A Systemic Approach to Implementing Response to Intervention in Three Colorado High Schools

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THE CHALLENGE

- Implementing RTI in high schools presents unique challenges that require educators to work across traditional boundaries.

TAKE-AWAYS

- **Create a coherent vision and structures that support implementation:** Leaders at the state, district, and school levels provide the vision that lends coherence to what may appear to be disparate school improvement initiatives. Leaders communicate the importance of that vision by creating structures, sharing responsibility for implementation, allocating resources, and creating tools that support implementation.

- **Build efficient data systems that provide timely access to data:** Providing efficient access to accurate and timely data that can support decision making at all levels of the system (e.g., policies, resource allocation, and instructional next steps) is essential.

- **Develop flexible interventions:** Given high schools' reliance on credit accumulation, they must ensure that interventions are flexible in both duration and intensity. Interventions should not become "parking lots" for students.

- **Provide professional development:** For RTI to be effectively implemented, people at all levels in the system should continue to benefit from ongoing, job-embedded support. This support is necessary as people learn to work across traditional boundaries—whether across state education department units, district departments, or general education and special education or disciplinary departments like mathematics and science.

INTRODUCTION

The National High School Center continues to receive inquiries about how to support high school implementation of response to intervention (RTI).[1] Given the National High School Center's previous work on the topic (described in the text box on p. 2), we wanted to better understand the conditions that contribute to or inhibit implementation of tiered frameworks in high schools and the role that district- and state-level leaders play in how these frameworks take shape in high schools. Although this brief uses some aspects of our previous work as a way to frame this conversation, the purpose of this piece is not to create an in-depth portrait of how schools implement RTI but rather to discuss the state and district policies and activities that affect the implementation of RTI across the system—at the state, district, and high school levels.

In order to explore these issues, in early 2011 we returned to Colorado's District 189[2] to the schools we had visited in 2008 and interviewed district- and state-level leaders who could share their perspectives about implementation.[3] In this brief, we summarize what we learned from these interviews and discuss the effect of district and state policies on RTI implementation in three high schools. In the process, we identify some implications for leaders at all three levels of the system as they address the sustainability of a complex framework like RTI. Although it would be easier to assume that the adoption of state policy is a sufficient mechanism for consistent and thorough implementation, in practice, we know that is rarely the case—local context and past practices all play a role in how initiatives such as this play out. Therefore, we also describe the role of local contexts and past practices within and across all three schools.

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[1] Although the National High School Center uses the term *tiered interventions* to refer to these frameworks, throughout this brief, we use the term *RTI* because that is how Colorado refers to the frameworks being implemented.

[2] The district and high school names have been modified to remove any identifiable information.

[3] We had a one-hour interview with a representative of response to intervention and positive behavioral interventions and supports in the Colorado Department of Education. We also conducted a four-hour interview with two district administrators. At the school level, the interviews varied in composition and length. We interviewed 10 administrators and participated in a walk-through at Hamilton for more than five hours. At Taft, we interviewed the principal for three hours. At Garfield, we interviewed three staff and the principal for four hours.

In the first section, we summarize the previous work of the National High School Center, national policy efforts that have contributed to the emergence of tiered frameworks, and Colorado's activities in response to federal policy and guidance. The second section describes four aspects that support RTI efforts at the state, district, and school levels: leadership, data-based decision making, interventions, and professional development. These four components have contributed to implementation at three high schools in District 189. In the process, we look not only at factors that support early implementation but also at those that advance and sustain implementation. We understand that much of the work by the Colorado Department of Education and District 189 toward sustainability continues to evolve and are grateful for their openness in discussing both successes and challenges. This story makes clear that although state-level policies can indeed support and accelerate implementation, district and school leaders' commitments to devote resources and stay the course play a pivotal role in sustaining implementation of tiered interventions at the secondary level.

BACKGROUND

National High School Center Prior Work on RTI

In 2007, the National High School Center released a brief, *Meeting the Needs of Significantly Struggling Learners in High School: A Look at Approaches to Tiered Intervention*, that describes the implementation and structural issues related to successfully instituting tiered interventions at the secondary school level. It defines RTI models, explores the benefits and challenges of implementing RTI at the high school level, and outlines the resources needed to support this work (Duffy, 2007).

Shortly after the release of that first brief, representatives from the National High School Center visited schools in District 189, located in a city in Colorado, to learn more about how tiered frameworks were taking shape in two different high schools. The information collected during that visit was intended to contribute to a portrait of what a tiered framework for instruction might look like at the secondary level.

In 2010, the National High School Center collaborated with the National Center on Response to Intervention and the Center on Instruction to publish *Tiered Interventions in High Schools: Using Preliminary "Lessons Learned" to Guide Ongoing Discussion* that illustrates how high schools were implementing tiered frameworks. The publication describes how a small sample of high schools applied the essential components of RTI as tiered frameworks and also identifies elements that support implementation of tiered interventions: leadership, evaluation, interventions, and professional development.

THE NATIONAL CONTEXT FOR RTI

In the last 30 years, several efforts in the research and policy communities have occurred simultaneously to contribute to the growing use of response to intervention to benefit all students and as an alternative to IQ discrepancy models[4] to identify students with learning disabilities (SLD). Beginning more than 20 years ago, a growing chorus of researchers called for alternatives to IQ discrepancy models as a means to identify students with learning disabilities (Aaron, 1997; Fletcher et al., 1998; Gresham & Witt, 1997; Siegel, 1988; Stuebing et al., 2002; Vaughn, Gersten, & Chard, 2000). Those researchers described the discrepancy model as both inaccurate (because of the over-identification of some students and the under-identification of others) and inefficient (because of its reliance on a "wait-to-fail" model). In 2004, the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) allowed states to utilize alternative means of identifying students with learning disabilities, stating,

> The National Center on Response to Intervention (NCRTI, 2010) uses the following definition of RTI: "Response to intervention integrates assessment and intervention within a multi-level prevention system to maximize student achievement and to reduce behavioral problems. With RTI, schools use data to 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 or other disabilities" (p. 2).

"In determining whether a child has a specific learning disability, a local educational agency may use a process that determines if the child responds to scientific, research-based intervention as a part of the evaluation procedures."

Two years prior to the reauthorization of IDEA, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) provided an opportunity for federal policymakers to align special education with general education by including special education students in its accountability framework. Both the IDEA reauthorization and NCLB have increased momentum for implementing RTI, even though people closely associated with each act have what Fuchs, Fuchs, and Stecker (2010) describe as "different answers to questions about the nature and purpose of RTI" (p. 301). Generally speaking, people associated with NCLB might see RTI as a way to increase standards for all students, while those closely connected with IDEA might be interested in RTI as an approach for identifying students with learning disabilities.

THE COLORADO CONTEXT

Faced with the 2004 IDEA mandate that authorizes other SLD identification models, the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) convened an RTI workgroup composed of multiple stakeholders across divisions at the state department of education. Also included in the workgroup were district leaders as well as elementary, middle, and high school teachers from special and general education. The workgroup met for two years to discuss research and examine promising practices in implementing tiered frameworks. According to one state leader, "We read everything we could get our hands on about what works out there." One product that emerged from those conversations was Colorado's six components of RTI (leadership, problem solving, curriculum/instruction, assessment/monitoring, positive school

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[4] Traditional discrepancy models involve comparison of IQ test results with unexpectedly low achievement scores on standardized tests. The IRIS Center defines discrepancy formulas as "any one of a variety of formulas developed by state education agencies or local districts to determine the difference between a child's actual achievement and, using the student's IQ scores, expected achievement; used to identify students with learning disabilities."

climate, and family/community).[5] These six components represent areas that the workgroup believed would be essential to successful implementation of RTI and served as the basis for a number of tools, such as the *Indicators of School Readiness for RTI: A Self-Assessment Tool*, and rubrics that support implementation.

From the beginning, Colorado viewed RTI as a general education initiative for school improvement. According to one leader, defining RTI as a general education initiative was very important to the assistant commissioner of education and the state director of special education. In Colorado, the broad definition of RTI has always incorporated *all* students and included secondary students. The workgroup acknowledged that implementation in secondary schools would be a challenge, but state leaders felt strongly that RTI provided an opportunity to do business differently. In December 2007, it became state policy to use RTI for SLD identification in Colorado (see http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdesped/download/pdf/SLDColoradoRulesFedRegs.pdf). The policy required that local education agencies submit plans outlining full implementation of RTI for 2009–10.

As implementation moved forward, the state developed implementation rubrics that districts could use to continue to deepen their practice and to identify exemplars for discussion. In addition, CDE reorganized itself to enhance coherence around supports and accountability for implementation and to strengthen the message to the field that RTI is indeed a general education framework. The RTI and positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS)[6]

Colorado has identified six components that support implementation of RTI:

1. **Leadership:** State-, district-, and school-level leadership are essential to defining a vision that will encourage buy-in and support for the sorts of changes that need to take place at all levels of the system.

2. **Problem Solving:** The problem-solving process allows educators, in collaboration with parents, guardians, and sometimes students, to accurately identify the root causes for student academic performance and/or behaviors and identify specific interventions designed to address student needs.

3. **Curriculum and Instruction:** The success of RTI rests on strong core instructional practices and a curriculum aligned to state standards. Colorado's three-tiered model provides increasing intensity of instructional intervention.

4. **Assessment and Progress Monitoring:** Using data to make decisions about individual student needs, as well as broader schoolwide and districtwide decisions about resource allocation and professional development needs, is essential to implementation.

5. **Positive School Climate and Culture:** Colorado's principles of positive school climate are based on four aspects: (1) a caring school community, (2) appropriate behavior and problem solving skills, (3) positive behavioral interventions and supports, and (4) rigorous academic instruction.

6. **Family and Community Engagement:** Colorado's framework also acknowledges the importance of a community's shared responsibility for student success. Families and communities can work in partnership with schools to share information, solve problems, and celebrate student successes.

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[5] For more detailed information on Colorado's six components of RTI, see http://www.cde.state.co.us/RtI/SixComponents.htm.

[6] Positive behavioral interventions and supports is a framework "for assisting school personnel in adopting and organizing evidence-based behavioral interventions into an integrated continuum that enhances academic and social behavior outcomes for all students." (Retrieved October 27, 2011, from http://www.pbis.org/pbis_faq.aspx.)

units originally were housed under the Exceptional Students division. After the reorganization, those responsible for supporting RTI and PBIS were (and continue to be) located in the Office of Support and Intervention. The other units within this office are School and District Improvement as well as Dropout and Student Engagement, which provide support for underperforming schools and districts within the state. In addition, the RTI/PBIS unit works closely with the Office of Learning and Results. This office oversees the Colorado Academic Standards (which include the Common Core State Standards) implementation. SLD identification work remains within the Exceptional Students unit.

According to one state-level leader, moving the RTI and PBIS units has helped break down some of the silos that had existed earlier. As a general education initiative, RTI is not considered to be directly aligned with special education—and yet, there were aspects of its implementation where special education appeared to be driving RTI. Therefore, while it is completely appropriate for special education to have an interest in leading SLD identification, it is equally important that special education identification not appear to have undue influence on implementation of RTI frameworks as a whole. Because RTI in Colorado crosses over general, compensatory, and special education units, those involved in historically separate units must also learn a different way of working together. Housing RTI within the Office of Support and Intervention has thus allowed state leaders to use the framework to drive other school and district improvement work.

DISTRICT 189 BEGINS RTI

At the same time that the state convened its workgroup, District 189 began to examine its data trends as part of its effort to identify underperforming schools. As more schools fell into program or school improvement,[7] one visionary special educator from the district suggested that the plan to support those schools include a group of schools that would pilot implementation of tiered interventions. He believed that tiered interventions would offer the district—and the underperforming schools in particular—a more structured, systematic way to support all students. In 2005–06, District 189 offered training to introduce RTI to all schools. That same year, seven pilot sites—many of them in program improvement—began the process of implementing RTI. These pilot sites included elementary, middle, and high schools. Early on, leaders in the district decided that their implementation would not focus solely on the elementary level. According to one district leader, "Those initial founders [those who spearheaded implementation] here in District 189 included secondary, and that was big." Similar to the state, District 189 moved RTI out of the Special Education division and into Curriculum and Instruction to help reinforce the district's vision of RTI as a framework that supports all students.

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[7] Schools that do not meet adequate yearly progress for two years in a row are identified as being in "school improvement" through NCLB.

District 189 Demographics:

- Total enrollment: 29,587

- Percentage of total student population participating in free or reduced-price lunch program: 51 percent

- Percentage of high school students participating in free or reduced-price lunch program: 41 percent

- Racial/ethnic composition: 1.1 percent American Indian, 6.9 percent African American, 1.9 percent Asian, 28.8 percent Hispanic, 53.4 percent white, 7.6 percent two or more ethnicities, 0.3 percent Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander

- Number of traditional, comprehensive public high schools: 5

- High school enrollment: 8,535

AN EARLY PORTRAIT OF TIERED INTERVENTIONS AT THE HIGH SCHOOL LEVEL

In 2008, three years after District 189 began piloting RTI, representatives from the National High School Center visited two high schools that were in the early stages of implementation: Hamilton and Taft. Although these two schools had different demographic profiles and student achievement patterns, staff from both schools recognized the benefits of a tiered approach to student support. As one team member stated, "Dropping out is not allowed. No one gives up here; we're always searching for ways to support students." Another teacher commented, "The framework has built a caring community between teachers and students. Kids are now worrying about other kids. It has also helped us see that the adults can't give up on each other either. We may not always have the answers, but we're committed to working together to find them. I'm not sure this would have happened without RTI."

At both schools, the tiered framework provided support for all learners—including gifted students—not just struggling learners. Both schools developed a three-tiered pyramid of interventions as their supporting framework. In addition, both schools expressed their commitment to the use of data to ensure that the system of interventions met the needs of students. Through screening, ongoing progress monitoring, and data analysis, students at both schools were matched with the appropriate interventions. At the time of our first visit, both schools were in the process of integrating positive behavioral interventions and supports with academic supports.

As they described the early stages of implementation, staff members at both schools pointed to the importance of conducting a school-level needs analysis and listing the supports already in place for students experiencing academic and behavioral challenges. Then, using schoolwide data, the faculty examined the gaps between students' needs

and existing school resources. They also pointed to the importance of staff buy-in. They credited their established professional learning communities as essential to the success of their early implementation efforts, along with time built into their master schedules for meaningful professional collaboration. Hamilton had a seven-period instructional day with an additional "0" period. This "0" period allowed older students to begin the school day early and leave campus early if they needed to get to jobs, and it provided other students with opportunities to enroll in additional classes. To buy time for teachers to collaborate, the "0" period was eliminated one day a week at Hamilton, and on Mondays the school created a "late-start" schedule so that teachers could meet.

In addition to providing teachers with time to collaborate, school leaders considered students' needs when thinking about the structure of the school day. Incorporating time in the school day for students to participate in "double doses"[8] of instruction required that principals make the case to district administrators for funding to cover additional staff and classroom space. To provide time for students to check in with teachers at the end of the school day, a 15-minute academic enhancement period was added to the end of each day at Hamilton. The academic enhancement period was an opportunity for students to meet with teachers to receive extra assistance with assignments and academic guidance. Hamilton also offered an early morning study hall for student athletes who were busy after school with sports teams.

At Taft, leaders quickly realized that they needed to focus their attention on Tier 1/core instruction, in part, because of the high number of students who arrived at the school without the requisite skills to engage with high-school-level material. In order to address the needs of incoming students, Taft designed the Millennium Academy (TMA) for ninth grade. While Taft had built its instructional day around a seven-period schedule, TMA used a "semi-block" schedule with students staying in the same classroom for two or three periods. This allowed teachers to plan lessons across English and social studies and to address the literacy needs of incoming students in an intervention class. Outside of TMA, a special education or an English language development teacher co-taught several core classes in Tier 2. Some general education classes with high ratios of special education students also had an educational assistant who worked with students one-on-one, along with the lead teacher. As with Hamilton, Taft students had one late-start day each week, allowing teachers to collaborate. Staff at both schools expressed their commitment to working through the difficult challenges of implementation in high school because they had begun to see the potential the framework offered for students.

RTI—THREE YEARS LATER

In early 2011, we returned to visit these two high schools in District 189 to see how their practices had evolved over time and what lessons they might have learned. At the district's suggestion, we also visited a third high school, Garfield, that had developed a Student Support Center that has served as a model for other schools in the district.

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[8] Double doses of instruction refers to the common practice of offering two sections of mathematics or English language arts to students who are struggling with mastering content.

Table 1. Student Demographics of Visited High Schools (2010–11)			
	High School		
	Hamilton	Garfield	Taft
Student Enrollment	1,965	1,798	1,027
Percentage Free or Reduced-Price Lunch	29%	37%	64%
American Indian	1%	2%	1%
Asian	2%	2%	2%
Black	5%	6%	11%
Hispanic	19%	22%	41%
White	62%	61%	39%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	1%	0%	0%
Two or More Ethnicities	11%	8%	6%
Special Education	4.4%	5.9%	8.4%
English Language Learners	1.3%	3.7%	15.3%

Implementation at Hamilton has continued to deepen. School staff use data in a variety of ways to examine their practices. Departments—especially mathematics—are using results from common assessments to discuss and improve instruction. The problem-solving team is using data to identify and track students at risk, and the leadership team uses data to examine schoolwide trends. Looking at their data prompted what school leaders said has been one of their major shifts since our last visit: their recent focus on differentiating Tier 1/core instruction. When they examined schoolwide data across years, one school leader described the trend as "the 'rollies'…. Sometimes we're up two points; the next year, we might be down two points. We aren't seeing that positive trend upward, and that's why we decided to look at Tier 1 instruction." In addition, the data indicated that they had been relatively successful serving students in Tiers 2 and 3, but students receiving only Tier 1 instruction were not achieving the kind of growth school leaders wanted to see. One administrator said that their move to differentiating core instruction made sense from a resource-allocation standpoint as well: "When you look at the number of resources you have available…the largest bang for your buck is to have that quality Tier 1 instruction and to make sure that you've really shored up the sides of that good solid instruction." Another added, "If we engage our students the right way, we are going to reach 90 plus percent of the students." Leaders at Hamilton indicated that they felt they had done well identifying the pocket gaps—the students who are at risk of falling through the cracks—and then looking at the interventions to support those students. So, in addition to focusing on Tier 1 instruction, they are now, according to one leader, "to a point…that we're through adding interventions. We're starting to do some self-reflection on how well we do the interventions."

We did not visit Garfield High School in 2008. However, what we learned there in 2011 reinforced what we saw at Hamilton—that is, the important role school leaders play in deepening RTI implementation, the importance of regular examination of individual student- and school-level data, and the importance of providing ongoing, differentiated supports to school staff. By all accounts, Garfield was a relatively high-achieving school and had maintained steady growth while experiencing changes to its student demographics. Garfield staff members highlighted

several important features of their approach to RTI. The first was the establishment of two different teams: the RTI leadership team and the problem-solving team. The RTI leadership team is responsible for monitoring systematic implementation schoolwide and communicating with staff and other stakeholders about the framework and implementation. As with Hamilton, Garfield's tiered framework consists of three tiers, and professional learning communities serve as the primary vehicle for professional collaboration. The school leader pointed to the strength of the RTI leadership team as the primary reason for the school's success in implementing RTI. Members of the leadership team shared their implementation story, starting with their focus on ninth-grade students. Although initially they were successful in identifying and monitoring incoming ninth-grade students, they pointed out that, because they were less systematic in setting up processes for later grades, their implementation schoolwide has not been as successful.

The problem-solving team identifies students at risk and monitors individual student progress. At Garfield, students are involved early in this process to get their feedback on the nature of the challenges they face and to increase the likelihood of student buy-in when considering possible supports and interventions.

Staff at Garfield pointed to their Student Support Center as one of the most effective interventions for high schools. The Center provides flexible intervention options for students who are struggling—without becoming what one teacher called a "parking lot." School leaders at Garfield pointed to several other benefits of the Center, including its capacity to improve proficiency on standards in reading, writing, and mathematics; its capacity to address skills that support learning (such as self-monitoring, study skills, and motivation); and its connection to core instruction because of a close collaboration with teachers. Two teachers staff the Center: a reading teacher and a special education teacher with a strong mathematics background. Other content area teachers are encouraged to spend some of their duty hours staffing the Center. The promise of centers such as this has been noted by other high schools in District 189 that have had opportunities to share resources and best practices through district-sponsored summits focused on implementation of RTI at the high school level.

Returning to visit Taft revealed some of the challenges of implementing RTI and reinforced the role that leaders play in establishing a vision and staying the course. Although both Taft and Hamilton had experienced leadership changes since our visit in 2008, the Hamilton principal continued to use RTI as a framework for schoolwide improvement, whereas the school leader at Taft did not. Because we did not have an opportunity to meet with other staff at Taft, it was more difficult to get a complete picture of implementation at the school. However, the principal indicated that attention to universal instruction was still a focus, and many of the same Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions were still in place. Yet, the new leader at Taft rarely mentioned RTI or its components to discuss his schoolwide vision or strategies. During our initial visit, staff at Taft were in the midst of combining academic and behavioral supports into their framework. There was no mention of these efforts during our later visit, nor was there mention of efforts that were getting started back in 2008 to enrich opportunities for gifted and talented students. In addition, although student progress was tracked weekly through D and F reports, there was no discussion about the role of the RTI problem-solving team in identifying or monitoring students using a broader set of data. Students with D's and F's were referred to an afterschool tutoring center on Tuesday or Thursday or to a Saturday morning tutoring center to complete their work. Those supports were in the early stages of their design when we first visited Taft. Although the intervention had been designed, Taft staff soon realized that few students were utilizing those resources, so they devised a monitoring system that would allow teachers and administrators to track which students were attending afterschool or Saturday tutoring. Another development was Taft's adoption of a Student Support Center modeled after the one developed at Garfield.

The Millennium Academy was still in place as a transitional support for incoming ninth-grade students and to provide additional attention to literacy skills. However, changes to its implementation also were being planned. When the principal looked at the ninth-grade achievement patterns, he noted that, although there was progress in literacy, students were not making progress in mathematics. As a result, there were several planned changes to address students' mathematics skills that included different ways to deploy the staff. Although it was clear that some components of RTI were still in place at Taft, unlike Hamilton, RTI was no longer the unifying concept for the school.

Our visits to these schools after three years of implementing RTI reveal the challenges of sustaining implementation over time and reinforce the elements that support implementation that we identified in our earlier *"Lessons Learned"* brief. In the following section, we examine those elements across the system in Colorado.

ASPECTS THAT SUPPORT IMPLEMENTATION OF RTI

In the previously published piece (National High School Center et al., 2010) we identified four factors that support RTI implementation at the school level: leadership, evaluation,[9] interventions, and professional development. Comparing what we learned from Colorado high school, district, and state education agency staff revealed overlaps with the previous publication. The importance of leadership and professional development was explicitly raised in our conversations. Evaluation was mentioned more in terms of having ready access to the right kinds of data to make decisions. Throughout our interviews, interventions were discussed but not intervention providers. This section describes how leadership, data-based decision making, interventions, and professional development unfold at the state, district, and school levels. We also discuss key implications based on our interviews. We acknowledge that these considerations are interrelated; our goal is to highlight these ideas in a manner that might be relevant for other high schools, districts, and state education agencies as they implement RTI in high schools.

LEADERSHIP

Leaders play an important role in showing other stakeholders how RTI can help make sense of other school improvement and student support initiatives. RTI is about systems—and, according to one state-level leader, all other initiatives must fit within RTI. We discuss three implications related to leadership that emerged from our interviews: the unit responsible for RTI implementation at the state and district levels matters, a distributed leadership approach should be used at all levels of the educational system, and securing buy-in from key stakeholders is important.

Leadership at the State Level

Earlier in this brief, we recapped the Colorado Department of Education's leadership role and actions in supporting the implementation of RTI throughout the state. Not only did the state provide the policy to move forward, but it also created the stakeholder group that helped the state identify its six key components of RTI. These six components became the foundation for achieving its vision. The state continues to use the six components as an organizing framework to create and disseminate RTI support to districts and schools.

State leaders reorganized units within the state education agency, moving both RTI and positive behavioral interventions and supports from within special education programs to general education. This move added coherence to the state's vision of the framework as a support for all students and eliminated silos in which staff operated. This

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[9] In the 2010 co-authored piece, this was labeled *evaluation*. However, what we describe here is more aligned to the term *data-based decision making* rather than evaluation. Given that, we use the phrase 'data-based decision making' for the remainder of the document.

change also helped provide continued alignment within the state for RTI and PBIS, which allowed both initiatives to become more integrated within the state's major reform agenda.

Leadership at the District Level

District 189 placed responsibility for response to intervention within the Curriculum and Instruction division, which has helped emphasize the district's vision and definition of RTI as a "school-wide, multi-tiered, data-driven framework that allows teachers to assist any child identified as needing academic and/or behavioral support—whether they are working below grade level or are gifted and talented and not meeting their full potential." The key elements of the district's framework include a multi-tiered intervention model, targeted interventions, problem-solving teams, data-driven decision making, family-school partnerships, and positive behavioral interventions and supports that are aligned with the state-level elements. Like state-level leaders, district staff convened a workgroup that developed tools and rubrics to support implementation of RTI in schools.

From the very beginning, school board members served on the district's RTI strategic team and, as a result, learned about the successes and challenges of implementing RTI from those who were doing the work. District leaders said that they initially received criticism from those who wondered, "Why in the world are you letting them [school board members] dig into the weeds?" However, as one of the district administrators admitted, "It was the smartest thing we've ever done because [we're] helping build their [school board members'] capacity. They're hearing the stories; they're hearing the challenges…. And they've become our greatest advocates." Not only did their participation allow board members to learn about complex implementation processes and make decisions about resource allocation based upon what they learned, but having them participate as members of the RTI strategic team also sent a signal across the district that RTI was more than a passing fad.

District 189's RTI leadership team is composed of key stakeholders in the district. Participants include the executive director of Instructional Services; two school board members; the executive directors of K–12 schools who oversee principals; content area specialists; RTI facilitators who provide districtwide RTI professional development and coaching; representatives from special education, gifted and talented, information technology, research and assessment, and discipline; literacy resource teachers; representatives from the teachers association; general and special education teachers from each level (elementary, middle, and high schools); principals; a social worker who works in schools; parents; and community partners, such as Restorative Justice. When they can, both the superintendent and deputy superintendent also attend. Although it might seem unwieldy to include such a wide range of stakeholders on the team, the district coordinator maintains that a broad membership on the team was an essential aspect of securing buy-in across the district. During the first two years of implementation, team members met twice a month. However, after the second year of implementation, they began meeting monthly. During their meetings, members examine districtwide data together to assess implementation and decide on professional development needs across the district. Often, the group breaks into subcommittees.

The district also uses a formal process to assess implementation and help them identify potential problems. The superintendent hired a consultant to train a cadre of district leaders to use the process. One of the RTI committee members led the entire RTI committee through the analysis, which allowed district and school leaders to anticipate potential issues and analyze district systems that can address those issues.

Leadership at the School Level

We previously described the role of leadership at the school level when discussing the implementation stories of the three high schools. Ensuring that the principal is invested in the framework is critical for implementation, but it is also important that the principal be committed to distributing leadership through an RTI implementation team and/or other collaborative mechanisms. Establishing a team to support implementation will likely ease the "burden" on any single staff person. These specific characteristics of school-level leadership were visible in the differences between the progress each of the schools had made with implementation of RTI.

Principals also approached the district and the school board to advocate for funding to pay for additional staff and classroom space to accommodate the changes that the framework required. By situating other ongoing work within the RTI framework, school leaders helped other staff see the alignment in the school and the district vision for improvement. Although school leaders pointed to the importance of bringing staff, parents, students, and the community on board, one also described the need to "stand up for what you believe is right for kids." This integrity among school leaders was critical to meeting all students' needs and building staff and parent buy-in. According to one principal, it was important initially to ask all staff members—including those who might not fully support the initiative—to commit to the effort in the interest of students at the school.

Leadership Implications

The Unit Responsible for RTI Implementation at the State and District Offices Matters

While leadership helps define and communicate a coherent vision for RTI, the unit at the state and district offices overseeing its implementation also sends a message about the framework. As mentioned earlier, staff at both the state and district levels discussed the importance of moving RTI out of special education. This decision allowed leaders to build on the vision of RTI as a framework for school improvement.

Perceptions of where response to intervention "came from" has implications for how the framework is implemented at various levels; this is especially true at the high school level. For example, if the framework is perceived to be an elementary school initiative, it might be harder to obtain buy-in from all content teachers in high schools and for all teachers to see their roles and responsibilities within what might be perceived as an elementary school model. Where the initiative is housed also has implications for various reporting requirements. During an interview, one staff member said that there seemed to be some mixed messages between the purpose of the framework and the reporting criteria (which implied more of a focus on special education) from the district.

A Distributed Leadership Approach Should be Used at All Levels of the Educational System

Although we have pointed out the importance of school leaders who define a coherent vision for RTI and stay the course, it was also clear that a particular kind of leadership characterized the high schools in which RTI had really taken hold. In Hamilton and Garfield, staff shared a sense of responsibility for and commitment to the work involved in implementing RTI—so much so that in those schools, we met with the RTI leadership teams for several hours during our visits and only later met with the principals. In contrast, in the one school in which RTI no longer appeared to serve as a coherent framework for improvement, we did not find any evidence of a similar level of staff engagement that had been observed in our previous visit.

The district also seems currently to be in the process of distributing leadership for RTI to include the staff who oversee principals, perhaps mirroring the shared sense of responsibility and commitment we observed at the school level. District staff also frequently mentioned not wanting RTI to be "person dependent." The district has put into place some "ways of doing business" that help foster the sustainability of RTI throughout the district and that also may remove the concern of the RTI work being "person dependent." Specific actions included implementing district policy on RTI, making an effort to incorporate principals' supervisors, aligning school improvement plans to RTI, and discussing intervention program support. At the state level, responsibility for RTI implementation has shifted to the Office of Support and Intervention and includes several other units that previously used to work in isolation.

Develop Buy-In to Support RTI Implementation With Key Stakeholders

As discussed earlier, both the district and state education agency included various stakeholders in their RTI teams. This strategy had multiple benefits, some of which have already been discussed, but one important outcome was creating buy-in to implement response to intervention. District staff credited the school board involvement for setting aside critical resources to support implementation, and this support demonstrated that the school board had bought in to RTI. At the school level, staff talked about the importance of including administrative staff and teachers from all departments to secure agreement that RTI will be the framework that provides coherence for all school-level initiatives.

DATA-BASED DECISION MAKING

In Colorado, leaders used data to inform decisions at all levels of the educational system (state, district, and high schools). Data can be used to address intervention supports that students need as well as to determine how best to support school staff implementing RTI. In this section, we provide examples of how the state, district, and high schools used data to make decisions that support the vision and goals each defined for implementation. We draw two implications from what we learned about data use. First, RTI implementation should be included as part of principal accountability frameworks. Second, tools should be developed that allow school staff efficient access to relevant data.

Data-Based Decision Making at the State Level

Colorado has a number of initiatives under way that are designed to improve outcomes for students, including Individual Career and Academic Plans (ICAP), Individual Literacy Plans, School Improvement Grants, and the adoption of the Common Core State Standards. Because states have multiple initiatives that have similar goals, it is important to create coherence. One lever states can use to do so is the development of coherent accountability systems. In Colorado, all schools and districts must engage in Unified Improvement Planning (UIP).[10] The templates include (1) an examination of data trends as well as discussions of root causes for performance challenges, (2) target setting, and (3) action planning. The process streamlines all accountability systems so that schools and districts need only a single improvement plan. This means that UIP incorporates improvement planning requirements for state accountability (e.g., accreditation, graduation requirements) and Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) accountability (i.e., Title IA, Title IIA, and Title III). Whereas those data were reported and examined in isolation before, now those data are examined together. UIP does not yet address specific IDEA requirements; however, special educators are involved in the work because the data analysis often shows that students on individualized education programs (IEPs) have growth gaps. Representatives from the state education agency meet with districts and schools to solve problems together and target resources where they are most needed. Essentially, then, using UIP, the state is practicing RTI—looking at data, intervening when necessary, and monitoring progress along the way. The state's ability

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[10] More information about Colorado's Unified Improvement Planning process can be found on the state website at http://www.cde. state.co.us/uip/index.asp.

to forge partnerships with districts and schools signals a shift in their role from being simply monitors to true partners who support work in the field. Those partnerships began with the formation of workgroups back in 2004—and the open communication that characterized those groups has carried over into current processes, including the UIP work.

Data-Based Decision Making at the District Level

As the district rolled out RTI, it used its implementation rubric as a guide. Using that rubric, the district developed heat charts to assess implementation levels and develop differentiated professional development based on results (schools were color-coded in green, yellow, or red depending on school performance within each of the six state components). The charts require that schools assess their implementation progress along the six components and provide evidence for their assessment. Thus, these charts are tools for schools to reflect on their work and are used as guides for data-based conversations when district leaders visit schools. In addition, the assessment on the six components from the heat charts rolls up to the school's UIP. Just as the state uses UIP to differentiate its resources, the district is using heat charts to provide different levels of support to schools.

Data-Based Decision Making at the School Level

Before they adopted any tiered interventions, the schools considered what kinds of data would be necessary. They also recognized the need to design systems that would allow them to access those data and then develop processes for both analyzing and acting upon those data. Although this might seem like an obvious way of conducting business for high schools, it has required major shifts in professional culture. Historically, high schools have measured student progress using course grades—grades that analysis sometimes reveals are not aligned with student performance on other measures of performance, such as standardized tests or performance assessments.

Staff at the schools we visited said it was important for them to have access to a wide range of data, including attendance; recent state test scores; assignment performance indicators, such as grades, homework, and writing samples; and behavioral referrals. These data were regularly analyzed by intervention planning teams of practitioners and administrators. Teams then shared those analyses with all staff in order to assess whether school resources were adequately meeting students' needs. These discussions allowed staff to think more broadly about the framework and its implementation. In addition, schools formed screening teams that examined attendance, behavioral referrals, and grades to identify any students who might benefit from additional supports. At the classroom level, department members met regularly in grade-level or course-level (e.g., Algebra I) teams to examine achievement data and discuss instructional implications of those data. The mathematics department at one school had begun examinations of student performance on common assessments, for instance, which led to discussions of instructional practices.

Data-Based Decision Making Implications

Include RTI Implementation as Part of Principal Accountability

Given the districtwide emphasis on RTI, there is an expectation that principals will support the ongoing RTI work within their high schools. In District 189, high school principals report to one of three K–12 executive directors, who ask the principals to complete a self-assessment based on the district RTI rubric and show evidence for the self-assessment results. However, the executive directors have not established a standard way of monitoring the evidence submitted with the self-assessment, and presently there is no direct accountability connection between the executive directors and the Curriculum and Instruction office that supports RTI implementation. The district leadership is actively trying to involve the K–12 executive directors more in the RTI work as well as build their capacity on RTI as a way to ensure sustainability of RTI.

Develop Tools That Allow Schools Efficient Access to Relevant Data

Districts play an important role in building data tools that can help meet the various needs of people throughout the system. However, carefully considering the sorts of data that school and district staff will require—and when and how those data are accessible—is essential. For example, one school pointed out that its staff accesses four different platforms for student data—one for grades and attendance, another for IEP documentation, another for curricular reports, and another for Individual Literacy Plans—and those do not include the smaller systems that school staff access for mathematics or reading interventions and monitoring. "There aren't enough hours in the day for me to truly use all of these systems as effectively as I would like to be using them…. It becomes very overwhelming," noted a staff member. Another challenge that data systems present is the fact that often in high school, those who make the greatest impact on students may not be the teacher of record. For example, an athletic team coach may be the adult on campus to whom a student turns most often for support and guidance. That coach may be monitoring grades and attendance and intervening by helping students set goals for themselves. Yet, much of that support can occur outside of official tracking systems. So, establishing processes whereby those kinds of relationships can be tapped to assess interventions and student progress also is important. Conversations across school and district levels are essential to determine the sorts of data that can provide the most accurate portrait of the supports available to students.

INTERVENTIONS

Most state education agencies and district staff do not provide specific interventions but instead provide supports so that school staff can implement these interventions and guidance on alignment and coherence across the system. Given this, we focus our discussion of interventions on the school level. At the school level, we heard repeatedly that Tier 1 and Tier 2 interventions need to be adaptable to the high school context.

Interventions at the School Level

Providing a list of specific interventions that Taft, Hamilton, and Garfield employed is outside the scope of this publication, but each school had interventions in place for Tiers 1, 2, and 3. The school staff mentioned that their activities included monitoring the interventions, reviewing student data, and making adjustments based on data. During our interviews, school staff also mentioned that having flexible interventions for Tier 1 and Tier 2 eliminated the concern of students being placed in an intervention for an entire semester. The student support centers at Hamilton and Garfield demonstrate a way of providing both Tier 1 and Tier 2 supports. The flexibility of these centers allowed some students to receive targeted support to help students master discrete skills, while other students received more intense support through the centers. However, those students who needed the most intensive level of support were served through Tier 3 supports. As Hamilton deepened their conversations about implementation, their focus shifted from adding more to stronger implementation of what they have in place. This shift in focus seemed like an important benchmark that school staff noted.

Intervention Implications

Districts Should Create a List of Recommended Interventions

District and high school staff noted the need to figure out how the district could better support schools' use of intervention programs. High school staff suggested that district-level guidance on intervention programs might be useful for staff as well as students. District staff mentioned being aware of this need: "Right now, our interventions

seem to be piecemeal…and we have some kids burn out because they've done it [the intervention program] in elementary, middle, and high school." The district staff continued to say that the district was hoping to create recommendations for intervention programs that would include suggested grade levels for the intervention program. This guidance could limit the number of intervention programs used in the schools, which, in turn, might help the district and the schools better leverage resources.

Tier 1 and Tier 2 Interventions Need to Be Adaptable

At the school level, creating flexible Tier 1 and Tier 2 interventions or flexible schedules that prevent students from getting stuck in an "intervention parking lot" is important, particularly in high school with credit implications. Even though they were using a screener to identify students needing additional interventions, two of the high schools realized that there were additional struggling students (who scored proficient on state assessments) whose needs were not being met by formal intervention classes. The two high schools that had established student support centers pointed to the centers as important tools to support the needs of students whose needs were previously unmet.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

In order to describe what we saw as a "nested" approach to implementing RTI, we focus the bulk of the following discussion on professional development at the state and district levels in an effort to stress the important role the district and state play in providing aligned professional development support to schools. We also highlight an important implication related to professional development—provide ongoing, differentiated support to staff.

Professional Development at the State Level

The workgroup that the Colorado Department of Education originally convened has continued to meet through the development of a smaller community of practice to provide feedback on best practices and to suggest areas in which the state can support ongoing capacity building to support RTI implementation at all levels. The six components of RTI and readiness tools that the state developed provided the foundation for guides that regional cadres have used for district- and school-level training. In response to requests from districts and schools who have moved beyond the readiness tool that Colorado developed, the state also has created more tools that support the implementation of such a complex framework (http://www.cde.state.co.us/RtI/ToolsResourcesRtI.htm). These include video guides showing the organization of one problem-solving team; a number of self-assessment tools; and blueprints for implementation at the classroom, school, and district levels.

Professional Development at the District Level

School boards also can support districtwide efforts, not only with policy but also by ensuring that professional development resources are devoted to support ongoing implementation. Supporting ongoing implementation was indeed evident in District 189. District leaders with whom we spoke credited their school board with making some

key decisions that supported districtwide implementation. First, board members recognized that RTI was a promising practice and provided initial funding for training across the district. Even more important, however, was the board's decision to fund intensive training for two years. According to a district leader, "We got funding midyear in a tough budget year…. That sent a message throughout our whole system that this is real."

The district also plays an important role in providing professional development for teachers and schools. Those charged with implementation support at the district level provide up-front training on RTI followed by modeling and coaching. Coaches use the state-designed implementation rubric to conduct conversations about where schools are in their implementation. Districtwide conferences on RTI have allowed high schools to meet and share best practices. For example, as noted previously, the Student Support Center at Garfield has been successfully implemented at another high school in the district. The district also provided professional development by creating tools that reflect the district's vision for implementation of RTI. The District 189 implementation rubric includes several indicators—each of which is weighted to reflect its relative importance—that are used to define each component. Because District 189 developed its implementation rubric at the same time CDE was developing its state-level rubric, the district components map to but are not identical to those developed by CDE. A separate tool is used to assess schoolwide PBIS.

Professional Development at the School Level

For years, research has pointed to the need for ongoing, job-embedded professional development and coaching at the school level to help change instructional practices (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Easton, 2008; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001). School leaders credited their established professional learning communities as a key to the success of their RTI implementation. Staff members were already accustomed to working together in teams to examine student achievement patterns and discuss instructional implications. One principal explained that adopting an explicit tiered framework was a natural outgrowth of the conversations that had already begun as part of the staff's work in professional learning communities.

Professional Development Implication

Provide Ongoing Support to Staff

Another consideration noted from the discussions in District 189 relates to using data to inform differentiated, ongoing support for staff. As staff knowledge increased during implementation, they identified new concerns and needs. In order to help address these new needs, the schools, district, and state created additional supports. Providing supports to address new challenges requires a commitment to using data effectively as well as a mindset of continual improvement.

CONCLUSION

These visits have provided a valuable window into the real-time successes and challenges of school, district, and state efforts to implement RTI in high schools. As we begin to gather more stories such as these, we can see themes emerge that are consistent with other documents on tiered interventions and high school improvement (National High School Center, 2008; National High School Center et al., 2010). Response to intervention is a framework used to ensure that students receive the supports they require for success, and, when implemented throughout an educational system, it also can inform the kinds of supports that might benefit adults in the system. Analyzing data allows states to provide the kind of differentiated supports that districts might require, allows districts to provide differentiated supports to schools, and allows schools to provide differentiated supports to teachers and, subsequently, their students. We know that RTI is a complex framework that is made even more complex when implemented in high schools. As the needs of students and adults change, the supports used to help address those needs must also continue to evolve.

This brief describes a systemwide effort to initiate, deepen, and sustain RTI implementation over time. School and district staff with whom we met expressed their pride in existing RTI efforts but also acknowledged that there was more work to be done. As one district staff member stated, "We still have more work to do…. We're proud of where we are, and we're viewed in a very positive way in the state in terms of our RTI system…but in some ways, it feels like we're only halfway up the tree…. We're not to the tree house yet."

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