervention plans (e.g., afterschool programs, day care, tutoring, mentoring, etc.) and tracked results.
- Over age students—those students who are at least two years older than their peers in a particular grade level—were a priority issue in another high school. Over age students are at serious risk for dropping out. Data showed that there were 150 over age ninth graders, 100 over age tenth graders, and 70 over age eleventh graders attending the high school. Teams developed individual plans for each over age student and tracked results.

Schoolwide teams make recommendations that all teachers must implement, so obtaining buy-in becomes an important consideration. "Collaborative decision making is key," she stresses. "For example, when we decided to create a literacy class for struggling students, the English Department had to look at how it would be staffed."

Dr. Martin says that principal support is essential. "Principals must acknowledge the work being undertaken by the staff and they must reward it," she explains. "They may need to find alternative incentives for teachers, as well as outside funding for particular interventions." And, she reminds us, "Principals must lead by staying focused on the vision that we will do whatever it takes to help all of our students succeed."

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