Model Site Research Overview Nrcld Report

By NRCLD Staff

A significant commitment of the National Research Center on Learning Disabilities (NRCLD) has been to work with school sites that are implementing responsiveness to intervention (RTI) models. The work with these schools began in November 2002 after the U.S. Department of Education requested that NRCLD identify, describe, and evaluate the implementation of RTI in elementary schools throughout the United States.

In conjunction with the six Regional Resource Centers (RRCs), NRCLD staff identified and solicited the participation of schools that had developed RTI models. Toward the goal of identifying sites with commendable RTI practices, NRCLD staff reviewed data and information from 41 of the 60 sites initially considered and determined that 19 of those sites were successfully implementing one or more RTI practices. We examined six RTI components: schoolwide screening, research-based reading instruction, research-based progress monitoring, data-based decision making, staff development, and parent involvement. Data from these schools have given us insight into how RTI works in the early grades and with reading.

As part of this NRCLD-school site work, RRCs conducted and audiotaped 45 individual interviews with staff members and parents from five RTI school sites. NRCLD staff then transcribed the audiotapes, which included interviews with six principals (two principals were at one of the schools), 13 general education teachers, three special education teachers, one school counselor, five reading teachers/specialists, one resource room intervention specialist, two school psychologists, one English language coordinator, and 13 parents.

Based on these interviews, we report here on improved instruction, reduction of inappropriate identification of students with specific learning disabilities, professional development, administrative involvement, establishing RTI practices, advice to schools wanting to adopt an RTI model, and practices that schools would do differently if they were to start the RTI process today.

RTI and Improved Instruction

Teacher responses. Staff members interviewed praised two components of RTI: progress monitoring and the development of, and preparation of staff to use, strong interventions. These components have improved instruction for all students and fostered a greater focus on quality instruction for every child, they said. Data gathered from screening and progress monitoring now drive instruction at these schools.

In explaining how data help improve instruction, one classroom teacher said data helped pinpoint each student's struggle and allowed teachers to assess each student's development. Paying careful attention to data, a reading teacher said, provides the information needed to select effective interventions for students. Teachers also use data to set student-focused goals.

A special education teacher in one school described the improvements in instruction as a result of RTI as "huge" and added that teachers' sense of responsibility for students had increased; teachers do not just send students to special education without first attempting to address areas of difficulty by modifying classroom instruction. Instruction

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is more skills-based and consists of more research-based instructional strategies. When teachers buy new materials, they look for materials that are research-based. Interventions are more strategic.

RTI affects students in the classroom who are in the process of SLD determination as well as students who need interventions but who are not yet in the determination process, one special education teacher said. With RTI, staff members may target only four students at a particular grade level, but many more students benefit. The reading needs of students are being met.

Another special education teacher who had been at her school for a year and a half now hears fewer concerns and believes that teachers are getting better at identifying students' problems earlier. She sees a significant increase in direct instruction and increased openness to scripted lessons.

Staff development on such topics as interventions, understanding monitoring, and looking at data has improved general education instruction, one general education teacher said. Because of staff development, teachers are aware of research, use research-based strategies, and continually look for additional research-based strategies that meet their needs.

Under the RTI model, according to those interviewed, all instructional staff members are flexible about collaborating and helping where help is needed. Additionally, the documentation compiled as a result of such RTI practices as screening and progress monitoring enables teachers to see individual growth and to describe and discuss with parents their children's instruction and assessment.

Parent responses. Parents interviewed called classroom instruction excellent. One parent, whose son has a disability, described instruction as "phenomenal," citing the many additional resources and additional help available in his son's classroom.

Administrator responses. A principal, emphasizing that RTI has improved practices and students' outcomes, described changes staff members have made as a result of implementing RTI: Staff use data to drive their instruction; all staff members gather and understand the data. They all examine data and use the results as the basis for decisions about what is best for each student. Staff members differentiate instruction, an improvement over prior practices, which lacked the current rigor. The district staff development has been very helpful in implementing changes associated with RTI. In another change from previous practice, the school holds teachers accountable by requiring them to prove they are using what they have learned in staff development sessions.

Reduction of Inappropriate Identification of Students with Specific Learning Disabilities

One way of beginning to determine whether the implementation of RTI has reduced the inappropriate identifi-

cation of students with SLD is to look at the number of referrals for special education or for further evaluation by an intervention assistance team during successive years. Data from five schools that had high overall RTI implementation scores (NRCLD) show the following:

School 1 – 2000–2001: 20 referrals; 2003–2004: nine referrals. During the first three years, the greater number of referrals were in grades two through four; for 2003–2004, the number of referrals was highest (four of the nine) for fifth grade.

School 2 – For the five years from 1999–2000 to 2003–2004, a total of only seven referrals; three of them were during the last year, with no obvious trend toward fewer referrals in the earlier grades.

School 3 – 1999–2000: 22 referrals; 2002–2003: 17 referrals. During the four years, the school saw a toward a greater percentage of the referrals occurring in the earlier grades. 1999–2001: K–3 shows 53 percent of the total referrals; 3–5 shows 47 percent. 2001–2003: K–3 shows 59.5 percent of the total referrals; 3–5 shows 40.5 percent.

School 4 – 1999–2000: 39 referrals; 2003–2004: 26 referrals. During this time, the school saw no change in numbers of referrals in grades one and two compared to grades three and four.

School 5 – Total numbers of referrals were low over a five-year period and actually increased from one (Year 1) to four (Year 5), with Years 2, 3, and 4 having, respectively, four, three, and five referrals. With the exception of one referral in grade three and one in grade four, all referrals occurred in K–2 for the five-year period.

Professional Development

Of key importance for the implementation of RTI is ensuring that school staff members have knowledge and tools with which to address student needs.

By far the most frequently encouraged practice was staff/professional development. Those interviewed mentioned professional development 16 times in their advice to schools wanting to adopt an RTI model and 20 times with regard to what staff would do differently if they were just beginning the RTI process. Interview participants advocated including a variety of staff members in professional development, focusing a significant amount of staff development attention on interventions, supporting special education staff, and enlisting the aid of an on-site consultant. Staff members emphasized the importance of professional development related to interventions to help address the challenges of RTI as a slow process requiring a large amount of work. Other important practices mentioned at least 10 times were the value and necessity of getting the entire staff, especially administrators, "on board" with RTI, the importance of emphasizing and sharing the common goal of working together to meet student needs, and the benefits of flexibility as a response to constant re-analysis and re-evaluation based on feed-

back from all staff members.

ADMINISTRATIVE INVOLVEMENT

Involvement of the administration is a crucial component in establishing RTI practices. Successful RTI implementation takes an administrative team that believes in the process. The principal of a school, as its instructional leader, must be very involved, must understand the curriculum, must spend time in the classroom, must participate in discussions, must monitor what is happening in the classroom, and must spend time getting to know the students. It also is important that the principal let the staff see the reasons behind his or her actions and decisions.

ESTABLISHING RTI PRACTICES AND OUTCOMES

Staff reported that looking at other working RTI models, using available resources, and having a strong bank of interventions were all helpful during implementation of RTI models at their schools.

They also emphasized the importance of patience. RTI implementation is a long process and must be accomplished slowly and one step at a time. During the process, staff should allow time to communicate and collaborate as they reflect on the process.

One general education teacher commented that using RTI decreased the stress for teachers because they could tell what was and what was not working; they had the data to back this up. She cautioned that it is important to give teachers time to talk, to collaborate and to reflect, and to continually have staff development. A special education teacher noted that she has more paperwork than before and the implementation of RTI has been very time consuming. She is getting more consultation work rather than direct services. She also sees a lot more integration between special and general education. Because RTI implementation is a huge drain on time and resources, schools must be prepared to meet these challenges if RTI implementation is going to be successful. School personnel must acknowledge that RTI is a continuing process requiring flexibility to incorporate such changes as the adoption of new curriculum. Although the process of implementing and improving an RTI model never ends, interview participants encouraged school faculty members to have faith that the changes they are making are in the best interests of the students they serve.

Special education teachers indicated that RTI is a great process—saying that more children receive more help and student achievement improves. They also described the process of identifying students who require special instruction as more "natural," involving intervention, progress monitoring, and comparison with peers. RTI helps both those who don't need special education (one teacher could think of students who worked with interventions for nine, 18, or 27 weeks and were then up to grade level) and for students who do need special education instruc-

tion. School personnel also said that RTI is a better, fairer model for students in poverty or with different languages and cultures. One principal said that the greatest benefits are that the school is meeting individual needs of the students and that students feel successful.

ADVICE TO SCHOOLS WANTING TO ADOPT THE RTI MODEL

Interview participants were asked to give advice or suggestions, based on their experiences, to other schools that were interested in adopting an RTI model. This section lists their responses. Some of the suggestions are repetitive; repetitions were purposely kept to indicate the number of staff members and parents among the five schools who made the same suggestions.

SCHOOL A
- have lots of intervention training - it is needed
- state schoolwide interventions and benchmarking to help to identify (learner) goals
- train a variety of staff, not just teachers; make sure administrators are really on board
- partner with a local resource center
- take it slow; the process works, but it is a slow process
- start slow; I didn't want to go slow, but I could see it was necessary because there were lots of people to convince; you get there faster if you start slow
- it is very important to get the staff development piece going; let the staff see the reasons behind what you are doing

SCHOOL B
- have conversations within a building about student needs - about what those "intensive" students need, believing that they can succeed
- look at models that work
- give teachers time to talk, collaborate, reflect
- help teachers understand that it will not happen overnight
- understand that the process is like fixing an airplane while you're flying it
- continually have staff development; have staff look at helpful data
- have the teachers be a part of RTI implementation
- make sure the RTI program fits the needs of the school – it's not a cookie cutter program
- provide needed staff development to provide expectations and to give teachers ownership
- look at other models
- have staff development
- look at research

- look at models
- model for your staff what they are to do
- visit other classrooms or other schools to see how the model is working
- be sure that each staff member knows what to do with the model – this is important
- have staff development!! teachers have to be knowledgeable, have that power
- provide flexibility - it is important; if it isn't working, change it; adjust; don't get frustrated
- revisit why you are doing this - how can we meet the needs of the students
- have staff development to be there to help teachers
- provide teachers with needed time and opportunity to collaborate

SCHOOL C
- know what you want your end product to be
- know what resources you have
- know what data you want to gather
- develop and form partnerships with area education community
- involve people who really believe in using data
- do lots of staff development so all are part of process, know what is going on
- don't be afraid of making changes
- put your heart into meeting needs of students
- look at resources you have, try to use them
- get feedback from staff
- perhaps have a panel of teachers, staff, parents - try to get everyone's input
- have strong leadership in administration
- promote a strong message that this is for the students
- understand that this is not a one-step process - from general education classroom to special education
- need to have something like this in place if you want to be successful for bottom 20 percent
- address the bottom 20-25 percent; otherwise they are going to get further behind each year
- be prepared for the majority of teachers to say "You have to be kidding me - I have to do all this!"
- be prepared to feel that you can't handle the workload (I've been here seven years and still have such days)
- be prepared to wonder how to juggle all of that and still feel classroom is under control

SCHOOL D
- realize that staff/all players must be interested and feel motivated toward it
- handle it slowly but not too slowly

- understand that staff must see value in early intervention and process
- educate staff on process and why we want to do it
- then, educate staff more formally through profession development
- get someone from each grade level to attend if you have state training
- after training, put together a team and continue to develop it
- re-evaluate as you go along, adding on, adding more people
- make sure parents know what you are doing, how the model works, support you
- make sure district office understands and supports this
- have everyone embrace the philosophy; stick with it
- provide full staff training
- understand that the building administrator is key
- have one person at each grade level be the "go-to" person to quickly answer questions
- eventually have everyone trained
- have principal on board
- have buy-in from some of the general education teachers, then bring the others along
- have PD (professional development) constantly, especially at beginning
- always refresh the process; constantly review the process
- observe others who are using the process - in person is best
- participants need to realize that it is not just a book; it is a mindset
- start with your team; come up with a plan:
- understand the kind of interventions your school has the capacity for

SCHOOL E
- take it slowly (but not sure you take it slowly in some (all?) ways
- find strongest teams/teachers or team players
- make sure people see the need
- find stories about students whose needs weren't met
- ask general classroom staff - am I meeting needs of kids?
- help teachers see the purpose: teachers can look at lowest 20 percent and tell you what they are going to do to help them with reading and tell about the intervention
- have a thick skin
- have resources
- understand change; be willing to take a risk
- realize that RTI is a good vehicle to explain to parents

- keep successes out there; bring it up to teachers
- understand that it's tough - it changes roles and that can be uncomfortable
- first, get teachers' cooperation (often not easy)
- get teachers who are willing to try it - teachers are a big part of the process
- help teachers know exactly how the model works, steps, etc.
- understand that the school administrator has to get on board with it
- have everyone buy in to it
- understand that those involved have to care about the kids and what is right for them - motives for teaching
- set up a clear system that works
- find clear interventions
- back up the data with progress in interventions
- know that it will change constantly; adjustments are necessary
- have different staff members on the committee
- start early
- ensure that the model is composed of staff from each grade level
- have patience
- take it one step at a time
- don't berate yourself
- try something; ask how it worked; revisit it; don't take it personally
- prepare for it to be a process - there is never an endpoint
- realize that there is always new curriculum
- have faith that what you are doing is best for the child
- understand that it is a huge drain on time and resources

What Would You Do Differently If You Were To Start The RTI Process Today?

Interview participants were asked what they would do differently if they were starting the RTI implementation process today. This section lists their responses. Some of the suggestions are repetitive; repetitions were purposely kept to indicate the number of participants among the five schools who made the same suggestions.

SCHOOL A
- would NOT change the professional development - that is the only way to change anything
- have an administrative check and balance for level three meetings regarding individual students
- require staff members to review data with administrators
- assemble a strong bank of interventions

- clarify level and intensity of interventions
- create a team of people whose role would be to look for good interventions
- create a leadership team to help staff go through the process
- have the paperwork and resources set up and made easily accessible to anyone coming into the program

SCHOOL B
- spend more time on staff development right off the bat
- have everyone on board; before we did that, we were struggling
- have more staff development - so everyone is hearing
- constantly analyze your practice
- understand that the key is working together for a common goal
- implement team building – realize the importance of leaders teaching others to be leaders
- have stronger background knowledge of what we are doing and why
- have background of programs presented to us - know the research
- use more staff development
- provide more time to plan, to get together and talk
- do the PD (professional development) a little differently - to make sure everyone is on same page
- get everyone to understand from the beginning; bring everyone on board
- ensure a good understanding of a strategy, of what we can do to try to help students with disabilities
- have more specific strategies pinpointed at certain struggles of students

SCHOOL C
- streamline to have group or grade-level problem solving
- in the beginning, have a plan to align intervention with problem solving
- understand the importance of aligning data with interventions
- if a school is frustrated with the process, slow down and implement what they can
- try to speed up the process; make sure data is carried over from year to year
- use data from one year to the next; making sure it is completed one year to the next
- have a class for beginning teachers to get rid of the gray area
- have schoolwide training – it is critical; initially

we trained only a few; then train the trainer model
- have an on-site consultant
- provide open and multiple venues for communication
- have the core team (at least one person/grade level) to facilitate sharing of issues and problems

SCHOOL D
- have a systematic way to make sure we have all components and aren't missing steps
- constantly check, do constant re-evaluation
- realize importance of staff training and ongoing training
- realize importance of development with general education staff
- provide more training for more people
- ensure that more people are trained at one time; have more people get on board right away
- have someone on site, rather than having to bring people in
- realize that it is hard to switch from one system to another
- make sure entire staff wants to do it
- have more general education teachers on the team - they are the biggest players
- with advanced training; send a rep from each grade level to attend training
- usually send a person not previously trained to training session - keep training

SCHOOL E
- make sure staff and teams understand importance of this
- make sure staff /teams know it takes time to un-

derstand language, systems, processes
- build trust - it needs to be there
- provide support for sped (special education) staff
- ensure a safety net for the RTI team; don't want "kill the messenger"
- include everyone, all programs (e.g., ELL) within school – this is imperative
- procure reading interventions for Spanish-speaking students
- at beginning of year, make sure staff have in-service, know guidelines and things to be looking for in each child (for LD ID)
- make sure staff is documenting, taking notes to be used for SLD identification
- have an open discussion about the relative weights of classroom teachers' observations vs. specialists'
- clarify for classroom teachers when they should do a referral
- have teachers meet monthly (rather than three times a year) to share concerns
- open discussion about the role of classroom teachers' insight – when they may feel something is wrong even when test results are fine
- provide help to classroom teacher – the details can be overwhelming
- start with more staff training, especially on sped (special education) laws and procedures
- provide more staff training on how to design interventions and how to track data
- provide more support; more training; more people on behavior plans
- provide bilingual people to help with bilingual intervention plans