Information Brief:

RTI Scheduling Processes for Middle Schools

The National Center on Response to Intervention (NCRTI) defines Response to Intervention (RTI) as the following:

Response to intervention integrates assessment and intervention within a multi-level prevention system to maximize student achievement and to reduce behavior problems. With RTI, schools identify students at risk for poor learning outcomes, monitor student progress, provide evidence-based interventions and adjust the intensity and nature of those interventions depending on a student's responsiveness, and identify students with learning disabilities (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2010, p. 2).

For more information about RTI, please visit http://www.rti4success.org

NCRTI maintains four essential components of RTI:

- Screening
- Progress monitoring
- A school-wide, multi-level instructional and behavioral system for preventing school failure
- Data-based decision making for instruction, movement within the multi-level system, and disability identification (in accordance with state law).

Implementing Response to Intervention (RTI) involves significant shifts for many people and elements within schools. Scheduling classes and activities appears to be one of the most perplexing challenges that school staff confront when implementing RTI. This seems to be especially true in secondary school settings, such as middle, junior high, and high schools (National High School Center, NCRTI, and Center on Instruction, 2010).

Having a workable schedule for faculty, staff, and students is important in making the RTI essential components cohesive and feasible to implement. This brief addresses frequently asked questions (FAQs) about scheduling issues in middle schools. The responses[1] were derived from observations, surveys, and interviews with administrators and staff at 11 middle schools that were implementing RTI. (For information about how the middle school sites were selected, see Appendix A.)

Throughout the text, readers will find *summary questions* and *guiding questions*. The *summary questions* are designed to help practitioners make sense of existing practices at other schools. The *guiding questions* are designed for practitioners to use as a guide or checklist during RTI implementation as they create or modify their middle school schedules.

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[1] The practices described here may or may not be effective in all schools and are not endorsed by the U.S Department of Education.

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How Do Schools Get Started in Creating or Modifying Their Schedules to Allow for RTI Implementation?

Many schools reported that their first task in preparing for RTI implementation was establishing a regular time for the RTI leadership team to meet. (These teams are also called "planning team," "data team," "RTI core team," etc.). Such a leadership team is pivotal in establishing RTI structures and processes for implementing the essential components of RTI and creating a school-wide schedule that accommodates these components. Many schools already have staff meeting time included in their master schedule; at these schools, this time is often expanded or revised to accommodate RTI planning time. Other schools manipulate their schedules to ensure that team members can meet at a common time (e.g., for a one-hour or a class period-long meeting) each week when they are not teaching.

Regardless of how the schools scheduled this time, meeting time was often used to plan for RTI implementation; provide professional development opportunities; and review students' screening and progress monitoring data.

For example, the leadership team at one school met every Tuesday from 8:00 to 9:00 a.m. The team worked on efficiency and task management in part through having a structured agenda. The school made sure that staff involved in the meeting did not have classes scheduled during that morning period. The team used this time to review implementation plans, needs, and next steps and to examine student data and progress.

Another first step that several schools reported was reviewing profiles of student assessment results during a data-based decision making meeting in the summer prior to the start of the school year. After identifying the instructional needs of students, schools focused on building classes to accommodate the range of instructional needs. Finally, schools ensured that students were scheduled to receive the appropriate instructional classes (e.g., primary, secondary, or tertiary levels) that met their instructional needs.

> *"We don't let the computer schedule our kids; we schedule very thoughtfully."*

Summary Question:
How should a school begin the process of changing or modifying its schedule?

Depending on the staffing and needs of your school, you may want to first establish an RTI planning or leadership team to help specify your plan for preparing the school's schedule and implementing the essential components of RTI. The team can review existing student assessment data and brainstorm techniques to prepare for implementation. Establishing an RTI team at the beginning of implementation has several benefits:

- Having staff representation during the process of organizational change provides cross-school representation and the multiple perspectives that can lead to buy-in from the rest of the staff.

- Holding regular meeting times offers an opportunity to continuously evaluate progress and success with the schedule changes and implementation activities.

As you prepare your school's structure to implement the essential components of RTI, remember that scheduling is not a perfect art form. Organizational, structural, and scheduling changes take time, patience, and, very likely, multiple iterations before finding the schedule that works for your school.

How Do Schools Find the Time for Grade-Level and/or Content-Area Meetings?

Many school administrators establish common planning or meeting times for content teachers (vertical grouping) and/or grade-level teachers (horizontal grouping) to review and share students' information and progress and make data-based instructional decisions. Establishing common planning and meeting times allows a forum for staff to learn about data-based decision making and to understand students' data and instructional needs. Staff involved in the team reported that they were empowered to make data-based instructional decisions to ensure all students received the necessary level of instructional supports. Many schools reported using portions of common meeting time to provide ongoing professional development.

For example, several schools in this study used already existing professional learning communities. Others rearranged the class schedules of teachers so that content teachers had identical planning times. Often, these meetings occurred in the morning (during the traditional "home room" time) or late in the afternoon (during the last period of the day).

When schools repurposed existing meeting times, they were able to do the following:

1. Evaluate previous meeting time usage and outcomes

2. Communicate purpose, goals, and anticipated outcomes for the meeting time

3. Establish a clear agenda that included intended goals and outcomes

4. Evaluate the progress and efficiency of the meetings

Summary Question:
How can a school schedule team meeting time?

You may already have meeting times in place, such as staff meetings, administrative meetings, or even professional learning communities. You might evaluate how you are currently using this time, and whether you can use this time for your RTI planning meetings. Often, you will need to find a way to work within your established routines for the RTI team meetings. Simply having the time set aside does not necessarily encourage communication about students, improve staff by in, or allow for professional development. This time has to be structured appropriately and purposefully with a clear agenda in place.

Guiding Questions:
When will you schedule the planning meetings?

- Which staff members will be involved?
- How frequently will the team meet (e.g., weekly, bimonthly)?
- Can any existing meeting times be repurposed for the RTI planning team?
- Who will set the agenda and intended goals and objectives for these meetings?
- How will you know if the meetings are meeting your needs?

How Do Schools Rearrange Class Schedules to Establish Intervention Classes?

Schools can use a variety of techniques, based on their individual needs, to integrate multi-level intervention classes into their schedules. Such integration generally depends on the existing school structure. This study observed only traditional school schedules. Overwhelmingly, the schools in this study used *elective periods* s the most common approach to scheduling secondary- and tertiary-level classes. For example, if a school used a 7-period school day, and two of those periods were for elective classes, then the school designated the electives as intervention classes for students needing interventions. The common goal for staff and students was to have students meet academic benchmarks and move back into their elective courses of choice.

In addition to using elective periods, some schools chose to shorten the time of their classes (e.g., by 5 minutes) and add an *additional class* period to the school day. In many cases, these schools also shortened transition times between classes to increase instructional time. The added instructional period provided either intervention or elective time for students. This method required all instructional staff to teach an intervention or an elective class.

One middle school shifted students from social studies and science core classes to secondary-level intervention classes. The principal indicated that staff was concerned about the students missing these subjects, but the principal stressed that students who were struggling to read would not understand the core social studies or science content if they did not take part in the intervention classes. Once the school began the process of using data-based decision making to determine the instructional needs of students, the students transitioned easily into and out of the intervention classes. When students transitioned back into their core classes, school staff reported that the students quickly picked up the missing content information with guidance from the general education teachers.

Finally, some schools provided *extended learning time* outside the existing school schedule. For example, classes met before or after the school day or on Saturdays. The sessions outside of the school day were voluntary, and schools had to gain the support of staff, parents, students, and the community to put these structures in place.

Several administrators reported that their instructional goal for primary- and secondary-level prevention was to provide such solid instruction that the tertiary level was truly meant for the hardest to teach students for whom previous interventions were not effective. Staff found it easier to schedule tertiary-level interventions when the number of students needing this level of instruction was a small percentage of the school population. However, many school administrators reported struggling with scheduling such individualized, resource-intense instruction. Several school administrators used existing special education classes and teachers to provide instruction to the students who were struggling the most, even if they were not identified as having a specific learning disability.[2]

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[2] We are describing practices we observed and do not endorse using special education resources to provide tertiary-level instruction.

Summary Question:

How can a school implement an intervention class schedule?

To schedule intervention classes that work best for students, the leadership team at your school should look very closely at the following types of information:

- Assessment data (e.g., level and variability) of students
- Existing class structure (e.g., number of class periods and courses)
- Lengths of classes
- Available resources

All of the techniques implemented by the schools in this study (e.g., using elective periods, pulling from core content classes, establishing a common intervention time, forming extra classes, and extending learning time) have their advantages and drawbacks. Furthermore, these techniques are by no means exhaustive; more appropriate solutions may exist depending on the needs of your students. Even schools that have been implementing RTI for many years still tweak their systems to meet the needs of students and staff.

How Do Schools Manage the Staffing Necessary for Smaller Intervention Classes?

Very few schools in this study hired additional staff to provide secondary- and tertiary-level classes. Most schools changed the teaching responsibilities of current staff. Some schools pooled resources and designated one or more staff as full time RTI interventionists. These staff members taught only the secondary- and tertiary-level classes. For example, one school has three full-time intervention teachers who teach the intervention classes and several para-educators who assist the teachers. In this school, intervention classes for secondary- and tertiary-level interventions are held every class period, which allows the school to move students into and out of the appropriately leveled intervention course as needed.

Other schools recruited general education teachers to be responsible for one intervention class period during the day. One school had all math teachers teach an intervention course during a common math intervention period. The students who did not need a math intervention took other general education classes during this period. This school held the reading intervention classes during a different common period. The teachers who taught the intervention classes were provided the appropriate professional development and resources for their instructional programs.

Summary Question:

Who will teach the intervention classes?

During the planning phase, the leadership team at your school should review resources and staffing. Since funding sources are limited in many schools, you will need to review how to best teach the secondary- and tertiary-level interventions. Regardless of whether you hire full-time intervention teachers or recruit general education and special education teachers to teach interventions, ensure that these teachers are experienced and have the appropriate professional development, supports, and resources. The most expert and experienced teachers should teach the students with greatest needs at the tertiary level of intervention.

How Do the Schools' Schedules Allow for Movement Between the Levels of Prevention?

When scheduling classes, school administrators often discussed the need for flexibility so that students could move fluidly among classes as they needed additional intervention supports. Most administrators reported manipulating their existing structure so that they could move students into or out of an intervention course at any point in the school year. The need for flexible student movement in and out of intervention classes posed an ongoing challenge to the typically rigid structures of middle and junior high school schedules.

One middle school offered intervention classes throughout the entire day and built its system to smoothly move students into an intervention course whenever necessary. Other schools held intervention classes at the same period during the day, making it easier to group students with similar needs together and allow students to transfer into and out of intervention classes.

The leadership teams at schools often acted as "gatekeepers" with regard to moving students into and out of intervention classes. The teams established data-based decision making processes to determine which classes best met the instructional needs of struggling students. Members of the leadership teams discussed the data and created instructional plans that included decisions about tier placement. This system allowed staff at schools to change a student's schedule at any point during the school year.

What Are Some Additional Scheduling Challenges That Schools Face?

Several schools reported that a "one-size-fits-all" schedule was not appropriate for their schools because the instructional needs of students varied from grade to grade. Some staff crafted schedules that provided different class lengths for each grade level. The following schedule illustrates how staff has been inventive with schedules to accommodate all students, regardless of the varying needs across grade levels.

> **Middle School X** *(8-period, plus homeroom, day; 40-minute class periods)* See Table 1
>
> *In this school, every student received an intervention. Advanced and proficient students received a program that was designed to advance their skills, and basic and below basic students received interventions that were designed to remediate their skills.*

- Sixth-grade intervention classes were scheduled by shortening the 6th grade homeroom time to add an extra period in their day, and thus the bell schedule was slightly different.
- Seventh-grade intervention classes were held in a block format in the morning by combining two class periods.
- Eighth-grade intervention classes were traditional length and held in the afternoon.

Table 1

Period	Grade 6	Grade 7	Grade 8
Homeroom	8:30 8:55 Homeroom 8:57 9:37 **INTERVENTION**	8:30 9:00 Homeroom	8:30 9:00 Homeroom
1	9:40 10:20 Core Class	9:02 10:22 Core Class-Block	9:02 10:22 Core Class-Block
2	10:22 11:02 Core Class	10:24 11:04 **INTERVENTION**	10:24 11:04 Elective
3	11:04 11:37 Lunch	11:06 11:46 **INTERVENTION**	11:06 11:46 Elective
4	11:39 12:19 Core Class	11:48 12:21 Lunch	11:48 12:28 **INTERVENTION**
5	12:21 1:01 Elective	12:23 1:03 Core Class	12:30 1:03 Lunch
6	1:03 1:43 Elective	1:05 1:45 Core Class	1:05 1:45 Core Class
7	1:45 2:23 Core Class	1:47 2:27 Elective	1:47 2:27 Core Class
8	2:25 3:09 Core Class	2:29 3:09 Elective	2:29 3:09 Core Class

Finally, one of the junior high schools reported struggling with its existing credit system. Because the intervention classes gave pass/fail elective credit, students could not move back into a graded elective course until the end of the semester. The principal is passionate about finding a solution to moving students into and out of the intervention classes based on their instructional needs, not the existing credit system. The school is investigating new structures to put into its schedule to facilitate the fluidity of student movement.

Many secondary schools have strict schedules for a variety of reasons, such as compliance with district and state regulations. Although these schedules may not lend themselves well to allowing students to move fluidly between tiers, staff can find methods to provide their students with the needed instructional supports. Fluidity addresses the need to be immediately responsive to the instructional needs of your students. You might choose to adopt a variety of schedules and structures for different grades, as was described previously. If you have restrictive regulations regarding a credit system you might try to find a way to manipulate and use elective credits to your advantage with intervention classes. Creativity is necessary to solve the problem of how best to serve students and help them move into and out of intervention levels as necessary.

Guiding Questions:

How can class schedules be manipulated to fit the needs of secondary- and tertiary-level interventions?

- Which staff members will organize the schedule?
- What can you do to manipulate the current class schedule to fit the needs of your intervention classes?
- How many intervention classes will you need to accommodate secondary- and tertiary-level interventions?
- Who will teach the intervention classes?

How Do Schools Schedule Screening and Progress Monitoring Assessments?

Staff reported that having a set time for test administration ensures that assessments are administered and with the necessary frequency. Most participating schools reported that screening was conducted two to three times per academic year. Schools built *screening* assessments into their school calendars before the start of the school year. For example, one school scheduled screening sessions for August, January, and May. During each session, the school administered the screen within a 1-week timeframe to all students. As soon as all students were assessed, the RTI team immediately reviewed the screening data, determined the instructional needs of the students, and implemented class placements.

Staff at many schools reported that integrating systematic *progress monitoring* into their schedules was extremely difficult. Most middle schools established regular progress monitoring routines for students that receive secondary- and tertiary-levels of instruction. Several schools scheduled weekly or biweekly progress monitoring for students depending on the level of interventions that the students received. At one school, assessments were administered to all students in intervention classes at the same time (e.g., every Friday or every other Friday at 11:00).

Conclusions

Staff at many of the schools that were visited considered the process of scheduling a potential barrier to full RTI implementation. Scheduling challenges meant adjusting class schedules, scheduling screening and progress monitoring assessments, planning meeting times for RTI leadership teams, and scheduling time for the data teams to make decisions about students' responsiveness to the multi-level prevention system.

Several administrators knew that their first attempts to change the schedule would not be perfect and anticipated the need for several iterations. They believed that they could find an alternative schedule to change the structure and make instructional delivery better for students. Thus, administrators and staff members investigated various approaches for establishing intervention schedules and team meeting times. Ultimately, they found that they could begin to accommodate the changes they needed to meet the needs of their students and staff.

To help your school leadership team make some structural and scheduling decisions, we provided some guiding questions throughout the text. To help guide you through your planning decisions, we have also created a matrix (Figure 1). The matrix provides some common scheduling considerations and sample (i.e., fictitious) "answers" for how a school might manipulate its schedule to better accommodate the essential components of RTI. These examples are not intended to be the real "answers" for your school, but they may help you in your own planning process. Feel free to modify this matrix or pull information that best fits your needs.

Figure 1. Sample Worksheet to Help Frame the Scheduling Decision-making Process

Common Scheduling Considerations	Staff Member(s) Responsible	Decision	Implementation Date	Evaluation (Is the Schedule Working for Your Needs?)
Determine the meeting time of the leadership team	Administrator, key RTI staff	Once per week during planning time	Schedule planning meetings for the summer (i.e., before the school year begins); start the regular schedule at the beginning of the school year	• Does everyone attend all meetings? • Is meeting time being used as designed? • What major accomplishment(s) result from the meetings?
Determine how the class schedule will be reorganized (secondary and tertiary)	RTI team, administrator	Common elective time, shortened class lengths, or an additional period	June	• Are all identified students receiving an intervention? • Is the schedule fluid?
Determine the needs of the class (e.g., reading fluency, reading comprehension, math computation)	RTI team	First focus on gaps in basic reading skills; add math computation next year	Summer	• Are classes meeting the needs of students? • What other classes are needed?
Determine the frequency and length of classes (secondary and tertiary)	RTI team	Secondary: One elective class, 5 days per week Tertiary: Two class periods, 5 days per week	September	• Does frequency of classes result in student growth? • Is the class length sufficient for the instructional needs of the students?
Determine who will be the intervention teachers (secondary and tertiary)	Administrator	Secondary: Trained general education teacher Tertiary: Special education teachers and reading specialists	Hold appropriate professional development sessions during the summer; implement the intervention in September; conduct ongoing professional development and supports throughout the school year	• Are intervention classes being taught with fidelity? • Do progress monitoring data show growth? • Do teachers have the necessary training? • Do the intervention teachers have the time to prepare for and provide the intervention classes?

Common Scheduling Considerations	Staff Member(s) Responsible	Decision	Implementation Date	Evaluation (Is the Schedule Working for Your Needs?)
Determine the assessment schedule (screening and progress monitoring)	RTI team	Screening: Three times per year (e.g., Sept. 1, Dec. 1, and April 1) Secondary progress monitoring: Fridays at 11:00 a.m. Tertiary progress monitoring: Wednesdays and Fridays at 11:00 a.m.	September	• Are screening and progress monitoring measures being administered with fidelity? • Are the right types of data being collected?

References

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Appendix

Our Approach

Staff from the National Center on Response to Intervention (NCRTI) used a mixed-method evaluation model to collect descriptive data from middle schools that were implementing Response to Intervention (RTI). Staff conducted telephone interviews with school administrators, held onsite administrative and staff discussion groups, observed multi-level prevention classes, and observed meetings with district and middle school personnel about the conceptualization, implementation, essential components, outcomes, and current status of their RTI practices.

Staff from NCRTI used a snowball sampling method from such venues as school Web sites, RTI summits, conference presentations, self-nomination, peer nomination, and publications to initially identify potential middle school sites that exhibited some level of RTI planning and implementation. We contacted 82 schools and asked them to participate in this project. Forty-two agreed to participate and also met our initial selection criteria of implementing the four essential components of RTI. We conducted in-depth, 2-hour phone interviews with staff from these 42 schools.

The next stage of data collection involved telephone-based data-collection surveys. At minimum, we sought to include schools with the following criteria (based on Shinn, 2008):

- One screening assessment at least one time per year in one content area
- Progress monitoring at least one time per month for secondary level interventions
- Progress monitoring at least two times per month for tertiary level interventions
- At least three levels (or tiers) of prevention
- A predetermined data-based decision making process

We invited 20 schools that met all the above selection criteria to participate in the follow up phone survey. Of the 20 invited, 17 schools participated in the follow up data collection phone survey that included questions to obtain information about the following areas:

- Data collection activities
- School wide screening scores
- Progress monitoring data collection
- Student movement in the multi-level prevention system
- Numbers of students at each instructional level
- Fidelity of implementation practices
- Professional development practices

When schools demonstrated positive student outcomes based on their data, we asked to visit to observe RTI practices and identify implementation characteristics that were common among the middle schools. We visited 12 middle schools. Most of these 12 schools served sixth, seventh, and eighth grades.

The schools were rural, suburban, and urban, located in all regions of the United States; Northeast, South, Midwest, Southwest, and West. The schools' populations ranged from a low of 172 to a high of 1436 students, with the median population at 658 students.

The schools were diverse in regard to economically disadvantaged students. Measured by percentage of reported free and reduced lunch, the percentage of economically disadvantaged students ranged from a low of 7.9 percent to a high of 81.1 percent of the school population. The schools' ethnic diversity also varied. The non-white population ranged from a low of 5.1 percent to a high of 82.6 percent of the schools' populations. The average non-white population was 30 percent.

The onsite visits included four components:

- Three discussion groups with school faculty about implementation processes, staff roles, benefits for students and staff, challenges, and next steps
- An interview with the principal about implementation activities, professional development, the leadership team, scheduling, structures, staffing, resources, and the role of parents
- Observations of data team meetings to gather information about data-based decision making, discussion structure, agenda, staff involvement, frequency, and length
- Observations of classes at each intervention level, focusing on class structure, length, numbers of students, instructional program/strategy, adherence, exposure, quality of delivery, program differentiation, and student engagement

About the National Center on Response to Intervention

Through funding from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs, American Institutes for Research and researchers from Vanderbilt University and the University of Kansas have established the National Center on Response to Intervention. The Center provides technical assistance to states and districts and builds the capacity of states to assist districts in implementing proven response to intervention frameworks.

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